

Wanting a Girl

“Mummeee..” the falling tone of Ben’s voice told me that this was going to be a long conversation, “...what kind of tree is dull?”

I sighed. The rain was coming down faster than the windscreen wipers could cope and I was having to concentrate on the road, where puddles formed and merged like DNA in an endless reproductive dance. Playing straight man to a five year old was not high on my list of ‘things to do’. “I don’t know, Ben, what kind of tree is dull?” I couldn’t see properly, my eyes were too tired, images seemed to be snagging, lasting too long...

There was an exasperated sigh from the back seat. “It’s not a joke!”

“You’re just stupid, all trees are the same.” From the lofty heights of a two year age advantage, Sam pronounced.

“Mummy, he kicked me... Sam just kicked me! Ow!” A scuffle ensued, as both boys aimed trained feet at one another across the width of the car, a lucky Nike contact made Sam squeal and his younger brother’s high-voltage yowl was the result of the revenge strike.

“Boys, shut up! I have to think when I’m driving!”

Despite the noise, I found I was smiling. They were so like their father, noisy, impetuous with gestures bigger than they were, determined to have the last, definitive word on anything. I patted one hand onto my stomach where the new-baby bump hadn’t started to show yet... let’s hope this one was going to be a bit more like me.

“I’ve often thought conifers were quite boring. You know, like Christmas trees.” I pulled the car clear of the traffic queueing to turn right onto the main road. “All spiky.”

“Christmas trees aren’t boring!” United in scorn, the boys stared at me in the mirror. “They’re brilliant!”

“Will we have a tree this year? A real one like Granny has, not that stupid plastic one that we’ve had for ever... plastic is boring. And it doesn’t even look real.”

“I suppose we could. We’ll have to ask Daddy, won’t we?”

I hadn’t told Richard about the baby yet, there hadn’t been time before he went off to Europe, and his phone calls home had been truncated and irregular. Not that I was worried about his reaction, no, Richard really wanted a girl; he’d be over the moon. He’d been so delighted when I’d got pregnant with both the boys he’d gone round for days looking smug and boasting about how it proved that ‘the old man still worked’. Quietly, secretly, not even confessed to my sister, I wondered if that’s why he married me. *He’d* always maintained that he hadn’t been able to resist me, from the moment he first saw me

lighting a cigarette on one of the bridges in Prague, modelling for Vogue.. He'd made me give up smoking, of course, when I had Sam... I blinked scratchy eyelids to clear my vision. The jeep was heavy to steer and the pedals were a long way down compared to my sporty little Merc; I'd only learned to drive after Sam was born because Richard said it would make things easier, that he couldn't always be around for me, and so I didn't have much experience of driving the big car in the rain.

"Why are we going to Granny's tonight anyway? We don't usually go on a Tuesday..."

"You *know* why, dur-brain! Mummy's going to the airport to meet Daddy off the plane! You are *soooo* stupid..."

"Granny said that she'd have you tonight, so that Mummy and Daddy..." I really should stop that, calling us Mummy and Daddy... I had an identity, didn't I? Somewhere, underneath it all, there was still a 'me'. "... so that we can have a nice meal in town." So that we could sit and talk. Properly. Without Richard jumping up and heading into the office that he'd made out across the yard, in one of the converted stables, muttering about paperwork, or e-mails to answer.

"Does Daddy like trees, Mummy?"

The lights of the oncoming cars were striking the edge of my vision, slicing down the side of the road like a migraine. "I think so, yes. Why, are you worried he won't let you have a real Christmas tree?"

"Well, Misha said..."

"Who's Misha?"

Behind my seat Sam stretched out his legs and pushed me in the small of the back. He'd never been able to do that before, he must have grown... I ought to check his school trousers weren't getting too short. That was one of the problems with Saint Michael's, that they insisted on 'proper' uniform. The first time I'd seen my little boy all dressed up in his blazer and cap, I'd cried, wanted to take him home and send him to the nursery in the village, where all the local children went; to be taught by the large, kind lady with the flowery scarves and the motherly bosom. But Richard said that public school was worth it, in the end. Not that he'd know, really, he was a Comprehensive boy made good, but it was what he wanted for Sam and Ben. I wondered what he'd want for his daughter? A tall tower, probably, with no stairs.

"She's the girl who comes and babysits for us sometimes, when you're at Auntie Nikki's."

"What, when Daddy is supposed to be looking after you?"

“It’s only sometimes.” Sam breathed on the window and drew a smiley face. I watched him in the mirror, his sandy hair and features so much like Richard’s that they could have been twins born fifty years apart. “Sometimes Daddy has to go to work in the evenings.”

“Oh. OK.” I bit my lip to prevent any further exclamations. Richard’s work was of the nose-tapping ‘you wouldn’t understand’ kind; I knew it was something to do with investing, but whenever I asked he’d just smile. He’d stop short of telling me not to worry my pretty little head about it, though. I didn’t understand money, he knew that. We’d met because I needed someone to tell me where to put the money I’d made from the modelling and he’d looked after my affairs ever since. Without him I’d be broke by now, trying to get by with my faded looks and single GCSE in Art, not living in a five-bedroomed Edwardian vicarage, like an Estate Agent’s wet dream. “So what did Misha say about Daddy and trees?”

“She said Daddy liked a dull tree.”

The big car shuddered and lurched and I realised that I was doing seventy; rocking along the single-carriageway like a panicked elephant. “Adultery?”

“She was on the phone to her friend. She said that he was always trying it on. How can he, Mummy, how can you try on a tree? It wouldn’t fit, would it, all the branches would stick out and everything.”

I persuaded my foot to come up off the floor, carefully, so that the car wouldn’t slide, carefully, carefully...

“I thought that was funny, I nearly laughed, but I didn’t because Misha would be cross that we were listening.”

Ben had lost interest now, he’d picked up Sam’s Nintendo and was fiddling with the buttons. “Did you hear any of this, Ben?” I asked, pretending so hard that it was all still a game, something that could be made right by the twitch of a joystick, the right click. Ben shook his shiny, cup-cut head, bored now.

I looked back at both of them, side by side in their car seats. They no longer looked like Richard

“We were playing, Ben and me, hide and seek in the playroom. I was in the toybox and Ben was in the fort...”

“No I wasn’t! I was hiding behind the TV! You couldn’t see me and it was your turn to find, so you pretended ...”

“You were! You were in the fort, I could see you!”

“And Misha came in talking on her phone, so we stayed quiet, cos she thought we were in bed. And she said about the tree.”

And then it all made some kind of sense, for one brief, illuminated moment, as though those oncoming headlights shone inside my head and revealed the doubts and the questions outlined in a bright halogen glare. I saw Richard, his ‘I’ll look after you’ persona gleaming in its true, bullying colours; the way he’d changed me, moulded me to be the kind of wife he wanted. The kind of wife who provided the children he thought he needed to prove himself a man.

And then I looked in my mirror and I saw my boys, the sons he adored, provided for. Down at my belly where the new child grew, so wanted. Closer, I drew the microscope down, saw my own life through its tight focus – too old and too jelly-waisted to model, did I really want to get on the merry-go-round of job searches, to be told by slack-faced old men with their jaws hanging loose with lust that I could do their filing if I provided ‘other services’ late in the evening?

And the knowledge didn’t bring power. It brought a thousand tired sadnesses; a weary ripping of the ‘blind-eye’ glasses from my face, where they’d filtered my vision for the last six years.

I knew I would go on with this. And I hated myself for it.