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The Friend

Written by Dorothy Koomson

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Dorothy KOOMSON

The Friend

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MOTHER-OF-TWO IN COMA AFTER BRUTAL ATTACK AT SCHOOL

A popular mother-of-two is in a coma after being found on the premises of a local Brighton school after a vicious attack the police are investigating as attempted murder.

Yvonne Whidmore, 42, was found in the early hours of Saturday in the front playground of Plummer Preparatory School, New Hillingdon Road, having been brutally assaulted and, according to police sources, 'left for dead'. It is still not clear how Mrs Whidmore came to be at the school, which is still on summer holidays.

A close friend of the family revealed that Trevor Whidmore, 43, and their children, aged eight and 10, have not left her hospital bedside since Mrs Whidmore was admitted.

Friends of the blonde housewife, pictured here in a gold ball gown at a recent school event, which she organised for Plummer Prep's Parents' Council, took to the school's social media site to express their shock and upset.

'Can't believe this has happened. Yvonne is one of the nicest people on Earth. Big hugs to Trev and the girls.'

'Get well soon, Yvonne, Plummer Prep needs you.'

'Thought this area was safe! Urgh. This is just horrible.'

'Who would want to hurt Yvonne???!!!! She's the soul of this place. She's everyone's friend. Get better soon, honey.'

Mrs Carpenter, the head teacher of Plummer Prep, told us she and other members of the senior management team at the £15,000-per-year private school were cooperating with the police in every way they could but this incident would not prevent them from continuing to run the institution at its current, outstanding level.

Police are appealing for anyone who was near or passing the school between the hours of 10 p.m. on Friday, 18 August and 5 a.m. on Saturday, 19 August to contact them as soon as possible.

Daily News Chronicle, August 2017

Part 1

MONDAY

Cece

6:15 a.m. 'This is like the start of a TV drama,' Sol calls to me from the bedroom. 'Husband in suit, getting ready for work, kids downstairs having breakfast, and wife in her underwear rushing around trying to get everything organised.'

'Hmm,' I reply. 'I suppose it is.'

I rinse my toothbrush under running water before slotting it back into the plastic pot on the glass shelf. I take my time doing this because I like being in the bathroom. It's calm in here, it's *unpacked* in here. In fact, the only places in our three-storey new home that are 'fully useable' as averse to 'technically habitable' are the bathrooms.

I linger in the bathroom, enjoying the calm finishedness, and avoiding the oppressive chaos that is the bedroom. There's a bed, there are sheets and a duvet . . . and a huge pile of my clothes on the floor in front of the bay window, nicely flanked by boxes of 'stuff'. Not Sol's 'stuff' though. He has somehow managed to sort out his 'stuff' – it is hanging up in the walk-in cupboard/wardrobe (something that sold the house to both of us), his shoes are lined up, his ties are on a special tie hanger, his underwear is folded into the drawers. He's been living down here in Brighton in a hotel for the last three months and seems to have had no problems settling into our new place.

June, 2003

'Can I ask you something?'

The good-looking man came up to me as we were leaving the

library. The last few months we'd seen each other almost every day and had progressed from smiling to actually saying hello. Now he, who I'd named Library Man, was speaking to me properly.

'Yes, of course. I may or may not answer depending on how intrusive the question is,' I replied.

'Why do you come to the library every day? I mean, I'm here every day because I'm studying, but I don't see you get any books out or anything.'

A little shiver of excitement ran through me that someone had noticed me and hadn't dismissed me as another single mother to be ignored and vilified in equal measure. 'It's a two-mile walk here from where I live, and the only way I can get my child to sleep during the day is to walk with her in the pram. After mile one she nods off, wakes up when we get here, and then half a mile back she falls asleep again and then stays asleep for a good couple of hours so I can do some work.'

'Right.'

'What about you? Why are you always here? I mean, you've just said you're studying but surely that can't mean going to the library every day.'

'It's a good place to come to keep warm and be around people.'

'You do know of these things called pubs, don't you?' I said to him. 'They're warm and dry and they have people. There might even be people in there that you know from your course.'

'Ah, maybe. But I'm twenty-five, most of them on my course are eighteen, away from home for the first time and enjoying every second of it. I feel positively ancient compared to them.'

'What about going to a café every now and then?' I replied. 'You know, mix it up a bit.'

'I might be tempted to try out one of these so-called "cafés" if you – and your daughter, of course – will come with me.'

'I'll come with you if it's not a date.'

'What have you got against dating? Are you with someone?'

'Sort of.'

'What does that mean?'

I indicated to Harmony, my one-year-old with beautifully frizzy hair, almost-black eyes, pale brown skin and huge smile. She blew a raspberry and clapped her hands at the brilliantness of this. 'Everything is dictated by the demands, stability and well-being of this little one. I'm not planning on dating until she's eighteen and I don't have to worry about her any more.'

'All right, it's not a date,' he said with a grin. 'But I feel it only fair to warn you, from everything my friends and family have told me, you never stop worrying about your kids, no matter what their age.'

6:17 a.m. Sol comes up behind me in the bathroom, slips an arm around my waist and tugs me close to him. He's had a summer of going to the gym and running along the beach, so I can feel every exercise-devoted second of his muscles as my eyes slip shut and I almost melt against him. It's so long since we've been this close. I haven't missed the sex as much as I've missed having him next to me. Holding him, being held by him . . . He kisses my neck, holds me closer. I relax some more and the scent of him fills my senses. He's started wearing a different aftershave, but I can still detect his natural scent: slightly salty, musky, a touch of sweetness under there. I haven't seen him properly in a while, but he's still Sol. His grip on me tightens and his fingers creep down over my stomach and slide into the waistband of my black knickers.

'Yeah, I don't think so, TV drama boy,' I say, removing his hand. He certainly killed that moment. I step away from him and cross the corridor, heading for the bedroom and my 'wardrobe'. 'Didn't you say something about the children downstairs and the mother running around, trying to organise things?'

He follows me into the bedroom and stands beside me in front of the wardrobe pile. 'It was mostly the underwear bit I was focusing on . . . Tee. Bee. Haitch.'

I face my husband. 'Did you just sound out "to be honest"?' I ask him. '*Seriously*? How old are you to be using that? When did you even *hear* that to start using it?'

Sol stares very hard at my clothes mound. I know his heart will be racing right now, little beads of sweat will be prickling along his forehead, he'll be praying I'm too distracted by the move to still be the person who would pick up on such an obvious 'tell'. One of the reasons I was so good at my previous job was because I picked up on things that most people ignored as irrelevant. For example, Sol has just 'told' me that he's been spending a lot of time with someone much younger than him (and me) and certainly more female than him, who uses that expression enough for it to have rubbed off on him. Sol makes a big show of looking at his watch.

'Wow, I didn't realise the time. Shouldn't we all be getting a move on? Especially me,' Sol says.

I study my husband, observe him as he avoids looking at me while he mentally kicks himself. When he does risk a glance in my direction I cock an eyebrow at him. '*T. B.H.?*' that eyebrow says to him. '*Really*?'

He whips his gaze away. 'I really need to be heading off. See ya.' He disappears out of the door with that.

'Yeah, see ya,' I reply. 'And T. B.C.,' I whisper. 'T. B.C.'

July, 2004

'So, are you still waiting until Harmony is eighteen to go on a date? Just, you know, asking for a friend.' Sol asked this in a pub.

Our daytime coffees had segued to afternoons with the three of us going for walks and plays in the park, days out at play centres and safari parks. And, more recently, my mum babysitting so we could go out in the evenings. I was still fitting my home-based data entry job around Harmony's sleeping patterns, and he was still a student, so we were both skint and whenever we went to the pub, we didn't simply nurse our beers, we coddled them until the very last drop.

I gazed at Sol. I did a lot of gazing at Sol, because he was very easy to, well, gaze at. He had dark brown skin that was smooth and dewy-soft, he regularly shaved his head, which exposed its beautiful shape while emphasising his huge, black-brown eyes and amazing

lips. Sol was also extremely easy to be with and every time I gazed at him I was reminded that he had been single and celibate for nearly a year because he liked me. He made no secret of it, either, hugging me, stroking my hair, giving me lingering kisses on my cheeks, staring into my eyes when we spoke. Although this was the first time he had come out and said something.

'This friend, anyone I know?' I asked.

'Yes. It's me. Look, this is driving me crazy. I like you so much and I've never waited this long for a woman before. Can I kiss you? Will you turn me down if I do?'

I gazed at him some more. 'You can kiss me, but only if you listen to the story about how I came to be a lone parent.'

'Not a problem,' he replied, staring at my lips. He wasn't listening, not properly. He was thinking of the bit afterwards, when he'd get to kiss me. 'Although, I feel it only fair to point out to you that I know the biology bits so you can skip them.'

'I'm serious, Solomon. I'm going to tell you the story and you must only kiss me if you can handle what I've told you and what it means about me. And if you promise never to use it against me. If you can't, no hard feelings, but I need you to be honest with me and yourself.'

'I'm a bit scared now.'

'You should be.'

'All right. All right.' He inhaled and exhaled rapidly like a boxer about to enter the ring then visibly braced himself. 'Tell me.'

I told him: the unvarnished truth about my life before I became a mother, how my daughter was conceived, what happened next. I was honest, in a brutal way that I had never needed to be before. No one had needed to know this about me. My parents just accepted (and rejoiced at) having another grandchild to coo over and love, my siblings added another name to their Christmas lists and my friends drifted away once I became all about the baby instead of all about the partying. My story was a strictly need-to-know type of tale, and Solomon definitely needed to know. At the end of it, he had stopped gazing adoringly at me and instead he stared into the mid-distance,

shell-shocked by what he'd heard. After a minute or two of silence, he could arrange his features enough to face me. I held my breath, tried to freeze time so it would be the moment before he told me he couldn't handle it for as long as possible.

He smiled at me, then very carefully, very slowly, kissed me.

6:25 a.m. I've parked Sol's 'tell' that he's been spending a lot of non-work time with someone else recently, and stare at the pile of clothes in the window bay. I had gone to sort and hang them up on Saturday morning, then I realised that sorting clothes was an indulgence when I had to unpack the kitchen so I could cook something, as well as organising the children's rooms as much as possible and getting the remaining uniform bits. After a weekend of organising everything else, I am left with this mound of clothes and no idea what to wear.

I want to run back to the calm of the bathroom and forget about this whole getting dressed to take my children to school business. Forget this need to find the perfect outfit that won't be too showy and won't be too anonymous and will say to every other parent at the gates: 'I'm nice, please be my friend.'

I hear Sol's footsteps on the stairs and I smile with relief and gratitude. I was being silly, he doesn't have anything to hide.

'Oh, Cee, I completely forgot,' he says when he dashes into the bedroom. 'My good suits will be ready to collect from the dry cleaner's today. The shop's not far from here. You just have to head in the opposite direction of the boys' school for a bit on the main road. The tickets are on the noticeboard and you can pick them up any time after eleven.'

With a deep frown grooving my forehead and narrowing my eyes, I rotate very slowly to look at my husband. I stare very, very hard at him.

'What?' he says after I have not spoken for two whole minutes. (I know because I counted them in my head.) 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Oh, Sol.' I sigh. 'Look, I know you're really busy with work and

all, but would it kill you to acknowledge the sacrifice we've all made for you? Even a little?

'I mean, our children have moved away from their friends and a life they loved because of *your* job and you haven't once acknowledged that over the weekend or this morning. Not only that – this is the first time we've all been together for three months but we've hardly seen you these past few days. You've not helped to unpack their stuff, you've not helped me with putting up their furniture, you didn't come to the uniform shop. Sometimes you've had meals with us.

'You know, they're starting at new schools this morning, and Harmony has changed schools at the start of her GCSEs. Would it have been the end of the world if you'd gone into work a bit later this morning so Harmony doesn't have to walk into school all on her own? I feel sick that I have to take the twins so I can't go with her. It never even occurred to you that she might need someone with her, did it? But you leave the house with barely a goodbye to any of us and then you come all the way back from your car, I presume, to order me to collect your dry cleaning like I'm your personal assistant. It's just . . .' I run out of words. Well, nice words. Instead, I flop my arms up and down in frustration and despair.

Sol, in response, physically draws back, as though someone has shown him his version of a Dorian Gray portrait and he is horrified by how unpleasant and downright inconsiderate he looks. 'I didn't think,' he says, shame and regret coating every letter. 'About any of it. I just didn't think.'

'No, I guess you didn't,' I reply.

'I've got a meeting, I can't cancel, it's really important.' He rubs his fingertips over his eyes, pinches the bridge of his nose. 'Not that you lot aren't important, but I can't cancel it last minute. I'm sorry. If I could cancel, I would.'

'It's fine, what's done is done,' I say. 'I just don't want you to start taking everything we've given up for you for granted, all right?'

'We've made this change for our family, not for me,' he protests.

Don't kid yourself, Sol, I almost say. *I did not want to move. I loved my life,*

my career, my friends I saw every now and then. I did not want to move. The children did not want to move. But we had to, for you.

'We agreed: it'd be great for them to be in a city but right near the sea, and that now we could afford it, we'd put them into private education,' Sol is saying. 'We agreed that getting out of London would be good for all of us, didn't we? *Didn't we?*'

'Yes, I suppose we did, but we should be seeing the kids off to school together. That's how our family works, remember?'

His face falls even further. 'I'm sorry, Cee, I really am.' He takes a few steps forwards until he is close enough to slip his arms around me. 'I really am sorry,' he murmurs. 'I'll do better. I promise you I'll do better.'

'I know you will,' I reply. I let him kiss me and even manage a smile and wave as he leaves the bedroom. He'll do it properly with the children this time – he'll hug them, reassure them, say a proper goodbye.

My hands reach out for a pair of jeans, a white top. I'm always trying to teach the kids to be themselves, to be who they are and allow the worthwhile friends to gravitate towards them. I should take my own advice. No, I didn't want to move, but I'm here and I have to do this. So I have to do it on my terms – a special outfit won't do that; what will do that is showing everyone I am comfortable in my own skin.

I also need to get a bloody move on.

7:40 a.m. I have three children, all in uniforms, standing on the pavement outside the house. I also have five minutes to spare. This is a win. This is a win that was achieved with only a minimal amount of shouting (me) and a tiny amount of scowling (them). Especially since they then went on to be moderately cooperative with the obligatory first-day-of-school photos in front of the fireplace. A miracle, especially when they all explained to me, at various points, that school started a week ago for everyone else, and so it's not really the first day of school.

I look at my children while I run through my mental locking up

checklist. Then I look at them frozen on my mobile's new screen saver: Ore, the youngest twin, tips his head up and pushes his chin forward, showing off his missing lower teeth; Oscar, the oldest twin, smiling as always with his mouth closed and his head tipped slightly to one side. And Harmony, standing behind them, staring at the camera, radiant and beautiful, simply smiling. Simply Harmony.

I turn to my fifteen-year-old. I hate the idea of her rocking up there on the bus knowing no one as she walks through the gates. 'Are you sure you don't want to come with me to take the boys, and I'll drive you to school a bit later? Actually, it won't even be that much later since they start at eight fifteen,' I say to her. I've been there for every single one of her first days at school – even making the boys late the past three years, so I can be there – and I can't quite believe I am going to miss this one. 'Or you could—'

Harmony shakes her head. 'I'll be fine.'

When she says that, what she really means is: I've earned this trip to school alone.

If we *were* in a TV drama, right about now, there'd be a montage of all of Harmony's first days at school – every one with me sobbing, or holding back the sobs, or pretending not to sob as I clung to her and whispered over and over how much I loved her. Each new clip would show a bigger, taller Harmony wearing exactly the same expression: lips pursed, eyes raised to the heavens, patience itself sitting on her face as she waits for me to *get a grip*.

'I can't believe I won't be able to see you in on your first day,' I say to her. 'Especially since it's a new school.'

'Mum, thing is, I *can* go to school on my own.'

'But we're in Brighton. It's not like London. We're practically in the middle of nowhere here and you're having to get a bus all on your own, wearing a strange uniform and, you know, I should be doing that with you.' Tears fill my eyes at the thought of my poor unaccompanied daughter.

'Didn't you have two other children so I didn't get to be the sole focus of this craziness?' Harmony says with barely concealed

contempt. 'I mean, isn't that what they're *for*?' She turns to her brothers. 'No offence,' she tells them.

'Lots taken,' Oscar, eight years of deep thinking, replies.

'Yeah,' chimes in Ore, 'lots taken.'

'Sorry boys, it's every child for themselves at times like this. I've had ten school years of this, you've had three, so don't "lots taken" me.'

'Right, well, when you've all *quite* finished being outraged at me, your mother, caring so deeply about you, shall we go?'

Before my daughter can even think to move, I fling my arms around her, kiss her cheeks, kiss her forehead, tell her over and over how much I love her and how proud I am of her. If I can't do it at her school, I'll do it here.

'Thanks, Mum,' she eventually mumbles, and untangles herself from me while in one smooth, practised move she swings her turquoise rucksack onto her shoulder. 'I'll see you later,' she says and then walks away. She doesn't get far before she runs back to us and bends to her brothers. 'See you two,' she says as she throws her arms around them. 'Have a great first day. Tell me all about it tonight, OK?'

'We will,' they say at the same time. She rises to her full height and I see it, a quiver of nervousness as it flits across her features. I'm not meant to know – none of us are meant to know – so I stop myself from grabbing her again and deciding to start home schooling. My daughter tucks her fears away behind her trademark cool nonchalance before she rehoists her bag. As she passes me, she presses a brief kiss on my cheek without looking at me, and then carries on, down the road, around the corner and to the bus stop. To the outside world she might be fifteen and taller than me, but to me, she'll always be five and not quite ready to do anything much on her own.

8:05 a.m. It's taken longer to arrive here at the gates of Plummer Prep than when we walked it yesterday. I'm not sure why. We practically strolled here yesterday, and today the boys have scooted while

I ran along behind, weighed down with book bags, rucksacks and hats, piling embarrassment upon embarrassment by shouting like a town crier to 'mind the road', 'watch out for pavement yuckiness', 'don't turn the corner until I'm there'.

Oscar and Ore slow down as we near the school. My heartbeat surges, becomes like rapid thunderclaps in my chest. Ore stops completely and I almost fall over him. Oscar stops next, and stands with his feet either side of his green scooter platform and stares. They saw the school yesterday, but didn't think – as I didn't, I suppose – what it would be like when there were so many people around.

Noise, disorder and chaos swirl through the warm, sun-blushed September air outside the school. Children are being herded in, most without lingering goodbyes; others cling to parents who are trying desperately to remove them. Clumps of parents stand like bundles of hay, left at various points on the pavement to untie themselves and go about their day; vehicles are double-parked, ignoring the yellow lines and the white zigzag lines as though those markings don't apply to them. Other cars pull up in the middle of the road, stopping traffic, while their drivers slap on hazard lights and jump out to open the back doors, virtually javelin-throwing their children out of their seats.

When I'd first come to look around Plummer Prep (Sol was working so he couldn't make it) I'd been impressed by the look of it: a red, double-fronted, rambling mansion-house, with white pillars that flank its large entrance, set on the corner of two main roads. Its roof is gunmetal grey, and its sash windows are painted white. It looks huge from the front, until you walk through the front and discover that it is, in fact, *mahoosive*, as Ore says. It has an extended glass walkway that is set like a large rectangle, with a large paved courtyard at its centre. The glass walkways lead to the art rooms, science labs and common rooms. Behind that are the three different playing fields, two that lie end to end, and the other is the cricket pitch, complete with its own weatherboard pavilion.

With the size of the place, I half expected there'd be a glut of people arriving at the same time in the mornings, but what I didn't

expect was this frenzied, manic air. I didn't expect so many parents to hang around, acting like this is the last time they'll be together. They are acting like I do on my children's first days, but they've all been here at least a week, they should be over it by now. And most of them will have been doing this for years. My heart puckers in my chest. *What is going on?*

'Come on, boys,' I say, my voice jolly and excited, not terrified and wary about why they are behaving like this. 'Isn't this great?'

Ore turns to look at me like I've finally lost my mind and Oscar continues to stare – neither of them moves towards the gates.

'Come on, scooters.'

Without losing their different expressions of terror, the boys relinquish their scooters, and deftly, like I do it all the time, I scoop them up with one hand, still balancing their stuff, and negotiate the islands of talking, lurking parents.

As we approach, I see the headmistress, Mrs Carpenter, who isn't that much older than me, standing like a guard at Buckingham Palace, the epitome of poise and control. She is wearing a purple suit with a green shirt – the school's uniform colours – and her strawberry-brown hair is swept up and twisted into a perfectly constructed chignon. She smiles and greets every child entering the school by name. I keep my eyes on her, a beacon in the turmoil that surrounds us. She grins as we approach and I know it's going to be fine. She will welcome the boys, she will make sure other teachers welcome the boys; she will make the transition easy, smooth.

As we arrive in front of Mrs Carpenter, the noise suddenly stops, cut off like a switch has been flicked on the background hubbub. Silence, a deathly hush, is cast over us. *Have I gone deaf?* I look around. But I can still hear birdsong, the rush of traffic from the adjacent road, the click of flashing hazard lights, the sound of the boys breathing beside me. I look around again. Everyone is staring. Everyone is silent and they are all staring . . . at us.

The thunderclaps in my chest increase; my breath forgets to go in and out. Maybe I should have put more thought into my outfit? Maybe I should have driven, then I could have done a drop'n'run,

without anyone noticing us. I look down at the boys. Ore has a determined-not-to-be-intimidated look on his face – ready, it seems, to slug it out if anyone says anything. Oscar is openly confused – his eyes dart here and there, trying to get a handle on the situation. Eventually he looks at me and mouths: *Mum?*

I shake my head and shrug: *I don't understand it either.*

I decide to ignore this, to not let the boys know that I'm scared, confused, worried about how the children will treat them if this is how the parents behave, and I'm about to move forwards when the space I was going to fill is suddenly occupied by a tall white man. His short wavy brown hair is scruffy but not intentionally so, I don't think. His navy suit is lightly creased, his white shirt could do with another iron, although his blue and gold paisley tie is in place. On either side of him he has two blonde-haired girls – their school uniforms look like they have been washed and an attempt has been made at ironing, but like their dad's shirt, it could all do with a re-iron. It's him – them – everyone is staring at.

The man has noticed the silence, of course he has, and he stops short of the school gates, ignores the now frozen smile of Mrs Carpenter, and looks left then right at the gawkers. Where his gaze lands, the heads turn away, embarrassed that they've been so obvious. When he has made everyone who stared feel uncomfortable, slightly ashamed, he carries on.

Mrs Carpenter seems to unfreeze then and her smile reignites itself. 'Good morning, Madison, good morning, Scarlett. It's lovely to see you both. Good morning, Mr Whidmore.'

In response, Mr Whidmore nods briefly to Mrs Carpenter before he lowers himself to his daughters' levels and hugs them.

'Have a good day,' he tells them quietly. The noise and talking has begun again but quietly, sombrely, like something bad has just happened and no one knows how to carry on. 'I'll pick you up from after-school club, OK?'

Both girls nod; neither speaks. They both stand very still, rucksacks on their backs and book bags in their hands as they wait for their dad to let them go, then both turn in a seemingly synchronised spin

to walk through the school gates. Most children who have entered the school go straight to the playground, these children, Madison and Scarlett, don't even look in its direction – they head straight for the open front doors, step through and disappear.

Mr Whidmore straightens up, stares at Mrs Carpenter and her face says, *What can I possibly say to make this right?* while her mouth says, 'Try not to worry, we'll take good care of them, Mr Whidmore.'

He nods. 'Make sure you do,' he says.

As he turns away, he spots me and the boys, he stares at me, then stares through me, looking somewhere off over my right shoulder, then he swings left, glares in that area as though looking at someone specifically. Once he has stared, has made his point, he leaves. Like his daughters, he doesn't look back.

What the hell have I just brought my children into?