

ISABEL ASHDOWN

Hurry
up
and
Wait


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Sarah waits at the kerbside, her winter coat buttoned up tight against the cold night air. The tang of sea spray whips through the lamp-lit High Street, as the distant rumble of clawing waves travels in from the dark shoreline, up and over the hedges and gardens of East Selton. It's an ancient echo, both soothing and unsettling in its familiarity. She checks her watch. She's early.

At the far end of the Parade, an old Citroën turns the corner and rattles along the street, drawing to a stop alongside her. She stoops to peer through the window, and sees John Gilroy smiling broadly, stretching across to open the passenger door, which has lost its outside handle. She slides into the seat, pulling the door shut with a hollow clatter.

'It's good to see you, John,' she says, returning his smile, not knowing whether to kiss him or not. She runs her fingers through her hair. 'This is a bit weird, isn't it?'

John pinches his bottom lip between his fingers and frowns. 'Yeah, *really* weird.'

There's a moment's pause as they look at each other.

'I suppose we'd better get it over with, then?' he says, releasing the handbrake and pulling away.

They cruise slowly along the deserted Parade as the wind buffets the faded canvas roof of the car, whistling out across the night. Sarah draws the seatbelt across her body, clunking it into place between the seats. A disquieting recollection rattles her,

a sense of having been here before, with John at her side. She studies his face as he struggles with the gear-change from second to third, a slice of mild irritation still lodged between his black eyebrows. ‘Sticky gearbox,’ he mutters as it grinds into gear.

Sarah gazes out at the shop windows as they pass through the High Street. She remembers old Mr Phipps from the tobacconist’s. Every Saturday morning Dad would take her there on the way back from the paper shop, and she’d choose something from the jars at the back of the counter. It was a tiny vanilla-smelling store, its walls adorned with framed black and white photographs of the screen greats: Clark Gable; Bette Davis; Victor Mature. She notices the estate agent’s, on the corner opposite the war memorial, although the name over the top has changed.

‘I couldn’t believe it when I got your email,’ she says. ‘It’s been years.’

‘Twenty-four years,’ John replies.

She nods.

‘I worked it out. It was just before your sixteenth birthday, wasn’t it?’

‘You’ve got a good memory.’

He keeps his eyes fixed on the road ahead. ‘Well, one minute you were there, and the next you’d gone. It sort of sticks in your mind.’

Sarah shivers against the cold. ‘The town gives me the creeps, to be honest. When I checked into the B&B this afternoon, the woman who owns it seemed familiar, but I don’t know why. I guess she’s just got that Selton look.’

‘What’s a “Selton look”?’

‘Don’t know. But it puts me on edge, whatever it is.’

John scowls, feigning offence.

‘Not you, though!’ she says quickly. ‘You don’t count.’

She notices he’s wearing a knitted waistcoat under his jacket. It’s a bit hippyish but she’s pleased to see he’s no longer in the black prog-rock T-shirts that seemed to be welded to his torso throughout the eighties.

They turn into School Lane.

‘So, who are you dreading most tonight?’ John asks.

‘Oh, God, what a question! It would be easier to say who I’m not dreading.’

‘OK, then. Who?’

A light mist of freezing fog has started to descend, and the windscreen wipers squeak into action.

‘Actually it’s the same people. I’m looking forward to seeing certain people but dreading them at the same time. Tina and Kate are the obvious ones.’

‘Dante?’ John asks, briefly turning his eyes on her with a small smile.

She blinks. ‘He probably ended up in some rock band in L.A. That was the trouble with Dante. Too cool for school.’

John laughs, rubbing his chin.

They pull up in the new car park at the rear of the girls’ building, a few rows back from the large open double doors of the gym. Sarah scans the area, trying to make sense of the layout. ‘This bit used to be the netball court,’ she says. ‘Can you believe they’ve built a car park on it?’

John shrugs. ‘Well, I suppose the schools are even bigger now than in our day. I’m surprised they haven’t merged the boys’ and girls’ schools into one. It would make sense, wouldn’t it?’

Sarah’s fingers fiddle nervously with the charm bracelet beneath the sleeve of her coat. She rolls a small silver conch between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Do you mind if we just sit here a moment?’ she asks.

John shifts in his seat. ‘We can sit here as long as you like.’ He reaches inside his jacket and brings out the postcard-sized invitation. ‘I wonder who designed the cheesy invites? Look at this: “*Wanna know what your old school friends have been Kajagoogooing? Then put on your leg warmers and Walk this Way for a Wham Fantastic night out...*”’

‘Stop!’ Sarah laughs, clapping her hands over her ears. ‘I can’t believe I let you talk me into coming.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ he says, slipping the card back in his jacket.

A taxi pulls up outside the entrance to the gym and a small group of men and women disembark. The men are clutching cans of lager, and they stumble on to the pavement, laughing and shouting to each other. Sarah recognises one of the women as a girl from her class, but she can't quite grasp the name. Melanie? Or perhaps it was Mandy.

'Bloody hell,' says John, grimacing. 'Look at the state of them.'

Sarah blows air through pursed lips, watching her white breath slowly drift and disperse inside the car. Her eyes rest on the funny little gearstick, poking out of the dashboard like a tiny umbrella handle. 'Is this a Citroën Dyane?'

John leans into the windscreen to wipe the moisture away with a sponge. It's a stiff synthetic sponge, and all it does is turn the condensation to water, which runs into a pool on the dashboard. 'Yep. My trusty old Dyane. It's a bit of a renovation project.'

'Thought so,' she says. 'It's freezing. Just like my dad's old car.'

He sticks the sponge under the dashboard. 'I know. I really liked his car. Used to see it chugging through the town sometimes, and I thought, one day, when I've got a bit of money, I'd like one of those.'

Sarah leans across and kisses him on the cheek. It takes them both by surprise, and she draws her hand to her mouth.

'Sorry,' she says from behind her glove. 'I'm a bit nervous.'

John shifts in his seat so he's facing the windscreen. 'Me too.'

Two screaming women run down the side of the car towards the school, click-clacking on high heels. Sarah tries to make them out, but they're strangers to her. She draws a smiley face on her misted side window.

'We'd better go in,' says John, 'before the car steams up completely.'

Sarah stares ahead, her fingers curled around the still-buckled belt strap. 'Just five more minutes.'