

Until Four

I know she's not on Facebook – I've looked - but I put her name into Google. The sound of the rain was stopping me from sleeping anyway.

I've Googled her so often now I recognise most of the hits, none of which have got me anywhere. I've been through countless pages of images looking for her face. Trying to imagine how she might have changed. Hair long or short? A different colour? Every time I try different search strategies, different combinations in the hope of finding her. But she's not the dog-trainer in Taunton. Nor the hypnotherapist in Liverpool, the estate agent in Glasgow, the City lawyer. I curse the ubiquity of her name. They say we all leave a digital footprint but it's as if hers has been washed away by the rain. Or as if I have imagined her and the night she said "*You can stay until four.*"

How many years ago was it? Fifteen? No, nearer twenty. It was raining that night as well. It was late and we were in her apartment. We must have been out somewhere I suppose; a movie, dinner or something. It's odd but looking back I don't remember what we had done that evening. Kate brought out a bottle of wine and two glasses, music was playing. Some soft rock that she loved and I hated but tolerated. The scene sounds romantic, but it had never been like that. We were friends, nothing more.

Until, that is, I ran my fingers gently over her foot. It seemed the natural thing to do. There it was, on the sofa beside me, calling out to me like something from Lewis Carroll. "*Caress me,*" it said.

'What are you doing?' Kate asked. Not angrily but quietly puzzled. She didn't move away.

'Stroking your foot.' My fingers explored her ankle and she shifted her leg to allow my hand more room.

We'd been close for a few years. Not that on the face of it we had much in common. No dating app would ever have paired us. Kate came in different shades. Sometimes she was the professional career woman in the smartly cut suit, other times the convent girl gone feral. Up and down; happy and outgoing when she wasn't depressive. I was none of those things and yet somehow there was a connection between us. A mutual shoulder to cry on when things weren't working out. We had kissed just once.

She sat upright, moved closer to me, and laid the palm of her hand on my chest.

'I'm not sure I'm over him yet.' I knew who she meant. The man she'd been chasing for months without getting anywhere. But her hand stayed where it was and I wondered if she could feel my heartbeat.

'I know.' I also wasn't over someone. A woman that I thought I would probably never be over. For all our differences that was one thing we shared: a hopeless unrequited love that we knew would never be returned but to which we were addicted and couldn't give up. Wouldn't give up. Once, in the early hours after a party, when both of us had been rejected by those we loved, we lay on the floor and held each other. Just held each other tightly. It might have been that night or one much like it that we agreed to marry if we were both still single when we hit forty.

I put my arm round her, pulling her gently towards me. She had shoulder length auburn hair that was never quite under control and it fell across her face. I wondered where we were going with this, pulled between desire and not wanting to destroy our friendship.

'Is there something wrong with us?' Kate asked. I wasn't sure if she meant our mutual obsessions or what we were doing. Or perhaps what we weren't about to do. 'Is it too much to ask to be loved?'

'No.' I resisted the trite "*I love you*". She would have seen through it in a moment and even I knew that it wasn't true. But what did I feel for her? More than friendship, more than companionship, it was as if she complemented me. Completed me. Not love then but something else. Something equally precious, perhaps more so.

The weather was getting worse. A door slammed in the wind.

'Do you remember the night we kissed?' I asked.

'Never.' She denied it. 'When was that?'

'I didn't think you did. It was the night you lost your keys and had to stay at my place.'

'I do remember that. And we kissed? Who started it?' Kate sat up, brightness in her eyes, wanting to know. 'Was it a long lingering kiss? Were there tongues? Two teenagers in the back row? Or was it a polite kiss for a Great-Aunt? Tight closed lips against cold unwelcoming cheek.'

'Somewhere in between those extremes. And you started it.'

'I did?' She seemed amused by the thought.

'I so wanted you then. I've never told you that before.' I was surprised at this admission. Not that it wasn't true, but that I had said it.

'But...' she began.

'But you were drunk. Nothing happened.' Kate pulled away from me. She looked troubled. 'Sorry. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you that,' I said, wishing that conversation had a backspace delete function.

'I don't know. It just seems strange that every time we've been together you've been thinking of me that way.'

We were silent for a minute until she looked at me as if she had come to a decision.

‘This time I’m going to remember it.’

We kissed. Gently. Tenderly. Seeking out each other. I could taste the cabernet sauvignon on her lips. We paused and I longed to slowly undo her top, button by button, but she was wearing a simple T-shirt with nothing to unfasten.

I hesitated and then it was too late.

‘You can stay until four,’ she said. I didn’t need to check the time to understand that this was an invitation to sleep with her but not to spend the night. I knew then that it wasn’t going to happen, that the relationship we had was too important and too delicate. Nothing would have been the same again. I moved away from her.

‘Perhaps I should go.’ I stood up and crossed the room to the door. ‘Sorry.’

Kate was silent as I left. Her face gave nothing away and I had no idea if she was hurt or relieved. But of course things never were the same again. When I next saw Kate, in the sandwich shop near work, she turned her back on me and walked away. In time we were friends again but always at a distance. The connection had been broken. We never spoke about that night and not long afterwards she moved abroad.

The rain has finally eased and I realise that it is getting light. How long have I been online? I go back to bed and lie there knowing it is pointless trying to sleep now. The alarm will go soon enough with Radio 4 announcing the start of the day. While I wait for John Humphrys I wonder: “*What if?*”

What if Kate had been wearing a blouse with buttons that came easily to hand?

What if I had stayed until four?

What if?