



THE HOLIDAY

by

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They had honeymooned in Brixham in 1967, she and Malcolm. The ‘summer of love’, people had called it. It had certainly been that for Sylvia, twenty-two and as pristine a virgin as ever there was. Girls were, in those days, she thought, sitting on the bench with her ice cream. You waited until you were married; kept yourself for your husband. Now you were free to love whoever and whenever you pleased. Two young women were mooching towards the old breakwater, arm in arm, confident and comfortable with one another. She watched them smile at something, heads bent close in affection.

The blonde one was sporting a tattoo. An intricate pattern of thorns and roses all over her shoulder. She could hear Malcolm tutting, even now. Nudging her elbow. *Look at that, would you?* Was it real, or one of those temporary ones you could have painted onto your arm in the harbour, down by the Golden Hind? It looked real, she decided.

The guest house was still here. Fifty-four years ago, it had smelled of cats and cabbage, but she supposed that it was much cleaner now. It would have to be, what with health and safety requirements. And no longer run by that fierce woman. What was her name? Sylvia forced herself to remember. She forced herself to remember little things every day. Mrs Brinton. That was it. *Brinton - like the carpets*, Malcolm had said. They had giggled over his joke like children as they discovered one another under the counterpane. Mrs Brinton had looked about ninety, even then, and would be long dead by now. Every year, every anniversary, Malcolm had made the same tired joke. She had laughed along, obligingly – at least until his memory had begun to fade and they had stopped laughing.

She wasn't staying at the guest house. She had fancied somewhere different. Modern. Fresh. The hotel was lovely. Everywhere was lightly perfumed with citrus. Her room was airy and clean, overlooking the sea front. There were plump white pillows on the bed, and several little cushions covered in shiny sequins that she didn't really know what to do with. She had piled them up on the small mushroom-coloured sofa and hoped that no one thought her foolish.

A seagull landed on the low harbour wall and cocked its head, hard eyes watching her ice cream cone for a moment before taking off, out over the sea. Sylvia watched it beat its wings, faster and faster, until it was high enough to soar in the warm air.

She might stroll back to that little restaurant she had seen on her morning walk. *Shoals*, it was called. Next to the old lido. It had looked nice, and with a lovely view over the bay. The menu offered monkfish, squid, and skate wings. Malcolm had loved his fish and chips. Cod, of course. Always cod. He was traditional, like that, and he would never have countenanced anything so fancy as monkfish. Sylvia had discovered it only when her daughter had taken her out. Malcolm had been in a local care home for a week. Respite, they called it. Claire had taken her somewhere very smart. Just the two of them. Proper conversation – the sort she had been pining for – and delicious food. She had ordered monkfish, at Claire’s suggestion, in a white wine and cream sauce, and tasted heaven. It had been a respite indeed. But it had also been a tantalising hint of something – and she had felt guilty about it.

Sylvia didn’t want fish and chips. She didn’t want to sit on a bench in the harbour and eat chips from paper, like she had with Malcolm all those years ago. It had been such a treat at the time – less so every holiday as the years rolled on. Now she wanted a table, and a waiter, and a glass of wine.

She popped the end of the ice cream cone into her mouth, wiped the last of the cookies and cream from her lips with an insubstantial paper serviette, and stood up. The tide was coming in, and the boats in the harbour that had earlier been leaning, stuck fast in the green mud, were beginning to bob about, as if happy to be surrounded by water again.

She would take the longer route, watch the people at the Prince William laughing over their pints, hear the chatter and shrieks of the children catching crabs in garish nets and plastic buckets, on the way.

She walked on, feeling the welcome stretch in her calves at the gentle incline, until she reached the restaurant. Yes, a table for one person – just one. Yes, earlier would be better, and outside, please, so that she might enjoy the scent of the evening air and worry less about the dreaded Covid.

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Sylvia was lying on the bed, taking a nap, when the mobile phone rang. Claire, checking up on her.

It had been Claire who had suggested the holiday to her. She could do with a break, a chance to rest and relax, after everything. Claire was the headteacher in a large primary school in north London. She lived such a full and hectic life that she assumed that all that anyone could possibly want was a rest. Sylvia had tried to tell her that she did not need to rest. She needed to find herself again. Rediscover who she was. But she had no way of finding the words – especially when she had no idea what she was looking for. Not after five decades.

Claire had suggested a coach tour, a company that took good care of widows, but Sylvia had not wanted to be cooped up on a bus visiting stately homes. She wanted to stare at the sea and listen to her own thoughts not the clucking of old women. So, she booked a train to Paignton, and a taxi from there to Brixham. She negotiated the internet and found a hotel, and then announced her intention to Claire – who could hardly demur.

Yes, she was all right. The hotel was lovely, properly sanitised every day, and run by two very nice young men who seemed to be a couple. The weather was glorious, and she was going out for dinner. Yes, on her own. She had a book. And yes, it was all very restful, darling.

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She nursed a large glass of chilled white wine, gazed out across the bay, and felt her shoulders soften. The sun was still warm, and she had draped her cardigan over the back of the chair. Her book lay unopened next to the napkin. She didn't wish to read. She was watching the seagulls wheeling around the sky, rising and falling and rising again, laughing together.

The salt and pepper squid was delicious. She dipped a piece into the hot chilli sauce and let the flavours fill her mouth. Savoury and sweet. Tender and sharp.

Five years, she had spent nursing him, watching his every move, staying one step ahead in case he wandered off, fell over, scalded himself making the tea, or put the tea bag into a saucepan instead of the mug. She had been his shadow, in those early days – when she had known, but he had refused to acknowledge it. Prompting him with the word, the name, supplying the story or the memory when he faltered. Except for that one week of respite, she had lived her life not only with him, but for him.

Her face began to glow with the sun and the wine. She chose the monkfish, of course. In a whisky sauce – which felt daring. And chocolate fudge cake for pudding – because life was now for living.

The sky was turning a deep velvety blue. The moon was a thin curl of lemon peel, and she could see Venus, the evening star, had appeared just above the horizon. A single bright spot at the darkest point where the sky met the blackness of the sea.

The waiter brought her bill on a little dish. They were not hurrying her on – *not at all, madam* – but she was a single diner, and the table might yet be used by someone else. She would wander slowly back to the hotel. Savour the warmth of the evening. She wanted to breathe it all in.

She fished her card from her handbag, waiting for the waiter to bring out the card reader, and reached for her cardigan.

It was probably the wine making her reckless, but she resolved to visit that stall in the harbour tomorrow – the one offering temporary tattoos. She knew exactly the design she wanted. She could almost see it on her bare forearm, under the restaurant's fairy lights. A pair of sea birds, near to her wrist, their wings outstretched, soaring upwards.