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A Question of Love

Isabel Wolff

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Extract

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ONE

'A very good morning to you,' said Terry Wogan, his voice as smooth as Guinness. 'It's ten to eight, and, if you've just tuned in, then a warm welcome to the show.'

'Thanks,' I murmured as I opened Nick's small mahogany wardrobe and surveyed his clothes with a sinking heart. To the left were his suits – two woollen ones, three linen, and some casual trousers. To the right were ten or twelve shirts. I ran my hands over them, masochistically imagining, for a moment, Nick's chest filling them, then I stopped at the dark blue silk one with the short sleeves. Patterned with tropical fish, and now faded, it had been his favourite. He'd worn it on our last holiday, four years ago.

'Now,' Wogan went on in that cheery way of his. 'Here's a song I've always been fond of . . .' I heard the opening bars, and flinched. '. . . "Just When I Needed You Most".'

I pulled out Nick's shirt, then pressed it to my face. As I inhaled the masculine aroma mixed with the faint scent of the sea, I remembered him wearing it in Crete. He was standing on our hotel balcony, his face alight with laughter, his glass of retsina uplifted as though he hadn't a care.

I miss you more than I missed you before . . .

Breathing slowly to steady my nerves, I set to work.

Now where I'll find comfort, God knows . . .

I removed the shirts, put them over my arm, then carried them down to the spare room. *Because yo-oo-ou . . . left me, just when I needed you most.*

'Yes, Nick,' I whispered. 'You did.' As I opened his father's old wooden trunk and placed them inside I wondered what other women in my position might have done. Many would have taken their husband's clothes to Oxfam long ago – but I couldn't. Somehow it just didn't seem right.

'Now . . .' I heard Wogan say as I went back into the bedroom and unhooked Nick's suits from the rail. 'Here's a question. A bit of a trick question, really. Do you know what day it is?'

'Wednesday,' I replied, as I laid the suits on the bed. 'The ninth of February.' My hands shook slightly as I buttoned up the jackets.

'It's the first day of Lent.'

'So it is.'

'A day, traditionally, for a little sober reflection, and of course a day for giving things up. So what are you all giving up for Lent then, hmm . . . ?'

I carried Nick's suits into the spare room and put them in the trunk, carefully folded between sheets of newspaper.

'Chocolate?' I heard Wogan ask as I stood up, back aching slightly. I glanced into the garden. A light snow was falling. 'That would be a tough one now, wouldn't it? Or maybe booze?' I returned to the bedroom, lifted Nick's jumpers out of the chest of drawers, then put those in the trunk as well. 'Fast food, maybe? Or sweets . . . ?'

Now I took out his shoes, then carefully unthreaded his ties from the rack. I fingered the blue and gold cashmere one he'd worn for our wedding and was nearly felled by a wave of grief.

'Swearing?' Wogan persisted. 'Smoking? Reading *OK!* and *Hello!*? Come on now everyone – let's give it some serious thought, shall we? What are we all giving up for Lent?'

I looked at our wedding photo over the bed, then reached up and took it down. 'What am I giving up? That's easy. My past.'

You have to try and get over things don't you? You have to move on, or, rather, 'let go' as they say in the popular jargon. And so, at long last, I am. I've finally put Nick's things away because I no longer want to live with a ghost. But, although I know it's something I have to do, at the same time it still feels wrong. As though I'm somehow denying that Nick ever existed or, that for six years, we had a shared life.

The hardest thing of all has been the answerphone. In three years I've never changed the message – I couldn't bring myself to – but now, at long last, I have. So, as from this morning, callers will no longer hear Nick politely saying, *Hello, we're sorry we're not here* . . . – that used to freak people out. Now they'll just hear me, on my own. *Hi – you've reached Laura* . . . I say with casual cheerfulness, as though I'm publicly acknowledging that he's gone.

This is something my sisters have been urging me to do for ages. 'It's *unbearable*!' my elder one, Felicity, would exclaim every time she came round. 'You can't carry *on* like this, Laura! The flat's a mausoleum! You've got to accept what happened and move *forward*!' My younger sister, Hope, who's more restrained, would just say, 'If you're still not ready to change things, then . . . *don't*.' But in January I finally decided that I was. My New Year resolution was to redecorate the flat – that's made a big difference to the feel of the place – and to put away all of Nick's stuff. I haven't disposed of his things – that seemed callous – I've simply hidden them, so that the outward evidence of his life here has gone. His computer, his books, his pictures and now his clothes, are all packed away in the spare room, out of sight. In one way it feels like a liberation, in another, like a betrayal. But, rationally, I know that it's not.

I miss Nick. And I still feel angry with him. They say that's a common reaction – especially if you're young. Of course it's got easier, over time. I've got used to it – I've had to – but even now, I can still be tripped up. Whenever a letter arrives for him from someone who still doesn't know, for example, and I have to write back and explain. And the way my neighbours sometimes react can upset me. This morning, for instance.

I was coming out of the flat at about nine thirty, on my way to work. For the first time in ages I was feeling energized and optimistic, ready to move forward. And I'd just locked the front door when I saw Mrs French from over the road leaving her house with her shopping trolley, on her way to Portobello. So I smiled at her, and she smiled back, but, as usual, her smile was tinged with sympathy and I almost heard her compassionate 'tut-tut'. And I realized that being, as I still am round here, an object of pity and curiosity, is going to make moving forward quite hard. Take Mrs Singh, next door. She's the same. Whenever she sees me she comes up to me and lays her hand on my arm, and asks me, very sweetly, if I'm 'all right'. And I always reply, as non-defensively as I can, 'Yes, thanks. Of course. How are you?' I don't like it, but I can't blame them because they remember Nick, and this is a gossipy little street, so I've become 'that poor girl at number eight'.

Dunchurch Road is at the far – unfashionable – end of Portobello just off Ladbroke Grove. Many of my neighbours have lived here for years, and not all of them are as charitable as Mrs French and Mrs Singh. Twice now in our tiny local supermarket I've overheard that hatchet-faced woman from number twelve telling the manager in a loud, authoritative whisper, that I must have 'driven him to it, poor man'. But then, when it happened, I know that there were a number of unpleasant theories doing the rounds. Some people blamed me – I don't know why as Nick and I were very happy, thank

you. Others thought he must have lost it with the emotional stress of his work. The most generous view of it was that Nick must have got himself in such a terrible mess that he just couldn't make sense of his life. What that mess might have been, in the absence of any firm evidence (and, believe me, I looked), was open to conjecture of the most lurid kind. But I suppose it was inevitable that there'd be rumours, not least because it got in the papers because of Nick's job. So, one way or another, I've had a lot to cope with; but now, as I say, I'm determined to move on, and to leave this sad phase of my life behind.

So, disconcerted by my encounter with Mrs French, I did some positive thinking to lift my mood. As I walked up Portobello – the sleety snowflakes whirling and eddying against my face – I reflected that work-wise at least, things have improved. As I passed the tattoo parlours and the halal butchers I reminded myself of how hard my financial position had been. There's no insurance payout in cases like mine, and Nick had left his affairs in a mess. On my TV researcher's salary I'd struggled to pay the mortgage alone, and, in my situation, I wasn't able to move. The Halifax gave me three months' grace, my family helped, and my boss, Tom, kindly gave me a rise. Now, as I passed the stalls selling cheap pashminas and tie-dye shirts, I remembered how, even so, I'd accumulated huge debts – but how I'd then found a good way to make ends meet.

Last March I saw an article in *The Times* about a company called InQuizitive which compiles quizzes for pubs. It mentioned that they were looking for freelance question-setters so, being a general knowledge junkie, I got in touch. I knew it was something I could easily do and, apart from the cash – £2.50 per question – it distracted me from my distress. Every evening after work I'd sit there with my reference books, totally absorbed, making up questions. 'Who designed the first petrol-driven car?' (Karl Benz). 'What is

stored in a mattamore?' (Grain). 'How many squares are there on a Scrabble board?' (225). 'What is the capital of Ukraine?' (Kiev). I enjoyed it. It was relaxing, and yet at the same time it gave me a buzz. And now, as I turned left down Westbourne Park Road, I thought, as I often do, about how that one newspaper article had changed my life . . .

One Friday afternoon last June I'd been in Trident TV's tiny 'boardroom' with Tom, who owns the company, and Sara the other full-time researcher – we're a very small company – and we were bouncing around ideas for new programmes to pitch at the broadcasters.

'Things are very tight, money-wise,' Tom had begun, as he twanged a rubber band between thumb and forefinger in the slightly distracted way that he does. He narrowed his blue eyes, as though drawing on one of his occasional cigarettes. 'So I think we may have to do something a little bit more . . . commercial,' he continued with slight disdain. I'd been with Trident for five years then – right from the start, when it was just Tom and me – and we'd done some quite heavy-weight stuff: two series about the first world war for the History Channel, for example; a drama-documentary about Helen of Troy for BBC Two, a four part series on the ethics of bio-technology, and a half-hour programme about the Turin Shroud. We'd also done a few corporate videos, to pay the bills, but we'd become well known for our factual work.

'It's very nice being nominated for the Baftas and all that,' Tom went on. He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. 'But what we *really* need now, is a money-spinner.' My heart sank. I liked the kind of serious-minded programmes we did. I've never wanted to do cookery programmes, or silly lifestyle shows or pander to lowest common denominator taste. Tom slowly swivelled his chair from side to side. 'So . . . ?'

'A money-spinner?' I repeated.

He winced. 'Yes – not least so that we can have a bit of a refurb round here –' he glanced at the floor – 'this carpet

must be due for its bus pass. So . . . any ideas for something a bit more . . . popular?' He looked at me.

'Well . . . how about . . . "Celebrity Wifestyles"?' I suggested. 'Or "Maisonette Makeovers"? Or "Bungled Bungalows" or, erm . . . "I'm a Nonentity, Get Me Into Here"?'

Tom fired the rubber band at me. 'There's no need to be facetious, Laura. I'm not suggesting that we start making *crap*.'

'Sorry, Tom. I'm just a bit tired.'

'Been partying?'

'Hardly. Burning the midnight oil.'

'Doing what? If you don't mind my asking,' he'd added politely.

I shrugged. 'I don't mind at all. Compiling pub quiz questions.'

'Really? Why?'

'Firstly, because I need the money and, secondly because I enjoy it – it's interesting.'

He leaned forward. 'And how does it work?'

'Well, usually the company I do it for asks for a batch of questions on different subjects. Last night was a bit heavy because –' I stifled a yawn – 'they needed twenty on the history of Russia, and another twenty on Scottish Premier League football clubs. I ended up dreaming that Catherine the Great played for Queen's Park Rangers.'

'Hmm.' Tom had steepled his fingers and was gently bouncing them against his lips.

'I make up the questions,' I went on, 'they have them verified, then they put the quizzes together and sell them to the pubs. Tonight I've got to prepare fifteen on the plays of Ibsen, then tomorrow I'm going to do fifteen on the Roman Catholic Church. In a good month I can make an extra five hundred pounds, which God knows, I can do with.'

'Quiz questions . . .' Tom repeated. He was just staring at me, saying nothing. Usually I feel comfortable with Tom

– we have a great working relationship – but I found this unnerving.

'Anyway, can we get on with the meeting?' I said after a moment. 'I wouldn't mind going home a bit early tonight, as I say I'm a bit tired and . . .'

'*We* should do a quiz,' Tom said suddenly.

'Yes,' said Sara, her face lighting up. 'That's just what *I* was thinking. That's a *great* idea.'

'A quiz,' Tom repeated. 'A really *good* one. I don't know why I've never thought of it before.'

'Probably because there are any number of good quizzes out there already,' I suggested drily.

Tom pinged another rubber band out of the open window. 'That doesn't mean we can't do one as well.'

'It'd have to be different,' said Sara. She took off her little black specs and began cleaning them on the hem of her skirt, which is what she does when she's fired up about something. 'It would have to be unlike anything that already exists.'

'In short it would have to be original,' said Tom. 'But the question – irony intended – is how?'

So for the next hour or so we'd talked about the different quiz shows and tried to analyse why it is that they work. With *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* we decided that it was the Greed Factor combined with the brilliant tension that Chris Tarrant creates. With *Mastermind* it was the sinister atmosphere – the menacing music, the Black Chair in the harsh spotlight – inspired, according to Tom, by its creator's experience of interrogation as a prisoner of war. The appeal of *University Challenge* was seeing young people answer such difficult questions, and the attraction of *The Weakest Link* seemed to be the mesmerising spectacle of the contestants' meek submission to Anne Robinson's bile. But underpinning the ever-growing success of the genre was, we agreed, the simple fact that we all like to show off what we know.

Watching a quiz makes us revert to our eight-year-old selves, shooting up our hands in class, bursting to answer.

'Yes,' mused Tom. 'A quiz . . . what do you think, Laura?'

I shrugged. I like television quizzes as much as the next person but I'd never for a moment thought that we might do one.

'Well . . . I think it'd be fine. In fact, I like the idea – as long as it's a proper general knowledge quiz,' I added quickly. 'Real information – not trivia. I couldn't stand having to compile questions about soap opera plots or . . . I don't know . . . how many A-levels Prince William got.'

'Quite,' said Tom nodding; then he looked at me. 'How many A-levels *did* Prince William get?'

'Three. Geography, Art History and Biology. He got an A, a B and a C.'

'But what could be the format for our quiz?' Tom swivelled from side to side in his chair again, his hands clasped behind his head. 'How could ours be different?'

When we came in on the Monday, we knew. Over the weekend Tom had thought up an idea for one which was original – if not actually quite radical. He said it had just come to him, in the bath. He swore us all to secrecy, we planned a pilot, and for the next month we worked like dogs. Tom produced, I compiled the questions, Sara, our P.A. Gill, and our incredibly annoying receptionist, Nerys, stood in as contestants and, to save money, I fronted it. Within a week of being pitched, *Whadda Ya Know?!!* had sold to the new cable channel, Challenge. They bought it, however, with one quite unexpected proviso – that I should present it myself.

Now, as I turned left into Tavistock Road, I remembered how Tom had been as amazed at this as I was. I'd had zero experience in front of the camera and we'd assumed that Challenge would want to bring in a star. But Adrian, the Commissioning Editor, said he wanted me to present it

because I was female – there are few women quizmasters – and, more importantly, young.

'Most quiz show hosts are middle-aged,' he'd said as Tom and I sat in his leather-scented office, the ink on our signatures still wet on the contracts in front of us. 'It would be a refreshing change to have a quality quiz presented by a thirty-something rather than a fifty-something. I also like the fact that you're –' and here he'd hesitated – 'interesting looking.' I winced. 'Now, don't get me wrong, Laura,' he added, much too quickly. 'But you're, well, rather . . . unusual. What some people might call "*une jolie laide*".'

'That means "jolly ugly" doesn't it?' I quipped, to cover my annoyance.

'Oh, no, no – it doesn't mean that at all. You're an attractive woman,' he added, again too quickly I thought.

'She is,' said Tom. 'Laura's lovely.'

'Of course she is,' Adrian went on. 'You're very . . . attractive, Laura . . . erm . . .'

'In a way?' I said pleasantly.

'Well, it's just that your looks are –' he squinted at me, cocking his head to one side – 'unconventional.' By now I felt like the Elephant Man. 'You're a bit like Andie McDowell . . .'

'Gone wrong?' I suggested.

'Well – ye-es. You *could* say that. I hope I didn't hurt your feelings,' he blundered on.

'You didn't,' I said politely. 'Really.' In any case I'm used to it. My sisters may be pretty but I'm what you'd politely call 'characterful': I've got Dad's angular jaw line, and his over-long nose. The galling thing is that I was a lovely baby – I was the pretty cygnet who became a duck.

'But the thing I really like about you,' Adrian went on, 'is the fact that you have authority.'

'Do I?' I said wonderingly. This had never occurred to me, though I liked the idea. Perhaps I should have been a policewoman – or a dominatrix.

'You have natural authority – which is the quality that quiz show presenters most need. They can get it in various ways,' he continued. 'On *The Weakest Link*, Anne Robinson exudes a kind of authority by being vile; Jeremy Paxman has authority on *University Challenge* because he's a serious journalist, ditto John Humphreys on *Mastermind*. But you have authority too, Laura. I think the viewers would feel that they're in safe hands with you and that you could probably answer many of the questions yourself.'

'She could,' Tom interjected. 'She's incredibly well-informed.'

'Misspent youth,' I explained. 'Too many books.'

'Plus you've got a fantastic memory,' Tom added warmly. I shrugged. But, to be honest, it's true. Facts and figures – however useless – stick to my mind like chewing gum sticks to the pavement. I only have to read something once for it to sink in. I've always regarded this as an oddity – a bit like having perfect pitch, or a sixth toe – but it can come in handy sometimes. No need for shopping lists, for example. Excellent recall of names and dates. No problem remembering what had rolled by on the *Generation Game* conveyor belt – *Cuddly toy-Teasmaid-Toaster-Carmen Rollers* – and, when I was nine, I won a family trip to Paris by being able to recite all fifty states of the Union in reverse alphabetical order.

'Yes, well,' Adrian went on, 'I think the viewers would feel that you're not just reading the questions out; and with this format – particularly with its highly unusual unique selling point – that's what the show really needs.'

Tom was delighted that I was to present the show. As I say, we have a good rapport – though it's strictly professional, mind you. I like Tom; he's clever and laid-back and very kind and yes, if I stop to think about it, he's definitely good-looking, and he's got this attractive, north American voice. But I could never see him as anything more than a colleague

because a) he's my boss and it could be awkward and b) I know he once did something that just wasn't . . . great.

But, to go back to the quiz, Tom had been worried that no established 'star' would want to present it. But then there were serious risks. It could have been utterly humiliating for them if they were no good – they could have got a really bad press. But the thing that makes *Whadda Ya Know?!!* so dangerous for the presenter is precisely what makes it riveting to watch. And so, last September it went to air. Being on cable, it didn't have a huge audience to start with – just two hundred thousand, but we were hoping to build. Then a tiny piece appeared in *Time Out* describing it as 'hip' and 'subversive'. Before we knew it, Channel Four had poached it, outbidding Challenge for the second series by £30,000 per show.

So tonight is a very big night because *Whadda Ya Know?!!*'s going to be aired nationwide for the very first time. And you might think that presenting a prime-time TV show would make me happy, and of course in one way, it does – but, in another way, it fills me with dread . . .