

After All These Years

WHERE'S he taking you?'

Liz Fuller was saved from immediately answering yet another of her sister's pestering questions by the kettle choosing precisely that moment to boil. But eventually, if only because of the way her lips had tightened, she felt obliged to. 'We haven't even talked about it yet.'

'You are joking! But it's such a big day for you both. He must be taking you somewhere special.'

Liz busied herself brewing tea, finding cups and saucers and putting biscuits on a plate. Her approaching Silver Wedding was the last thing she wanted to discuss right now. Ted had been oddly silent on the subject, and, as they had little enough money for treats, she hadn't wanted to put any pressure on him.

'He's forgotten about it, hasn't he?' Sally caustically remarked, accurately reading her sister's expression.

'Of course he hasn't forgotten! What a thing to say.'

A prick of tears stung her eyes, which Liz blinked furiously away, trying not to glance at the image of the tired, middle-aged woman with greying hair, reflected in the chrome surround of her cooker.

Ted couldn't have forgotten, could he? No, of course not.

Sally had a knack for saying the wrong thing. Tact had never been her strong point, as her long-suffering husband would agree.

But she was right in one respect. This was a special occasion, once in a lifetime you might say, so they ought to talk about it. It shouldn't be ignored.

She poured tea, determined not to respond to her sister's pitying glances, aware of Sally's voice prattling away but managing to avoid listening to the details. Only when the voice grew in volume could Liz no longer pretend that she hadn't heard.

'I said Bill's taking me to Paris for the weekend. Did I tell you? He says it's to make up for recent neglect.' Sally fluffed out her bright blonde hair and sighed with pleasure. 'You know how hard he's been working recently, poor love. So, if he can do that as a simple gesture of goodwill, just think what your Ted should do for your Silver Wedding.'

Liz wished the subject had never been mentioned. 'It's two months away, Sally. I've told you, we haven't even started to think about it yet.'

Oh, but she had. She'd thought of little else for weeks. She kept remembering herself as a teenager: bouffant hair, can-can petticoats in rainbow colours, and spiky stilettos, which hadn't stopped her dancing the night away.

Rock 'n' Roll. How they'd loved it! Elvis Presley, Tommy Steele, Guy Mitchell.

Afterwards, Ted would walk her home, carrying her shoes, as her feet would be sore. Then he'd kiss her tenderly under the stars.

Liz smiled softly now at the memory.

After they were married and the children had come along, there'd been less and less time for such delights. And less money to pay for them.

Unlike her glamorous sister, who had her hair styled every week at the trendiest salon in town, wore the latest fashions and never seemed to go short of anything. Every penny in Liz's house was spoken for before they'd even earned it.

Twenty-five years of marriage. Sometimes it seemed as if it had been one long struggle to pay the bills, the mortgage on their small semi, rates and heating. An endless stream of demands from three children . . .

Though Tom had now flown the nest, Susie was at college and needing their financial support, in spite of grants and loans. Johnnie was still at home and eating like a horse.

They'd been happy years, mind, and she hadn't begrudged a single penny to her brood. But

there were moments when Liz would have liked to stop being the sensible, caring mother and do something completely reckless! Let her hair down and really enjoy herself. Be a carefree teenager again.

But Sally was the one who had all the fun, she demanded it as if by right. Sally had fun while Liz was the salt-of-the-earth, practical one.

Liz quickly raised her teacup to her lips to hide the flush of shame on her cheeks, hating her own silly jealousy.

Funny how she still suffered from this mild resentment of her sister's easy life, even after all these years.

'A big party, perhaps?' Sally was saying. 'Everyone loves a party.'

'Ted doesn't. He's a quiet man. Doesn't like a fuss.'

'That's probably the answer then. He's keeping it all a surprise. A secret.'

Sally giggled. 'Ooh, how lovely. It might be a holiday: Rome, or Venice. Or even a trip on the Orient Express!' She gave a squeal of childish delight. 'How wonderful. Just like in the movies.'

Liz had to laugh. 'Oh yes. And no doubt he's booked the Savoy Hotel afterwards for bed and breakfast! Dream on.'

Long after her sister had gone, Liz couldn't quite stop dreaming. What if Sally was right? What if Ted was planning a surprise holiday? Nothing quite so exotic as Venice, of course. But somewhere warm and relaxing would be wonderful. Just the two of them on some foreign beach.

In her mind's eye, Liz was already boarding the plane, walking into a smart hotel and a room filled with flowers and champagne, to celebrate the happiest day of her life. She couldn't remember the last time they'd had a holiday alone. Before the children were born, she supposed.

Maybe she would have a quiet word with Ted, just to sound him out. If he was taking her somewhere special, she'd need time to save up for a new outfit or two . . .

A door banged and she came abruptly out of her reverie.

What was she thinking of? Tea was nowhere near ready and Liz found she'd eaten all the best bits of cooked chicken she'd meant to bake in a chicken and mushroom pie. Quickly scanning her spice rack, she decided on a curry instead.

It was immediately plain that Ted wasn't in the mood for teasing banter that evening. His pale blue eyes sparkled with unaccustomed anger and all questions about celebrations and foreign holidays died on her lips.

'Do you know what that rat, my boss, said to me today?' He was more upset than she'd ever seen him.

'He only told me that if I didn't agree to a cut in my wages I could ask for my cards!'

Liz felt a burst of outrage on Ted's behalf, and the first stirrings of anxiety. 'They wouldn't do that to you, would they?'

'Oh, they'd do it all right, Liz. They know they can fill my job ten times over. So, if they want to squeeze a bit more out of me for less, I'm in no position to object.'

He looked bleak and suddenly quite old. For the first time, Liz saw him for what he was; a man in his early fifties, no longer the lively young man she'd fallen in love with and married.

She sat beside him on the sofa and tucked her arm in his. 'We'll manage,' she said, wanting to reassure him, to bring back those smiles, which could still set her heart racing.

'Don't we always?' Some of his anger faded and he pulled her close in his arms. 'I'd meant to do something really special for you. For our silver Wedding, you know?'

'I know.' She laid her cheek in the warmth of his neck and breathed in the dear scent of him.

'Remember that song, 'Why Must I Be A Teenager In Love?' Who sang that? Marty Wilde?'

'Frankie Lymon, I think it was.'

'That's what we used to be.'

'What, in love? I hope we still are.'

'Teenagers.'

Liz kissed his cheek. 'Remember how we used to kiss behind the bike sheds at Ash Lane Secondary?'

‘Sending notes to each other in the Maths, Lesson.’ He chuckled. ‘Signed with a loving kiss. S.W.A.L.K.

‘And getting caught and put in detention!’

They both laughed at the memory.

‘But we stuck together, didn’t we? So young and excited, with our whole lives before us. I’d like it all over again, exactly the same.

‘All I ever wanted was you, Ted. When we married I was the happiest woman alive. I still am. Nothing else matters. Celebrations aren’t important.’

‘But they are, Liz,’ he told her softly. ‘Our marriage is worth celebrating.’

‘You sound like Sally,’ she said, and she felt him stiffen against her.

‘Why, what’s she been saying?’

But Liz only smiled, not wanting to spoil the moment. ‘Bossing me about, as usual. But she would call it offering a few helpful suggestions.’

‘Expensive ones, too, no doubt.’

‘I told her we’d had twenty-five years of celebration, and didn’t need anything more special than that, thanks very much.’

He blinked his surprise then kissed her tenderly on her lips. ‘Bless you. I’ve been saving up for a bit of a do, but now . . .’

We’ll need every penny to see us through. But she didn’t say it out loud. There was no point. Liz buried her dreams, and went back to stirring her chicken curry.

Sally went off to Paris for her weekend break and, to Liz’s surprise, didn’t call in the moment she got back to boast about it. Perhaps she’s still trying on all the new clothes she bought, Liz thought, rather uncharitably.

And though not for a moment had she expected anything half so grand or fanciful as any of Sally’s more wild suggestions, a part of her quietly grieved.

The day would come and go without anything more to mark it than the usual hurriedly written card and, if she was lucky, a bunch of flowers bought at the local petrol station.

Stifling her self-pity, Liz devoted her attention and sympathy to her husband and his very real concern over a job he couldn’t afford to lose.

When Sally did pop in for a cup of coffee, she wasn’t at all her normal self. She sat at the kitchen table and burst into noisy tears the moment Liz asked if she’d enjoyed her romantic trip to Paris.

‘Guilt trip, more like. Honestly, even when we were away, he phoned the office every day. He couldn’t relax. I think he’s married to his work, not me. And he’ll never change.’

‘Oh, Sally.’

‘It’s all right, I’ll make him sorry!’ Sally sniffed into her hanky. ‘I’m not speaking to him at the moment. Not till I’ve made him suffer a bit more.’

Liz gloomily poured coffee as the last of her hopes died. How could she enjoy her Silver Wedding when her sister was so miserable? Best to put it out of her mind and count her blessings.

The day itself dawned and there indeed was a card, propped against the clock as she had expected. It was, as Liz had feared, a perfectly ordinary day exactly the same as any other. She dreaded Sally coming in to gloat but she didn’t come near.

At five o’clock, Johnnie came bouncing in, bearing the bunch of flowers, for which she thanked him. Liz arranged them neatly in a vase and put them on the dresser.

‘I’m going out, Mum. I’ll leave you two young lovebirds alone. Stay cool,’ he said, in that mystifying manner of the young.

‘I will,’ she promised.

Both Susie and Tom rang, wishing her well, and promising to visit soon. It was lovely to hear from them and Liz said all the right things, even managing to keep smiling throughout the conversations, despite the lump in her throat. Then took herself off for a healing soak in a hot bath.

She must make the best of it, Liz decided. Who said life should be easy? She could at least

make herself look nice for Ted.

A chicken roasted in the oven, and she'd baked a chocolate gateau for afterwards. They'd open a bottle of red wine and enjoy a relaxing meal together.

She wasn't sure afterwards what made her go into the loft. Warmly wrapped in her dressing gown, she'd considered her meagre supply of dresses, and then suddenly remembered the old linen box. It was stuffed with treasured baby clothes that she couldn't bear to throw away, a box of building bricks, a couple of broken dolls and a tipper lorry.

There were piles of old photographs, of course, and family papers. She found the shoes she'd worn at her wedding, a bright pink dance dress. Within moments she had it spread out before her.

Downstairs, she put on the dress, astonished and gratified that she could still zip it up, even if the waist fitted rather more snugly than it used to. It had a full, flouncy skirt and a low, scoop neck – really quite flattering.

She put on the white shoes, fluffed out her hair, touched up her make-up and swirled happily before the long mirror. If she didn't stand too close to it, she almost looked a teenager again.

'Where did you find that?' She heard Ted's voice from the door.

'In the loft.' Turning to face him, she blushed.

'It'll go very nicely with this.'

He took out a small velvet box, opening it to reveal a silver locket, which he hung shyly about her neck. Inside were both their pictures.

'I wish it could've been more, love,' he said softly.

'It's lovely, Ted.'

'It's to say that you're still my girl,' he said, his arms going around her.

All her disappointment faded. It didn't matter that there would be no party, no trip on the Orient Express or champagne and flowers in her room. All that mattered was this man. Their love.

'I think we still have that record you mentioned up in the loft somewhere. I'll go and look for it before I change.'

Ted came back down with a stack of old records. They lit candles, ate the chicken and the delicious gateau, and drank every drop of the wine.

Then he pushed back the furniture and played all the old tunes on the record player. They bopped and rock 'n' rolled, and smooched cheek to cheek.

'Just like teenagers again,' Ted said, rather breathlessly.

'Not quite,' Liz confessed, going to put the kettle on. 'I don't know about you but I need a tea break!'

Sally was bursting with curiosity when she came in for coffee the next morning. 'What did you do then, in the end?'

'Nothing much,' Liz said, though the sparkle in her eyes told a different story.

'Come on, you must have done something special. A nice meal out?'

But Liz refused to say another word. Some things were just too special to share.