



Jigsaw

by Celia Bryce

You were always the organised one, the walking timetable, the one who made all the decisions. Well, recently I've been making decisions that you would never have approved of...

Yesterday, I got up, straightened the bed, dressed and cleaned my teeth. Then I wandered around the place, indecisive as ever. That always drives you up the wall, doesn't it, my inability to make decisions?

I made coffee. Took the grinder from the cupboard, switched it on and watched it blast French Roast beans into tiny little bits. Loud, that coffee-grinder. Peace-shatteringly loud. The kitchen burst with its noise.

At one time, I would have had a quiet cup of tea. You changed all that when you moved in. Woaned me on to French Roast. Black.

It was a strong cup of coffee. Once we might have had croissants with it, being Saturday. And fruit juice and days of papers to read. All those weekend things we did together.

I drowned the coffee with milk.

Then it was off to the supermarket. Up and down every single aisle with a trolley. It killed time. Stopped it dead. I might have been in there hours, maybe just minutes, but when I came out it was still only morning. A whole day left to fill. And I should have stuck to a basket. The trolley was full of space. It was too big. I couldn't think of what to put in it. I can see you nodding. 'Typical,' you're saying.

Everyone else had packed their trolleys to overflowing, as if Christmas was round the corner. It made me wonder what date it was. I couldn't remember. You were always good at dates. Organised. Not like me. But that's you. A walking timetable. Well-practised.

The shopping rattled around the bottom of my trolley. A frozen meal. Loaf of bread. Bag of salad. Milk. And tea-bags. Just in case. Not really being a coffee drinker.

There were small children swinging their legs in child seats, picking at packets of biscuits. Whining for sweets. We used to make faces at fractious children, you and I. Tried to make them laugh instead of cry. We'd pick on a particular mother and child and follow them round the shop making faces until, fascinated, the child completely forgot its troubles and looked at us being silly. Made shopping that much more interesting. Enjoyable.

If I'd taken a basket instead of a trolley, I might have whizzed past the queues, gone straight to the basket-only checkout and got out quickly. As it happens, there I was behind a mother and toddler squabbling, in a long line of fat, bulging trolleys.

The toddler had curly brown hair and would have made a good advert for shampoo if he'd only remembered to smile. But all he did was scrunch his face up and squawk.

I'd always imagined you as a father, me as a mother, making our children laugh and giggle along the supermarket aisles. But you never seemed keen. Putting me off whenever I got round to mentioning offspring.

It slipped your mind about telling me you didn't ever want them. But then there were a few things along the way, weren't there? Things that just happened to slip your mind.

When I reached the sweet stand by the checkout, I dithered a bit, then dropped a bar of chocolate into my trolley. Decisively, as it happens.

You were never very keen on me eating sweet things, either, were you? Wanting your wife to be slim, good to look at. Bought me a year's subscription to the gym for my birthday. Now that it was paid for, you argued, I should make use of it. Always telling me what I should and shouldn't do. What was best for me. Because you loved me. Apparently.

But I liked to walk. To tackle the hills around the flat. To feel the fresh air and wind in my face, not the sweat of a windowless gym. That's where I went instead. Up the hills and down again. In trainers and shorts. Kept slim anyway. And you weren't to know, were you? Being away so much. I felt guilty about the deceit. The wasted money.

I thought about that as I stood in the queue. Looked at the deceitful chocolate bar stuffed full of hazelnuts and smiled. I was going to enjoy every single bit. I'd go home and nibble away at it with a cup of tea. A big cup of tea. And afterwards, full of feel-good factor, I'd clean out the house.

And here I am, Sunday afternoon. Furniture arranged the way I like it. My favourite pictures, the ones you said didn't really go, are now up. Replacing the ones you said did go.

I've put your clothes in black bags and they're sitting outside. The bin men come tomorrow. There's a pile of ashes in the garden. Books of yours and papers. Probably quite important, some of them.

I looked at the bar of chocolate and smiled

Too late now.

And in my hand I've got this letter — it's almost finished. I'm sending it tomorrow, to your other home. The one where you live with your other wife and two children when you're not living with me.

Your wife must be as stupid as I am to be so taken in by so much working away. Not any more, of course. Because she'll have the other letter I posted on Friday.

Something I forgot to tell you when you went off last week. The person I met while out walking. He's a nice guy. Very talkative.

We've been going up and down hills for weeks now and apparently he knows all about you. Pointed a few things out. Proved it, even. It wasn't too hard, evidently.

Odd, isn't it? Meeting a person just by chance on a hill. And being told something that makes all those peculiar little things fall into place. Like missing jigsaw pieces, lost in corners, under cushions.

Then the picture's complete and clear. Complicated, too.

But you're out of it now and won't be coming back. That's one decision I've made. Probably the most sensible to date.

You should be pleased with me.

THE END

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