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The Honeymoon

Written by Tina Seskis

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The Honeymoon

TINA SESKIS



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PART ONE

Missing

I

Now

I gaze at the sea, and it is a wondrous, ever-shifting patchwork of paint-box blues, the likes of which I've never seen before, and I wonder if he's out there. I strain my eyes to look for a snorkel, a flash of yellow, but the glow of the indigo further out is so deep and dominant I'm not sure I would even notice. I wait forever, but still there is nothing. A bat flaps lazily above my head, and then it turns and heads back into the trees.

My feet can feel the silken scratch of the sand, and it grates against my fractured nerves. My head throbs, almost to the point of nausea. Nothing feels right. He will come back, I am sure of it. Everyone has rows, even in paradise. I just have to wait for him.

I sink down onto the beach and sit cross-legged. I let the sand sift through my fingers, soft like dust. It makes me think of ashes, the urn on the mantelpiece at home, and I wonder if he is dead. The thought drifts into my mind so calmly it borders on trauma.

Time passes. The sun continues its inexorable rise into the whisper-thin sky as the heat settles on my

skull, and my arms and legs begin to burn, even at this hour. My bones feel soft and useless. But I cannot leave. I have to wait for him. The moment I turn away will be when he comes back. After all, it's happened before. Watching for him becomes all-encompassing, like a mantra. My eyes strain with the effort, and my brain aches, and then, minutes or hours later, finally it is too much. I bow my head, and I can't look any more. I can't look out at nothing forever – it will be the undoing of me.

I stand up. The beach is empty. I walk across the soft white sand towards our bungalow, which is set back in the palm trees, nearly invisible from the beach. The sunlight freckles through the lush green canopy, and the heat is sultry. The brightness can't burn off the foreboding, though. It seems to permeate the island now, insidious and subtle. I stall, at the slightest noise from the bush, and I wonder who is there. I call his name, and I can hear the fear in my voice.

Nothing.

Perhaps it was just a lizard, or a bird. My mind is piled high with crazy theories and demonic premonitions, and the longer I wait the more the absence of my husband grows, like a monster puppet shadow over this most utopian of places.

I return to the bungalow and search, just in case, but he's not in the bedroom, nor in the lounge. I check in the bathroom, and even in these circumstances I acknowledge that there will never be another bathroom like

this. It is outdoors, enclosed by large-leaved exotic plants shielding tall white walls, and it has its own infinity plunge pool, a free-standing bath, an outside jungle shower, matching his-and-hers sinks. At night, the lamps light up the fronds of the palms and make the geckos glow, and it's almost as beautiful as on the beach itself.

But he's not to be found here either, which of course I knew, and it's at this point I decide that I can't wait any longer. I have to report that he's gone.

Seven-and-a-half years earlier

The evening Jemma met Dan was bitter and stormy, and the weather had only added to her reluctance to go. She'd even tried to compose a text politely cancelling, but she'd prevaricated over its precise wording for so long that in the end she'd decided it was too late, and far too rude, to send it. Yet sometimes being a woman of her word did Jemma no favours, and her subsequent journey to meet Dan took her through London at its worst. The rush-hour Tube had been halted in a tunnel, without explanation, for just a minute or two too long for the passengers' potential-terrorism-frazzled nerves, and unease had crept through the carriage from human to human, spreading and growing like a malevolent virus, infecting everyone. And then, when the lights had *finally* come back on and the train had lurched into the station, a tall well-dressed man had physically barged past her on the platform, as casually as if she'd been a swing door, without even looking back. She was still fuming when she reached the top of the escalator, where the warm atmosphere of below ground was replaced by a fierce, freezing rush of air that came at

her so viciously it nearly knocked her backwards. The final insult was that it was raining, hard and horizontal, and completely appearance-ruining.

The only saving grace was that the pub her date had proposed was right opposite the Tube station, as he had promised. Its fascia was newly painted, and even through the deluge Jemma could see a dim, upmarket glow coming from the hanging industrial-style lamps inside. It looked inviting, and safe, a welcome respite from the foulness of the evening. She checked her watch. Despite her journey, she was seven minutes early, and the thought of having to hang around only made her feel more irritated somehow. But at least it gave her plenty of time to dry off, compose herself, make herself look presentable. And, who knew, the evening might even be fun – and even if it wasn't, she had nothing to lose. She never had to see him again.

Jemma put her leather handbag over her head as ineffectual protection from the rain and sprinted diagonally across the road, dodging cars and buses and puddles with the expertise of a true Londoner. As she burst into the pub, someone familiar turned from the bar and looked over quizzically. *Ob shit.* Was he early too? It was a strange feeling – as if they already knew each other, which she supposed they sort of did, seeing as they'd read each other's online dating profiles and had emailed each other a couple of times. He was a little taller than she'd imagined, but still instantly recognizable, and if anything, better-looking than his

photo. Jemma realized she had no choice but to brazen it out. She marched across the dull wooden boards, her head held high, despite being completely drenched.

‘Hi – Dan?’ she said, trying to keep the question in her voice as discreet as she could manage, but still making the cute barman immediately look over.

‘Hi, yes. Jemma?’

‘Hello,’ she said, and she wondered just how bad she looked, although she supposed it didn’t matter. It wasn’t like she was ever going to marry the guy.

‘Good to meet you.’ He said it quietly, and shuffled awkwardly, making no attempt to kiss her or even shake her hand. He looked dubiously at the rain dripping off her. ‘Er, would you like a drink?’

‘In a minute,’ she said. ‘I think I’d better go and stick my head under the hairdryer first.’ She flashed him a smile that she hoped was full of bravado. ‘And then I’ll have a glass of red, thanks.’

‘Of course.’

‘I won’t be long.’ As Jemma sashayed across the half-empty room, she could hear the tap-tapping of her ankle boots, and she could feel eyes watching her. When she reached the toilets she went straight to the mirror and was relieved to see that she didn’t look quite as bad as she’d imagined. Just soaked through, and a bit flushed, perhaps. She could feel the rhythm of her heart, though: quick and insistent, definitely edgy somehow. Or maybe it was simply that she was still out of breath. She took a couple of deep gulps of air as she

grabbed some paper towels and rubbed her hair with them, wiped the water off her coat sleeves. She rummaged in her handbag, found her one item of make-up and smudged it onto her lips, rendering them pink and pale. In the absence of a comb she ruffled her pixie hair with her fingers, and decided she quite liked the wet look. Her eyes glowed, feisty yet startled, like a rambunctious tiger cub's. She'd looked worse.

When Jemma got back to the bar she could tell that the barman had sussed that she and Dan were on some kind of blind date, and she blushed. Dan picked up their drinks and led her towards the back of the pub, but even as Jemma slid into an old-fashioned booth in the corner, she still felt on show. 'Would you like to get anything to eat?' Dan asked, as his opening gambit. 'They do good tapas-type stuff.'

'No, I'm fine, thanks.' There was an awkward, self-conscious silence. She took in his khaki jacket, which looked new, and the blue shirt beneath it. She'd noticed earlier that he was wearing dark narrow-leg jeans, though she couldn't see them now, and some kind of suede boots, which she'd liked. His eyes were bark coloured.

'Have you had to come far?' he asked.

'Oh, just from work. It was only four stops on the Tube. It would have been easy – apart from the crowds, the rain, a nerve-jangling blackout in the tunnel . . .' She smiled, to show she was joking, and picked up her drink. Her hand was shaking a little, and she wondered

what was wrong with her. She felt weird in a way she hadn't expected, and that she couldn't quite put a name to. He was attractive, she had to give him that, but not at all her type – which was probably because her best friend had picked him out in the first place, saying he looked perfect for her. *Bloody Sasha*, she thought now, always thinking she should play Cupid. Why did she listen to her?

Jemma watched as Dan picked up his pint. She assumed it was real ale rather than lager, as it was rich and dark-golden, with a pale foam on the top, like spittle. His hands were rough, and although his nails were neatly clipped, they had thin lines of dirt deep under them.

'So, you're an interior designer, Jemma?' Dan was looking straight at her, unblinking. There was an intensity to his gaze which felt almost intrusive.

'Yes.'

'And what does that involve?'

'Oh, you know. Nothing remotely glamorous, like people think. Just normal office life, really ...' She paused, and Dan didn't step in to rescue her. Instead he was still staring, waiting for her to speak. 'Er, so you're a garden designer?' she managed at last. She wished he'd stop looking at her like that. 'That sounds exciting.' She almost sounded rude – her jokes had a tendency to come out wrong when she was nervous.

'Hardly,' Dan said. 'Mostly I dig holes and shift dirt about.'

‘Oh.’ What was she meant to say to that? Was he joking? Or just deliberately making it hard for her? But it didn’t matter anyway, she reminded herself. The way things were going, there was no way they’d have a second date. She just needed to get through tonight. She decided she preferred her normal method of picking up guys, which was almost always whilst drunk.

A group of men in suits entered the bar, and their blokeish banter breathed welcome life into the atmosphere, enabled Jemma and Dan’s conversation to be more private at last.

‘Have you done this many times before?’ Dan asked now.

‘No. You?’

‘A few. Nothing has really taken off.’

‘Oh,’ she said. And then the conversation fizzled out again. When she dared another look at him, his eyes were brooding, perhaps slightly tormented, and so she turned her gaze down, studied the table, the deep grooves in the dark wood, noticed how Dan’s hands seemed to meld in with it. When she imagined them touching her face she felt an odd jolt, and almost felt like asking him if he wanted to cut the crap and just go home and have sex with her, but of course she didn’t. Besides, she knew *nothing* about him. He could be anyone. He could be a stalker – or even a murderer. The thought appalled her. She’d had enough. Why were they wasting each other’s time?

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I think I’m going to have

to go in a minute . . . I, er, I've got a bit of a headache coming on.'

'Oh,' said Dan. Was he disappointed? It was hard to tell. He unnerved her somehow.

'I'm sorry,' she said. She couldn't look at him. 'I'm not usually like this. Honest.' She muttered goodbye and virtually ran across the bar, ignoring the doe-eyed barman, who was still looking far too interested in proceedings, and out into the rain. And then when Sasha called later to ask her how it had gone, Jemma was far too pissed off with her best friend to pick up.