

Moving On

The man at the next table was deep in a crossword. Luke, biting into a Danish, glanced at him casually and instantly snatched his eyes away. Then he sneaked another glance. Surely? The straight nose, the cleft chin, the jutting brow. Yes, it was Jason, without a doubt. But what had happened to that halo of blond hair? Gone – the lot. And in its place a shiny brown dome, flanked by jug-handle ears. The change was huge and shocking.

Luke kept his eyes lowered and hid his disquiet with a sip of coffee. It had been a long time. Seven years, to be exact. The day as clear as yesterday. Jason had come to his room and spoken rather formally. ‘You’re very young. Still a student. There are guys of your own age all around. Why fixate on me? I may have misled you. It was a great night and I’d like to see you again from time to time. But you must stop phoning me. You must move on.’

Luke had retained his words for seven years.

He wondered what to do. He was too flustered to speak and decided to keep his head down. He fumbled in his bag for something to read, but could find nothing but a government guide to tax codes. He thumbed through it slowly, pretending to be engrossed. Perhaps the thing to do was to leave now, briskly and purposefully, before Jason had a chance to lift his eyes from his paper. He sneaked another glance. Ah, too late! Jason was looking at him, though with a puzzled air of only half-recognition. Well, that was understandable – *he* had changed too. He was no longer a boy. He now wore a suit, worked in a law firm and lived in a smart parkside flat with a long-term lover.

Jason caught his glance and smiled, looking mildly embarrassed as if he sensed that he ought to speak. ‘Small bird with Iberian head and weapon in the tail,’ he mused aloud. ‘Seven letters.’

Luke chuckled and, seeing that further pretence was silly, said, ‘Oh, Jason, why ask me? You know I’m no good at that sort of thing.’

Jason stared, the smile frozen on his lips. ‘Oh my God! ... Luke, I’m so sorry ... I mean, I can’t believe ... So what happened?’

Luke shrugged. ‘Time, I guess. It happens to all of us. Look at you, for instance.’

Jason grinned and passed a hand over his pate. Then, picking up his paper, he moved to Luke’s table and dropped onto a chair. ‘Yeah, well, it’s been ... how long?’

‘Seven years,’ said Luke promptly.

‘Seven years!’ Jason whistled, studying Luke’s face as if staggered at this instant response. ‘Well, well. And now, what a change! You’re looking amazingly good. Just *amazingly* good. So what have you been doing these past seven years?’

Trying to forget you, Luke wanted to say, but a self-protective wall prevented him. In any case, he was reluctant to plunge in with such an abrasive reply. So he smiled and said, ‘Ah well, growing up, I guess. Getting on with it.’

‘You qualified, of course.’

‘Yeah. I’m with Wesley Mitchell now.’

‘So ... a rising young professional.’

Luke winced. ‘No call to sneer.’

‘Hey, I’m not sneering, I’m envious.’

‘Oh really? Well, you *have* changed.’

Jason shrugged and fell silent. Then: ‘So are you seeing anyone?’

‘I live with Patrick. He runs his own business. Financial services.’

‘Financial services. Wow!’

‘And you? How’s the writing?’

‘Ah, not good, not good.’ Jason rubbed his temple. ‘I mean, let’s face it, no one wants my plays. And I’ve written nothing – or nothing I like – for a very long time. The truth is I’m not a writer, Luke. I just thought I was.’

‘You *are* a writer. I’ve seen your stuff and it’s impressive.’

‘Thanks, but ...’

Jason glanced away. It was the first time he’d confessed to failure and he wondered if it was seeing Luke again that made him want to open up and admit all the setbacks of the intervening years. He could scarcely believe the change in the lad. The raw, tongue-tied youth had been replaced by an engaging young man with attractive looks and a confident manner. The soft brown eyes had a frankness, too, a sympathetic appeal that seemed to pull you in and break down any lingering reserve. Jason felt himself irresistibly drawn. It was perfectly ridiculous. He was going to fall in love again – and with the boy that he had spurned seven years ago in an awkward meeting on the first floor of a student hostel.

He felt a stab of guilt. At the time, his response to Luke’s attachment – a devotion he’d thought of as pestering but now recognised as an unstated declaration of love – had probably been heartless. But then, sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind – isn’t that what they say? It bothered him, though, that he’d seen nothing of Luke since the meeting and had more or less put him to the back of his mind, giving little thought to the way the break-up might have troubled him. Was that because he knew he’d behaved callously and couldn’t bear to think about it? Had he banished Luke, buried him deep, to keep his conscience clear? Well, perhaps. But hell, he’d had problems of his own at the time. His writing had become a struggle, he was in a tense affair with a married man and

had fallen out with some colleagues at work. So there *were* excuses, and though he might have slightly mishandled the situation, he couldn't quite blame himself.

'So what are you doing, if not writing?' Luke broke in.

'Still bartending – though not at Chez Louis, of course. As you know, I change my job every six months. It's the only way to keep sane.'

Luke shook his head. 'That's sad, Jason. You're wasting yourself. Are you living with anyone?'

Jason smiled wryly. 'I was living with a guy called Nathan for three years. But then it all fell apart.' He tugged his earlobe. 'It was my fault. I started an affair with a colleague. It was a casual fling, nothing serious. I just wanted to upset Nathan. We were too settled, I thought, and needed shaking up.'

'So you shook things up and the sky fell in.'

'Yeah. It's my self-destructive streak. I didn't allow for his insecurity, did I? Eventually, in revenge, he started an affair of his own and I came home one night to find him snogging a cute Jamaican lad on the sofa. It was now my turn to get mad and I started jabbing his lover in the shoulder. There was a fight and the police came.' Jason looked away to hide the welling in his eyes. 'Nathan and I broke up a few weeks later.'

He fell silent and stared ahead, chewing the side of his thumb.

Luke, taking a sip of coffee, studied the face in front of him. A greatly changed face – more lined and mature, more richly marked with experience. The callow arrogance of youth had gone. And yet – it was still the same old Jason. The Jason that Luke had loved and wanted so desperately, had thought about day and night. The Jason that he had called one evening after far too many beers and kept on the phone for almost an hour while burbling on shamelessly, brimming with confession and teetering on the brink of self-embarrassment. The Jason that for the

past seven years had never been far from his thoughts, that he had never stopped loving, that even now called up a strange fluttering thrill in the centre of his chest.

Jason snapped out of his musing and turned to Luke with a weak smile. ‘So now, what about you? Tell me more. Is life good?’

‘Good?’ Luke scratched his nose. ‘Well, I guess it’s ... not bad.’

‘And who’s this Patrick?’

‘Patrick? Oh, he’s the sweetest guy. We met in the Musée d’Orsay – you know how I love that impressionist stuff. I was studying a Renoir and he came and sat beside me. Apparently he’d been dogging my steps all day, following me from room to room. We chatted, gazed at each other, and after a while he took my hand – simple as that.’

Jason stared at him, stroking his chin. ‘Hm ... and you’re happy?’

Luke lowered his eyes, then lifted them to face Jason with a straight look. ‘Hey, I’m comfortable, I enjoy my work and I live with a man who adores me.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

Luke wriggled and sighed. ‘Happy? ... Oh Jason, for Christ’s sake, how do *I* know?’

They fell silent, and Luke, frowning, turned his sightless gaze on some people passing in the street. Jason’s question had nettled him. Was he happy? It was not something he’d asked himself recently – or perhaps ever. He’d been too busy *getting on with it*, to recall his earlier remark. And he resented this sudden, careless intrusion. What right had Jason to come barging back into his life, probing, prying and stirring up discontent. If there was lack, if he was less fulfilled than he might be, then the cause was sitting right here in front of him, thoughtlessly – or deliberately? – relighting the flame on which he’d already burned his fingers. And happiness? What was *that*, anyway? It was a by-product, a

condition seen in retrospect, not something to go for. If you had it, you didn't know you had it, and only not having it made you think of it at all.

Still, the question bugged him. Was he happy? Well, sometimes. But in general? Hm ... probably not. Oh God, Patrick was a sweet guy, he'd not lied about that. Mild, loving, considerate, but a bit dull. A nervous workaholic, obsessed with share prices, percentages, sheets of figures. No, there was no denying it, not a bundle of fun. And as for the charge between them – well, what could you say? The buzz when they looked at each other was so low that it scarcely registered on the scale.

Jason broke into his thoughts. 'Luke, I'm sorry if I hurt you that night ... and truly sorry we split in that way ... I didn't mean to be unkind, please understand that ... I didn't mean to crush you ... I simply handled it badly ... I can be – well, you know – a bit clumsy ...'

'You spoke down to me, Jason ... like my father.'

'Yes, I know. But there was the difference in our ages. You were *very* young at the time and I had a lot on my mind. I was involved with another guy, actually.'

'None of which stopped you tumbling me into bed.'

'Oh Christ, Luke! ... I've said I'm sorry.'

They lapsed into tight silence and Jason felt a mood of depression descending on him like a rain-cloud. It was one of those fits that in recent times he'd experienced with increasing frequency. The worst of these had come just after the break-up with Nathan, a blow that had coincided with the rejection of his script by the cruelly-named Serendipity Theatre Company. The greyness that had enveloped him then, the frozen monochrome of the room where he'd been living, the turning of the key in the lock, the little mound of pills in his palm, the hammering on the door, the bursting in of several policemen in the company of his distraught landlady, were memories that haunted him still. His friends,

Tony and Bruce, had rescued him, taking him in and caring for him until he had regained balance. But his confidence had gone – and would he ever get it back? Recently he'd bravely begun a new script, but the going was hard and sometimes he wondered if he had the talent or the will to finish it.

He glanced at Luke, who was studying his fingernails with a look of wounded abstraction, and wondered what was going through his head. He felt another stab of guilt for having treated him so badly. He'd given precious little heed to the pain he'd caused him at the time and then dismissed him from his thoughts. So what kind of brute was he? He was learning something about himself and it was a hard lesson. But perhaps it was not too late to make amends. Did Luke still have feelings for him? It seemed so. It was the way Luke looked at him – his sympathetic manner, his air of concern. And as for his own feelings – well, they had changed! Luke had blossomed into such a fine, self-assured young man. And now this chance meeting – it was as if fate had brought them together. There was Patrick, of course, but that was no great obstacle. Patrick was not a passion; he was merely comfortable; it was clear as daylight. On the other hand, the mutual attraction that he now sensed between himself and Luke looked full of promise. Yes, they needed each other, he felt sure of it.

He reached across the table and took Luke's hand. Luke looked up with a wry smile. 'You're right, I did speak down to you. And I repeat, I'm sorry – though I can't recall exactly what I said, of course.'

'Okay, I'll tell you. You said: "I may have misled you. It was a great night and I'd like to see you again from time to time. But you must stop phoning me. You must move on."'

Jason stared, his face rigid with astonishment. 'Christ, Luke! That's creepy! It's seven years, for God's sake.'

'I know – I told you how long it was.'

‘So you *haven't* moved on.’

Luke flinched and glanced away. Not true. Putting Jason behind him had been an immense struggle, but he'd come through and made a life for himself. That first week, when he'd lain in bed all day, staring with tense horror at the bottle of pills on the bedside cabinet, had been the worst. But on leaving his room, he'd been relieved and strangely comforted to find that college life was going on around him just as before. Gradually he'd begun to socialise and attend lectures, and in the following term he'd run through perhaps a dozen or more lovers before slowing down. True, the image of Jason had never faded. True, he always scanned the papers for any report of a new play. True, he sometimes conjured up Jason when making love to someone else. But year on year the pain had lessened until its rawness had eventually healed. And he sometimes called his new protective skin *Life with Patrick*.

‘It's been hard, Jason. At times, very hard. Do you recall what *I* said that night?’

Jason shrugged. ‘Eh ...’

Luke flinched. ‘Anyway ... I meant it.’

‘So what are you saying? That you have the same feelings for me now, seven years later?’

Luke swallowed the dregs of his coffee and looked away, his face slightly flushed. He could feel Jason's eyes burning into him.

‘Luke, what can I say? ... I'm amazed ... If I'd known ... if I'd only known ... I've caused you a lot of pain, I can see that ... Can you forgive me?’

Luke turned again to his fingernails. Jason shifted nervously.

‘Luke, look ... I know you're living with this bloke ... but perhaps we could meet from time to time? ... Maybe here, or somewhere else? ... I'd

really like to see you again ... I can't believe the change in you ... You're looking so ... well ... so *good*.'

Luke, raising an eyebrow, smiled wryly. 'And not too young?'

'Oh Luke, *please* ... that's unkind ... I'm truly sorry ... how many times do I have to say it? ... The fact is, as you may have gathered, I've had a fit of the glooms for quite a while now, and right at this moment I'm at a low point ... I've no one to talk to, no one to share with ... and that's why I say I'd like to see you again ... You say – or don't deny – that you've never lost your feelings for me, and I sense – oh I don't know – that you're not happy ... Is that fair? ... So maybe we need ... can help each other? ... It's not too late, is it, to bring each other a little comfort? ... To make up for the bad times?'

Luke stared hard at the face before him. At the familiar straight nose, cleft chin and jutting brow, now astoundingly transfigured by the shiny brown dome and jug-handle ears. Stared hard at the face that he'd held in his mind's eye since that painful night, the face that he'd ached to see again. Yes, the tug was still there, and if he stared hard enough he could feel something twisting in the space behind his ribcage. The lightning strikes just once – isn't that what they say? And isn't that the dread point? It strikes just once and never again. It blasts you with galvanic fury and leaves you scorched and wounded for life. Jason had asked if he was happy, and he thought that if happiness was possible the time to seize it had passed. What had been his chances of finding happiness with Jason in any case? And were they any greater now than then? He thought, too, that it was probably a mistake to become involved with a frustrated writer, sensing that he might end up as a cross between a muse and a nurse.

Besides, there was Patrick to think about – no small consideration. Patrick, who was probably at home at this moment, swivelling on the chair in his snug little office, perhaps speaking on the phone or lifting

sheets of data from his printer. Dull, kindly, unsuspecting Patrick. To start seeing Jason now, even on the sly, would be not only wrong but probably fatal. It would put everything in jeopardy. There could be no half measures with Jason – he'd devour you whole, and the likeliest outcome was that it would all end in misery. No, if the tug was still there, it had to be fought.

Reaching across the table, he took Jason's hand.

'Hey, Jason ... I'm sorry you've hit a bad patch ... And you're right – my feelings for you ...' He wriggled in confusion, clutching his brow. 'Look, I won't deny them – they're as strong as ever ... But as for happiness, I don't know ... I doubt that we can help each other now – it's too late.'

Jason spread his hands, twisting in anguished disbelief. 'Luke, don't be absurd, it's never too late.' He leaned forward with a look of desperate urgency. 'Look, I'm not asking to run away with you – just to see you from time to time. You can allow *that*, surely? It would be good for both of us, wouldn't it? ... Well, good for me, I know that.' He jerked back in sudden convulsion. 'Christ, Luke! ... Are you going to *tear* it out of me? ... I *need* you, for God's sake.'

Luke leapt up, though a weakness in the legs made him clutch the table to steady himself. His heart was pumping and his eyes had started to prick. His head was a chamber of echoes. *Why fixate on me? You must move on.*

'No, it wouldn't be good for us, Jason. Can't you see that? It's too late. We must put a stop to this now, before it takes a grip.'

But Jason was scarcely listening; he was too busy scrawling something on a scrap of notepaper. 'Look, here's my number, Luke ... Don't cut me out of your life, I beg you ... Please phone me ... *please* ...'

Luke, recoiling slightly, made no move to take what was thrust at him.

‘Oh Jason,’ he chuckled darkly, ‘isn’t that what you once asked me *not* to do?’

Hesitating for a moment, as if sensing a need to say something more, he blinked at the wavering image of his former lover, at the face wide with pleading concern that was swimming before his eyes. Then, with a look of sorrowful regret – knowing that if he stayed a moment longer his resolve would give, that he’d take the number and stow it in his wallet, where it would burn a hole in its clamour for attention – he dashed a hand across his face, turned and hurried into the street.

Jason sat staring through the window for the next forty minutes, watching the sun drop behind the buildings. The street darkened, the lights of evening came on. And when he glanced around, he saw that the place was almost empty, the two other customers preparing to leave. He shivered slightly and pulled up the zip on his jacket. No, he couldn’t face going home just now. Not to the dog howling in the next garden, the tread of footsteps overhead, the barren drabness of his room. He’d eat out tonight. Somewhere warm, busy, brightly lit. Perhaps look in at Chez Louis and share a laugh with some of his old mates. Yeah, good plan. He felt slightly cheered. But then a cough at his elbow made him turn. The waitress was smiling. She asked after Luke. He made some excuse, fumbled in his pockets and paid for both of them. Then, with a brave grin, his newspaper tucked under his arm, he strolled out, screwing up the scrap of notepaper and tossing it fiercely into the bin at the entrance.

(3,619 words)