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The Way We Were

Written by Sinéad Moriarty

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The Way We Were

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London, Holland Park, November 2014

Dan reached over and took two glasses of champagne from the waiter. Handing one to Alice, he smiled reassuringly at her, then tapped his to get everyone's attention. He cleared his throat and made a toast: 'I'm so happy that you, my closest friends, could be here tonight to meet Alice properly. You all know my story, and you also know from me that Alice has had a very difficult time. I feel very lucky to have met her. Second chances are hard to come by in life, and I'm grabbing this one with both hands. Here's to new beginnings with the most wonderful woman in the world.'

He pulled her close and kissed her as his friends clapped and cheered.

Alice glanced over at Jools and Holly, who were standing in the corner with Dan's daughter, Stella. Jools smiled crookedly at her mother, while Holly gave her a double thumbs-up. Alice smiled back and allowed herself to breathe. Everything was going to be fine. She had made the right decision.

Alice leaned into Dan and said, 'Thank you for . . . well, for everything. For saving me and for making me see that I could be happy again . . .'

She stopped as her voice quivered.

Dan kissed her hand. 'You're the one who's made *me* happy. I want to tell them about the engagement.' Alice tried to protest but before she could stop him, he bellowed, 'One final thing. I've asked Alice to marry me.'

The room went silent. Clearly Dan's friends had not been expecting this. But then someone began to clap and everyone joined in.

Alice frowned. 'Dan, I told you I needed time for me and the girls to get used to the idea before announcing it.'

'Relax, darling, I told the girls when they arrived that I was going to announce it tonight. They told me to go ahead.' Dan beamed

Before Alice could say anything else, there was a quiet cough at Dan's elbow and the event organizer shot him an apologetic smile. 'Excuse me, so sorry to interrupt, but I'd just like to check when you wish the food to be served, Mr Penfold.'

Dan kissed Alice once more, then headed towards the kitchen. Alice's brother, Kevin, came over to her. Squeezing her hand, he said, 'Calm down, it was going to come out soon anyway.'

'I know, but I don't like surprises. I'm worried about the girls.'

'They're fine. They really like Dan. Alice, smile, you're going to scare the guests.'

Alice laughed, letting go of the tension in her stomach. 'You're right. I guess I'm still getting used to the idea of marrying someone else.'

'You deserve to be happy. He's a good man. You have to look forward now.'

Alice's eyes filled with tears. 'Thanks, Kevin, you've been brilliant. I really do love Dan and, like he said, I'm going to take this second chance and embrace it.'

'Good for you,' he said. 'If only his brother was gay – I could get seriously used to this.' He waved his hand around at the plush furnishings and enormous chandeliers.

'Your prince will come,' Alice teased him.

‘When? I’m not getting any younger. Older gay men are not in demand, especially the ones with no money!’

‘If it can happen to me, it can happen to you.’ Alice kissed her brother’s cheek.

‘By the way, you should probably say something, Alice. I overheard one of Dan’s friends mutter that he hoped Dan was doing the right thing. They all seem nice enough, but I’d say the idea of him taking on a widow and two kids has raised a few eyebrows.’

Alice sighed. She and Dan had kept to themselves during their whirlwind romance so she didn’t know his friends, but she did want them to like her. There were about twenty people gathered in the room, and she was doing her best to talk to each one. They seemed very nice, but it was all a bit intimidating. She decided her brother was right, that she needed to take the bull by the horns and say a few words.

Dan was walking towards her. As he came close she caught his hand and whispered, ‘I’d like to say something too, if that’s all right.’

He looked pleased. ‘Of course, darling.’

Alice tapped the side of her glass for silence. The chatter died down. ‘I’m sorry to string out the speeches, but I’d like to add something quickly. I never expected to be lucky enough to meet someone again, but then Dan came into my life and he’s made me see that there is such a thing as a second chance. I –’

Alice was interrupted by Mrs Jenkins, Dan’s housekeeper, who pressed her arm gently. She was holding a phone. ‘I’m sorry, Alice,’ she whispered, ‘but there’s a man on the phone who says he must talk to you urgently. An emergency. A Mr Jonathan Londis from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.’

Alice excused herself, took the phone and walked out into the vast reception area.

‘Hello?’ Alice said, her voice sounding odd in the emptiness of the large hallway.

‘Hello, Mrs Gregory, I’m calling you with some rather incredible news.’ He sounded breathless. ‘I have someone here who wants to say hello.’

Alice’s heart began to beat very fast. Her mouth went dry. What was going on? Her hands were trembling uncontrollably. ‘Hello – who is it?’

PART I

London, October 2012

Alice

Kevin locked up the surgery and handed Alice the keys.

‘God, I’m tired today.’ Alice yawned. ‘It’s been non-stop.’

‘It’s such a bitch being so popular,’ Kevin said, grinning.

Alice smiled. ‘I’m glad to be busy, but I’d just love a soak in the bath instead of a long evening wrestling with Jools about homework. And now Ben’s invited David and Pippa for dinner tomorrow night, so I’ll have to go to the shops on my way home.’

‘Maybe Ben will come home early tomorrow and help cook for his friends.’

‘Fat chance.’ Alice sighed. ‘I love David and Pippa, but dinner at nine on a Tuesday night just doesn’t suit me. I’m always so tired after dealing with Jools.’

‘You should have said no, then.’

Alice smiled at the idea. Kevin had never really grasped the concept of compromise in relationships. Which was probably why his never lasted very long. ‘Ben was really keen to have them over and we do owe them. They’re always inviting us to dinner parties in their house.’

‘Get take-out and pretend you cooked. Problem solved.’

Alice shook her head. ‘It’ll be fine. I’ll pop into M&S now on the way back. Don’t mind me, I’m just being a grump.’

‘Well, I’ll think of you slaving over a hot stove as I’m flying into NYC.’

Alice punched his arm playfully. ‘I hope you have a great

time, but don't go home with strange men. New York is dangerous.'

Kevin snorted. 'I'm planning on going home with as many strange men as will have me.'

Alice rolled her eyes. 'Like I said, have fun but be careful and safe too.'

'You'll miss me.'

'I always do when you go away, even for just a week.'

'I'm the best medical secretary around.'

'Yes, you are.' Alice kissed her brother. 'See you when you get back. Have fun.'

'I fully intend to!' Kevin winked at her. 'Now go home to your girls.'

Alice liked the fifteen-minute walk home, which allowed her to decompress. Some days being a GP was very hard – today, she'd been vomited on by a three-year-old with tonsillitis, shouted at by a patient with acute back pain and propositioned by a randy eighty-year-old man.

On days like this she envied Ben and his exciting job. He considered a general surgeon to be at a different echelon from a general practitioner. He never said it, he wouldn't dare, but she knew he thought it. He'd say things like 'I've had a hell of a day. I performed an inguinal hernia repair, a cholecystectomy, a cervical gland excision and two breast biopsies. How was your day?'

Sometimes she wanted to scream at him that (a) she had studied for almost as many years as he had and (b) she had chosen a job that allowed her to get home early for their children because someone had to be there. As a result, she not only ran a busy surgery but she also did the vast majority of the work involved in raising their two daughters. As she went into M&S, she felt a stab of envy for her husband's life:

hot-shot surgical job, no housework, setting up dinners without doing any of the organizing whatsoever. It must be nice to be Ben, she thought crossly.

Once she had decided on and bought the ingredients for dinner the next night, she walked quickly towards home. She wanted to get back in time to cook for the girls. Nora, her nanny, housekeeper and, at times, surrogate mother, was wonderful, but her cooking was very basic. When they were young it had been fine, but now the girls were a bit older, Alice was keen for them to try new things.

As she stepped into the hall of their Kensington mews home, she could hear Jools complaining: 'I'm not eating rice any more, Nora, only quinoa now.'

'Keenwa?' Nora snapped. 'Never heard of it.'

'It's kind of new. Gwyneth Paltrow eats it all the time and she's super-healthy. So can you please cook it for me?'

'Sure that one is like a toothpick. She needs a good feed. I bet you that keenwa is one of those new make-up things. One of those scientist things that'll give you cancer in the end. Meat and two veg is what you need.'

Alice rounded the corner into the kitchen where fifteen-year-old Jools was looking very put out. She was pouting in the way Alice knew well – it generally preceded an outburst of one kind or another, which Nora wouldn't tolerate.

'I think quinoa is perfectly safe, Nora. Don't worry, I'll cook it for her. Why don't you head home?'

'I will so,' Nora said. 'Himself will be wanting his pork chops and potatoes. No keenwa for him!'

Alice laughed at the idea of Nora's husband, a retired plumber from Yorkshire, eating quinoa. They were a nonsense couple. Nora was from the deepest west of Ireland,

with a sturdy farming background. When Alice had gone back to work after Jools was born, she had been delighted to find an Irish minder for her baby. Nora's kids had flown the nest and she wanted a nice job where she could earn some money. She had been there when Alice's parents had been killed in a car crash and had become a surrogate mother to Alice in many ways.

As Alice walked Nora to the door, her phone beeped. It was Ben: *Going for a cycle after work. C u about 9.*

Alice cursed. The selfish git. He had promised to help Jools with her homework tonight and now he was going for a bloody cycle. She could kill him!

'What is it?' Nora asked.

'Ben's going cycling after work. Again.'

'Sure aren't all men in their forties these days cycling around in tight shorts looking like right eejits. Don't worry, it's just a little mid-life crisis. Better his balls are tucked into the Lycra than into some young nurse.'

'Nora!'

'I'm just saying . . .'

Alice sighed. 'Let's hope it's not both!'

Nora slapped her arm gently. 'Stop that now. Ben is devoted to you and the girls. He's a good man, Alice. Let him off on his bike. This phase he's going through will wear off. He'll tire himself out eventually, or the Lycra will cut off his blood circulation. Either way, he'll get fed up.'

Alice laughed and waved Nora off. It had started to rain and she half hoped it might put Ben off cycling so he'd turn up before nine and do the homework shift.

When she went back into the kitchen, Jools was flicking through the Gwyneth Paltrow cookbook. Alice had bought it a few weeks previously in an effort to try different recipes and be more healthy generally. So far she'd only made one

dish from it and she'd ended up eating a whole box of Maltesers afterwards, which had cancelled out her effort at healthy eating. Mind you, she liked looking at the pictures of Gwyneth and her beautiful children, sunlight kissing the tops of their heads.

Jools closed the book with a slap. 'So, we need to talk about my party.'

Alice smiled. Jools seemed to think turning sixteen deserved some kind of jubilee celebration.

'I know I said I wanted to be healthier,' Jools went on, 'but when it comes to my party, I want a chocolate bonanza. I want —'

'I would like,' Alice interrupted.

'Fine. I would like a chocolate cake, with Harry from One Direction on it, and a sleepover with my seven best friends — I've decided to invite Harriet, too, even though she's kind of a nerd but she's funny — and we're not watching some lame film. We're going to watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and I don't care what you say.'

Leaning over the table Alice said, 'Let me stop you right there. You will not be watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because it's really violent and frightening and is not suitable for you or your friends.'

Jools slammed her hand onto the marble countertop. 'I knew you'd say that. I knew you'd ruin my party. I'm going to ask Daddy — he'll let me.'

Of course he will, Alice thought. His giving in to Jools was the main issue that Ben and she argued about. Ben completely indulged Jools and it drove Alice nuts.

Alice reckoned it was because Jools was their firstborn, a girl and looked just like him. The moment Jools had been born, Ben had fallen head over heels in love with her. When he'd held her for the first time, he'd cried. The love in his

eyes was overwhelming. Alice had known he'd be a great dad, but she'd also had the foresight to anticipate trouble ahead. A man so besotted with his daughter was going to be a walk-over when it came to discipline. Ben found it very hard to say no to Jools, so Alice had ended up with the role of 'bad cop'. Alice loved her daughter more than anything, but she didn't want her turning into a spoilt brat. She wanted her to know the value of things, to appreciate what she had and not to take everything for granted.

Holly had come along four years later and had been a dream child. Where Jools hadn't slept through the night until she was three, Holly had from ten weeks. Even as a baby Jools had demanded everyone's attention but Holly had always found something to occupy herself. Half the time Alice and Ben would forget Holly was even in the room. She was always so quiet and concentrated.

Alice knew it was wrong to compare children, and that she shouldn't, but if she was being really honest, she found Jools very trying and Holly was just . . . well, easy.

Alice took a deep breath to calm herself. She didn't want to get into an argument with Jools. 'What do you want for breakfast on Friday? You know you're allowed anything you want on your birthday.'

Jools didn't hesitate. 'Pancakes filled with whipped cream and Nutella.'

'I really don't think you need cream on top of Nutella – you'll be sick.'

Jools eyeballed her mother. 'You said I could have anything I wanted.'

'Yes, but I thought you were trying to be more healthy.'

Jools snorted. 'I'm hardly going to have quinoa in my birthday pancakes.'

Alice decided to let this one go. ‘Fine, but don’t come crying to me if you throw up in school from sugar overload.’

‘Don’t worry, I’d never come crying to you. Daddy’s the one I go to when I’m upset about anything.’

Alice tried not to show that she was hurt. She knew she was strict but she wasn’t unsympathetic. Ben, on the other hand, was hardly ever home, these days, and when he was, he always sided with Jools. Alice was sick of being the bad cop. She needed Ben to help more. Lately, she had felt increasingly like a single parent.

‘That was mean, Jools,’ Holly said, as she came into the room, with a book. ‘Mummy’s just offered to make you a super-yummy breakfast. You should be grateful. There are nearly eight hundred and seventy million people in the world who don’t have enough to eat. That’s one in eight people.’

‘Will you please shut up with your stupid facts? You’re like a walking calculator.’

‘Leave your sister alone,’ Alice warned. ‘You could do with a bit more fact-finding yourself – and a little less cheek,’ she added.

‘Yeah, like I want to be a nerd like Holly,’ Jools snarled.

‘Holly is not a nerd. She’s a very clever girl.’

‘Miss Robinson says I’m a joy to teach,’ Holly defended herself.

‘Good for her. I bet you are.’ Alice kissed her.

‘Nobody likes the teacher’s pet, Holly. You’ll end up with no friends.’ Jools was unimpressed.

‘She has lots of friends!’ Alice said.

‘Like who?’ Jools asked.

‘Jackie,’ Holly said.

‘Is she the geek with the big glasses?’

‘Yes.’

‘Seriously, Holly, you need to stop banging on about boring stuff and start making some cool friends before you totally blow it and end up being cast as a total nerd. I don’t need my sister being the biggest loser in school.’

‘I feel sorry for you, Jools.’ Holly placed her book on the table. ‘You care far too much about what other people think. Miss Robinson says you should be true to yourself and not worry about other people’s opinions.’

‘Miss Robinson is officially insane. Mum, you need to talk to her and stop her ruining kids’ lives.’

Alice decided to step in. ‘OK, girls, let’s try not to argue any more. I want us to have a nice time and not fight over dinner. Jools, I’ll make you pancakes with Nutella and whipped cream for your birthday breakfast, but I’m only allowing you to eat two. I’ll make big ones.’

‘Three.’

‘Two.’

‘Three.’

‘How about two and a half?’ Holly suggested.

‘Good idea,’ Alice said.

‘Fine,’ Jools said.

‘Yummy!’ Holly enthused. ‘I can’t wait for Friday. Can I have two, Mummy?’

‘Yes, pet.’

‘Can I at least have a hot chocolate as well?’ Jools asked.

Alice knew it was a case of picking your battles, and gave in. ‘Okay.’

Jools almost smiled. ‘Thanks.’

Alice went to the fridge to get a start on dinner while Jools and Holly did their homework at the kitchen table.

Alice spotted *Little Women* in front of Jools. 'Have you finished it yet?'

Jools flushed. 'No, not yet.'

'Aren't you supposed to be doing a summary of it for next week?'

'Yes, it's fine. I'll get it done.'

Alice frowned. Jools was a slow reader. She struggled with spelling. When she was seven, Alice and Ben had thought she was dyslexic but the tests said she wasn't. She was just a very bad speller. Alice had done everything in her power to get Jools to read more as she knew it would improve her spelling, but Jools didn't enjoy it and it was a constant battle to get her to read anything.

'No television tonight. I want you to read for an hour instead. You need to finish it, Jools. It's a brilliant book. You'll love it once you get into it.'

'That's what you said about those stupid *St Clare's* books with all those dorks at boarding-school having midnight feasts and playing lame stink-bomb tricks on their ridiculous French teacher. They were beyond boring.'

'If you'd read more than the first twenty pages, you would probably have enjoyed them.'

'I love those books, and the *Naughtiest Girl in the School* ones,' Holly said. 'I'd like to go to boarding-school.'

Jools snorted. 'You should go to a boarding-school for geeks. You'd fit right in.'

'Stop it!' Alice snapped. 'Holly isn't a geek, she's clever and studious.'

'Yeah, and I'm thick,' Jools muttered.

'No, you aren't. You just need to concentrate your mind a bit more.'

'Yeah, right! It's OK, Mum, I know I'm rubbish at school'

but I'm popular and good-looking so I'll be fine. You won't have to look after me. I'll marry some millionaire and live in LA.'

'I like looking after you and I hope you marry someone you love, regardless of the size of his wallet. Besides, I'd hate you to live in LA – it's too far away and it's full of vacuous people who've had too much plastic surgery.'

'Is "vacuous" a kind of Botox?'

Alice tried not to laugh. 'No.'

'Is it a type of filler?'

'How do you even know about these things?'

Jools shrugged. 'The Kardashians. They get it done and they look amazing.'

Alice frowned. 'I told you that I didn't want you watching that rubbish any more.'

'Then how come I caught you watching it last week?'

Alice had been caught red-handed, glued to *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* – it was her secret guilty pleasure. After dealing with patients' problems all day, she liked nothing better than to kick back and watch cheesy reality TV.

'I wanted to see if it was as bad as I thought.' Alice fudged the question.

'"Vacuous" means "not expressing intelligent thought".' Holly looked up from her dictionary.

'The Kardashians would be an excellent example of that,' Alice noted.

'I think they rock. Their life is so cool.'

'I want to be like Malala Yousafzai,' Holly said.

Alice paused. 'Well, yes, she is incredibly brave, but I'd rather you didn't get shot for your beliefs.'

Jools's mouth dropped open. 'OMG, is she the kid who got shot because she *wanted* to go to school? I thought it was a joke when Miss Kent told us about her. Then I presumed

there was something wrong with her, like she was mentally ill or something. Why would anyone get on some stupid bus to go to school if they could stay at home? I actually said to Miss Kent that I wanted to go and live in Pakistan. It sounded awesome – no school for girls. How cool is that?’

Alice covered her eyes with her hand. ‘What did Miss Kent say?’

‘She was all red in the face and went on this crazy rant about women’s rights and sufferagettes and equality and blah-blah-blah.’

Alice didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

It was Holly’s turn to be incredulous. ‘I’m actually embarrassed to be your sister right now. Malala Yousafzai is the bravest, most courageous girl in the world. She risked her life to get an education. You’re just . . . just –’

‘What? Dumb? Stupid?’ Jools challenged her.

‘Ignorant.’

‘At least I knew Flo Rida was a rapper and not an actual place in America!’

‘Florida *is* a place in America. It’s one of the fifty states in America. He just took the name and cut it up,’ Holly countered.

‘Oh, my God, you’re like an old woman who lives in the Dark Ages,’ Jools shouted. ‘You should read less and actually watch some TV so you know what’s going on in the world.’

‘Sure, because knowing Flo Rida is some loser who can’t even sing is going to make my life so much better.’

‘You might make some actual friends if you can talk to them about normal things.’

‘You –’

Alice put a hand on each daughter’s shoulder. ‘Enough! Stop being so mean to each other. I always wanted a sister

and you're lucky to have each other. I hate seeing you guys fighting.'

'Kevin is kind of like a sister,' Jools said.

Holly giggled.

Alice grinned and went back to her cooking.