

# The Other Side of the Story

Marian Keyes

TO: Susanjnseattle@yahoo.com

FROM: Gemma\_343@hotmail.com

SUBJECT: runaway dad

Susan, you wanted news. Well, I've got news. Although you might be sorry you asked for it. It looks like my dad has left my mam. I'm not sure how serious it is. More as and when.

Gemma xxx

When I first got the call, I thought he'd died. Two reasons. One: I've been to a worrying number of funerals over the past while - friends of my parents and worse again, parents of my friends. Two: Mam had called me on my mobile; the first time she'd ever done that because she'd always persisted in the belief that you can only call a mobile from a mobile, like they're CB radios or something. So when I put my phone to my ear and heard her choke, 'He's gone,' who could blame me for thinking that Dad had kicked the bucket and that now it was only her and me.

'He just packed a bag and left.'

'He packed a . . . ?' It was then that I realized that Dad mightn't actually be dead.

'Come home,' she said.

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'Right. . .' But I was at work. And not just in the office, but in a hotel ballroom overseeing the finishing touches to a medical conference (Seeing the Back of Backache). It was an enormous deal which had taken weeks to pull together; I'd been there until twelve-thirty the previous night coordinating the arrival of hundreds of delegates and sorting out their problems. (Relocating those in non-smoking rooms who had slipped and gone back on the fags in between booking their room and showing up for it, that sort of thing.) Today was finally Day Zero and in less than an hour's time, two hundred chiropractors would be flooding in, each expecting

- a) a name-badge and chair
- b) coffee and two biscuits (one plain, one fancy) at 11 a.m.
- c) lunch, three courses (including vegetarian option) at 12.45 p.m.
- d) coffee and two biscuits (both plain) at 3.30 p.m.
- e) evening cocktails followed by a gala dinner, with party favours, dancing and snogging (optional).

In fact when I'd answered the mobile I thought it was the screen hire guy, reassuring me he was on his way. With - this is the important bit - the screens.

'Tell me what happened,' I asked Mam, torn as I was between conflicting duties. I can't leave here. . .

'I'll tell you when you get home. Hurry. I'm in an awful state, God only knows what I'll do.'

That did it. I snapped my phone closed and looked at Andrea, who'd obviously figured out something was up.

'Everything OK?' she murmured.

'It's my dad.'

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I could see on her face that she too thought that my father had bucked the kickit (as he himself used to say). (There I am talking like he actually is dead.)

'Oh, my God . . . is it . . . is he . . . ?'

'Oh no,' I corrected, 'he's still alive.'

'Go, go, get going!' She pushed me towards the exit, clearly visualizing a deathbed farewell.

'I can't. What about all of this?' I indicated the ballroom.

'Me and Moses'll do it and I'll call the office and get Ruth over to help. Look, you've done so much work on this, what can go wrong?'

The correct answer is, of course: Just About Anything. I've been Organizing Events for seven years and in that time I've seen everything from over-refreshed speakers toppling off the stage to professors fighting over the fancy biscuits.

'Yes, but. . .' I'd threatened Andrea and Moses that even if they were dead they were to show up this morning. And here I was proposing to abandon the scene — for what exactly?

What a day. It had barely started and so many things had already gone wrong. Beginning with my hair. I hadn't had time to get it cut in ages and, in a mad fit, I'd cut the front of it myself. I'd only meant to trim it, but once I started I couldn't stop, and ended up with a ridiculously short fringe.

People sometimes said I looked a little like Liza Minnelli in Cabaret but when I arrived at the hotel this morning, Moses had greeted me with, 'Live long and prosper,' and given me the Vulcan split-fingered salute. Then, when I told him to ring the screen guy again he said solemnly, 'That would be illogical, Captain.' No longer Liza Minnelli in Cabaret but Spock from Star Trek, it seemed. (Quick note:

Moses is not a beardy biblical pensioner in a dusty dress and child-molester sandals but a hip, sharp-suited blade of Nigerian origin.)

'Go!' Andrea gave me another little push door-wards. 'Take care and let us know if we can do anything.'

Those are the kinds of words that people use when someone has died. And so I found myself out in the car park. The bone-cold January fog wound itself around me, serving as a reminder that I'd left my coat behind in the hotel. I didn't bother to go back for it, it didn't seem important.