Vince and Joy

Lisa Jewell

Outside, Vince could hear Chris making friendly conversation with the mysterious girl. Fearing that he was missing out on something or, worse still, that Chris was embarrassing him in some way, he pulled his hands through his James Dean hair, ran a fingertip across
the angry red scars beneath his jaw line and headed outside.

'Just outside London,' Chris was saying, 'Enfield. What about you?'

'Colchester,' she said, sliding the silver cross back and forth across the leather thong. 'You know, in Essex?'

'Aye,' said Chris, 'I know Colchester. Oh, look who it is.' He turned to look at Vince.

'Vince,' he said, 'come and meet our new neighbour. This is Joy.'

She was even more beautiful close up. Her skin was alabaster white, but there was something about her features that suggested something far-flung. Her nose was small and chiselled, and her cheekbones were set high in her face, but it was her eyes that held clues to the uncommon. Compact and wide-set, flat-lidded and framed with dense, dark lashes - the eyes of a painted china doll.

'Hi,' he said, smiling his new, stiff smile.

'Hiya,' she said, resting her magazine on her lap and sitting on her hands.

He noticed her eyes stray to the scars on his jaw, and turned his hands into fists to stop them wandering protectively towards his face.

'So,' she said, 'are you two mates?'

Vince looked at Chris in mock horror. 'God, no,' he said, 'Chris is my stepdad.'

'Really? How come?'

'Well, he married my mum.' He and Chris exchanged a look and laughed.

'Oh, right. Of course. Just you look kind of the same age.'

'Yeah - everyone says that. Chris is ten years older than me, though. He's twenty-nine. I'm nearly nineteen.'

'Right,' she said, looking from one to the other, almost as if doubting their story. 'And where's your wife? Your mum?'

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'She's at the Spar,' said Chris, hauling the gas canister out of the little wooden cupboard and blowing some cobwebs off it. 'Getting us some tea. Should be back in a minute. Oh, talk of the devil, here she is.'

Kirsty's green Mini pulled up alongside the caravan and came to a halt with a crunch of gravel under rubber.

'Give us a hand, you two,' she said, heading for the boot.

Chris instantly dropped the canister and went to his wife's assistance. Vince nodded at Joy and rubbed at his scars.

'God, is that your mum?' said Joy.

'Uh-huh.'

'She's gorgeous.'

Vince turned, expecting to see Beatrice Dalle or someone standing there, but, no, it was just his mother.

'How old is she? She doesn't look old enough to have a son your age.'

'Thirty-seven, I think. Thirty-eight. Something like that.'

'Bloody hell. She's younger than my mum was when she had me.'

They both stared at Vince's mum for a while, and Vince tried to think of something to say. This was officially the longest dialogue he'd ever exchanged with a girl who wasn't either in his class or going out with one of his mates, and the conversation felt like a flighty shuttle-cock he was trying to keep in the air with the force of his will alone. He wanted to ask her something interesting. Something about music maybe, or her intriguing slanted eyes. Or what a beautiful girl like her was doing on a shitty caravan site like this. A dozen potential conversational openers formed in his head and were discounted in a nano-second — too personal, too naff, too boring, too much.

The silence drew out like a held breath.

Vince looked from Joy to his mum's car and back again while he tried to think of the next thing to say 'You staying long?' he managed eventually, with a rush of blood to his head.

'Another fortnight,' she said, 'worse luck.'

What happened to Geoff and Diane?'

'Who?'

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The people who own your caravan.'

'No idea,' she said. 'Mum and Dad are renting it off someone or other.' She pulled her hands out from under her and turned them upwards in a gesture of ignorance. She obviously didn't care about Geoff or Diane, or whose caravan she was staying in. He was officially the most boring man in the world.

'Right,' he said as silence descended again. Joy rustled the pages of her magazine and Vince felt a deep blush developing in his chest area.

'So,' he said, his hand rising subconsciously to his scars again, 'I'll see you around then?'

'Yeah,' she said, 'I guess you will.'

Her eyes were already dropping to her magazine. He'd lost her. But then, mused Vince, as he took a cache of carrier bags from his mother and mounted the stairs to the caravan, he'd never really had her. Of course he hadn't. He was Vincent Mellon. Or Melonhead, as he'd been known at school. He'd been stupid to think that some operation, some bit of surgery, was going to change that. He couldn't talk to girls when he was ugly, and he couldn't talk to girls now he was supposedly 'good-looking' either.

When he came out two minutes later, the deck chair was empty and the girl called Joy was nowhere to be seen.

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