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Famous Last Words

Written by Annie Sanders

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Famous Last Words

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How it all began

The moon must have woken me, slanting in through the window onto my face, but once I woke, my brain started ticking over and I just couldn't get back to sleep. So here I am curled up in my favourite chair. I left my watch on the dressing table next door, so I'm not sure what time it is now – but the moon is throwing light across the small patch of grass I grandly call my lawn and it must be two or three a.m.

I pull the blanket more closely round my shoulders and stand up to look out of the window. I love these windows – they must be twice as tall as me and then a bit. They're what sold the flat to me all those years ago. Whilst the estate agent was wittering on about how convenient it was for town, I'd fallen in love with the high ceilings and panelled doors of this old Victorian house; had already made the flat mine in my head. I could imagine us both in it, could see the Christmases we'd spend, with the tree set up here in this bay and Nat's presents piled up underneath.

Buying this flat was probably the last spontaneous thing I did for years. Until recently, that is, when I tried to fit a lifetime's postponed spontaneity into a few short days.

Something catches my eye and I watch as a fox creeps gingerly out onto the grass, sniffs about and then scuttles away out of sight. A vixen, I think, on her own and off to raid a dustbin somewhere to feed her young. I can relate to the loneliness. At times in the past I even came pretty close to scavenging, if you

count charity shop trawls and the 'marked down' section at the supermarket.

But here I am. I can see my smile reflected in the glass. These last few weeks have turned everything upside down, and I don't think I'd recognise the woman who lived here before it all happened. Before the most extraordinary few days of my life when I thought it was all over. The woman I was before I met Micah.

It's so late now it's hardly worth going back to bed. I'm not sure I could sleep anyway. Come on. I'll tell you all about it.

Chapter One

Monday

My name is Lucy Streeter. It's always been Streeter. Of course, like we all did at school, I've tried to imagine what it would be like to be married and have someone else's name. I assumed by the time I was about twenty-eight I'd be proudly saying, 'I'm Mrs Bloggs', but it didn't happen that way.

So the name Lucy Streeter is me, and I am Lucy Streeter. Not that I regret keeping my name, you understand. And anyway, sticking with it makes things much more straightforward and uncomplicated.

And uncomplicated is how I've liked things. In fact, the pattern of my life was pretty much without change or variety for years, once Nat was at school, and even more so when he headed off to university in Leicester – once I'd stopped crying and going into his room to smell the air. But until he was five, life was far from uncomplicated. It was more like a balancing act of single motherhood and scratching a living, whilst pretending that I was young and fancy-free to anyone around me. You don't realise how wonderfully irresponsible your teens and twenties can be, until you have to be responsible.

What my father termed my 'downfall' was the fault of a trait my grandmother would have called 'being headstrong'. Teenage bloody-mindedness, combined with the desire to challenge my father's iron will and snobbery, made me determined to

do everything I could to defy him. And that included going out with the most unsuitable boy I could find. We lived near Warwick then, in a sprawling development of what they now call ‘executive homes’, each with slight differences but basically the same. With their usual habit of being sensible, my parents had bought it because it was convenient: my brother, Chris, and I would be able to walk to school – for him the nice private boys’ school, for me the nice private girls’ school, up the hill.

My route took me across the park and in the early days, when Mum walked with me, it wasn’t a problem. In fact, sometimes we’d stop on the way home and I’d play on the swings. Even better, if she was in an especially good mood, I’d be allowed an ice cream from the thatched café by the pond. Mum would sit on the bench and watch as I swung upside down on the playground equipment, pushing my luck and secretly hoping I’d fall off and have a spectacular bruise to show off at school for my daring.

The downside was that the path sent me into headlong collision with the kids heading home from the comp in the other direction. By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, I was going to school on my own. I avoided the other kids in the morning because school started earlier for us – a fact that only exacerbated our sense of intellectual superiority – but at home time, if I timed it wrong and if I didn’t have a music lesson or late games, I’d see them coming over the bridge and along the path through the park. Noisy and showing off, self-consciously smoking cigarettes, pretending to push each other into the river; then they’d be there in front of me: Neil Bartlett and his coterie.

‘He’s got a wicked face,’ my mate Kate would giggle when she was with me – and she was right. Dark scruffy hair and eyebrows that met in the middle, Neil oozed attitude. His shirt hung out, his tie was never tight, his school bag was written

on in Tippex. I was into Tiffany, 'I Think We're Alone Now' and 'Having the Time of My Life' (can't remember who that song was by at the moment). He was into the Beastie Boys, all baseball cap and the ubiquitous VW badges hanging round his neck.

I saw *Dirty Dancing* four times. He was into *Full Metal Jacket* and the gratuitous violence of *Robo Cop*. But to me then, stupid and naïve and romantic, he was my Heathcliff. I knew he was all wrong but when he pulled me close in the park and kissed me hard and inexpertly, his mouth too wet and his clutch clammy, I shook with excitement and sexual awakening.

I can't even remember now how the relationship came about. I suppose we must have started to chat when we collided, like Montagues and Capulets, by the rowing-club boathouse. Kate, who would have flirted with a lamp-post if it had shown the slightest sign of responding, probably set it going somehow, but in only a matter of days I was lying to Mum that I had a late rehearsal and was hanging around longer and longer. Neil's mates eventually peeled off, I shook off Kate (who was tactful enough to know when she was surplus to requirements), and the two of us would kick about.

I cannot imagine for one second what we found to talk about, the only thing we had in common being the fact that we lived in the same town, but I do know that I spent a long time being polite, listening to him trying to be impressive – the big I Am – and struggling with how much I liked him touching me and how much I knew he shouldn't.

'You're posh,' he'd tell me over and over again, making it sound like a criticism.

'He's common,' my father spluttered, when he found out, thanks to my brother Chris's sanctimonious hints over Sunday lunch, and that was *definitely* a criticism.

For my father it was the ultimate crime. He'd paid through

the nose for my schooling to make sure I didn't fall in with the likes of Neil. My plan had worked.

We continued our odd, secretive relationship throughout that summer term. I flunked my end-of-year exams, too busy dreaming about Neil and what we were going to do when we met next, and my parents were hauled in front of the head, who was at a loss to understand what had gone wrong with my performance and my attitude.

'It's that bloody boy,' my father fumed on the way home. 'You're far too young to get involved – especially with the likes of him – and you'll mess up your education. You only get one crack at it, you know!'

The nadir of my downfall happened when my parents went to Darlington overnight to see Auntie Jayne. Chris and I refused to go. It was boring and the prospect of us sulking in the car was enough to persuade my dad to agree to us staying behind. I know that Mum wasn't happy leaving us and she was no fool. Chris scarpered to a friend's no sooner had the tail lights left the drive, and I was on my own and due to meet Neil at five.

'Go on, they'll never know,' I can still remember him saying, his lips so close to my ear that it made my legs shiver and go weak, and the sense of exhilaration was mixed with terror as I bundled him into the house, hoping the Goughs next door hadn't noticed.

It doesn't take much to imagine what happened. No interruptions; the novelty of a soft bed as opposed to a grope in the bushes by the river; add to that the heady and dangerous cocktail of teenage hormones and curiosity.

Happy that my teenage rebellion was spent, I gently shook off Neil – making excuses why I couldn't see him – before I realised I was pregnant. I'm telling you this because it will explain things. Why I'm who I am, why I'm still Lucy Streeter,

and despite all I've done in between, why I'm still the girl who threw away her future on Neil Bartlett one sweaty Saturday afternoon in the July that I was seventeen.

It also explains why every morning for the last ten years, ever since I moved up the road to Leamington Spa, the town that blends seamlessly into Warwick, I would shut the front door and head up Warwick Road, make my way round the bin bags that someone always left annoyingly on the corner, and eventually on to Paradise Street, pick up a paper from Deepak at the newsagent and open up my shop. That's how the days would go. Straightforward and uncomplicated, because I had a son to care for and perhaps, too, because everyone was waiting for me to mess up again. Better to be boring than give them the satisfaction.

That week – *that* week – was no different. In fact, it amazes me now how we can go on with the same routine for years. Perhaps there's some reassurance in it – too much change and we get nervous – and I have to say that hearing Deepak's 'whatcha' every morning when I picked up the *Guardian* was a sort of marker buoy in the very familiar sea that was my life.

I tried not to look at the front of Sandy's shop as I passed that Monday. I say Sandy's shop, but the windows had been whited-out for a few days now and a big To Let sign had been erected over the weekend. 'Custard' – absurdly named after her childhood cat – was Sandy's shoe venture. It had kept the holistic element of Leamington in oddly-shaped and deeply unsexy footwear from Scandinavia for years. She seemed to have been doing okay to me, but perhaps Custard had too small a fan base to make it viable (even though this town has its share of yogurt-eating knitters). Its closure, virtually overnight, was too raw a reminder of how all of us on Paradise Street are holding on to our livelihoods by our fingernails. And our landlord wasn't making it any easier, but more about that later.

The last stop before my shop was, as usual, the Deli. The warm smell of coffee wrapped round me as I opened the door. There were a couple of people in there reading the paper and sipping from tall glasses of steaming latte.

‘Hi, Luce, good weekend? What can I get you? One of these?’ Sally’s smile was broad and welcoming. Her hair, as always, was scrunched up on the top of her head and her hooped silver earrings waved as she bustled over a wicker tray of muffins, all of which would be sold to hungry shoppers by eleven.

‘You are an evil temptress and I will be strong in the face of your malevolence,’ I said, or something stupid like that, and ordered a skinny latte to go, as I always did and as she knew full-well I would. But more often than not a muffin would find its way into the paper bag with the coffee. I think I must have peered through the door behind the counter to see if Richard was there.

‘Where’s your brother, then? Nursing a hangover or recovering from another bonkfest?’

Sally laughed as she blasted steam into the milk. ‘Both. He’s pretending he has a really important meeting first thing with the accountant, but I know damned well he hasn’t. He was last seen in the Pig and Whistle on Friday night with some gorgeous slip of a thing.’

I handed over the money for the coffee. ‘Pathetic in a grown man, but you have to admire his ability to still pull the chicks.’

‘‘Bout time he grew up, I reckon,’ she laughed and I waved goodbye.

Looking through the shop door, I could see a couple of bills on the mat as I balanced my bag, the coffee and the keys to reach the Yale lock. Monday post tends to be bills or strange blanket mailings trying to sell you stretchy chair covers or hearing aids. Today’s haul looked no different. I was tempted to put the bills in the bin with the mailings but instead slipped them into a

drawer to fester until I could juggle the cash flow sufficiently to pay them. As I pulled up the blinds, the shop flooded with light reflected off the white buildings opposite, casting bright slashes across the stripped wooden floor. By twelve, the sun would have come round and would be pouring in through the glass, something I had mixed feelings about. It would catch the gold in the embroidery on the coat standing on the mannequin in the window, and lift the emerald-green silk lining, but if it stayed there for too long, it would fade the fabric.

I suppose the shop always smelt the same, but you can't really smell a place you are familiar with, can you? My friends say it has a fragrance of hyacinths, but that's only because I fill the place with them the minute they are in season, cramming them into odd-shaped pots, along with tiny narcissi, because I adore them. There were always flowers of some kind, though, and on that particular day it smelt of lilies that had opened with obscene speed in the summer heat. Their heady scent didn't quite mask the smell of damp that had filled the place for weeks since the roof had leaked and rainwater had come through the ceiling of the empty room above and down into the shop onto a rail of jackets. My business manager at the bank at the end of the road would probably say buying lilies was an extravagance I should have resisted, and I should have settled for an air freshener, but what the hell? It lent something to the shop, and life's too short to be entirely sensible.

Ain't it just?

I probably went through the rails and displays of shoes and bags and accessories because I always do, making sure the stock looked good, spreading it out to make it appear as if there was more than there really was. These days, more and more of the pieces are my own designs, but it wasn't always that way. It had taken all my cash (and my energy) to transform the place from the chemist it had been into something close to my dreams. It

still had the wonderful drawers for potions and pills, but I'd had to take out the awful striplights and the vinyl flooring, replacing them with chandeliers my mum and I had found at an auction and polishing the floor until I had no fingernails left.

Because of that, I'd played it very safe and stocked tried-and-tested designers (or at least those who were prepared to supply a tiny, little-known shop in Leamington Spa), slowly sneaking in a few of my own pieces as I grew more confident. There were still the safe items – stylish but wearable tops and flowing skirts that were close enough to high-street designs to attract passers-by who didn't know about me. It was the steady flow of their purchases that had paid the rent, but little more, for years.

Rarely did those sort of shoppers part with their cash for *my* coats and dresses, though I'd watch with irritation as they fingered the silk and the velvet – in raptures over the fabrics, the colours, the embroidery.

'You've got such a talent,' they'd coo and my hopes would be raised, until they knocked me back with a sigh. 'But I've got nowhere to wear it.' So they played it safe for their parties and holidays, and the clothes I'd made stayed on the hanger.

One woman in particular – Mrs No-Buy, I'd christened her – seemed to have made a habit of coming in, getting just to the point of buying before she bottled out and complained about the price or the cut. No. My flights of fancy were more often wrapped in tissue and slipped into the stupidly expensive carrier bags I'd ordered, for my regular customers – usually friends – who'd whip out their debit cards with an 'I know I shouldn't' and 'I don't really *need* it'. And thank God they did, because their largesse (and their husbands' bank accounts) kept me and Nat out of the workhouse. And kept me motivated enough to keep designing.

How can I describe the clothes I make? You'll have to imagine something as far from my personality as you can, and if I tell

you that I am the sort of person who would rather lock myself in a darkened room than stand up in front of people and speak, then you'll have some idea of just how shy I am.

At school, I used to be amazed how girls would get up on stage in plays and *love* it, lapping up the applause and the attention. I'd be the one hiding in the shadows, happiest behind the scenes, building sets or making costumes. It is probably deeply unfashionable to enjoy sewing – it certainly was then and I kept my fascination quiet, as if it were some shameful habit – but the school drama wardrobe was my haven. With its labelled shelves crammed with hats and shoes, scarves and fabric, it was my escape: an irresistible treasure house for the imagination.

I'd sign myself up to help in all the school productions and while the cast were rehearsing upstairs, I would stay on late to create frock coats or Victorian bustled dresses from cheap bolts of lining fabric for dress rehearsals looming fast on the horizon.

Of course, my tryst with Neil Bartlett brought an end to all that. It brought an end to school completely, in fact. But that short time in the theatre does explain my designs. 'Dandyish' my mate Tamasin calls my frock-coats. Their three-quarter length and embroidered lapels do have a slight Louis-Quatorze quality about them, I suppose. Extravagant fabric – the more lush and jewel-like the better – has always been my weakness. Nat will vouch for that. Any holidays we went on – and there weren't many – usually ended up with him standing waiting while I rifled through vintage clothes stalls at markets. I must have spent a fortune pacifying him with ice cream to make up for it. I remember one trip to France when we camped in a very cheap campsite miles from any attractions that were suitable for an eight-year-old boy and I led him from one flea market to another in search of bits of braid and buttons. That cost me a hideously expensive day at the newly-opened Disneyland Paris on the way home.

Poor lamb. No wonder his favourite artist is Lichtenstein and he's decorated his room at university in wall-to-wall IKEA.

So that is the shop. My pride and joy, where I holed myself up, sewing like some latter-day clogged Hans Christian Andersen character, waiting for the door to ping as someone walked in, and my heart to race in the hope that another purchase would be made. *That* week, I remember, I was creating a dress and coat for Tamasin. Her willowy daughter, Harriet, who'd been saved from a tedious future making canapés for directors' lunches when she met her rich banker, was due to waft up the aisle in a couple of weeks' time, and Tamasin had given me the commission to transform her into the most stunning mother of the bride anywhere north of the M4. For once I was grateful that the shop was quiet – anyone with any sense would have been sunning themselves in Victoria Park – because I could concentrate. It was so bloody fiddly and I kept jabbing my finger.

By six each evening I was stiff and sore from concentrating so hard and, by Wednesday night, I was growing more and more irritated with the stitching, which in turn became irritation at the fact that the coat was for a wedding, and why was I never the bridesmaid, let alone the ruddy bride? I didn't usually resort to self-pity on the relationships front – or only when I reminded myself how long it had been since I'd last had sex – but the summer heat and the fiddly work had got to me. The prospect of stopping by at the Deli for a well-earned glass of wine was a delicious one. Well, there was sod all to go home for.