

From Paramour

March 2014

Wendy Morton was sitting in the hall at Trehidy going through Giles's things. She pulled out a small box containing the cards and notes they had given to each other throughout their fifteen years together. As she lifted them from the box, several photographs fell onto the floor. She picked them up and smiled at the face of a girl laughing back at her in one of them, the thinner, prettier version of herself in a platinum wedding dress.

It was strange, she thought, seeing herself in a dress. She had stopped wearing dresses months ago and had just spent the morning emptying her wardrobe in the spare room. It had been full of dresses, along with her once-treasured designer shoes and the Mulberry handbag Giles had bought her on her thirtieth birthday. Now she tended to slop around in jeans and jumpers, and had buried her makeup bag somewhere towards the bottom of one of the removal boxes.

As she flicked through the rest of the photographs, she saw Giles looking almost identical in every shot – a little camera-shy, a slightly forced off-the-peg-for-the-camera smile; he never seemed to age. Then she caught a glimpse of herself five years earlier: Wendy who never missed her daily gym session, wore dresses, took pride in her appearance and went on last-minute holidays abroad with her friends. The Wendy whose friend Beth always made her laugh but somehow always managed to compliment and insult her in a single sentence. She remembered Beth's 'hen do' in London. They were staying in a youth hostel getting ready for a night out: 'God, Wendy, I'd kill for your body from the neck down.' That was a personal favourite of

hers, though she suspected her friend wouldn't say that now if she saw her. But then she hadn't seen any of her friends since Giles's funeral – she had just wanted to be left alone. She couldn't bear feeling pitied.

After the funeral she had shut herself away – she ignored all her emails, texts, letters and voicemails, and whenever a car pulled up or the doorbell rang at Trehidy, she hid herself upstairs and peered around the edge of the curtains to see who it was. She never once answered the door. Eventually the phone calls stopped and nobody called round anymore. In moving from Cornwall to the Cotswolds she was closing the door on her past life. She didn't want sympathy, she felt she didn't deserve it.

At a pub lunch a couple of years before Giles had died, she met up with some of her friends: 'You know, everyone who sees you together can see you and Giles were just made for each other,' one had said. There came a general consensus in the form of exaggerated nodding and emphatic 'absolutelys' from her other friends. She had smiled, volleyed back a compliment about the woman's boyfriend and offered to buy the next round of drinks. Funny, she thought now, how easy it was to recall their words and faces, but not all their names. It was as though she were recalling someone else's tangled memories. A different life, she supposed, the me before things changed.

Giles had been a stable, kind husband to her. Their love had been simple and uncomplicated from the start. It grew slowly during the three years that they had dated, before Giles had asked for her father's blessing to marry her. She reflected on the sad irony; they had met in hospital, the same hospital where she had been asked for permission to turn off his life support machine just over a year ago. She remembered vividly the first time she saw him. It was 20th July 1999. His face was horribly bruised and he looked in agony, but he was always cheerful and uncomplaining. He had fallen off a ladder, broken his collarbone, fractured some ribs and punctured one of his lungs. She had been one of the nurses on the ward at the time. Three years later they were married on the same date – Wendy's twenty-fifth birthday.

Though the early passion had gradually waned, she knew that the roots of their marriage were deep and secure. Strong enough, she had thought, to endure the changing winds of recent years. She looked at the photograph of Giles at their wedding, as he watched her make her way down the aisle. And again, in a more recent photograph, another un-posed shot of them

taken at a friend's wedding only a year ago. They are seated two places apart at a round table. She is laughing at something or someone in front of her, and Giles watches her with the same intent look of unconditional affection.

Placing the two photographs side by side on the carpet, she feels her conflict more acutely, a happy nostalgia compromised by rising feelings of guilt and anxiety. She puts the photographs back into their box at opposite ends of the pile, places the cards on top of them and shuts the lid firmly.

Her friends' compliments about her marriage often made her uncomfortable. It was one thing to be praised and hailed a paragon of marital magnificence, she had thought, but they had no idea how heavily she had felt the weight of their invisible expectation. 'Wendy and Giles are perfect', 'I bet they never argue', 'they will never have conflicting opinions', 'they are perfectly suited'. She imagined these same women talking about her inability to have children: 'Such a shame, but at least she has Giles. She has stability. He'll stand by her no matter what.' She didn't tell them about his vasectomy. She didn't tell them about the failed reversal and the three failed IVF treatments that she had undergone. It was hard to tell people things they didn't want to hear and to shatter their image of her, so she let them go on believing what they wanted. She was their friend and they knew absolutely nothing about her.

Sometimes she feared that she still didn't really know herself, like she was always searching for that elusive thing or feeling. What puzzled her now was that the hollowness she felt was nothing to do with being unable to have a child, and yet she could not explain even to herself at this moment exactly what it was she was searching for.

When Giles died she had given up a lot of the things she loved. His death had left her conflicted – there was grief, but more recently there was also guilt. She had wanted to punish herself. She cut herself off from her friends. She had turned down all their invitations and was moving over a hundred miles away.

To replace the things and people she had lost, she took up wine and coffee and ate more cakes and chocolate. She had given up going to the gym and, though she was naturally slim, these comforting daily indulgences were beginning to show around her hips and waistline. Having to buy clothes even in a size 10 would have horrified her five years ago. Now, approaching

size 14, she told herself she preferred to buy things a couple of sizes bigger than she really needed, that clothes sizes had become smaller and that it was no longer fashionable to wear things skin tight. And though she convinced herself that her four pairs of jeans had all shrunk slightly in the washing machine, she had never quite managed to summon up the courage to step onto the bathroom scales.

But whenever she caught sight of herself in the mirror or saw her reflection as she was walking past shop windows, it wasn't her softer figure that concerned her. She simply didn't recognise the woman who stared back at her. She had become suddenly a much older, sadder, more lonely version of the woman she had once been, and had wanted to reach into those shop windows and pull out the girl hiding in the shadows of her reflection. And, though the decisions she had made over the past year seemed irreversible, she couldn't help wondering how different her life might have been if only she had handled things better.

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Katherine feels suddenly guilty about agreeing to have lunch with him. What if anyone saw them together? What would people think? Her father always told her you shouldn't ask for trouble. Wasn't this lunch date playing with fire? Was it right to have lunch with someone else's husband? Wouldn't they get into trouble for leaving the school premises at lunchtime? He was married and she knew precious little about his wife and son. Not even her mum knew about their Seaton date. What was there to say? Apart from a brief hug there was nothing to tell. It was harmless, she kept telling herself, purely platonic. Two people enjoying each other's companionship. Nothing more.

And yet, even now, she couldn't forget the feel of his arms wrapped around her, the newly ironed handkerchief smell of him. She liked that he often laughed at himself but never at the misfortunes of others. His laughter was infectious and uncontrollable at times. She can picture him now: face plecting; shoulders starting to shake, hunched shoulders, glasses aslant on

the end of his nose. He would sometimes laugh to the point of tears and end up bent kneed and gripping the roots of his wiry brown-grey hair with the fingers of his right hand.

And yet something is nagging at her. Something about his phone call at Seaton, the way he spoke so dispassionately about his wife and her holidays abroad without him. It bothers her that he barely speaks about Jane or Robert. She wonders why it is he doesn't wear a wedding ring. He seems so sensitive one minute and yet strangely able to detach himself from his family the next.

Is that what happens in some marriages, she wonders. Over time do people just gradually start to detach themselves? Since Christmas she has told herself repeatedly that she hardly knows him, that she isn't doing anything wrong – his wife was there at the Christmas dinner and since then all she has done is agree to go running with him and instead they spent an afternoon by the sea. It hardly constitutes adultery, she thinks.

But then she remembers Freya Duffy's face in her dimly lit classroom. The slight narrowing of her pale green eyes, the straight set of her mouth. Even now she can remember the sound of bitter disapproval in Freya's voice as she turned and left the classroom. But what had she seen? What could she have seen?

She wonders now what these feelings are that she has for Jonathan. She cannot deny that she likes his company, she likes his eyes, his un-vain self-assurance, his dry sense of humour. She likes that he makes her laugh, understands her love of Victorian literature, shares her love of poetry. She checks herself. He is so different from her. So much older. And he's married.