

Fixing the past

A decade of venom and bile bursts like a bubble when I read Della's email: 'Ozzie is dead – am inconsolable. I expect no sympathy, but thought you would want to say goodbye. Funeral is on Thursday; 12.00 at St Patrick's crem. Della.'

No love, no kisses, no recriminations or apologies, just the bare facts. I respond accordingly; 'Terrible news. Thank you for telling me – I'll be there. Sara.'

And now I do not know how to act, how to *be*. How do I grieve (*do* I grieve?) for a man who left me after nine years of marriage for my best friend, Della de Neil?

Della de-Light, he called her. It was Ozzie's running joke...all that energy and giddiness, cute as a button-ness. My friend, my confidante, funny and kind – always the third wheel, until over time, a barely discernible shift, that rendered me the outsider – banished from our triangle.

The double whammy of betrayal; I don't know which hurt most, losing him...or losing her. For ten years, barely a day has passed when I have not imagined the two of them together, smiling; laughing intimately at jokes that once included me.

When I arrive at the crematorium, a light spring rain is falling; a red polka dot umbrella stands out against the bobbing tide of black as mourners watch the cortege come into view. Then I see Della – hair streaked with silver now, her profile blurred by age, but trim and straight-backed as before. Eyes hidden behind sunglasses, she looks ahead and walks behind the coffin as it is borne into the chapel. I see that she is alone now. Like me.

I sit beside two heavily-powdered old ladies; the sound of boiled sweets clashing against dentures tells me they have come prepared. Furtively I look around for familiar faces during prayers, and spot Ozzie's brother, Marcus, and his cousins Joanne and Dale. We were friends once – family-in-law, but how will I be received today?

During *The Lord's My Shepherd*, my silent tears begin to fall as I weep for Ozzie, once the love of my life, for Della, my fallen friend, but mainly for myself. I am 57 years old and at a junction that says: *this way; cling to the past – that way; start living before it's too late!* It is not a difficult choice to make.

The aptly named Olive Branch bistro is laid with white table cloths; small vases of freesia scent the room, mingling with perfume and the dry stink of grief.

Platters of standard funeral fare - tiny sandwiches, sausage rolls and mini quiches are soon snapped up, and for those not driving, the wine soon begins to flow. Grateful for my local taxi firm, I down a glass of Prosecco, before reapplying my lipstick in the ladies' powder room.

Then I seek out Della who is humouring the boiled sweet clan; I can tell she isn't really listening because I recognise her expression – one eyebrow cocked too high, lips slightly pursed. Ignoring the old women I embrace her.

“I'm so sorry, Della. How are you? What happened?”

And in that simple gesture, I feel a hard nugget brittle as glass break in my chest and I can tell by Della's face and the heaviness with which she leans against me that she feels it too. We find a table and begin to talk, haltingly at first as I learn that Ozzie died suddenly of a blood clot to his brain.

“It was such a terrible shock. He was as fit as a flea...and due to retire in two years...you know what a workaholic he was. Now...oh...anyway, how are things with you, Sara? Where are you living now?”

“I've still got my flat on Welbeck Road and it's lovely and convenient of course, but I'm thinking of moving to the seaside...to Deal or Whitstable.”

Della's face lights up; “Ozzie loved Whitstable, he used to-”

“Yes, I know...it was *our* place,” I cut in, although not unkindly. Della's cheeks flush.

“I can't pretend I regret taking Ozzie from you, Sara; I loved him...it was an unstoppable force when it happened, creating havoc for all of us. But I am sorry – always have been – for what it did to you. For the pain and distress it caused and that it ended our friendship.”

“Della, I've had ten years to hate you – and I'm tired...I haven't got the energy to do it anymore. I feel old and lonely... and I'm sick of being stuck in the past.”

“You were a much better wife to him than I ever was,” says Della, taking my hand in both of hers adding “I never heard Ozzie say a word against you – it was all my doing. Sara, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I'd like us to be friends again.”

“I already have forgiven you. Now let's drink to our boy,” I say, as we raise our glasses to Ozzie.

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The candy-coloured beach huts sparkle with January frost, and only die-hards and dog walkers inhabit the seafront today. Hands jammed into my coat pockets, Marnie's lead about my wrist, I recognise Della by her walk first, muffled up against the cold and wearing a grey beanie hat. I wave and she waves back, shouting something I cannot hear against the biting wind.

“Who is this little angel?” she says, after we have hugged hello.

“This,” I say, lifting the little tan dog, “is Marnie – and she's a Pomeranian.”

“Oh, she’s a little joy – you must love her to bits!” Della says, rubbing her foxy nose and pointy ears.

“Oh, I do...she’s such a kind little dog, I can’t remember life without her. I’m so pleased you’re here all weekend, Della. You’ll have to ignore the boxes; I’ve still got loads of unpacking to do. There’s so much to talk about...I’ve made a cake and bought plenty of wine...I thought we could have takeaway tonight...does that suit you?”

“Perfect,” she says, linking her arm through mine as we fall in-step.

“Mustn’t stay up gassing all night though,” I remind her; “We’re seeing the first property at 9.30 tomorrow, then another at 11.00.”

“Ooh yes, I’ve got high hopes for the second one, Sara. Which one do you like the look of...?”

Then we walk up the drive of my new house, where pale twisted vines cling to the white rendered walls, and I know wisteria will bloom in April and May, visitors will return to the beach, the shops will be full of day trippers keen to spend their money on local novelties - and that by summer, I will have a new neighbour, friend and confidante to share the next chapter with.

The End