

REASONABLE ACCESS

“How are things at home?” he says, running a finger round the rim of his coffee cup.

I stare through the condensation on the café window.

“OK... same old.”

What does he expect me to say? I’m trying not to take sides, and when he pesters for information, about how Mum’s coping since he left, I feel uncomfortable, almost disloyal. I wonder if he realizes that when I get home tonight and Mum says “How did it go today?” my response will be exactly the same. “*Same old.*” If either wants to know how the other is, then they should ask directly, instead of communicating through me, the solicitor or my Aunt Jen, who’s trying to keep Mum’s head above water.

“What do you fancy today, then? The zoo?”

I sigh. “We did that last week, Dad.”

“Oh yeah, so we did. The pictures then?”

“What’s on?”

“I don’t know.”

It’s not like he prepares for these ‘access’ days, is it? It’s just a date on the calendar when, for several hours, he pretends nothing’s changed, and he expects me to do the same. Like I’m going to ignore that the family is split, that Mum cries a lot, eats too little and drinks too much. And when the day’s over, we’ll both agree how great it’s been and walk away, heaving sighs of relief.

I used to go to his bed-sit in town, anything to avoid them having a row on the doorstep, but then his landlady said it ‘didn’t look right’ and he wasn’t supposed to bring people back anyway. So these days we meet at the café on the High St, and he’s always late. And it hardly matters.

“Another coffee?” he asks, hopefully. I think if he could, he’d probably sit here all day drinking coffee, checking his phone, and asking me about school. But in his heart he knows he’s supposed to do something more than that.

I shake my head.

“We could go to the art gallery,” I say, without enthusiasm.

“Do you want to?”

“Not really.”

He’s looking desperate now.

“Shall we just walk down by the river then?”

It’s cold out, but I’m well wrapped up so I nod. He goes to pay the bill and I’m getting my stuff when his phone, which he’s left on the table, buzzes loudly. I glance towards the till, but he’s chatting there, so I pick it up and study the screen. Before I know it, I’m clicking on the incoming text message.

*“I’ll be late home tonight, my love. I’ll explain later. Nothing to worry about. Hugs
– Pat xx.”*

I see Dad threading back towards me, and quickly replace the phone on the table.

I wonder if he’ll notice that I’ve clicked on his messages.

“Ready then?” he says cheerfully. “I was thinking we might take a cruise on the river, grab some lunch on the boat. That’ll make a change won’t it?”

He pockets his phone without checking it, and we leave the cozy warmth of the café and head towards the river, cringing against the icy wind buffeting our bodies.

Once on the boat, we make our way to the lower deck. It’ll be like sitting in the café all afternoon, only this time the scenery – greasy, grey waves and scudding

clouds - will change as the day wears on. I wonder whether I might be sick, as the boat noses out of the shelter of the jetty and into the middle of the river, rolling with the swell, but quickly get used to the motion.

Dad's concentrating on his sandwich and hasn't looked at his phone yet.

"Da-aa-ad..."

We both laugh at the tone I've used.

"Wha-aa-t?" he responds.

I stop giggling.

"Did you and Mum break up because of anyone else?" I say.

The smile vanishes from his face.

"What makes you think that?" he says edgily.

"Just wondering," I say, watching him. Dad's talked to me a lot about their separation – stuff about 'compatibility' and 'shared aspirations' and 'people changing...'. I've been told it was a 'mutually agreed' decision, a realization that a mistake had been made, nobody's fault. But I've watched his face as he's talked - open, earnest, honest. Then I've compared it to Mum's face, which is drawn, pale,

her mouth twisted in bitterness. There's nothing 'mutually agreed' about her reactions.

And just now, it's occurred to me that he's never actually claimed that there's nobody else.

"Tell me straight, Dad. Is there another woman in your life?"

Is that relief flickering briefly across his face?

He seizes my hands.

"There is no other woman in my life, Tess. I swear."

I stare at him, memorising his expression. I want to remember this forever, because now I know he's lying I'll need to watch out for this expression again in the future. If there is a future.

He gently shakes my hands.

"You do believe me, don't you?"

I turn to stare out at the heaving waters, the faint outline of buildings on the riverbank looming menacingly out of the mist.

His phone rings, and he rummages feverishly through his pockets.

“Hello?” He sounds irritable, but when the other voice speaks his tension eases and he sits back in his chair, turning away slightly.

“No, when was that? Oh, I didn’t check, sorry. No it doesn’t matter. I’ll see you when you ...”

He glances back at me “...later, OK?”

There’s an uncomfortable pause. “Me too,” he says.

He flips the phone shut and immediately re-opens it, scrolling through his messages. His face drops.

Our eyes meet. And I find my voice.

“You lied to me,” I say, gathering my things , realizing as I do that I’ve nowhere to go. I’m trapped on this silly boat with him until we dock. As I walk quickly towards the doorway, I hear him bang into the table as he rises to come after me, upsetting the coffee and cursing.

“I didn’t lie, Tess. I swear I didn’t.”

But I’m already climbing to the deck, the rain heavier now, soaking my hair and anorak.

“Watch out, love,” cautions a deck-hand, “it’s slippery out here. You don’t want to go falling into the river, do you?”

Do I? I guess not.

The boat is approaching the jetty when he finds me. I’m standing near the passenger exit, watching the crew on the jetty prepare to take the ropes.

He puts a hand on my shoulder, but I shake it off.

“You lied,” I whisper fiercely, “and then you lied about having lied.”

“Honestly, I didn’t, pet.”

I swing round to face him.

“You said there was nobody else in your life, that you didn’t leave us for anybody else.”

He grips my shoulders, his face white.

“You asked me if there was another woman in my life. And I said there wasn’t. I was telling the truth.”

“So who’s Pat, then?” I hiss, straining away from him.

His mouth works, and for a moment I think he’s going to lie once again.

“It’s not Pat. It’s Patrick.”

It’s a fine June day and the sun warms my back as I leave the bus station. I’m a few minutes late but they won’t mind, they’ll be deep in conversation as always. I pause outside the cafe and I can see them, Dad and Patrick, heads bent together as they look at something on Patrick’s phone. Then they laugh, Dad throwing his head back and Patrick nudging him with his elbow as he grins mischievously.

There’s so much joy there, so much love, compatibility, understanding... I could go on watching them, but I want to be part of the joke, part of the warmth, and so I hurry in. They turn towards me as I approach, and both rise, reaching out for me.

Patrick goes to the counter for my lemonade, and Dad’s already asking about my end-of-term exams.

“Oh leave her alone,” Patrick says, returning, “what’s done is done. She’s bound to do well, she’s your daughter.”

They exchange a look so powerfully affectionate it takes my breath away, the joy almost painful to behold.

“So what’s on the agenda?” I say.

“Patrick has some great ideas,” says Dad.

And as Patrick reels off his suggestions... abseiling, rock-climbing, a treasure hunt... I sit back, brimming with contentment. Mum is over the split now, and more importantly the reason for it. She’s seeing Geoff, and I like him; he makes her happy. I have four great people in my life, and I’m loving it. I used to feel like a misfit, compared to the other girls in my class with ‘normal’ families. Now that’s in the past and I feel really special, truly blessed to have twice as much loving family life as everyone else.

“So what’s it to be, Tesspots?” Dad hasn’t called me that in years.

“I don’t care,” I say happily, “you two choose.”

I’m just happy to be here.

Words: 1500