BUCKET LIST

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For Margaret and Jean
– two great old gals

01

A Leap of Faith

Lottery number 29 (Dot is twenty-two years old)

'A bloody leap year, you're crazy!' Dot's mum protested, pouring too much tea into Dot's cup. 'Getting the date in everyone's diary was a nightmare, you know. And how are you meant to celebrate your anniversary every year?'

'We'll celebrate every four years,' Dot said, taking her teacup before her mum purposefully added an excess of milk to punish her. 'And hardly anybody gets married on the twenty-ninth of February, which makes our day more special.'

'It's done now, I suppose.' Her mum heaped sugar onto a teaspoon and moved it towards Dot's cup.

Dot placed her hand over her tea. 'Not for me.' She fluttered her eyelashes. 'I'm sweet enough already.'

'Move that hand – you'll need all the energy you can get today.'

Dot relinquished control and her mum slid four heaped teaspoons of sugar into her cup as if sliding muck from a spade, filling the cup to its brim.

Dot sipped the tea down to a safe, manoeuvrable level. She

stared at the mounds of wedding gifts, partly excited to open them and partly despairing at the sheer volume of crockery she knew she would uncover.

'How are you feeling?' her mum said, softening. 'Nervous?'

'Actually, no. It's strange, but it feels like any other day. Except for *this* thing.' She looked down at her pearly cheesecloth wedding dress. 'I feel like a meringue.'

'Well, you look like an angel,' her mum said. 'And don't worry about the presents. Your cousins will all be getting married in the next few years, so you can just give away any duplicates or tat. If anyone asks where their present went, just tell them I borrowed it.'

'I already peeked at a few.' Dot took another sip of her obscenely sweet tea. 'There are at least six casserole dishes. I haven't made a casserole in my whole life.'

'Me neither, dear.' Dot's mum took a tarnished golden pocket mirror from her posh purse and flipped it open, checking her lips. 'I'll redo our lippy once we're finished. We ought to look our best – people will remember today, and all eyes are on the mother of the bride.' She added another stealthy sugar to Dot's cup. 'And you're sure, aren't you? Because if you're not sure, now's the time to change your mind. I mean, you can't *really* change your mind because your aunts have already taken the sandwiches and trifles to the social club for your wedding breakfast, but if you've any niggles then now's the time to tell me.'

'I'm sure,' Dot said. 'Charles is wonderful, Mum, there's nothing to worry about.'

The doorbell rang and Dot's mum bolted up, checking her watch. 'He's early, that idiot! Stay here!'

Dot's mum marched downstairs and opened the front door. Dot, half-listening to her mum's agitated mumbles and her

uncle's muffled apologies, finished her tea and picked up the bouquet that her best friend, Grace, had made for her. She sniffed the pink and yellow roses, imagining herself lying in a country garden, bathed in sunlight as birds twittered amongst the branches.

'Right, time to go!' Dot's mum shouted as she climbed back up the stairs to Dot's room. 'There's a road closure and a lorry crash, so there are diversions. Today of all days! You'll have to take the long way round, and Uncle Brian stinks of whisky and cigars.'

Dot took a deep breath, hoping that her bouquet's scent might be enough to mask Uncle Brian's shortcomings. No, it wouldn't do. She didn't want to sit in his stinking, cramped car and take the long way round.

'Tell him to meet me there,' Dot called back as her mum reached the landing.

'What?!' The wedding antics had turned her mum's face so red that blusher was out of the question. 'What do you mean?'

'I'll get there by myself. It's not far and it's a really nice day. For February. I'll cycle – I can cut through the lanes in the housing estates. It'll be quicker than taking the car through diversions.'

Dot's mum placed her fingertips on Dot's forehead. 'I'm sorry. I thought maybe you'd lost your mind. What about your hair? What about the dress? It'll get caught in the wheels, I know it.'

'I'll manage, I've cycled in dresses before.' She stared into her mum's frantic eyes. 'Relax, okay? It's me getting married, not you. What happened to the unflappable woman who raised me to be as cool as I am?'

Her mum took a long, deep breath. 'All right, it's your day.

But arrive on foot, won't you? The town will talk if they see you arrive at your wedding on a push bike.'

Dot grasped her mum's hand and shook it. 'Deal. You ride in the stink mobile and bring the favours.' She gestured to the box of silver-papered cardboard horseshoes, pastel-coloured confetti and plastic silver bells on her bed.

Her mum piled their bouquets on top of the box of favours and kissed Dot on the cheek. 'Don't be late.' She picked up the box and scurried down the stairs.

Dot watched from her bedroom window as her mum (her head now topped by a huge lavender-shaded flying saucer-shaped hat) continued to berate Uncle Brian until they clambered into his car and drove away.

Dot checked she had everything she needed, walked downstairs and locked the back door behind her. She placed her purse into the bike's basket and sat on the saddle, hitching her white dress over the handlebars so that it wouldn't snag in the wheels or trail on the dirty ground. As she rode through the quiet lanes towards the church, she smiled to herself and thought of Charles in his suit and wondered just how many casserole dishes they might have inherited.

A few people waved to Dot as she passed, congratulating her on her happy day. But most of them looked utterly confused at the bridal effigy that flew past them, and she couldn't care less.

Dot left her bike near the back of the bakery, taking in a lungful of yeasty air before walking the final two streets to the church. Uncle Brian's stink mobile had indeed beaten her to the venue, but she wasn't late and the bike ride had kept her warm despite the crisp February air.

She watched her guests from afar, catching her breath while hidden behind a bush: Grace looked the best in her short skirt as she smiled at Dot's elderly relatives and ushered them into

the church; her mum pretended not to look around nervously for Dot as she chatted to Uncle Brian, partially eclipsed under the brim of her hat; Dot's nurse friends clung to the arms of their wide-tied, mane-haired, moustached men; flower girls ran in excited circles around Dot's good-looking kilted cousin; and the younger boys stood awkwardly, gawping in second-hand suits, their hands disappearing into the overlong sleeves of their jackets.

Dot's mum caught sight of her. She whispered into Uncle Brian's ear and shoved Dot's bouquet into his hand. Uncle Brian ushered the guests inside and, when the coast was clear, Dot joined him.

'You nearly gave your mother an aneurysm,' Uncle Brian said, taking Dot's hand. 'But you look crackin'. Charles is inside, sweating like a glassblower's arse crack. Ready?'

Dot smiled, threading her arm through his. 'Absolutely.'

★

The photographer's camera flash blinded Dot as the newly weds left the church in a shower of pastel-coloured confetti. As bulbs danced in Dot's vision, an ominous grey cloud lurked overhead, threatening to unleash its load and leave confetti-shaped stains on her wedding dress.

Don't you dare! Dot thought with her best menacing voice, psychically scowling at the cloud.

The photo-taking was a hazy, dull chaos of family members coming and going in overly specific combinations. Dot just wanted to push on to the social club for a cheese sandwich and a bag of ready salted crisps, but Charles appeared to be enjoying the attention.

'Dotty, you've hooked yourself a good fish, there,'

Grace said, standing next to Dot for a photo. 'I suppose we won't see you at work for much longer.' She smiled for the camera.

'What do you mean?' Dot whispered to Grace.

'Well, you've got your honeymoon in the Highlands, right? Then nine months later you'll be stuck at home.'

'No, I won't.'

'Did I get it wrong? Are you already . . . ? You know. Is that why you didn't wear a veil?'

Dot continued to smile, trying not to ruin the photos. 'No!'

The photographer lowered his camera, he grinned, eyeing Grace's leg. 'I know you want to natter, ladies, but the faster we get through this, the faster you can get to the buffet. All right, sweethearts?'

Dot wanted to smoosh her bouquet into his face, but she simply nodded. She could feel her tethers wearing thin.

'Let's talk at the social club,' she whispered to Grace, readopting her photo pose. While she found the photographer to be intrusive, demanding and slightly pervy, he was right about the buffet.

With the photos taken, sky darkening and guests mumbling about the chilly weather, Charles opened his car door and held out his hand to Dot. Dot approached, kicking a couple of the tin cans that were strung to the bumper.

'Wifey . . .' Charles said, his best man and friends chuckling nearby. 'Shall we?'

'Yes, husband,' Dot said playfully, taking his hand and inspecting the inside of the car. She looked up to the guffawing groomsmen. 'I'm ninety-nine per cent sure there's a booby trap in here, but just reassure me that it won't damage my dress or my ego.'

The men looked disappointed.

'You're safe,' the best man said. 'There's nothing fishy going on.'

Charles sighed. 'You didn't?' He peered into the car and pointed to the heater, where a kipper's tail protruded from the vent.

The groomsmen burst out laughing.

'As it happens, I love the smell of smoked fish,' Dot said, sitting in the passenger seat. She pulled the kipper from the vent and sniffed it. 'Beautiful. We'll see you geniuses at the social club.'

Dot closed the car door and waved to her guests as Charles sat in the driver's seat. Outside, the best man tossed huge handfuls of coins into the air, and children appeared – as if from another dimension – to collect them.

'Thank goodness that's over!' Charles said.

'It looked like you were enjoying yourself,' Dot said.

'Looks can be deceiving. I wanted to wallop that photographer.'

Dot laughed. 'Me too! I think he had the hots for Grace.'

'I think most of the men there had the hots for Grace.'

'Most?' Dot raised an eyebrow.

'Not me, of course. I've only got eyes for one woman . . .' He leaned in and kissed her softly. 'Your mum. She looked so good in that giant purple hat. Like a Lazy Susan that had come to life.'

'Well, I suppose I can't stop true love. Or true lust. It was a short marriage, but good while it lasted. Please promise me that you'll make my mum happy.'

Charles laughed, started the car engine and revved it. The kids scattered like startled birds, their pockets heavy with gathered coins.

'Do you want to go to this wedding breakfast?' Charles

asked. 'Why don't we just drive off and live in the hills?'

'It's almost dinner time and I've only had a cup of sweet tea, so we're going to that party.'

Charles eased the car away, the tin cans rattling behind them. The guests cheered, waving goodbye. Dot wound down her window and put her hand outside, rolling it in circles as though she were royalty. As they drove into the distance, Dot's stomach rumbled.

'Forget it,' Dot said. 'It's our wedding day, let's do what we want.' She switched on the car radio and 'Get Back' by The Beatles played. She cranked up the volume and loosened her shoes, tapping her feet to the music. 'I'm hungry, and a cheese sarnie won't do it.'

'Fish and chips?' Charles asked. 'Or did the kipper trap put you off?'

'Now I know we were meant to be together.' Dot leaned her head on his shoulder. 'Fish and chips with plenty of sauce, please. The rest can wait.'