

The Twenty-Year Itch

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Extract

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Chapter One

‘He’s packing. *All by himself!* I can hardly believe what a grown-up boy he is. Making an absolute hash of it, of course, but you have to let go, don’t you? Let them learn by their own mistakes.’

I’m on the phone to Gemma, my sister. She knows me too well. ‘Julie, you sound slightly hysterical,’ she says. ‘Perhaps I should pop over.’

‘Me? Hysterical? Not at all. Look, I’ve been through this gap-year business twice before. First with Tess, then with Katy. I’m used to it.’ I’m holding the cordless phone to my right ear. The middle finger of my left hand is doing its customary twiddle. Twiddling a lock of blonde-highlighted hair in a continual circling motion just above my left ear. I’ll regret it. I always do. Yesterday I went to the hairdresser. At eight in the morning, before work. An act of pure defiance, I’d thought at the time, observing myself dispassionately in the mirror, being blow-dried to unaccustomed sleekness. You see what we can do, my smooth, shiny, confident hair seemed to say back to me, we can survive this.

Together we can survive this.

‘You look different,’ he’d said to me in the evening, but of course he couldn’t identify what exactly was different about me. Men never can. And I wasn’t about to enlighten him. ‘Nice,’ he’d said, as I left the room.

‘Too late for nice now,’ I say to Gemma, voicing my thoughts.

‘Sorry, Julie, but I seem to have lost your flow . . .’

‘Yes, well, I suppose I am a little distracted. You see I went to the hairdresser.’

‘And . . .’

‘And nothing. I just thought you’d like to know.’

‘Have you been drinking? You sound a bit barmy,’ says Gemma. ‘Not that I’d blame you for being drunk or barmy given the circumstances.’

‘What do you take me for, Gemma?’ I reply, keen for this conversation to meander, to wander with neither aim nor direction, for as long as possible. ‘It’s ten o’clock in the morning. You know I never start on the gin before eleven a.m. on a Saturday. I tell you, last time I popped into the bedroom – on the pretext of needing to empty the wastepaper basket – he was scratching his head. Either he’s got lice or he’s completely flummoxed. A bit of me just wants to take over like I always do. He’s never had a clue when it comes to packing.’

‘Don’t even think about it, Julie. Just self-medicate – surely there’s something in your medical arsenal that will calm you down – and read the newspapers.’

‘But I could offer. It will mean he’ll be finished in half the time, and he may even get to the airport on time and not miss his flight.’

‘JULIE!’

‘What?’

‘This is not your call. It’s out of your hands. Why are you hanging around, torturing yourself like this? Leave the house or something. I’ll meet you for a coffee if you like.’

‘What do you mean torturing myself? I’m having fun. It’s a genuine spectator sport, watching him make a complete prat of himself. Anyway I can’t go out, he might need me.’

‘You’re crying, aren’t you? I can tell.’

‘Rubbish . . . Well, maybe just a bit.’ I give the hair-twiddling a rest and touch the corner of one eye with the back of my wrist. Definitely moist. ‘I mean you’re entitled to, aren’t you? It’s what you do when they leave the nest. Especially the last of the bunch. But they come back, don’t they? They don’t leave you for ever.’

‘It’s not the same, Julie. We’re not talking about Tess and Katy. We’re not talking about the girls. We’re talking about Walt, Walter. You remember who Walt is, don’t you? Walt is your husband.’

I pull a tissue from the sleeve of my sweater and blow my nose vigorously.

‘Of course I know it’s Walt. I mean you don’t go to the hairdresser because your son is going back-packing. But if your husband is bugging off for a Gap Year, well, going to the hairdresser makes some kind of sense. A statement of sorts.’

Dammit, I can feel the tears welling up. I was determined not to do this. Gemma was always the cry-baby of the family, but I’m supposed to be made of sterner stuff. Our mother had always said there’d been a mix-up in the birth-order, that from the moment I could talk – and boss and manage and organise – I had usurped Gemma’s older-sister role. Gemma didn’t seem to be bothered by it, she was so dreamy and sweet natured that she could go along with my plans while keeping a space free in her head to create the stories that helped her shine in English lessons at school, and eventually led to her becoming a writer. Gemma cried easily, but that’s because she was so sensitive to other people’s pain. She never cried because she felt sorry for herself.

‘I wish I was there so I could give you a hug,’ says Gemma.

‘Oh Gemma, I honestly think it would be easier if he had another woman. Or had gone gay on me.’ The truth is that however much I go over it in my mind, I’m still mystified as to why Walt’s doing what he’s doing. This leaving me for the Scarlet Macaws of the Brazilian rain forest, before heading for a flock of Australian sheep and moving on to some Indian yogi in a loincloth who spends all day standing on his head does *my* head in. And all this uncertainty about what’s going to happen when he comes back. *If* he comes back. ‘I don’t get it, Gemma, I really don’t.’

‘Neither do I, but you’re going to be all right you know.’

‘I don’t know about that. But I suppose I’m luckier than most. I do have the girls and my work and all my friends, and of course

you and Antony.’ My fingers travel automatically back to the tangled knot of hair behind my left ear. So much for the twenty-four quid plus tip I spent at the hairdresser yesterday. I’m sure the scarecrow look was not what my stylist had in mind.

‘Zis will show ze barztard,’ he had said, admiring his handiwork and spraying a swirling mist of lacquer somewhere in the region of my head.

‘Well, maybe not me *and* Antony,’ says Gemma.

‘What? Sorry, I don’t understand . . .’ My thoughts are darting around like fireflies searching for a mate on a summer’s night.

‘Well, you’ve been a bit wrapped up. Don’t get me wrong. Understandably wrapped up. I didn’t want to mention it.’

‘Mention what?’

‘That I’m thinking of seeing a lawyer.’

‘Antony is a lawyer.’

‘A divorce lawyer, Julie. A *divorce* lawyer. I couldn’t ask Antony to handle our own divorce. In any case, he only does corporate.’

‘That’s not funny, Gemma. I mean this whole thing with me and Walt isn’t exactly a joke.’

‘I know it’s not a joke, Julie, and believe me, I’m not kidding either.’

‘But . . . but Gemma. You can’t. You absolutely one hundred per cent definitely can’t. I simply won’t allow it.’

‘Why can’t I?’

‘You just can’t. It’s impossible. Ridiculous. I won’t be able to cope.’

‘*You* won’t be able to cope?’

‘Jesus, Gemma, I had no idea. Well, of course I did have an idea, but not that it was this serious. Just because you had a holiday fling three years ago and are killing yourself with guilt and remorse, that’s no reason to leave. You love Antony . . . Even *I* love Antony. Well, except when he’s being a pompous prick or expecting the boys to be performing seals, but his heart’s in the right place.’

‘Well then, you can marry him. With my blessing. Keep it in the family, that would be really cosy. And I can assure you that

my holiday fling has absolutely nothing to do with it. I knew you wouldn't understand. I should have kept my big mouth shut. At least until the dust of Walt's departure . . .' Gemma halts mid-sentence, as if suddenly aware that whatever she says is going to sound crass.

'It's just such a shock, Gemma, and your timing isn't exactly . . .'

Another phone rings, playing the opening bars of 'Goodness Gracious Me' . . . *Oh doctor I'm in trouble . . . Well, goodness gracious me . . .* The ring tone was Walt's doing, not mine. Being too technically incompetent to set up my own I asked Walt to choose something for me – something subtle but distinctive, and not too intrusive. This is what he came up with. I laughed a lot when I first heard it. Now every time it rings I want to hurl it at the wall. Or is it really Walt I want to hurl? When he's gone I'll change it, and I won't ask anyone to help me this time. I'll do it on my own. ON MY OWN. Three little words I hate even more than my ring tone.

'It's the mobile, I'd better take it, it might be Tess to tell me about the ultrasound.'

'Of course take it. We'll talk later.'

'Gosh, Gemma, we could do double dates.'

'I can't imagine anything more horrible.'

'Me neither.' And then despite everything I begin to laugh. And then Gemma's laughing, too. I can picture her putting down the receiver with a big grin lighting up her toothy mouth, a mouth which she customarily covers with her hand, just like Japanese women do when they giggle. Gemma has never liked her big, white teeth. Teeth too big for her sweet little face, so she covers her mouth from habit, even when no one else is there to see.

As I grab the mobile from the kitchen table I'm still chortling. 'Hi, darling,' I manage to splutter. 'Tell me the good news.'

It's not Tess on the other end though, it's Aggie.

Aggie is one of those women who never introduces herself. She doesn't even do that annoying thing of saying 'Hello, it's me,'

leaving you to wonder who the hell me is. She just launches right in.

‘Glad you’re having such a good time. What’s the joke? Fucking Armageddon here,’ she says.

‘I was expecting Tess,’ I say. ‘I’d better be quick. What’s up?’

Aggie is a drama queen. Armageddon could be running out of Touche Eclat, or a stray chin hair.

‘He knows everything. Last night. He extracted a full confession.’

‘*Everything?*’ I know exactly to what Aggie is referring. Everything means the catalogue of affairs that Aggie has been conducting throughout her twenty-year marriage to Charles. The paramour revolving door, as our gang likes to call it. The *liaisons dangereuses* that have kept her marriage all tickety-boo, as she has always insisted. Or rather the affairs that kept her marriage tickety-boo so long as Charles didn’t know about them.

‘I’m such a fool. I played too close to home. My first mistake in all these years. He’s chucking me out. I may have to come and stay for a while. Just until he agrees to take me back. He has to take me back, he has to . . .’

‘You know Walt is leaving later today,’ I say, deliberately changing the subject. I really can’t deal with Aggie’s histrionics right now. Not after Gemma’s bombshell, which I take far more seriously. I’ve always believed that Charles is fully aware of Ag’s antics, and has simply chosen to ignore them for a quiet life. If my theory is right, and he has been complicit all along, surely it won’t take long before he shrugs it off and continues as before. I decide to say none of this for now. What I want is Aggie off the phone as soon as possible in case Tess is trying to get through.

‘Of course I know,’ says Aggie. ‘That’s why I thought I might move in. Keep you company for a bit. Oh, I’m sorry, are you all right? Am I being terribly tactless? You sounded so cheery when you picked up the phone.’

Sometimes you put up with your friends despite their complete unsuitability for the job.

I'm suddenly aware of a particular patch of skin, just above my armpit, around the join where my arm meets my chest. It's been flaring up lately, intermittently itching and burning. And there's a matching dry, red patch on the other side. *Pruritis* to give it its proper name. I can't help it – you can take the girl out of medical school, but you can't take medical school out of the girl.

My skin is trying to tell me something. Of course! It's not just a stress symptom, it's a physical manifestation of what's happening to my marriage, and indeed the marriages all around me. It's the twenty-year itch. And it appears to be catching.

'You still there?' asks Aggie.

'Sorry, yes. Just that I was thinking that all this stuff that's going on, it's like a virus. It's like MRSA, only it's not just in the hospitals, and it's not bacterial, it's out here, in the general population.'

'You've lost me, Dr Broadhurst. You know I don't do this medical stuff.'

'Miss Broadhurst to you. I'm a surgeon, remember. And there's nothing medical about it, Aggie. I was just musing on my itchy skin and then I got to thinking about all the people I know whose relationships are falling apart. And it made me think that the seven-year itch has been replaced in the twenty-first century by the twenty-year itch. Itchy armpit as marriage metaphor.'

'But I've been itchy for at least fifteen of the last twenty years. The difference is I don't want my marriage to end.'

'Where did we go wrong, Ags?'

'Search me, Julie my friend.'

The sound of a man dragging a suitcase across the floor in the room above brings me back to the present.

'We'll have a war council later. Once Walt is out of the house.'

'Around seven thirty?'

'Seven thirty will be fine. And I'll get Gemma and Valentina to come, too. At least Valentina has a head on her shoulders. Despite what she's been through.'

‘And a happy marriage.’

‘Well yes, but at this rate even her marriage could be over by tonight. No, that would be the worst. I shouldn’t have said that, even as a joke.’

‘Hang on in there, Julie.’

‘You, too, Ags. Bye.’

A beep sounds out from my mobile. It’s a text from Tess, and it has an image attached to it. I press the bar to access the picture and a grainy, barely discernible image of a 12-week-old foetus appears on the screen.

‘My baby!’ says the accompanying text. ‘All is well. Beautiful/handsome genius cooking nicely. And if you think you can tell the sex, I don’t want to know.’

‘Walt!’ I screech, racing out of the room to the bottom of the staircase. ‘Walt, come here. Quickly. It’s Tess. The ultrasound is fine. The baby’s fine!’

A moment later Walt’s head and torso lean over the banister. A long-distance blur of an outline so familiar that I don’t need my glasses to help me fill in the features. The thick head of curly hair, made up of coiled springs in gun-metal grey streaked with black, reaching to below his collar and giving him a professorial air. The full, slightly feminine mouth. The still visible scar, tracing a jagged path along his nose, the result of a football boot spike slicing through it when he was a boy and a stitch-up job by someone who hadn’t learned to sew. And, most important, the stubble, which by mid-afternoon, despite daily shaving, would be clearly visible. For so many years, just by thinking about it, I could conjure up the sensation of his stubble lightly grazing my lips as I kissed his cheek or chin. It would send a tremor right through me. But that was then.

‘You see, grandma-to-be, I told you everything would be all right.’ I can hear the smile in Walt’s voice, and his acknowledgment of just how much this baby means to him as well as to Tess. I’d really rather Walt was horrible to me all the time. At least then I’d

have something to fight back against. When he's being kind, which is often, I feel utterly helpless.

I click on the text again. A new baby I can understand. I can absolutely see the point of that. A new life? For me? At fifty-three? Whatever for?