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From Work In Progress

By Irena Hill

They became aware that the room had filled up with the voices and banter of mainly young office types. Two actually came over and sat down opposite them. Pete picked up his glasses, looked at Lucy and mouthed “let’s go”. She nodded and stood up, straightening her jeans and shaking her head – her way to comb her hair, Pete thought as he felt the urge to kiss her again.

They held hands as they went downstairs. Half way down they squeezed together to make room for a couple of guys climbing up. Pete turned and kissed her, pressing her against the wall. And cautiously, in case someone else appeared, he brushed his hand against her breast.

- Hey hey Pete - she gasped, pushing him away slightly.
- Don’t you...?
- ... Dunno...

Lucy turned away and climbed down the stairs fast. Pete followed. He felt terrible. She teased me, he thought, and now she’s dumping me and next thing she’s going to laugh at me. His hands tightened into fists. It was exactly what happened with Carly a few months before. She was on his Art History course. He really liked her – her face reminded him of the dead Ophelia in the Millais painting. He told her so during a school visit to William Morris’s Red House in Bexley. She was flattered and let him kiss her behind an apple tree in the orchard. She continued to let him kiss her in exciting, stolen moments like that but it never went any further. It wasn’t long before she claimed that she needed to concentrate on her studies, her parents were expecting great results, and so on.... In brief, she dumped him. He noticed some excess giggling among her friends after that and was deeply hurt. The same had happened with Rana the year before. That time the excuse had been ‘my parents would kill me if they found out...’. But the result was identical. And now Lucy.

They walked down some narrow Soho streets in silence, a couple of feet apart, neither of them saying or doing anything to put an end to the awkwardness of being together yet not together at all. After what seemed an interminable time, they emerged in Trafalgar Square and bright evening light. Still in silence, Lucy sat down on a sunny stone bench, took off her t-shirt and scrunched it on her lap. Pete looked at her, at her arms emerging from a purple sleeveless top, at her face in profile, and before he could think, he found himself telling her about his visits to the National Gallery, about his favourite paintings, about his dad's scorn for all that stuff. Lucy sat still, looking straight ahead, squinting at the slanted light, making no comments. Then Pete heard himself recount the Oscar episode, and when he looked at Lucy he noticed she was biting her lower lip, and when he looked again, he saw that her shoulders were shaking. Eventually, she couldn't hold it any longer and broke into a peal of loud, uncontrollable laughter.

Pete felt exposed and stupid – he'd opened up to her as though the rejection back in the pub hadn't been enough. He got up, fists in his pockets, turned his back to her and wondered whether to walk away.

- Show me that picture - he heard Lucy say after a minute. - Mary Magdalene, wasn't it?

She stood up, took Pete's left hand out of his pocket and held it, unknitting his fist finger by finger.

- You're funny! - she said. - Nice funny I mean. I can see that scene with Oscar so clearly! You should be a scriptwriter...

Pete sensed his tension melt away but didn't know what to say.

They started to walk.

- The Gallery's closed now - was all that came out of his mouth.

- Tomorrow then? - Lucy asked. The next day was Saturday and Instant Treats didn't operate at weekends.

- Sure. I'm free. You? - Pete said. He couldn't understand why he was feeling low – or maybe he was just tired out by all the emotion.

- Me too...

- Lucy...

- Yes?

- Two things. One, I want to know more about you. And two, I'm hungry.

- Hey, I'm starving too. I'll tell you over pizza. If you don't mind me talking with my mouth full.

- Try it now... - Pete pulled Lucy to him and kissed her wet and deep. He noticed that she didn't close her eyes while kissing and made a mental note to keep his open too. A kind of tender face-off. As they let go of each other a couple of young foreign visitors applauded.

- Do you think they took a picture of us kissing? - Lucy asked, noticing they were holding cameras.

- Hey, we'll become famous like the Paris couple in the Doisneau photo....

- The what?

- I can't pronounce it, sorry. An awesome black and white picture of a couple kissing in the street in Paris.... You must have seen it...

- Well, you'll have to show me that one too, then ...

They walked on in silence. Pete's mood was still subdued, and it puzzled him. He felt he'd regained some control over things and that Lucy really liked him. So what was it about? Then he remembered he was left with about fifteen quid in his pocket, which wouldn't allow him any largesse. He couldn't treat Lucy to a night out, let alone a night in – where the hell could they go for some privacy?