

**12:00**

Marcia glanced at the clock and lifted her glass taking a sip of her wine. She glanced around the restaurant as diners started to arrive for their lunch. She knew her companion wouldn't be on time she never was. Marcia was always punctual and Chrissy would arrive maybe ten, maybe twenty minutes late, making such an entrance. She would be breathless like she had just run a marathon to get here in time. But the breathless voice never matched the way she sauntered in, exaggerating her curvaceous hips and taut arse. She always wore jewellery, something glitzy and brash unsuitable for luncheon, and she would begin talking, about herself of course, even as she sat down.

12:10

Maria wished she hadn't bothered; every year was the same, every year she left with a headache and a yearning for an excuse not to come back next year. She took a gulp of her wine. They were all so young, mid-twenties all of them, still full of youth and vigour. She watched the other diners with only vague interest, as each day that passed they would grow older, grow more like her. Marcia caught a glimpse in the window, she looked good. Her hair was well groomed and her foundation immaculate but it was there where her cheeks met her chin, the slight sag that gave away her age. Was she really forty, how on earth had that happened.

12:15

Marcia finished her glass of wine and poured another. How dare she be late again? She was so angry about the way that bitch treated her. Marcia had left Sheffield University with a good honours degree and ok she didn't leave with a first class degree and a professor husband, but she left without the scandal. She couldn't really remember how it had started that they met every year, by the end of the final year they were barely speaking. Marcia had been busy dealing with her father's estate; there had been decisions about the horses and the main house. No one wanted big estates anymore; people with money lived in warm places without money pit ancestral houses to contend with. How had this wretched arrangement started?

12:25

Marcia poured some wine into Chrissy's glass, she was becoming embarrassed at the obvious empty seat. The last of the bottle went into hers. She took a big mouthful and let the wine slide effortlessly down her throat. Martin Chuzzlewitch. Marcia had hated that book and she had stopped suddenly to stare at the old cover in front of her. Someone was reading that damn book and it had surprised her. Then Chrissy had moved the book away from her face and had stared up from the past. It had been such a shock. Chrissy had looked older, more elegant, but she still held that adorable puzzled expression. Marcia had held her tightly trying somehow to cling to her lost youth. They had been comfortable together and their coffee had turned into dinner. As Marcia had left she had been the one to suggest meeting again. Maybe next year and so it had begun.

12:35

Marcia watched Chrissy walk down the street. Her legs stretched out as she tried to dodge around the pedestrians blocking the sidewalk. That was the problem with London. The streets were either full of tourists gazing mindlessly at the shops or locals who would block the streets whilst lunch hour shopping. Marcia could never get anywhere without being nudged or brushed against.

Chrissy entered the restaurant and glanced around wildly, trying to attract attention. She had a good figure, rounder now, but somehow that made her even sexier. She let her hair settle as she smiled and walked towards her.

"I'm sorry,"

Chrissy pulled out her chair and bent to place her handbag on the window sill.

“The train was delayed, and the streets are packed,”

Chrissy flicked her golden hair from her shoulders and sighed contentedly.

“But I’m here now. Happy Birthday Marcia.”

Marcia blinked slowly. The wine made her cheeks flush pink. The waiter moved towards them. Marcia glanced down at the menu.

“Waldorf salad please and, oh I have a glass of wine, and a sparkling mineral water please.”

They both glanced at Marcia.

“The same and another bottled of this wine.”

Chrissy turned to the waiter and smiled apologetically.

“Don’t do that, don’t apologise for me being slightly tipsy, I’ve been here for over half an hour AGAIN. I don’t need you to apologise for me.”

Chrissy blushed pink.

“I didn’t, I’m sorry I’m late, really I am. I know he’s been waiting to take your order so it was for him. You know the trains are always late, the faster trains stop over lunch and you always have to choose such an early time. Remember I have to leave work, get the train and traipse across here to see you.”

Chrissy stopped speaking. She had been saying exactly what she thought and that couldn’t lead to any good.

“What do you expect me to do about it?”

Marcia whispered through clenched teeth. Chrissy stared at her, she still had no idea how to behave, she was a social Luddite, it was to be expected she had no friends.

“You don’t work so you could come closer to me, you could make the time later, you could.”

She stopped at the expression of disgust on Marcia’s face.

“Always the same isn’t it, your work, you, you, you. You’ve been here five minutes and not mentioned your husband, remember I had to look after father.”

Chrissy stared into her pale inhuman grey eyes.

“Your father has been dead over twenty years, you’ve never had a job because you have money. I come here to check you’re ok because I hope one day you’ll tell me you have something else in your empty shallow life. But every year you just dismiss my little machinations, my career, my husband, my children as mere incidentals and every year I go back wondering why I bother.”

Marcia blinked faster. She had never suspected that Chrissy had the capacity to snap and here she was being honest. Marcia liked the freshness of this conversation; it matched the crispness of the next gulp of wine. They stared at each other. Chrissy’s face held a fixed grin. Marcia just smirked back. The waiter was close enough to feel the tension, the rest of the diners were oblivious. Marcia’s phone bleeped. She reached in her bag and read the text from her husband. He would be back in the country later this evening, he would be there for the cricket tomorrow, and did she need any perfume whilst he was in the Duty Free area. Chrissy felt warmth grow inside her. She had a job, a devoted husband, two crazy sons and some good genuine friends, her life wasn’t perfect, but it was pretty great. She looked into Marcia’s eyes and felt pity. This woman in front of her had nothing; she had things and numbers on a bank statement but nothing of worth.

“So how are things? Still a childless friendless unemployed spinster?”

Chrissy sipped her wine and tilted her head.

Marcia couldn’t register the insults there were too many. She reached for the new bottle of wine.

“I slept with him before you did, I found him ineffectual and rather disappointing. You weren’t the first student he had sex with, must be half our class at least.”

Chrissy stared blankly back at her. She had always wondered when she would tell her, when she would try to hurt her with the past.

“He had, has, a sex addiction, he slept with most of your class and most of mine. I was one of the only ones who wouldn’t shag my tutor, I considered it unprofessional. When I threatened to report him he went into therapy and it was only in the final year that he asked me on a date, when he was allegedly cured.”

Marcia couldn’t believe what she was hearing, it fascinated her, she rarely found anything of interest in the world, but this was amazing.

“He’s not cured but we manage it together. He is rationed, it works out fine really, now I’ve reached the menopause I’m quite like a rabbit myself. Was he the last time you had sex without writing a cheque?”

Chrissy opened the bottle of sparkling water and took a deep drink.

Marcia waited for the waiter to place down the salads. Chrissy picked up her cutlery and attacked her food. She focused on eating barely acknowledging Marcia’s existence.

“I’m leaving the country, I’ve decided to travel.”

Marcia liked Chrissy’s expression of surprise.

“I’m pleased for you.”

She replied through a mouthful of food.

“Where are you going?”

“Everywhere.”

Marcia hadn’t considered her food, her words were beginning to merge in her mouth and her brain. She had said that to surprise her, she hadn’t expected lots of questions. She picked up her fork and knocked over a desert spoon. It clattered to the floor. Chrissy continued to eat, she didn’t help to cover her fumbblings. Marcia rose onto her unsteady feet and headed for the toilet. Chrissy watched her disappear whilst she continued eating.

The waiter sidled over to Chrissy’s side.

“She just needs some air; she’ll be fine in a moment or two.”

12:50

Chrissy finished her meal and drank the last sip of wine. She stared at the empty chair then stood up and gathered her bag. She turned wrote a note on her napkin and left the restaurant.

Marcia dabbed her eyes. She looked dreadful now, extreme emotion had always made her skin blotchy and the very tip of her nose was red. She had been awful to Chrissy, she had travelled all that way to see her and she had been so rude, why had she mentioned her husband. She dabbed her eyes again, Marcia knew why. She had wanted to hurt her, she had wanted to upset Chrissy’s perfect little world. Marcia would make it up to her, she would take all of them out for a meal, she would book a hotel in town for them, she could afford it, she should spend her money on the people she cared for and who cared for her.

As Marcia entered the restaurant she was aware of the empty plate, and the empty window sill. Marcia felt unbearably sad. Chrissy was right, she had nothing; she stayed at home afraid to go out into the world. There wasn’t anything that interested her out there; she had with no one to share the world with. Marcia slumped into her chair. The waiter hovered at her side.

“Strong black coffee.”

She couldn’t be polite, being alive, simply existing hurt too much.

The napkin lay across her cutlery.

*See you next year*

Marcia sobbed happily into her espresso.