

Janet Makes a Discovery

The sun was shining insistently through the window as Janet sat patiently at the table for two in Luigi's. Dressed smartly but casually in a mid length floral skirt and calf-hugging knee-length boots, she was beginning to regret being so heavily dressed. But the weather forecast had warned of cold winds and rain to come.

Janet wasn't waiting long, as Julie soon bounded through the door. She was dressed somewhat more casually than Julie, in a short denim skirt and a black long-sleeved top, with a little bow strategically placed at the base of its v neck. On her feet Julie was wearing flimsy black patent ballet pumps.

"Hi Janet, sorry I'm late".

"It's no problem, Julie, I only just got in myself".

"I like your skirt! I saw one like that at Next. Is that where you bought it?"

"Er, no. It was just from ASDA actually".

"Well, not to worry, it looks lovely and the boots as well. But it's such a lovely sunny day!"

"Yes", replied Janet quietly. "Well, the weather forecast was not so good and...."

Janet's voice trailed off and she looked into the middle distance, as if trying to spot a small stain on the wall opposite her.

"Is everything O.K.?"

"Yes, yes..."

"Good. How's life treating you at the moment?"

"It's good..well on the whole anyway.."

"You don't sound so certain..."

"Well, Jack's doing well.....in his first year at Grammar School. It's Lucy."

"Lucy? What's wrong?"

"Well, nothing, really....it's just that...."

"She's alright, isn't she?"

“At the moment, yes...but”

“But, what?”

“Well, she’s going to go and teach English in Thailand..”

“Well, that’s O.K. University is it?”

“No, in a refugee camp, on the border. With all these Karens...”

“Karens? Are all the people she will be teaching called Karen?”

Janet smiled at this, while Julie looked on somewhat annoyed.

“I don’t know what I said that was so funny...”, Julie said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Karen is the name of an ethnic group from Burma. Loads of them have had to flee from Burma, so my daughter tells me, because of persecution in Burma”.

“Burma? I thought everything was O.K. there now”.

“Well, apparently not. Anyway, my beloved daughter has decided to use all her education to go and live in a hut in a refugee camp in a place called Umpiem along the Thai/Burmese border. I mean what a waste...”

“It’s probably just a fad, a phase she is going through....”

“Probably yes, but I’m so worried... Living in a hut, with no proper showers. There could be all sorts of diseases in that camp and it’s still a war zone really...”

“She’ll be alright...”

“Well, I hope so. She’s so unrealistic and idealistic.”

At that Julie began to smile.

“Now I don’t know what I said that was so funny...”, Janet said.

“Do you not remember?”

“Remember what?”

“When we were young. You were so idealistic!”

“No, I wasn’t!”

Just as Janet was launching into a vigorous self-defence, a young waiter appeared and smilingly gave Julie and Janet a copy each of the menu. They both smiled back and thanked him, before putting them down.

“I wasn’t”, Janet repeated.

“You were! At school, you were always getting told off for all the badges you had on your uniform. And there was that awful punk band you dragged me along to see at the Rock Against Racism gig. I remember you went to that church youth group quite a lot, not just the open nights, but the discussions they had. You once told me at tutor time in school, so proudly, that you were going to be all that you were meant to be....”

At this it was Janet’s turn to smile again.

“Yes, I was a bit radical wasn’t I? But I don’t remember saying anything about being what I was meant to be! That doesn’t sound like me!”

“You did, really you did! I remember it well. You came into school and....”

“Well, that’s all a long time ago now...”

“Well, it was indeed. Happy days, but we’ve all moved on now haven’t we?”

“We have. Anyway, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine, but I’m worried about my mum. She’s not getting any younger and needs an operation. She seems to be having to wait a long time for it.”

“It can be a long wait these days.”

“It certainly can. I read that it was due to immigrants coming here...”

“Yeah, I read that. Health tourism. That’s what it’s called. At least I think so...”

“No, no, I think you’re right..”

“Anyway, I’m a little worried about it. I hope she can have the operation soon.”

“I’m sure. Mind I remember my mother was never very keen on your rebellious streak, when you were younger...said you were a bad influence on me....especially when you dyed your hair purple.....”, replied Julie before breaking into laughter.

“I never dyed my hair purple!”

“No, fair enough, I made that bit up!”

“But was the rest true? Was she really a bit down on me, because I was, er rebellious?”, asked Janet,

“Yes. A little bit. She was worried that I was going off the rails a bit. To be honest, she was more worried about one or two of the boyfriends I had. Very respectable my mum, you know”.

“Well, I’m sure that she would find me to be a suitable friend now.”

“Of course, Janet. A pillar of genteel respectability. Although you really do colour your hair now!”

“Thanks for that Julie. Well, you know as well as I do, that when a lady gets to a certain age a few adjustments...”

“Yes, indeed. It’s funny how those feelings that you have when you are young seem to fade over time.”

“Well, yes they do. It’s just growing up I suppose...”

“And being realistic. You have to be realistic when you have children to look after...and husbands!”

This time both Julie and Janet laughed. The waiter came over again and they ordered drinks and both decided upon the 2-course lunchtime special.

Outside the sun was fading away like springtime snow, as an army of grey clouds marched in from the west. Janet glanced out of the window and mentally thanked herself for putting on her cosy warm, boots. The pretty young woman, with her hair so attractively tied up and wearing the gorgeous red dress, who had appeared on her television screen that morning had been right after all.

“I do sometimes wonder where all the time has gone”, Janet said wistfully. “I still can’t believe that your mother thought I was such a threat.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It was all a long time ago and we’ve both changed so much. But can I pass on your best wishes next time I see her?”

“Yes, yes, of course you can”, Janet replied smiling.

The first course appeared and the conversation drifted on to other areas of concern and soon they were both sipping coffees.

“Well, that was very nice and it was lovely to see you again, Janet”, Julie commented.

“Yes. And great to see you again too! And please do pass on my best wishes to your mum. I hope she gets the operation soon”, Janet replied.”Still, I must get back, I promised John I would look after Jack, so that he could get off to watch the match. He’ll whinge something rotten if I’m not in time...”

“Oh, well, you don’t want that do you?”, said Julie and they both laughed again.

At that, they both stood up and made ready to go out. Julie glanced outside and watched two raindrops racing each other down the outside of the window pane. She looked down at her flimsy ballet pumps. Janet watched her do this, but said nothing.

Outside the restaurant, the two friends hugged briefly, not wanting to spend too long in the heavy rain, which was beginning to turn to sleet, before bidding each other a fond farewell. Julie made her way off towards her car, whilst Janet went in the opposite direction, towards her bus-stop. As she walked along, she could just about hear the heels of her expensive boots clicking on the pavement, above the howl of the wind and the roar of Saturday afternoon traffic. They had been a lot of money, but on a day like this...

Janet had nearly reached her bus-stop when she saw a man sheltering forlornly in a doorway. She was just walking past him, clicking her expensive heels, when he cried out to Janet, in what she thought was a foreign accent.

“Excuse me. Do you have any money? I have nothing.”

Janet made to move on and ignore him. She was tired of beggars. Why couldn’t they just find a job and pay their way, like she had always done? Even when she was at school, Janet had had a part-time job at a local school when she was in the 6th form. Janet smiled as she quickly reflected on how he couldn’t have had that job, if she really had had purple hair. And yet, as he forlornly asked her again, just before she could have been safely out of earshot, something made her turn round. She could hardly believe just what she was doing as she walked up to the man and stood before him, while a particularly cold drop of sleet made its way down her neck. Janet looked into his eyes and saw a whirlpool of the deepest misery. It seemed like his whole body was shaking.

“Can you spare some change?”, the man asked again returning the look into Janet’s eyes.

“Yes, yes of course”, Janet said without thinking as she rooted around in her lovely DKNY handbag for the few pence that would get this sad little man off her conscience. Yet when she found the money and gave it to him, Janet found that the trick hadn’t worked and the spell was not broken.

“Why are you here?”, Janet asked as another cold drop of sleet made its way down her neck.

“I come from far away. Here to be safe.”

“What in this doorway?”, Janet asked incredulously.

”No, here, in this country”, the man replied. “I come here to be safe. I have bad time. I have many nightmares and I come here to be safe”.

“Oh, you’re on of those asylum seekers?”, Janet asked.

“Yes, yes”, the man replied.

Janet stood looking at him as people walked past and the sleet began to turn to snow. It was as if she and this man were in a tiny bubble away from the rest of the world, a place where time stood still and everything and nothing made sense. Janet and the man just looked at each other. She looked again into his eyes.

“Look, you can’t just sit here in this weather.”, Janet said eventually. “There is a little café just around the corner. Come with me and I’ll buy you a hot drink.”

The man said nothing and Janet began to feel a streak of annoyance burn through her with as much heat as the trickle of sleet down her neck had been cold. But as he got to his feet he looked at her in a certain way and the annoyance disappeared.

Two minutes later Janet and the man were sitting in a local café, as a waitress brought them both steaming hot mugs of tea. It wasn’t the kind of place where Janet would normally go, but it was cosy enough and at least it was warm and dry. The young man gradually stopped shaking, as they both sat in silence for a minute or two, before Janet ventured a few words.

“Why were you on the streets?”

“On the streets?”

“Yes, why were you sitting in the doorway?”

“Because I fail application. I have no money. I need to contact friend but no money and no phone.”

“I thought you all got mobile phones as soon as you got into this country”, Janet replied.

“Sorry, I do not understand”.

“I thought..... Oh, never mind, don’t worry about it.. Who do you need to phone?”

“My friend. He might be able to help.”

Just then a loud ringing sound came from within Janet’s handbag. After a short search, Janet was able to find her phone and speak into it.

“Hello, Janet speaking.”

The young man was just about able to hear the angry voice at the other end of the phone.

“Yes, I know I said that I would be home by 2.30, but something has cropped up.” Janet replied, glancing at the gathering gloom and swirling white outside “It will be called off anyway won’t it? Oh, alright there’s underfloor heating, but anyway I’m doing something important.....What am I doing?Well, I’m sitting in a café, with this young man and.....John? John?”.

Janet muttered to herself and turned the phone off before putting it away in her handbag. There was a short silence.

“Can I use your phone please?”

“Use my phone?”

“Yes, please. I need to phone friend...”

Janet was taken aback at first by such a bold request. Had she not done enough? She had got this man off the streets, taken him to a café, bought him a hot drink and now this She should already be home....but then Janet looked again at the man in front of her and some long forgotten feeling rose inside her. She had no choice and she knew it.

“Yes, sure”, Janet said, reaching back into her handbag to retrieve her top of the range phone.

“Here”, Janet said handing over the phone.

“Thank you”, the man said before trying to make it work. After a few seconds he gave up and handed the phone back.

I’m sorry, I do not know this phone”.

Janet smiled gently and patiently showed the man how to use it., before handing it back. The young man thanked her, followed Janet’s instructions and began speaking into the phone in a language Janet didn’t understand. She looked around the almost deserted café while he spoke, her gaze soon settling on two teenage girls chatting in a secretive way in one corner. Their hair was cut in wild rebellious styles and they were both wearing heavy Goth make-up. Their jackets were covered in badges and both wore skirts which were so short they might as well have been belts above their jet black tights and Doc Marten boots.

Janet gazed at them as the young man continued his conversation. While she couldn’t understand the language, there was no disguising the urgency in his tone. Janet

momentarily wondered if John was trying to phone back and if the match was really going to be on. Then she gazed again at the two girls in the corner and she smiled softly, as her mind drifted back to a conversation she had had with Julie at school so many years before.

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