

Promise

Pulling into the car park of a nearby rustic pub, I decided to step out of my dad's bashed-up old Fiat Punto so I could stretch my legs. With a loud grunt I hoisted myself out of my seat and onto cobble path, slamming the door behind me and stretching my arms high into the air until I felt a satisfying crack in my spine. I could hear the fan in my engine buzzing as it struggled to fight off the intense heat beaming down from the first - and most likely the only - day of summer for Yorkshire. The smell of wild garlic filled my lungs and reminded me of my dad's allotment behind the house which now lay in disrepair, another example of his short-lived enthusiasm for trendy mid-life distractions.

I shook my arms out of the tattered leather jacket draped over my shoulders and tossed it through my open window to the passenger seat, breathing a sigh of relief as I began wafting some cold air through my t-shirt to cool myself down in the gentle breeze that brought the sound of birds through the rustling trees. I had never abandoned a lecture before but for some reason it just felt right today - besides, I'm sure my tutor wouldn't miss me answering all of his questions as usual.

Running my fingers through the tangled chestnut waves draped to my shoulders, I stood staring back across the patchwork of greens and yellows that lined the dales, I couldn't help but admire the single grey seam stretching onward to the horizon from which I had once driven across. The drive may be long, but it will be worth it to see that awful grin on Jack's face again. I hopped back into the car, fighting the gear stick into reverse before I carried on down the winding road ahead.

It was around midnight on some dreadfully cold July night in Lincoln as I blundered through the doors of some dingy night club off the main stretch. For some reason I had been conned by my friend Jennifer into joining her on a night out, simply so she could find a new group of men to admire her skimpy jeans-shorts and a torn crop top. I hated her for it, but at least it kept the men from bothering me.

Standing from my cold metal stool, I slipped between the hordes of mindless drones fixated by Jenny's hips as she sauntered knowingly across the dance floor and brought myself to a quiet set of torn leather sofas, looking back across the room as I went. The smell of sweat and stale beer floated around the room, choking me until I brought my glass of cheap whisky up to my nose. The bitter taste of the whisky was no better, but if the drab Americana lining the walls was anything to go by it was probably the classiest drink in the place.

Laying my drink on a nearby table, I made my way steadily to the door across the sticky vinyl floor and pushed absent-mindedly against the saloon door. Without warning, I felt the door pushed back harshly against my hands before throwing me shoulder-first onto the sodden ground below with a thud.

'Oh damn,' came a soft voice hanging over me, 'are you alright?'

Turning my head slowly up, I saw a dainty woman sporting an off-white shirt buttoned up to the top and tucked right into her skinny jeans. With her arm outstretched, her button sleeve stretched just far enough to reveal a small tattoo in the shape of a semi-colon adorning her pale wrists.

'Come on, you can't sit there forever!' she shouted excitedly, yanking my arm and pulling me swiftly from the ground and to my feet.

'Thanks,' I muttered, 'but I really should be going, I don't belong here and honestly I-'

'Woah, calm down there!' she yelled in a broken voice, 'do you really think I'd come to a place like this if I belonged anywhere?'

She gestured sarcastically to her face, grinning as she pointed out the mismatched piercings adorning her pink lips and lining her eyebrows, taking great care to show off the fake stretchers in her ears. She started chuckling to herself before making a chirp and pulling me over to the seat where I had only just abandoned my whisky.

'Trust me, this place sucks, but at least the guys are too busy with that skinny thing at the bar,' she gestured over to Jenny who still sat bathed in the cheap gel lights like a siren on the rocks surrounded by a sea of men, 'but when you run into someone who hates it as much as you, it definitely gets a little better!'

She brushed her hand over her shaved head, staring down at the ground as she sat in silent contemplation for what seemed like an age. I momentarily found myself lost in the scent of sweet mangos radiating from her perfume, filling the air around me and driving away the stale air. I snapped myself out of my daydream and forced another swig of my drink before throwing myself to my feet.

'I appreciate it, I really do,' I uttered shyly, 'but I seriously don't think I can stay here much longer. I don't even know why I came to be honest.'

She gave an uneasy smile and bowed her head, 'sure, sure, I get it. I was a little forward'

'No, it's not you, it's me'

'Jeez, is this a goodbye or a break up?' She stifled a laugh, holding her hands over her mouth as her cheeks met her eyes and turned a bright shade of red. Her giggle was so soft and sweet, I couldn't help but join in laughing as I sat back down, resting myself against the dingy beige walls which appeared so much brighter than before.

'Oh my god!' She blurted out, abruptly throwing her hands against the veneer table, 'I don't even know your name!'

'Ellen,' I giggled, 'How about you?'

'Jackie,' She mumbled back, 'It's a weird name, it makes me sound like a granny if I'm honest.' Running her hand across her shaved head, she began scratching the back of her neck and turned to the table, eyeing my near-empty glass, 'then again, my mum didn't just give me an awful name, she also likes to shave me nearly bald if I dye my hair.'

'Seriously? Why would she do that?'

'She thinks this whole alt-girl thing is just a phase. I mean, I'm nineteen now, I thought you got your independence when you hit 16?' She slung her arm across her

chest and began rubbing her shoulder, her lip trembling slightly, 'look at me, I look like a dude!'

'I don't know,' I piped in, 'I think it quite suits you! Besides, if you think you look like a guy i'll have to start calling you Jack!' She sat deep in thought for a moment before a wave of cheer washed across her face.

'Hey, 'Jack actually has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?' She exclaimed, bouncing excitedly, 'Thanks Ellen, it means a lot to hear someone who isn't calling me a weirdo!'

As we spoke I felt a sense of delight filling our little corner of the club, almost like we had known each other all our lives. As time went on, we spoke of such trivial things - music, TV, even the weather before realising that the sun was beginning to break through the shuttered blinds beside us.

'I guess that's time,' I sung joyously to myself, 'it's been nice to make a new friend.'

'Same, I really couldn't have gotten through the night without you,' she chirped back, 'promise you'll stay in touch?'

'Promise.'

As I stood up and stretched my arms, Jack swiftly untucked her leg and launched herself out of her seat, throwing her arms around me tightly and nestling her head into my shoulder.

A few months later on an unusually warm October evening, I sat alone on the ragged red sofa of my dad's living room. My dad was a kind man, but there was no doubt that he could be strict when he needed to be, sometimes making it harder to talk to him. Although I love my dad to no end, I never spoke to him about how I was feeling or my emotions, mostly just what my lectures had taught me.

A sudden knock came from the wooden door of our small stone cottage, taking me by surprise and causing me to wrap my arms hesitantly over my chest. I glanced through to my dad's study where he sat quietly typing away at his computer, completely oblivious to the sound at the door. I stood frozen for a moment before reaching for the door handle, easing the door open to see a face a familiar face donning a leather jacket over her baggy blue pyjama top

'Jack? I whispered, 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't just drop by like this, but I needed to see you' She stood shaking, her face reddened and sodden. She stepped into the living room and curled her legs up underneath her and brushing down her jeans.

After our time in the bar we had become close friends and spoken nearly every week, whether it was over a coffee at our local cafe or a game of Sniper Squad at the arcade. We had always made time for each other, but it wasn't often that she visited me at home, during the day, let alone in the evening.

'I don't know how to say this,' she murmured shakily, 'but we can't meet up any more.'

'What?' I shouted, tears welling suddenly in my eyes, 'Why not? I thought we were friends?'

'We are, but...' she hesitated briefly, wiping her nose on her sleeve, 'my parents are taking me away, up to some town in the north east. They won't let me stay!' She let out a yelp, the tears streaming down her face and onto the arm of her already-sodden jacket. I leapt over the sofa to her side, wrapping my arms around her and laying my hand softly on her head. We sat silently for a moment, the gentle whistling of the wind against the window easing the silence.

After a moment, Jack reared her head and stared up at me, her deep blue eyes staring back at mine. She looked so beautiful in the dim light of our living room, the trails of her mango perfume still filling the air of our living room with its sweet scent and reminding me of the first night we met. I leant in closer, resting my forehead against hers, her warm breath coursing down over my neck and sending a tingling down my spine.

'Promise me you'll come for me when I leave?' She whispered into my ear, her sweet voice wrapping its way around me like a velvet scarf.

'I promise.'

As I planted a soft kiss on her lips, the taste of her cherry lip gloss filling my mouth with glee as I pulled her in tighter and pressed my hand against her chest. An abrupt grunt came from behind me, startling me like a rabbit caught in the headlights and causing me to turn my head sharply, only to be greeted by the sight of my dad's piercing eyes staring back.

'Jack, is it?' He said in a stern tone.

'Y-yes, Sir'

'No need to call me Sir, just John will do.' He exclaimed, a gentle smile creeping across his face. He began to chuckle lightly before rubbing his hand on my head and mussing up my hair, 'you are welcome to stay the night, it sounds like you two need some time together.' At which point he gently wandered back to his study, leaving Jack and I to ourselves.

It had been nearly a year since that day, yet as I mounted the car onto a nearby kerb, I couldn't help but wipe away the tears that now clouded my vision on the sleeve of the leather jacket Jack had left behind. Stepping back out of the car, I took a look around before breathing in a lung full of the bitter sea air. I clambered over a the rusted metal gate leading into the church yard ahead, headstones adorned with flowers and wreaths lining the path ahead of me, Trudging through the muddy ground, I felt a light rain spitting down from above, chilling me as it came down.

As I approached the headstone I had come to see, the smell of fresh grass filled the air as a raincoat-clad groundskeeper mowed a patch near the small church nearby, I rested my hand against the cold marble plaque and hung my head, a pain rushing through my chest. For a moment I saw the time we had spent together flash by as though it were nothing, leaving a lump in my throat as the tears began to wash my makeup down my face.

'I thought I'd find you here,' came a familiar voice from behind, 'I brought the flowers like you asked, are they alright?'

I turned sharply on my heels to see a petite figure shivering behind me with one arm wrapped tightly around her chest and the other outstretched, a bunch of bright white lilies clutched tightly in her hands. Her head was covered in a short brush of auburn hair which shimmered in the rain, bowing under the weight of each individual droplet.

'Thank you, Jack. It means a lot,' I uttered shakily, sliding the jacket from my shoulders and wrapping it over hers, 'He would have been proud to see us both back together.'

'I'm sure he'd be happier knowing that old car of his is still running.' she replied, her mouth widening as she began to chuckle to herself.

Jack laid the flowers at the foot of my father's grave, wiping her hands on her jeans before reaching across and clutching mine. Despite the bitter cold, her hands still felt warm, reminding me of how long I had waited for this day. Jack turned to face me, her cheeks still red from the cold.

'Promise me we won't lose each other this time,' Jack muttered softly, wrapping her arms around my waist and planting a gentle kiss on my lips.

'I promise.'