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Men from the Boys

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part one: *autumn term – the secret language of girls*

one

September. The first day of school. New blue blazers everywhere, leaves and conkers underfoot, but an untouched sky and summer clinging on. And now I thought I understood why my son had been so quiet and preoccupied all through the long holiday. I should have guessed, shouldn't I? Sooner or later, there was going to be a girl.

I had wanted to believe it was just because he was almost fifteen.

I watched my son watching the girl. His face got red just looking at her.

'You could talk to her,' I said. 'You could just walk right up to her and – you know. Talk to her.'

Pat laughed. He watched the girl dawdling by the school gates. Black haired, brown eyed. Laughing, swinging a rucksack stuffed with books. Tall for her age. Radiant in the blue blazer of Ramsay MacDonald Comprehensive School. Surrounded by admirers.

'Talk to her?' he muttered, all polite disbelief, as though I had said, *Levitate, why don't you? The ladies love a bit of levitation. The chicks go crazy when they see a lad who can levitate.* 'Probably not,' he said.

'Is she in your year?' I said.

He shook his head, and a matted veil of blond hair fell over his eyes. He pushed it away with a sigh, the love-sick Hamlet of the local comp.

'No, she's in the year above me.'

So she was fifteen. Or maybe already sixteen. An older woman. I should have guessed he would fall for an older woman.

I watched him fumbling nervously with the Predator football boots that were resting on his lap.

'Do you know her name?' I asked. He took a breath. He swallowed. He brushed some flakes of dried mud from his Ramsay Mac blazer. He did not look at me. He kept looking at her. He was afraid he might miss something.

'Elizabeth Montgomery,' he said.

The eight syllables tripped off his tongue. The way he said them, it was infinitely more than a name. It was a sigh, a prayer, a kiss, a love song. He slumped back in the passenger seat, weak with exhaustion. It had taken a lot out of him, saying Elizabeth Montgomery's name.

'Just talk to her,' I said, and his face burned again at the very thought of it.

He looked at me. 'But what would I say?'

'What do you want to say?'

'I want to tell her . . .' He shook his head, struck dumb, but then it came in a barely audible torrent. 'I want to tell her that she is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. That her eyes – they shine. They just shine, that's all. Like . . . black fire or something.'

I shifted uneasily in my seat.

'Well, Pat, some of that stuff you might want to save for the second date.'

He was that age where he still believed in the secret language of girls.

The age where you believe that girls speak in an Esperanto that is alien to you – a mere boy, consumed with longing and unworthiness, tongue-tied by youth and yearning.

And I wanted to help him. I really did. I wanted to be the Yoda of love he could turn to. And even if it did not work out with him and Elizabeth Montgomery – if they never fell in love, if he was not the millionaire who shared her wedding day, if she never became the one the angels asked him to recall – then at least I thought I might be able to

help him have a conversation with the girl. That did not seem too much to ask.

A distant bell began to ring. Elizabeth Montgomery moved off, the centre of attention in a blue-blazered crowd of boys and girls. It was not just Pat. Everybody loved Elizabeth Montgomery.

I drove him to school every morning. Although by the time they are pushing fifteen you no longer really drive them to school. You drive them close to school and let them walk the rest of the way before you have a chance to embarrass them with kisses, hugs or words of sage advice on the mysteries of attraction. He opened the passenger door.

'You around tonight?' I said.

He pushed his hair out of his eyes. It had grown long over the summer. 'I've got my Lateral Thinking Club after school and then I'm around,' he said. 'What about you?'

'I'm around,' I said. 'But late – there's some black-tie thing. The show's up for an award. Lateral Thinking?'

'You know. Thinking outside the box. Creative thinking. Edward de Bono.'

'Oh right – Edward de Bono. Used to be married to Cher. No, that was Sonny Bono. Before your time.'

'Everybody was before my time,' he laughed, getting out of the car. 'I haven't had my time yet.'

He slammed the door shut and looked at me through the window.

'Enjoy your Lateral Thinking,' I said. 'And talk to her, kiddo. Talk to Elizabeth Montgomery.'

He waved and went. That was my son. Some kids his age were out mugging old ladies for their iPods. But he had his Lateral Thinking Club and his one-way love for Elizabeth Montgomery. I watched him go as the bell faded away.

Parents were still milling around, so I did not look twice at the woman parked directly across from the school gates. In fact, I didn't really look at her once. But then she got out of her car and I saw that she was watching Pat too.

And now I looked.

She was tall, blonde, and a little too thin. Dressed for serious exercise – a dark tracksuit, proper trainers – and a raincoat thrown over the top of her running clothes. Looking a touch unkempt and exhausted, but who doesn't in the aftermath of the school run? Despite the blue September sky, the morning was cold enough for me to see her breath.

I stared straight at her, and straight through her and then we both watched Pat go through the gates, the tail of his white shirt already coming out of his trousers, unfurling like a flag of surrender.

And then I looked at her again and something deep inside me fell away.

Because I always think that it is bizarre – no, I always think that it is unbelievable – that you can love someone, really and truly love someone, and then one day you do not recognise their face.

If you have loved someone, you would think that you would know that face always and forever – wouldn't you? Shouldn't every line of that face be stamped on your heart?

But it is not. Your heart forgets.

Especially after – what? Seven years? Could it really be seven years since I had seen her? Where did seven years go?

She got into her car and as she pulled away she looked at me with a kind of wary interest.

So she felt it too. Who is this stranger?

And by then it was all coming back to me. All of it. Oh yes. She had changed – older, thinner and many miles travelled in worlds that had nothing to do with me – but I remembered Gina.

I remembered loving her more than I had ever loved anyone, and I remembered our marriage and the birth of our son, and I remembered how it felt to sleep by her side. And I remembered how all that was good had gone bad, and how it had hurt so much that I truly believed nothing could ever be good again.

So, yes, now that I came to think of it, she did look vaguely familiar.

* * *

We envied families who had had a good divorce.

Families where the love was still intact, despite everything. Families where they remembered every birthday – on the actual day. Families that did not let entire years slip by, entire years just wasted. Families where the absent parent turned up at the weekend on time, stone-cold sober and eager to prove the wise old saying, 'You don't divorce your children.'

But some people do.

So we – my son and I – looked longingly on the families that had had a good divorce.

To us, they were like the family in a commercial for breakfast cereal, an impossible ideal that we could never truly aspire to, a wonderful dream that we could only gawp at with our noses pressed up against the windowpane.

Families that had had a good divorce – they were the Waltons to us. They were the Jacksons. They were the Little Broken Home on the Prairie. They were what we would have loved to have been and what we would never be.

Families that had had a good divorce – we could hardly stand to look at them. Because it was nothing like that for us. Me and my boy.

It never felt like much to ask. A life like other lives. A divorce that could hold its head up high. Some love to remain after the love had flown.

Dream on, kiddo.

Home at midnight. And in a bit of a state.

I had not really touched dinner – rubber chicken for five hundred – so now my stomach was growling and my head was reeling and I was a shade drunker than I had planned to be. My bow tie was coming undone. There was a smear of crème brûlée on the black satin collar of my dinner jacket. Now how the hell did that happen?

It was a school night and Pat should have been tucked up in bed like the rest of the family. But he was sitting at the dining-room table, Japanese homework scattered around him,

pushing a fistful of hair out of his eyes as I came into the room with the exaggerated care of the accidental drunk.

He was always mad at me if he thought I had drunk more than I could take.

'Celebrating, are you?' he said, tapping an impatient biro.

I suddenly realised that I was carrying a bag containing a magnum of champagne and – something else. I looked inside. The something else was a shiny gold ear set on a base of glass and chrome. My award. The show's award. I placed both the bottle and the award on the table, careful to avoid Pat's homework.

'Congratulations,' he said, softening a little. 'The show won. You won.' But then he scowled again when he saw me fumbling with the foil on the bottle. Just a nightcap, I thought.

'No show tomorrow?' he said. 'I thought you had a show tomorrow.'

'I'll be all right.'

'And I thought recovering from hangovers became harder as you got older.'

I had removed the foil and now I was easing off the wire. 'So they say.'

'They must be getting really hard for you then,' he said. 'Now you're forty.'

I stopped and looked at him. He had this infuriating smirk on his face. 'But I'm not forty, am I?' I said. 'I'm only thirty-nine and three-quarters.'

He got up from the table. 'You're almost forty,' he said, and exhaled the endlessly exasperated sigh that only a teenager can make. He went off to the kitchen and I put the champagne unopened on the table. It was true. We were on air tomorrow. Opening a bottle at midnight was possibly not the best idea I ever had.

Pat came back with a pint glass of water and gave it to me.

'Dehydration,' I said, trying to worm my way back into his good books. 'My body's dehydrated.'

'And your brain,' he said dryly, and he began collecting

his books. I saw that he had been waiting up for me. Then he thought of something. 'Someone called. He wanted you. An old man. He didn't leave a message.'

'That's strange,' I said. 'We don't know any old people, do we?'

'Apart from you, you mean?'

I chugged down some water and followed him as he went around turning off lights, and checking locked doors.

I watched him making sure we were safe, and with my wife and our daughters sound asleep upstairs, for a few moments it felt as though the family had once again boiled down to just the two of us. The last light went out.

I did not mention his mother.

The next day, when he was back from school, we walked to the large expanse of grass at the end of our street.

The recreation ground, it was called with no apparent irony. There was a patch of concrete where some lost civilisation had once built an adventure playground, brimming with swings and slides and seesaws and all manner of wonders. But that was all long gone, destroyed by vandals and health and safety officers, and now the recreation ground was just a place to boot your ball, or take your dog for a dump, or get your head kicked in after dark.

'Three and in?' I said, balancing the football on my forehead, feeling some flakes of dried mud fall away.

Pat was sitting on the grass, lacing his Predator boots. 'Just take shots at me,' he said.

We took off our tracksuit tops, threw them down for goalposts and I smiled as Pat went through some stretching exercises. He was tall for his age, all long-limbed awkwardness, and he always seemed surprised at how far and how fast he had grown. But he looked like what he wanted to be. He looked like a goalkeeper. And I really thought he would make the school team this year but I knew better than to mention it.

Some things are too big to talk about.

I curled a shot at him and he leapt up and snatched it from the air. There was a round of mocking applause and we turned and saw a group of teenagers who had annexed the two benches that were the highlight of the recreation ground. They were maybe a bit older than Pat. Or perhaps just wilder. A couple of girls among a group of boys. One of them was a lot bigger than the rest, built more like a man than a boy, and the shadow of his beard looked all wrong above his Ramsay Mac blazer. They leered at us, roosting on the back of the benches with their feet where their baggy-arsed trousers were meant to go.

Pat rolled the ball out to me and I drove it back at him, low and hard. He got down quickly, his body behind the ball. More applause, and I turned to look at them again. In the fading light, their cigarettes glowed like fireflies.

'That's William Fly,' he said. 'The big one.'

'Just ignore them,' I said. 'Come on.'

Pat threw the ball out to me and I trapped it, took another touch, and banged it back. Pat skipped across his goalmouth and hugged the ball to his midriff. No applause this time, and I looked up to see the little group had wandered off to the knackered strip of shops that lay beyond the recreation ground.

'William Fly,' Pat said. 'He nearly got expelled for putting something down the toilet.'

'What did he put down the toilet?'

'The physics teacher,' he said, bouncing the ball at his feet. 'William Fly is famous.'

He kicked the ball back to me.

'No,' I said, watching it coming. 'Winston Churchill is famous. Dickens. Beckham. David Frost. Justin Timberlake is famous. This guy is not famous. He's just a hard nut.'

'Same thing,' Pat said. 'Same thing when you're at school.'

He was on the balls of his feet, springing around the goalmouth because he saw me flicking up the ball, getting ready to unload my legendary volley. I laughed, happy to be here, and happy to be alone with my son.

The ball came off my instep with a crisp smack. Pat threw himself sideways, stretched at his full length, but he couldn't get to it.

Then he went to get the ball while I ran round in circles in the fading light, trying to avoid what irresponsible dog owners had left behind, my arms held aloft in triumph.

Cyd went to the foot of the stairs and called their names. All three of them. Pat. Peggy. Joni. My kid. Her kid. Our kid. Although after ten years we thought of them all as our kids.

From the kitchen I heard chairs being shoved back from computers, doors slamming, laughter. A high, tiny voice struggling to make its point amid two bigger voices. And then a small herd of elephants – our mob coming down for dinner. Cyd came back and watched me trying to chop up parsley without removing a few fingers.

'Did you tell him yet?' Cyd said.

I shook my head. 'Not yet,' I said. 'The time wasn't right.'

'He has to see her,' she said. 'He has to know she's back. He has to see his mother.'

I nodded. I wanted him to see her. I wanted it to be great.

Cyd poured the pasta into a colander and looked at me through the steam.

'Are you afraid of him getting hurt, Harry? Or are you afraid of losing him?'

'Can't I be afraid of both?'

Our mob came into the dining room. Pat. Peggy. Joni. This was a bit of an event because we rarely ate dinner together.

My radio show, *Marty Mann's Clip Round the Ear*, went on air at ten, four nights a week, so I was usually around for dinner. But at seven Joni had the social life of Paris Hilton, a constant round of playdates and dance lessons. Peggy had a best friend – the kind of giddy, isolationist, all-consuming friendship you have at fifteen – and was often at the friend's house, which wasn't a problem just as long as she observed the curfew. Pat had Lateral Thinking and football. And Cyd's catering business, Food Glorious Food,

meant she was sometimes going out to work when everyone else was coming home.

So often, only bits and pieces of the family sat down for dinner together. But not tonight. Tonight we were eating together, and Cyd had made spaghetti meatballs, because it always felt like celebration food. So I naturally felt a spike of irritation when the doorbell rang just as I was about to take off my apron.

Here's one for the show, I thought, as my family began without me. Reasons to be angry, number ninety-three. *Someone ringing your doorbell when you never asked them to.*

There was an old man on my doorstep, eyes bright behind his glasses.

He was short but too broad in the shoulder to be thought of as small. And immaculate – everything about him was smart, in an old-fashioned, Sunday-best sort of way. He was wearing a shirt and tie with a dark blazer and lighter trousers. Clean-shaven and smelling of things that I thought that they had stopped making years ago. Old Spice and Old Holborn.

The neatness of this old man – that's what I noticed most of all. Even at that first moment of seeing him, that was what I saw above everything – that military bearing, tidy and trim and ship-shape to the point of fanaticism.

As though he was on parade, and he would always be on parade.

He blinked at me through his glasses.

'Good evening,' he said, his voice thick with formality and old London, and I wondered what he could possibly be selling that I could conceivably wish to buy. 'I'm looking for Mr Silver.'

'You found him,' I said coldly. I could hear my family eating dinner behind me.

And then the old man laughed at me.

He took me in – the white Ted Baker shoes that I wore to stave off the black day that I bought a pair of slippers, the frayed black jeans from Boss Homme, the floral Cath Kidston apron – and the cheeky old git looked at me as if I was some kind of transsexual.

I felt like saying, It's an apron, not a frilly pink dress. What do you wear when you're chopping parsley? But he probably never chopped parsley in his life.

'But you're not Pat Silver,' he said, bristling slightly, and despite the effort to be polite, I could see he had a temper on him. It happens as you get older. You just get grumpier and grumpier. By the time that Marty Mann is that age, he will probably be on the roof of some public building with a high-velocity rifle.

'Pat's my son,' I said, and I could see no connection that this belligerent old hobbit could possibly have to my boy. And then I got it. 'And my dad,' I said, as the ship came out of the mist. 'You're looking for my father, aren't you?' We stared at each other. 'You better come inside,' I said.

'Kenneth Grimwood,' he said, and we shook hands. 'I was in the same mob as your dad.'

He called their outfit his *mob* – the same word I used to describe my family, and I remembered that they were as close as a family, that diminishing band of brothers, those old men who had been Royal Naval Commandos before they were out of their teens.

'We served together,' Ken Grimwood said, as we came down the hall. My family looked up at us from their pasta, as I wondered – do people do that any more? Talk about serving? These days everyone wants to be served.

He stared at them and gave no sign of embarrassment, no sense that he even saw them. 'Your dad and me were in Italy together,' he said. 'Sicily. Salerno. Anzio. Monte Cassino.'

And suddenly I felt a mounting excitement. Because this old man must have been with my father at Elba. Where he won his medal. Where he nearly died.

I remembered my dad taking his shirt off on summer days on English beaches and in our back garden, and people who did not know him staring with horror at the starburst of scar tissue that completely covered his torso. That was from Elba.

I wanted to know all about it. So much had been lost, so

much that I would never know. Here was my last link to the past.

'And Operation Brassard,' I said. Oh, I knew all about it. I had read books. I knew everything apart from what had actually happened. What it was like. 'The raid on Elba. You must have been with him at Elba.'

But the old man shook his head. 'No, I didn't make it as far as Elba,' he said, and he stared at my youngest daughter. She had a loose front tooth and was working it with her tongue as she stared back at the old man.

I felt the disappointment flood me. He wasn't at Elba? Then I would never know.

Cyd was on her feet and smiling. She came over to us and shook his hand. Introductions were made. She pointed at our children, told him their names.

'You're having your tea,' Ken said, and I hadn't heard that for years. It was a word from my childhood – when your lunch was your dinner and your dinner was your tea.

Cyd asked him to join us and he took one look at what we were eating and recoiled. For a moment I thought he was going to say something about, 'Foreign muck,' which I also had not heard for a while. But instead he looked at Pat – really looked at him – with a sly smile.

'You're the grandson,' Ken said. 'You're the apple of his eye.' The old man nodded emphatically. 'Named after him, you are. He thinks the sun shines out of your arse.'

A silence settled across the dining room. Not total silence – I realised that Bach's 'Sheep May Safely Graze' was playing on the Bose. Joni covered her face with her hands.

'Arse,' she guffawed. 'The man said arse.'

'No need for you to repeat it, young lady,' Cyd snapped, and our daughter looked at her plate of pasta with wry raised eyebrows.

Ken Grimwood looked at me appraisingly. I was still wearing my Cath Kidston. I quickly pulled it off and tossed it aside. I did not want him to see me in an apron. Even if he wasn't at Elba.

'Our mob are marching,' he said, 'that's why I'm here.'

Then I watched in horror as he took out a pack of cigarettes with a death's head covering most of the packet. Perhaps I imagined it, but I think I heard Cyd's intake of breath.

'Didn't have any Old Holborn in your newsagent,' he told me, as if I was personally to blame. 'The geezer didn't seem to know what I was talking about. Foreign chap.'

The children were all staring at him, their dinner forgotten. They had never seen someone taking out a pack of fags in our house – or any house – before. That twenty-pack of Silk Cuts had the exotic danger of an Uzi, or a gram of crack cocaine, or a ton of bootleg plutonium.

'You know,' Ken said. 'At the Cenotaph. The eleventh hour of the eleventh month of the eleventh day.' He stuck a Silk Cut in his mouth. 'Nearest Sunday, anyway,' he said, fumbling in his blazer for a light. 'What did I do with those Swan Vestas?' he muttered.

My wife looked at me as if she would tear out my heart and liver if I did not stop him immediately. So I took his arm and gently steered him to the back garden.

I sat him down at the little table at the back, just beyond the Wendy House. Through the glass I could see my family eating their dinner. Joni was still laughing at the hilarity of someone saying 'arse' and thinking they could smoke in our house.

And I realised that Ken Grimwood talked about my father in the present tense.

'But he died ten years ago,' I said, afraid he might unravel. 'More than ten years. Lung cancer.'

Ken just looked thoughtful. Then he struck a match, lit up and sucked hungrily on his Silk Cut. I had brought a saucer out with me – we hadn't owned an ashtray since the last century – and I pushed it towards him.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Someone should have told you.'

He took it surprisingly well. Perhaps he had seen enough death – as a young man, as an old man – to vaccinate him against the shock. I had seen a few of them over the years – those old

men from my dad's mob. I remembered their green berets at the funeral of my father, and later my mother, although there were less of them by then. But Ken Grimwood was new to me.

'You lose touch over the years,' he said, by way of explanation. 'Some of our mob – well, they liked the reunions, the marching, putting on the old medals.' He considered his Silk Cut and coughed for a bit. 'That wasn't for me.' He looked at me shrewdly. 'Or your old man.'

It was true. For most of his life, my father never gave me the impression that he wanted to remember the war. Forgetting seemed like more his thing. It was only towards the end, when the time was running out, that he talked about going back to Elba, and seeing the graves of boys that he had known and loved and lost before they were twenty. But he never got around to it. No time.

And it turned out that Ken Grimwood's time was running out too.

'Lung cancer,' he said casually. 'Yeah, that's what I've got.'

He stubbed out his Silk Cut, lit up another and saw me looking at him, and his cigarette, and his fag packet with a skull. 'You've got to go sometime, son,' he chuckled, dry-eyed and enjoying my shock. 'I reckon I've had a good innings.'

And we sat there in the twilight until he could not force any more smoke into his dying lungs, and my meatballs had gone stone cold.

I walked him to the bus stop at the end of our road.

It took some time. I had not noticed until we were out on the street that he had a slow, strange walk – this laborious, rolling gait. When we finally got there I shook his hand and went back home.

Cyd was watching the bus stop from the window. She's a kind person, and I knew she would not approve of me abandoning him on the mean streets of Holloway.

'But you can't just leave him out there, Harry,' she said. 'It's dangerous.'

'He's a former Commando,' I said. 'If he's anything like my dad, he's probably killed dozens of Nazis and he's probably had bits of old shrapnel worming its way out of his body for the last sixty years. He can catch a bus by himself. He's only going to the Angel.'

She started to follow me into the kitchen. And then she stopped. And I heard it too.

A smack of air, then breaking glass, and then laughter. And again. The crack of air, the breaking glass, and laughter. We went back to the window and saw the two men standing in front of the house across the street.

No, not men – boys.

A security light came on – the kind of blinding floodlight that was becoming increasingly popular on our street – and illuminated William Fly and his mate, a spud-faced youth who cackled by his side, every inch the bully's apprentice.

Fly lifted his hand, pointing it at the light, and I heard my wife gasp beside me as the air pistol fired.

The security light went dark in a tinkle of glass and a ripple of laughter.

They moved on down the street, letting the next security light come on, and I was glad that we had decided against getting one. Fly shot out that light too, and they sauntered on, down to the bus stop where the old man was sitting.

My wife looked at me, but I just kept staring out the window, willing the bloody bus to come.

The two boys looked down at the old man.

He stared at them curiously. They were saying something to him. He shook his head. I saw the air pistol being brandished in the right hand of William Fly.

Then my wife said my name.

And we both saw the glint of the blade.

I was out of the house and running down the street, a diminished number of the security lights coming on as I went past them, and I was almost upon them when I realised that the knife was in the hand of the old man.

And they were laughing at him.

And as I watched, Ken Grimwood jammed the blade deep into his left leg.

As hard as he could, just below the knee, half of the blade disappearing into those neatly pressed trousers and the flesh beneath. And he did not even flinch.

There was a long moment when we stood and stared at the knife sticking out of the old man's leg.

Me. And the boys. And then William Fly and Spud Face were gone, and I was approaching Ken Grimwood as if in a dream.

Still sitting at the bus stop, still showing no sign of pain, he pulled out his knife and rolled up his trousers.

His prosthetic leg was pink and hairless – that's what struck me, the lack of hair – and it was like a photograph of a limb rather than the thing of flesh and blood and nerves that it had replaced.

And all at once I understood why this old man had not been at Elba with my father.