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The One That Got Away

Written by Annabel Kantaria

Published by HQ

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The One That Got Away

Annabel Kantaria



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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HQ
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

This paperback edition 2017

1
First published in Great Britain by
HQ, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd. 2017

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-84845-512-2

Printed and bound by
CPI Group, Croydon CR0 4YY

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– a light in our lives;
forever in our hearts

ONE

Stella

'Just give me five minutes,' I tell the cabbie as we pull up outside the wine bar.

'First date?'

'School reunion.'

He winces, cheeks sucked in. 'Rather you than me. Take as long as you like, love. It's your money.' He unfurls the *Evening Standard* across the steering wheel and hunkers down in his seat. Above my head, the meter blinks and I stare at the glass frontage of the bar. I'm out on a limb, far from my comfort zone, and unfamiliar these days with this regenerated area south of the river. But I was born not far from here: it should feel like coming home, not entering a different country.

Outside, there's a drizzle falling. Behind the windows of the bar, I can see the rain-smeared shapes of people standing: bright colours, short dresses, high heels. It's hard to tell if these people are even part of the reunion – how would I know what my schoolmates look like now; what fifteen years has done to their faces and silhouettes? Still, short dresses

don't seem the ticket. I'm in jeans, heels, cashmere. Neutral colours; no effort.

Tyres swish as cars pass by on the wet street and I think for a second about telling the cabbie I've made a mistake; got the wrong night. Whatever bravado it was that made me click 'going' on the school reunion page is now long gone. What am I doing here? I blame it on Martin Johnson: it's he who thought up the reunion; he who set up the Facebook page that brought life to this freak show, but the irony is I don't even remember who he is.

For the hundredth time, I try out the sound of his name on my tongue. Quite possibly it's a name I used to know; to hear; to say on a regular basis. Did I like him? Did we sit next to each other; did he tease me in the playground? Was it he who famously tripped up the deputy headmistress causing her to fall outside the school hall?

I can't picture the person behind the name, and the stamp-sized adult face on Facebook doesn't bring to mind the image of the child I must once have known. What comes to mind, though, as I think about the names of the children I do remember, is the cabbage-and-dumpling smell of the school dining hall; the interminable tick of the classroom clock; the peeling beige paint of the corridors; the din of the electric bell; the constant hitching of over-the-knee socks; and the thick nylon weight of the navy blazer that coated us, one and all.

On my phone, I flick to the reunion page to check again who else has confirmed. It's a long list of names, many familiar, but most of whom I've not spared a thought for since

the day I left school. I didn't stay in touch and I wonder if anyone even remembers me. I wasn't particularly gregarious; kept myself to myself, wrapped up in my cooking, neither fashionable nor cool.

Which reminds me: what am I doing here? It's really not my scene and I bet I'm not the only one – yet not a single person's clicked 'not going'; not one person has dared openly to refuse this olive branch stretching across the decades. And, without a doubt, it's George Wolsey – whom I see is happily, confidently, brazenly 'going' – who is the biggest draw.

Whatever Martin Johnson might like to think, it's George Wolsey – along with his wife, Ness – who's the glue of this event. It's because of him that people will come tonight. Housewives, accountants and social media consultants; 'mummy' bloggers, shop managers and men who work in IT – they'll all be here to bask in a little of their glorious classmate's success; they'll come just to be able to tell the people they hang out with that they're going out tonight with 'you know, George Wolsey? Of Wolsey Associates?' Self-effacing smile. 'Yes, him! We were at school together.'

My classmates and I are, I realise, some of the favoured few who knew George Wolsey before he became successful – before the celebrity lifestyle and the gorgeous Richmond house, the magazine spreads and the paparazzi shots. We're a select group that knows his secrets.

Some of us, more than others.

I wonder if he's there already.

George.

On the pavement, the sound of unsteady heels makes me

turn and I see two women, clutching each other's arm and sheltering under one umbrella, approach the door. I know them. They were close at school – like me, they hung on the outer peripherals of cool, but they didn't seem to care – they stuck together. Tonight they're noticeably heavier, tarted up, and they look happy; excited. They're giggling, and I picture them half an hour ago in the cluttered family kitchen of one of their homes, generous glasses of white wine in their hands as they down a bottle for Dutch courage. Am I jealous?

Oh please.

The women wrench open the heavy door and step inside the bar. I hear a snatch of music, laughter, but not George's voice. My thoughts slide towards Ness – also officially 'going'. Perhaps it's because of her, not George, that butterflies are dancing in my stomach. But it's all history now, water under the bridge, and I need to make a stand.

'OK,' I say to the driver. 'I'm ready.'

'Sure?'

I pass over some notes, slither out of the cab and pull open the door to the bar before I have time to change my mind.

TWO

I'm up at the bar, my back to the room, listening to a woman I used to sit next to in French class tell me about the successes of her three marvellous children when George and Ness arrive. I suppose I've been there for forty-five minutes – an hour tops. I hear the door open and the bar seems to stop, to pause, as everyone turns to see the golden couple walk in. My peers may deny it, but they've all googled him; everyone in the room knows who George is these days. There's a collective intake of breath as my classmates absorb the fact that George and Ness are actually here: that George Wolsey really did click on the 'going' button and that he and his picture-perfect teenage sweetheart wife really have come to see them. I know what every single one of them is thinking: *OMG, I have to get a selfie with him.*

George breaks the pause. His voice rings around the wine bar, somehow drowning out the music which, up to this point, has been abrasive. I turn to face the room.

'Hey! Long time!' he says in that affable voice I remember from the sixth form, and I see his smile, the way it envelops everyone in the bar, making them feel wanted, included,

valuable: a missing part of George's wonderful life. He rubs his hands together and his voice takes on the tone of a game-show host. 'So how's everyone tonight?' Seeing what happens next reminds me of the day we placed a little pile of iron filings next to a magnet at school. Vroom. George is surrounded.

I turn back to my companion.

'So tell me again about the music lessons. How exactly did you decide on clarinet instead of oboe?' She's only too happy to explain the process of choosing the right instrument for your child and the lesser known benefits of learning music at a young age but I notice that, as she answers, she keeps a keen eye on George and Ness, and it makes me want to kick her in the shin. We get through a few more minutes of football and ballet and how the eldest son's in the top maths set then my companion suddenly whispers, 'OMG. He's coming over!'

For a second, I actually think she means her son.

'No!' she giggles, giving me a nudge. She flicks back her hair. 'George Wolsey!'

'Stella Simons?' George's voice is right behind me so I take a breath and turn to face him, a pleasant smile on my face as I absorb the sight of George Wolsey aged thirty-three. His teeth are straightened and whitened; his skin tanned, possibly from an Indian Ocean hideaway, or maybe from a bottle. Either way, it's clear he's a rich man in his prime; a man who knows he looks good.

'Hello, George,' I say.

'Stella! It *is* you! I'm *so* glad you're here!' George leans in with a waft of cologne, and I close my eyes and tilt my

cheekbone to touch his in the most impersonal of air kisses but, as his mouth comes into the proximity of my ear, he whispers, 'I'd know that arse anywhere.' His hand touches the small of my back and I feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

Now, there are many ways this reunion could have gone; many ways in which George could have behaved with me after an absence of fifteen years but, given the fact that he hasn't seen me for a decade and a half – not to mention the terms on which we last parted – a comment about my backside is not what I'm expecting and, honest to God, it throws me.

'Lovely to see you,' I say. 'But, if you'll excuse me—' I nod vaguely at the room '—I was just about to…'

I skirt past George and launch myself into the bar. It's not a wise move: I end up face to face with Ness. At first glance, she looks like an even better, glossier version of her beautiful self – the best possible Ness there could be – but there's something slightly out of kilter from how I remember her face looking and I realise in an instant that it's Botox, and quite possibly some fillers, too, that's changed her contours. Ness's teeth gleam like a row of Japanese pearls and I clock, too, her perfect nails. Ness's complexion is glowing but, up close, I see how much make-up she's wearing and there's a brittleness about her eyes. It's not this, though, that everyone notices: it's her hair. Ness's magnificent hair has a life of its own and I see now that it's even more impressive than it used to be. In another world, I'd ask her what her secret is.

She looks me up and down, this vision of perfection that is Ness Wolsey, then she speaks.

'Stella! How lovely!'

She leans in for one of those girlie hugs around the neck and I get a whiff of some rose-based perfume as her cheek brushes mine. The scent is nauseatingly sweet.

'It's been – what? Fifteen years?'

I don't grace this with a reply: it's the fifteen-year reunion, after all, and the bar is full of banners and silver balloons proclaiming the fact. 'So how's life treating you?' she continues. 'You always *were* going to run the world. Did you succeed?' Her voice is smooth, but I see a vein pulsing in her neck. She knows what happened – of course she knows.

'I'm good, thanks,' I say. 'I'm in catering.'

'You always were baking cakes,' she laughs. 'Lucky you to do something you enjoy.'

'Yes. I'm doing fine. No complaints.' I don't tell her the name of my company – a name she'll definitely recognise. Neither do I mention that it's the largest private catering company in London; that its annual turnover could wipe out the debt of a small country. 'And, well – congratulations to you,' I say. 'You've… done well.' I force a little laugh to detract from the fact that we both know the only thing she did well was to marry George.

Ness takes a swig from her wine glass and I notice two things: first, that it's a small glass and, second, that she's nearly halfway through it. She's barely swallowed her mouthful when George swoops, grabs the glass out of her hand, and replaces it with a glass of sparkling water, making me think 'alcohol problem? Interesting.' George heads back to the bar without saying a word and Ness, unfazed, gives a little shrug.

'I'm good, thanks.' She smiles, and her pretty dimples blink at me, taking me straight back to those dark days in the sixth form. I smell medical disinfectant, see the shine of steel, feel the stiffness of a green gown against my skin. 'It's all good.' She nods towards George, back at the bar, and gives a little sigh. 'Been married fourteen years now. You know how it is.' She pauses, glances at my left hand. 'So, how about you? Got anyone special these days?'

I smile. 'Not at the moment.'

Ness puts her hand on my arm as if she understands how desperate I must be. 'Don't worry,' she says. 'We'll find you someone. The right one's out there somewhere. You just haven't found him yet.' She pauses. 'Maybe there's even someone here for you tonight.' Ness rolls her eyes around the bar taking in what she presumably sees as a cast of men with whom I at least have some shared history.

'Maybe,' I say, seeing a room full of married thirty-three-year-olds in Friday-night casualwear, 'but I'm afraid I won't have a chance to find out. My taxi's waiting. Have a lovely evening.'

I practically run out of the door.

THREE

George

'Yes!' says the woman Stell was talking to at the bar. 'So he's been picked for the rugby squad and now we're hoping he'll make the First XV!'

I'm standing with my back to the bar, leaning my elbows against the counter so I can scan the room for Stella while absorbing the chit-chat from this woman who clearly fancies me but is yet to realise that talking about her kids isn't the way to get me to fuck her. My eyes roam the crowded room; I'm searching for *that* arse in those jeans, and the cling of cashmere on those incredible tits. Failing to see Stell, I turn my attention back to the woman at the bar.

'There's a lot to be said for playing sport at that age,' I tell her with a smile. 'Keeps them out of mischief. Not that I'd know!'

Where the hell is Stell?

'But you don't have any children of your own?' The woman pauses, drops her voice a notch and I see her eyes gleaming, keen to absorb any confidences I might want to share. 'I hope there isn't a…'

'A problem?' I ask smoothly. I drop my gaze then look back at her. 'I suppose there is…'

She leans in, all ears, and I look at the floor in an attempt to keep my face straight. She's so close I can smell the scent of her skin; feel the warmth coming off her. It would be so easy – *so* easy – to lead her round to the car park out the back for a quickie. Not that I would, of course; not with Ness here. Just hypothetically. I look up and search for her hand. I take it in mine, look her in the eyes and blink, as if holding back tears. 'I suppose there is a problem,' I say quietly.

'I'm here if you need to talk,' she breathes, inching her face even closer to mine and squeezing my hand. Now I can smell the wine on her breath; see the little dots of mascara gathered beneath her lower lash line. I lean in even further and whisper into her ear, my lips touching her skin; teasing.

'Well, it's just that…' I pause. 'I'm not sure I'm doing it right.' I step back and hold my other fist at hip height and thrust my pelvis suggestively a couple of times towards her. 'Know what I mean?' I give her a big wink.

I watch her expression change as she realises she's been had, then I burst out laughing as she turns away, embarrassed.

'Oh, for God's sake, George!'

'Come here!' I say, pulling her in for a hug. 'Just kidding. Just a bit of banter!' I kiss her hair, enjoying the scent of it and the soft feel of her in my arms, then I let her go, clinking my glass to hers. 'Cheers, darling! You have a great night!'

I saunter across the bar, slapping people on the back and shaking hands as I go, working my way over to Ness. She's with a group of girls – women, I suppose now – she used to

hang out with at school: the popular ones; the netball team; the pretty ones; the smart ones. This was her crowd. She looks good. She's in her element; the queen of them all.

'All right, sweetheart?' I ask, giving her a showy kiss on the cheek and snaking my arm around her waist. 'I trust these lovely ladies are keeping you entertained?'

'Yeah, all good. You?'

'Just going to the little boys' room.'

I unwind my arm and slip through the double doors that lead to the bathroom. There, in the service corridor, even though it's muted, I can still hear the racket from the pub; the screech of voices straining to be heard over other voices; the thump of the music in the background. The floor's slightly sticky and, under it all, there's the smell of old coats and stale beer. I pull out my phone and message Stell.

'Where are you?'

I wait but, when she doesn't reply, I type again. 'I can't see you.'

I'm still there in the hallway, staring at the phone, when the door to the pub kicks open. Ness, her glass in her hand, is framed in the doorway, her hair backlit and slightly wild, and she looks for a second like a modern-day Medusa. Neither of us moves. Then, quickly, I slide my phone back into my trouser pocket, knowing as I do so, that there's guilt written all over my face.

'I'm just going to the loo,' I say to her, 'then we're leaving.'

'But I was just…'

'No buts. I'm done here.'