

PATIENCE AND PROCRASTINATION

Lucy hoped Eddy would be fast asleep when she slid under the duvet beside him, but as soon as she was settled he turned to face her. He'd been at the office fourteen hours that day and looked tired, his face white and doughy against the scarlet pillowcase, but his eyes glistened with hope and anticipation. She knew that look.

'Not tonight,' she said. 'I've just done my nails.'

Fortunately, over the years, he'd learned not to persist. 'Goodnight then,' he said, cuddling into her. 'Love you.'

'Yeah,' she said, removing his arm. 'Me too.'

Lying in the dark, she considered their future. She knew it wasn't entirely within his control and that he had to wait for a suitable opening, but couldn't help feeling disappointed and a little bit annoyed at his failure to make adequate progress in his career. It's not as if she hadn't been honest with him from the outset, making it clear she'd only marry someone who shared her values: someone aspirational and ambitious, someone who wanted the same things as she did, like a semi-detached new-build, an SUV in the integral garage and a kitchen with real granite worktops. And, she thought resentfully, it wasn't as if she wasn't supportive. Didn't she always make sure there was a good selection of ready meals in the freezer when he came in after his long commute, even if it meant a detour to the supermarket on her way home?

He'd asked her to marry him eight months into their relationship – almost six years ago now – presenting her with an antique garnet and seed pearl ring during a mini-break in Bath. It was precisely the sort of romantic proposal she'd always dreamed of, with him

getting down on one knee in the hotel restaurant in the hiatus between pudding and coffee. Genuine tears had pricked her eyes as she felt the waiters and other diners hold their breath while she considered her answer; they'd even applauded when she said 'yes'.

The next day, as he dragged her around those god-forsaken Roman baths, she'd talked him into returning the ring and replacing it with something more suitable and modern. Something with a bit of bling. No offence, she said, but it was her that would have to wear it and he did want her to be happy, didn't he?

Driving home, he'd tried to talk about the actual wedding, saying they should get something in the diary, let friends and family know, book the registry office...

'Registry office?' she shrieked. 'Are you joking?'

'Well... I thought...'

'Well you can think again.'

Her list of requirements was long, but not, she thought, unreasonable. A white wedding in a nice little country church –

'But you're not religious,' he pointed out.

'A white wedding,' she said emphatically, 'in an old church, with a champagne breakfast for close family and friends and a buffet and disco in the evening.'

'Wow,' he said. 'That's a bit more elaborate than I had in mind.'

'Well, if you don't think I'm worth it, maybe we should call the whole thing off right now.'

'Come on, Lucy, there's no need for that.'

‘Or alternatively you could get your finger out at work and move up the career ladder so we can have the wedding we’ve always dreamed of.’

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When Eddy started coming home late every Thursday, Lucy was pleased. It was about time he did a bit of networking.

‘Sometimes I think you've got no sense,’ she told him. ‘It’s not just about what you do at the office, you need to socialise a bit, be a team-player. Get yourself noticed.’

‘Do you know the sort of places they go to?’ he asked her. ‘Glorified strip clubs, that’s where. Why would I want to go somewhere like that?’

‘But men like that sort of thing, don’t they?’

‘Some do, but it’s not *my* cup of tea. In fact, I can think of nothing worse than some poor girl writhing around a pole in front of me. It offends my sensibilities.’

‘You can’t afford sensibilities when you’re saving for a down payment on an executive home,’ Lucy said. ‘Honestly. Anyone would think you don’t want to be a success.’

Every Thursday she quizzed him about where he’d been and what he’d done, but he was evasive.

‘Just out with the lads,’ he said.

‘Were any of the senior executives there?’

He hesitated. ‘Not this time...’

‘Who then?’

‘No-one in particular.’

‘So where did you go?’

‘Oh... just some... place.’

‘And does this place have a name?’

‘Um... the Peppermint Hippo or something?’

She Googled it the next day but found nothing. Week after week she quizzed him, but always got similar answers. Who was he with? No-one in particular... Where had he been? He couldn’t quite remember the name of the place.

Her suspicions grew. He was obviously hiding something.

She rang her sister, Anne. ‘What do you think he’s up to?’

‘An affair?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘There’s not a man on this earth who’d say “no” if it was handed to him on a plate,’ Anne pointed out. ‘Let me put it this way, if he was my fiancé, I’d be watching him like a hawk.’

Now Lucy came to think of it, Eddy *was* behaving differently. The hours he used to spend watching detective dramas on television or reading books about military strategy in the Napoleonic wars were now spent furtively surfing the internet. She checked his browsing history, but drew a blank; he was obviously using software that allowed his activity to be hidden. She watched him more closely and noticed that when he set off for work on Thursday

mornings, he always took a nylon holdall. Maybe he was going to the gym on the way home, but why the secrecy?

‘Just ask him,’ Anne said, over a pot of tea in Marks and Spencer’s café.

‘But I don’t want him to know I suspect.’

‘Suspect what?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Has he changed his habits?’

‘Well, he’s online a lot.’

‘I meant is he dressing differently, showering more frequently? That’s often a sign.’

‘Not that I’ve noticed.’

‘Does he take his phone everywhere with him? Even to the bathroom?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘That rules out an affair then, I suppose.’

‘So now what?’

‘Keep watching him,’ Anne said, stuffing the last of an Eccles cake into her mouth.

After a few more weeks of watching, Lucy came to a conclusion.

She rang Anne. ‘I think I know what he’s doing.’

‘What?’

‘He’s joined the Freemasons.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘I don’t know. Midlife crisis?’

‘He’s thirty-four,’ Anne reminded her. ‘Bit young for a midlife crisis.’

‘He’s got this bag he takes with him on his Thursdays.’

‘Black briefcase thing?’

‘Sports holdall.’

‘That doesn’t sound right.’

‘I know, but I reckon the case is inside the bag. A kind of double bluff. You know how secretive they are.’

Anne was quiet for a moment before saying, ‘Well, if he was my fiancé, I wouldn’t have it. Those Masons get up to all kinds.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ Lucy whispered, as if a Mason might be hovering in her hallway, ‘but according to their website it’s all quite innocuous. They just do community work and the like.’

‘Well they would say that, wouldn’t they?’ Anne said darkly. ‘I think we should follow him.’

The following Thursday they staked out his workplace in Anne’s Micra and at six forty p.m. Eddy emerged and made his way across the car park with his holdall. They followed him down the A27, but although Lucy would have bet money on the Masonic Lodge being his

destination, he drove right past, continuing for another mile or so before pulling up outside one of the few pubs that had not yet been converted to a Tesco Express. They watched him park the Astra and take his holdall out of the boot and were about to follow him inside when a second car pulled up. Eddy greeted the other driver and together they made for the pub entrance. A third car pulled into the car park and two more men climbed out with their own baggage.

‘Let’s wait,’ Anne suggested, ‘and see how many more turn up.’

Fifteen minutes later, the two women looked around the near-empty bar, taking in the Formica-topped tables and padded vinyl seats. There was no sign of any of any of the men that had entered the pub - eleven at the final count.

Anne ordered two gin and oranges. ‘Is there another room?’ she asked the barman.

‘There’s a function room upstairs, but there’s a private meeting going on there.’

‘Yes,’ Anne lied, heading for the stairs. ‘We’re meant to be at it.’

The door at the top of the stairs stood slightly ajar. Lucy crept forward and peered in. The room was full of men in peculiar outfits, which they definitely hadn’t been wearing when they arrived. It took her a while to identify Eddy, who was seated at a small oak table with a couple of companions. His hair was brushed forward in a style that formed little spikes at his temples, and in common with the other men he appeared to be wearing a neck bandage tied so tight and high that he could barely move his head. On the table stood a china teapot and a collection of delicate cups and saucers.

‘Seed cake?’ asked one of the men, proffering a plate to a man with bouffant ginger hair.

‘Too kind, Tilney.’

A tall, slender man was looking in the mirror over the fireplace and stroking his pointed sideburns. ‘What do you think, Colonel? Are they too much?’

‘Not at all. I think they look very authentic. And your hair’s fabulous. How do you manage it?’

‘*Dax Wave And Groom*. You have to do what you can in the absence of bear fat.’

‘I think I’d draw the line at bear fat, Knightley. Even if it was available, it would make a shocking mess of the soft furnishings.’

‘What are they talking about?’ Anne hissed.

‘Hair,’ Lucy said. ‘And bear fat.’

Anne squeezed in alongside her and stared through the open door. ‘What the hell...’

‘Ssh, they’ll hear you.’

The man called Knightley was removing his long, leather boots. ‘What do you think of these?’ he asked the room at large.

‘What are we looking at?’ asked a short, scruffily-dressed man.

‘Foot loops. They keep the trouser leg nice and taut.’

‘I’m not keen on them,’ Eddy said.

‘Why ever not, Ferrars?’

Why were they calling her Eddy ‘Ferrars’? He was Eddy. Eddy Palmer.

‘It’s not the foot loops, it’s the trousers. I just think buckskin britches are more... stylish.’

‘This is typical of the sort of upper-class meaningless chitchat I object to,’ said the small scruffy man. ‘People like me did exist you know.’

‘No-one’s saying they didn’t, Thomas, but it’s not really the focus of this group, is it?’

Lucy heard one of the men closest to the door turn to his neighbour and say, ‘I’m not sure we want members like him. I know those slops he’s wearing are historically accurate, but a nineteenth century muffin man would never be permitted in the drawing room, let alone scoffing tea and seed cake off the bone china.’

‘Quite, Crawford. Someone of his lowly status could never aspire to be properly idle. Maybe we should tighten up the membership criteria.’

At the far end of the room someone rang a bell. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘shall we have the tea things removed and get on with tonight’s reading?’

Lucy gave Anne a shove. ‘Quick. Downstairs. One of them’s coming.’

Lucy finally confronted Eddy over breakfast on Saturday.

‘What exactly *do* you do on your Thursdays?’ she asked.

‘I told you. Meet the lads. Have a drink.’

She stared at him, lips pursed. ‘Eddy,’ she said. ‘I want you to empty the contents of your holdall.’

‘What holdall?’

‘The one you take out with you on Thursdays.’

‘But it’s... it’s private...’

She took off her engagement ring and placed it on the table. ‘I’m not going to marry someone who has secrets from me.’

‘Sometimes,’ he said sadly, ‘I wonder if you want to marry me at all. You keep putting it off and putting it off...’

‘Holdall,’ she said.

He fetched the bag and began to remove its contents.

She grabbed a pair of silver-buckled shoes. ‘What’s with the poncey clothes? And what’s this?’ she held up a small leather-bound book.

‘My pocket sonnets. You may as well know,’ he said, a flush creeping over his face. ‘I’m a Janeite.’

‘And what’s a Janeite when it’s at home?’

‘I found about them on the internet. It’s... it’s an appreciation society.’

‘I see. And what exactly does your appreciation society do? Is it one of those re-enactment groups? Are you going to start spending Saturdays running around fields and having pretend battles?’

‘Battles? Good grief, no. It’s more about the...’ he was beginning to squirm, ‘...the stories, the fashions, the romance...’

‘Romance? I’ll give you romance. So what exactly does your group do?’

‘We just read aloud... drink tea...’

‘You read?’ her voice is outraged. ‘And what exactly do you read?’

‘We’re on Northanger Abbey at the moment.’

‘Since when have you been interested in monks?’ she demanded.

‘I can see this is pointless,’ Eddy said.

‘What’s pointless?’

‘This discussion. Us. Everything.’

Lucy found out about Eddy’s wedding in the local paper. Well, she thought, he didn’t let the grass grow under his feet, did he? Since embracing social media and encouraging a more mixed membership, the Worthing Janeites seemed to be all over the place: not just on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, but out there in the real world. Every third Saturday, groups of Austen admirers got into their poke bonnets, donned their cravats and picked up their canes and parasols to promenade along the sea front in what they described as an homage to Sanditon – a place Lucy had never heard of. They came from all over the country to eat pound cake at one of the many tea houses that had sprung up alongside the shore and enjoy – if that was the word – themed dinners of broth and roast mutton in the local restaurants.

She looked at the caption under the picture: ‘Founding Janeite member marries his Isobel’. He was wearing those silly clothes she’d seen him in the night she followed him, although she had to admit there was something about that high-collared coat and embroidered waistcoat that made him look quite handsome – a bit like Colin Firth in that film he’d made

her sit through when they'd first met. She scrutinised the photo again, looking at the demure face of his insipid-looking bride and wondered vaguely why they'd had their picture taken outside Pizza Express. Some people, thought Lucy, just have no style.

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