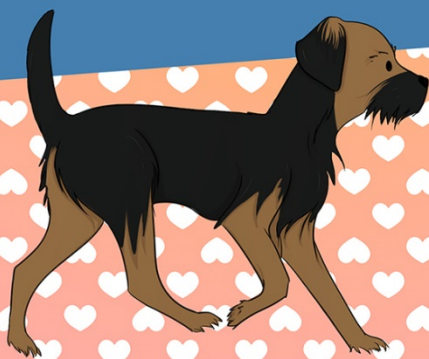


Once



L.T. SMITH



Once upon a time, in a land far far away, there was a young woman...

Aw fuck. I can't start my story like that. Let me think. What about:

It was a *lovely* day...

What a load of bollocks. Here am I, wanting to spin you a tale, and I can't even decide how to begin. Should I start at the beginning, the middle? Or even begin at the end and then go backwards. I think I'm diverting into some kind of literary cul de sac. Before you know it, I will be using tired old clichés and quoting Shakespeare.

Perhaps I should set the scene. You know—paint a picture with words. Number one in the tired old cliché brigade. Setting is important, though, isn't it? It gives readers a feel for the story. Without it they will be visually bankrupt, much as I am feeling verbally bankrupt at the moment.

Okay, here we go, setting the scene, thereby readying my reader. Just a minute—you are ready, aren't you? I don't want to waste ink starting and then find you are still fiddling around in your handbag, looking for a mint.

Consider this the beginning, the setting, the start.

Now to the scene: Shall I set it with time or place, or shall I go for the gold and set it with emotion?

The latter, I believe. Visualize, if you will, a metaphorical pushing of glasses up onto the bridge of my nose, which gives me a look of intelligence.

Right. I'm ready too.

Cough.

On your marks, get set...

The Start. Formally Known as The Introduction

She said she'd love me forever. For *e* ver. Three syllables, seven letters. Go on; - count them. And those three syllables and seven letters turned out to be a one-syllable, three-letter word.

Lie.

Unless “forever” meant it was okay to treat me like pond life and then shag her work mate. If that is the case, then I’m sorry, I’m wrong; it is forever. But in *my* dictionary, “forever” means something completely different. Let’s just check.

Forever / *fə're.və* / *adv* 1. *also* for ever, FOR ALL TIME, for all future time. 2. *also* for ever, FOR A VERY LONG TIME, for a very long or seemingly endless time (*informal*).

See? “FOR ALL TIME” and even “A VERY LONG TIME,” if you want to be informal.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not a pedant. I don’t typically carry a dictionary around with me and contradict people on their usage of the English language. But come on! When someone tells you they will love you forever, it usually means longer than three and a half years. Or it should.

In my own way, I loved Sue. I didn’t like the way she treated me, but I loved her all the same. We had lived together for just over three years when I came home to find her rolling around on our bedroom floor with a woman I’d met briefly at their company dinner two weeks previous. The prevailing thought bouncing

around in my head was *I hope I don't have to steam clean the carpet*, then I turned, walked down the stairs and out of the door.

I'd barely grabbed the handle on my car door when Sue was behind me. Gripping my arm, she spun me around and started throwing accusations. Words literally splattered on my face, words like "cold," "heartless," and the blinding one that charged me with "indifferent."

"Even when you catch me fucking someone else, you just walk away!"

What had she expected me to do?

"Why can't you show any emotion?"

Why should I? That wouldn't change the fact that she'd lied when she said she would love me forever.

In hindsight, I should have asked her the question, but all I wanted to do was get out of there, flee the scene of her crime, block it all out. I couldn't see the point in staying to listen to her blast out all my alleged shortcomings to all and sundry who happened to be passing by at something nearing a hundred shrill decibels, a level that was loud enough to make dogs howl.

And that's where my story truly begins.

The True Beginning

Sue was the longest relationship I'd ever had—forty months, to be precise. We met through a friend of a friend of a friend, which nearly made our introduction an urban myth. It was lust at first sight, and we barely knew anything about one another before we were inside each other's underwear. We scarcely even made it inside my house before we were at it. The front door clicked, and so did her bra strap.

Sex had always come easy to me, or it used to. I wasn't the type of person to form long-lasting relationships, and that suited me just fine. I actually preferred it to be just my little boy and me. When I say little boy, don't misunderstand me. I'm not a single mother, and I most assuredly never slept with a man. My little boy has the most gorgeous brown eyes and wet nose any mother could wish for. Unlike most, the child in question had four legs instead of the customary two.

Dudley, Duds for short. Black and tan, fuzzy, with a tail that wagged liked crazy taking his whole bum with it. His smile was the perfect overshot jaw of the classic Border terrier. We'd been a team long before Sue came on the scene, and I knew we still would be long after Sue had gone.

It was weird how it all kicked off, the relationship with Sue, that is. Before I knew it, we were seeing each other every night, and if I were to say I didn't enjoy having sex with her, I'd be lying. Things between us just grew. We became dependent on one another in a way that was a bit like smoking: You know it's bad for you, but you believe you need it to feel normal.

Duds found Sue suspect from the first moment he clapped his beady eyes on her. The first time I introduced them, he tried to bite her tit. To be fair, we were in the hallway, and he was just protecting his property. I should've asked her to leave there and then, because dogs are never wrong, but at that moment in time I wanted to bite her tit, too, so I kind of ignored Duds' warning. I can guarantee that gross negligence will not be repeated.

After four months of being together, Sue began to apply the pressure. Why couldn't we move in together? It would be so much easier, cheaper, fun. And on and on and on, and then on and on and on some more.

I can hear you saying, "Why didn't you just tell her to sling her hook?"

Ah, easy for you to say, but you weren't the one receiving wonderful, mind-blowing sex, were you? You weren't the one who steadily began to believe that you actually couldn't do all the things you used to do; you were suddenly dependent on another person. Even washing up. I couldn't even do that right. She systematically broke me down until I thought I would have difficulty trying not to drown in the bath.

When I agreed to her moving in, she was in, unpacked, and settled in less than twelve hours. She must have been half packed and waiting for me to give her the go-ahead. Duds was not a happy boy, as she banished him from sleeping at the foot of my bed from the very first night, claiming it wasn't healthy.

I missed him, missed the way I would wake up in the night and stretch my arm down to feel a warm wet tongue lavish my fingers with kisses. I even missed the way I would inadvertently tickle his winkle because he was sprawled on his back, snoring away.

As you might have guessed, the relationship between me and Sue wasn't easy from the start. But when she moved in, I began

to see a different side to Sue than the one she had presented to me over the first six months. At first I would argue, especially when it came to Duds, but then it just became easier to go along with her. Oddly, that seemed to infuriate her even more. Arguments would start as soon as I got home from work. She didn't even wait for me to take my coat off before she was accusing me of the usual things—not appreciating her, not telling her I loved her often enough, loving that damned mutt more than I loved her. Erm, well I... Nah, you get the picture.

Eventually I didn't have the energy, or inclination, to argue. I just took it on the chin, rolled up my sleeves, and began to wash up. Badly. Sex went out the window after the second year, and I spent more time in the sunroom with Duds, reading or just “arsing about,” as Sue so delicately phrased it.

I thought these things were a blip most couples went through when they first moved in together. I truly believed I loved her. Honestly.

Because, you see, she had told me she'd love me forever. And I, like a fool, believed her. It didn't even occur to me to wonder whether I wanted her to.



Self-confidence was a thing of the past. I was beginning to believe I was a worthless piece of shit. I'm not saying Sue purposely set out to make me feel that way, all I'm saying is that I felt vacant. The only thing I believed in was that she would always love me. The most sorrowful thing was that I hoped she was lying.

I felt trapped, caught like a poor fox in the woods, leg stuck in a mantrap and waiting for the end to take him. The pain wasn't physical, more an emotional rendering of the helpless, if you get my meaning. Vacancy morphed into hollowness, and hollowness

seeped into an abyss, trickling away and leaving me clutching at straws, at what I once called hope, but what eventually seemed like a last ditch attempt to maintain my sanity.

Then I came home one day and saw her, saw her on the bedroom carpet with another woman. At that excruciating moment, any excuse she might have offered for her infidelity wasn't important, and I wasn't going to stick around and ask her why she was shagging someone in our home.

A few weeks after the event, she finally admitted she had wanted me to catch her in flagrante delicto, wanted me to respond in some way that would prove to her that I loved her as much she loved me.

I said the only thing that made any sense. "Bollocks."

The word conveyed an inner strength I thought had died, but by dignifying her argument with any response at all, I believed it also robbed me of what little self-respect I had left. And I wanted to keep that; she'd taken everything else.

Well, not straight away. She did give me a little time to adjust before she turned up with a removal van and wiped me out. Most of the furniture was now stacked in her apartment—unused for the most part and collecting dust. Not surprising, considering that nearly six months had passed.

When she demanded visiting rights for Duds, she went too far. Duds hated her. At the time I didn't know why, because it isn't in a dog's nature to hate, only humans have that capability. But as time went on, I began to get the whole picture.

Why would a dog that has been loved from the minute he wiggled his fat little arse into my arms until now, dodge when I lifted my hand up suddenly? And why would a dog hide when I slapped a newspaper on the side of the chair?

Mmmm. It was not rocket science.

That was the moment when things started becoming interesting. That was the moment when I thought I might choke the fucking life out of her. But I didn't. Nope. That wouldn't have been satisfying enough.

Part of me still believes that what I did next wasn't just because of what I thought she had done to Duds. I think it was because of all the times I had never fought back in the past—verbally, I mean. I am not offering this as an excuse; I'm merely trying to explain how I felt and why I did the thing I am about to confess to.

Sue opened her front door, and I smacked her right in the face. Her look of surprise was priceless, and the satisfying crunch of her nose under my fist will live with me for the rest of my life. I revelled in the sight of the once-straight feature leaning to one side and pissing blood like a soda siphon.

“Cold? Heartless? Fucking indifferent?” I grabbed the front of her shirt. The buttons tore away from the cloth. I stopped. This wasn't me, wasn't who I was. I never fought, whatever the provocation.

Grey eyes looked into mine. One emotion in them stood out above all others—fear. And I had put it there.

Duds was going crazy in the car, howling and scratching at the window in a vain attempt to get to me. He distracted me for less than the blink of an eye, and that's all Sue needed.

Bang! Knee up and meeting my crotch with the speed and precision of an all-in wrestler. And down I went. Flat on top of her. Face to face, her blood smearing on my cheek.

“You haven't heard the last of this, Beth,” she spat into my face. “I'll get you, and your little dog, too.”

What the fuck was that? A twisted version of *The Wizard of Oz*? Were Munchkins going to clamber out of the flowerbeds and

start singing in voices that sounded as if they'd been altered by inhaling helium?

I tried to pull away from her, but she clutched me nearer so she could then push me away with extra force. I clattered onto the paving slabs and tried to stop myself from skidding. Sue shakily got to her feet, wiping the back of her hand across her nose and wincing in pain. I just sat there while the neighbourhood squatted in eerie silence, apart from the demented howling of my little wolfman.

She slowly stepped forward, and I cowered, lifting my hands to my face, believing she was going to hit me. Her shadow loomed over me and stayed, and I cowered, curled into my protective shell.

“You're not worth it.”

And then the shadow left, and the sun warmed the backs of my arms and dried the tears that had trickled down my face at the introduction of her kneecap to my private parts.

I don't know how long I sat there, but by the time I struggled to my feet, both my right leg and my backside were numb. I undoubtedly looked ancient as I hobbled back to the car, where I was greeted by a very concerned bundle of fur. Duds licked all the dried tears from my cheeks. He even cleaned all the new ones that raced down my face. Bless him.

Unconditional love. If only humans could do that, I'd be set for life.



Things went downhill from there, really, although I'd had no sense that they could get any lower than they already were. The only time I went out was to take Dudley for his walks or to collect more work to do, as I'd stopped going to the office and did all my design work from home. My boss, Jim Adamson, had

no objections, as he realized that drawings and ideas came from within, not from one's surroundings. That's what he said to me anyway. All I needed to do was to go in to the office to collect the project files allocated to me. Of course, all my accounts were small fry in comparison to what else the company offered, and mainly concentrated on local business promotion. I used to be one of the high fliers in the company, but not anymore. This was my choice, though. I didn't think I could cope with too high profile a workload.

Jim believed in me, more than I believed in myself. He actually told me to take some time to get my life in order, however long that might take.

Every day I found it more difficult to get out of bed, and not just because I'd hit Sue or found her sleeping with someone else. Maybe those points were a factor, but I think it had been building for a while. There is only so much negativity a person can take before it begins to erode the positives in life, and, to be honest, I don't think I was handling being on my own again. I know I should have been ecstatic, but that was not how I was feeling. Far from it, in fact. And if it hadn't been for the necessity of taking care of someone else, I don't think I would have even bothered to get up in the morning. What was the point? A black cloud had descended on me, and I had the distinct impression that my life had taken a swan dive off a cliff and landed on concrete.

As mums tend to do, my mum was forever phoning and trying to get me to "Get my backside" round to her place. My brother Will also wanted to come over, take me out, fix me up with a work mate, anything to take my mind off things. But I couldn't face them; I felt too fragile. After realising Sue was no longer on the scene, old friends came out of the woodwork, only to discover I was "unavailable for comment." I just wanted to be left on my own to simmer and stew and sink deeper into myself.

What I needed to do was get the facts of the case out in the open. Firstly, she said she'd love me forever. Secondly, she didn't. Should I say thirdly? Nah. I should bullet point.

- She hit Duds. Fucker.
- I hit her. Sound of cheers from the crowd!
- She kneed me in the lady garden, and it still throbs at the memory, and she wiped blood and spit all over my face.
- The grabber nicked half of my furniture. Robber.
- She made me feel worthless and stupid. Erm...
- *And* I had to steam clean my bedroom carpet.

Sorted.

Now all I needed to do was to make a similar list to counterbalance that one.

- Shower.
- Dress
- Feed Duds.
- Eat.
- Go for a walk.

And that brings me to the development stage of my tale.

The Development

Earlham Park. Beautiful—green lolling fields and a clear sky. I would say “blue sky,” but this was England in October. Therefore, we have a clear sky, maybe greyish at best.

The day was cool, but not cold. It was cold enough for a jumper, and the ground was wet enough to wear boots, but all in all, it was a crisp autumn day in Norwich. The field was filled with butterfly dogs and their owners, you know, people who only walk their dogs when the sun is shining.

Duds didn’t know what to do first—chase his ball, or dash around yapping happily with the biggest dog he could find. Smiling occasionally at his antics, I became lost in thought, and ignored the first rule of walking a dog: Always be alert.

But you know how it is—thoughts pop into your head and you just go with them, and before you know it, thirty minutes have flown by and you have no idea how. It’s scary how we can ignore time, considering how we dwell on it so much.

Of course I had been thinking about Sue and how things had fallen apart. I was trying to put it all in perspective—from how we met to the final punch-out in front of her house. The blame was shifting from her to me and then back to her again. It was so unlike me to be violent. After I started living with Sue, I would do anything to avoid conflict, and physical contact of the “bodily harm” variety was not my style. Or hers, for that matter.

What had happened to the two of us? What had created the first chink in our relationship? I know what had triggered my

outburst, but why had I felt the need to punch her, especially with no concrete evidence of her having done any harm to Duds?

The thought of Dudley being mistreated brought me back to reality with a crack.

I couldn't see him.

Couldn't see him!

Panic raced through me and choked off my breath. My heart was thumping against my ribcage.

"Duds! Come on, fella!" The shout broke the dam in my throat, and I felt the tears start to gather. "Dud...ley!"

I was running, my head whipping round trying to spot his little black body, but he wasn't there anywhere. He was gone.

Sue's words rattled around my head, the ones I laughed at: "*and your little dog, too.*" I can guarantee I wasn't laughing now. She had him. As sure as I was racing down the hill screaming his name, I knew she had him. All thoughts of physical violence not being my style flew out the window. If she hurt him in any way, I would rip her apart, limb from fucking limb. But all the smacking in the world wouldn't bring him back.

Then I saw it. I couldn't believe I hadn't been on my guard, couldn't believe I hadn't followed the first rule of dog walking.

The river.

Fuck.

The river.

Duds loved the river. In the summer, I frequently took him to the shallow part so he could jump in and fetch sticks. I can't tell you how many balls he had dropped in there to sink into the murky depths of a watery grave. Now Duds had followed them. He would drown in there this time of the year. The current would be too fast for him to get back to the bank.

There was no sign of him at the river's edge. Despair shot through me, and my knees gave way and I sank to the ground.

The cry that came from within me felt as if it had been ripped from my heart. I had lost everything...everything. Duds was my everything, and he was dead.

I heard a whimper. Distant, but definitely a whimper. I didn't think twice, just leapt up and vaulted into the freezing water. It seeped through my jeans and jumper and soaked my rapidly cooling skin, and I found the weight of it pulling me under. The sheer power of the water made me realise that if Duds had whimpered a second ago, there was no way he would still be whimpering now. It would be impossible for him to get back to the bank in this current.

It didn't stop me. I had to find him, alive or—

“Excuse me.”

The sound of the water was nearly deafening, but I could tell that someone was calling to me from the bank. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the water. It was taking all of my effort to not be whisked along with the raging water. Duds had to be here somewhere.

“Excuse me!” The voice was a little louder, a little more insistent.

“Can't you see I'm busy?” I didn't look back, didn't even ask the voice for help.

“Is this your dog?”

The first thought that popped into my mind was that Dud's body had been washed to the shore, and the owner of the voice had found him. But then I heard the whimper again. I steadied myself and turned toward the bank.

The woman standing there was holding something black, wriggling, and *very* dry. The bundle in her arms was whimpering around a bright red ball that was clamped inside his mouth.

I bet you're thinking I sloshed to the side, clambered up the muddy bank, and had a tearful reunion with my little man. Nope.

I stood there and cried. And cried. And cried. Relief? Maybe. Anger? A little bit. Shock? Almost guaranteed. But I think it was just everything pouring out at last, everything I had bottled up since splitting with Sue, or even before that.

Words seeped into my consciousness, but I couldn't respond to the woman asking me if I was okay, did I need help, to sit and stay. Sit and stay?

Water splashed and splashed, and then I felt arms enveloping me, pulling me against a solid chest. The closeness jolted me out of my misery-cum-happiness for a brief moment, and I looked into a most glorious pair of brown eyes. The sob which was in the process of being launched from my slackened mouth stopped midway.

The woman pulled me closer to her and held me for a split second before steering me towards the bank. Her arms left me briefly as she scrambled up, and then a hand extended and hovered in front of me, offering me help to reach safety.

It was a strange feeling, a tingling. Her fingertips seemed to trigger something deep inside, but I couldn't grasp the implication. My brain was frozen like the rest of my body, except for my hand. One tug and I was on the bank, falling onto my hands and knees, an excited Dudley licking my face, his ball rolling towards the water's edge. Shit. He would follow it.

But she was there again, swiftly catching the ball in one capable hand.

The funny thing was, I hadn't really had a good look at her yet. I had only seen her close up, and then it was the back of her head as she had scrambled up the embankment. One thing I knew, though, her eyes were brown, a mesmerising brown. I was kneeling on the ground, soaking wet, hair going all directions, and completely covered in mud. Not to mention being thoroughly loved by my boy, which, if you've ever seen a dog really excited

at being reunited with his mum, you will know is not a flattering sight. So, when she turned to look at me, ball in hand, I felt thoroughly dishevelled, to say the least.

“You must be freezing.”

“Huh?”

She stood straight, and I looked upwards so I could see her eyes again. The way she strolled over, totally controlled, her wet jeans flapping against her legs, made my stomach tighten with what I believed to be shock about what had almost happened with Dudley.

“I said, you must be freezing. You need to get out of those clothes.”

“Huh?”

A smile flickered briefly over her face and then disappeared. “You’re all wet...erm...the river...erm...water.”

I was surprised that the heat emanating from my face didn’t dry my clothes. Duds had decided to just lie across my chest and stare into my face, his breath cool against my glowing skin. I could hear his panting, my panting, and a rapid clattering inside my chest that I put down to exertion.

“Are you okay?” Her face came down towards mine, and I felt my focus moving from her eyes to her mouth, watching the words come out. “Come on. Let’s warm you up.”

Now there was an offer.



We ended up in the café in the middle of the park, and the people who ran it gave us towels and a blanket to wrap around our legs as sodden jeans, underwear, and boots dried in the kitchen. Duds curled up in front of the fire and dozed, his ball under his chin.

“I’m Amy, by the way.”

When I took her hand again to introduce myself, I got the same sensation I had before, but this time it seemed stronger. “Beth.” I stared down at our intertwined fingers, maybe to try to put a name to what was happening, and before I knew it, her hand was gone.

“Here. Drink this.” She passed me a steaming mug of hot chocolate, and I wrapped my hands around it, willing the heat to spread through me.

The only sounds were the clattering of the workers in the café and our slurping of hot drinks. Time seemed to drift, and the warmth I felt from the fire and the drink made me want to just curl up and sleep.

“Are you feeling warmer?” Amy’s voice was filled with concern.

Not wanting to break the serenity I was feeling, I barely nodded. It had been a long time since I had felt so relaxed.

“May I ask you a question?”

My gaze shifted to her face. I saw nothing threatening there, so I nodded again.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Go on.” The words coming out of my mouth sounded crackly, as if I hadn’t used my voice box for ages. After a quick cough and clearing of my throat, I said, “What do you want to know?” I placed my empty mug on the table and turned to face her.

“I was just wondering...”

She looked embarrassed, and I was thinking, *Shit*, but I just stared at her and waited.

“Erm...I was just wondering...why on earth were you in the river at this time of year?” She shifted nervously, and her bum crunched on the plastic seat. “I mean, it’s freezing in there.”

“Tell me about it. But I didn’t have time to think, just wanted to save Dudley.”

“But he was with me.”

“I know that *now*, but at the time...” I started to cry again.

“Hey. Come on. Everything’s okay now.”

I tried stop the flow of tears, but it was beyond my control. I felt so low, so beaten. My head slumped forward into my waiting hands, and I just let it all out.

Hands slipped around my shoulders, and arms caught me, even though I wasn’t falling. The warmth and smell of her flooded through me, and the tender murmurs trickling over my forehead made me want to stay there indefinitely.

“Come on, Beth. He’s safe. Look at him. Come on.”

I lifted my eyes to look at Duds, who was at my knee, one paw on the blanket, his eyes full of worry.

“I was having a cup of tea when he came in a while ago. I think he was trying to get some treats.”

Dud’s eyes shifted guiltily for a split second.

“And then he wanted to play ball.”

Did I see my dog lick his lips, as if he was going to speak up to deny it?

“I went out to find who he was with, but I couldn’t see anyone. He went ballistic. Kept on racing ahead and then running back to me, as if he wanted me to follow him.”

I stroked his fuzzy head; tender licks covered my fingers. My dog was Lassie. Or Skippy, the bush kangaroo.

“Next thing I knew, we were at the river, and I had to hold him to stop him coming in after you. Didn’t I, fella?” Amy stroked Dudley’s head, him obviously lapping up the attention from the both of us.

Our fingers met, only briefly, but the sensation was there again.

“I’d better go.” I stood up sharply, wanting to flee the scene, failing to recall that I was naked from the waist down. Until the blanket fell from me, of course. “Shit...erm...sorry...and... Oh crap!” I clutched at the blanket, which made her laugh. Such a musical laugh.

Her hand grabbed at the edge of the blanket to preserve my modesty, but she inadvertently grabbed my crotch.

Recoiling in an embarrassment of her own, Amy fell backwards onto the floor, exposing herself in the process.

What a pair of lemons—both of us flashing our girly bits in the middle of a café in the centre of Earlham Park. Could things be any more embarrassing?

Only time had the answer.



How does one follow such an exhibition? You can either dress quickly to save further humiliation and run for your life, or you can laugh. Amy chose the latter. She sat on the floor, trying to pull the blanket over her, but her laughter was making her weak. I was opting for a quick getaway. My blanket was *firmly* in place by this stage, and I was on a one-way trip to the kitchen to gather my belongings.

Her mirth stopped me, and I just looked at her laughing. Her head thrown back, her brown hair flew backwards and then forwards as her body shook. A tickle of a chuckle rose up my throat and rested patiently just behind my lips.

She tried to get up and tangled her legs in the blanket, hitting the floor like a sack of potatoes. Unfortunately, I was trying to help her up, and she took me down with her. I landed awkwardly, half on and half off her jiggling frame.

It was an opportunity not to be missed by Dudley, who thought it was a game. All four paws simultaneously landed on

the centre of my back, his ball thwacking me on the back of my head and pushing my face forward. The crunch of Amy's skull against mine stopped her laughing for a moment, and her widened eyes looked into mine. Jesus. We were so close, I could feel her breath. I knew my eyes flared in shock, as did hers, but when a very wet nose poked itself around and licked my face, then hers, she guffawed loudly.

And so did I. Real hearty laughs, the ones good for the soul. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. My legs kept tangling with the blankets and bringing me back down on top of Amy. Buster Keaton sprang to mind.

"Hold up...hold up. I...I...can't breathe." Amy was trying to control herself, panting and laughing, laughing then panting. "If we just stop," she froze and so did I, "then maybe we could do this properly, before we lose every shred of our dignity."

Slowly, gradually, we puzzled ourselves apart. The cool rush of air reminded me of where I was and what I was wearing.

"I'm so sorry." What else could I say? "God. I can't believe this." Not the most coherent of apologies, but I wasn't feeling very coherent or rational. How *do* you apologise for making someone jump into icy water, sit half-naked in a café, and then be the cause of her exposing herself to all and sundry? Words failed me.

"What for? I haven't had this much fun in ages." Her face was open and honest, and so beautiful, natural...and apparently waiting for a response.

"For...for *this*." My hand gestured wildly at her dishevelled frame and half-covered torso. "For getting you all wet." She sniggered. "Erm and erm... Aw shit." My face was beetroot red. I wouldn't have thought twice about having commented on how wet I'd made her if she hadn't sniggered. "I'd...I'd better go."

It was amazing how nimbly she got to her feet, surprising me with her swiftness and sureness of foot.

I shook my head and then turned to get the clothes for my bottom half.

We dressed in silence as Duds watched patiently from the wings, red ball clamped in his mouth. His little eyes looked from me to Amy and then back, his head bobbing comically.

After thanking the owners and offering to pay for the drinks and assistance, we went back to the car park. Amy walked me to my car, and then stooped to ruffle Dudley's hair.

"Thanks." Brown eyes looked into mine. "I don't know what I would've done without you. You're a lifesaver."

"My pleasure." Amy's smile radiated a genuine happiness, and my chest heaved and relaxed as she lectured Duds. "And you stick by your mum. Don't want her jumping in rivers too often, do we?"

And then I left, leaving her standing in the car park, waving and laughing. Dudley stood on the parcel shelf of the car and wagged his tail until she was out of sight. If I'd had a tail, I would have wagged mine, too.

Then it dawned on me—I didn't know her surname, didn't know anything except that her name was Amy. No address or phone number. Nothing.

My imaginary tail stopped wagging, and I drove away, taking one last look in the rear view mirror, just in case she might still be in view.



For a moment here I deliberated where I should pick up the tale, whether or not it would be best to jump a ways ahead. I have decided that proceeding to the middle sounds good.

Maybe you're wondering, "What happens now?" or even "I don't give a shit. Where's the sex?"

But, like me, you have to be patient, although my patience was the forced result of not having the foresight to ask Amy even a little about herself. I wanted to kick myself for not thinking things through and reeling off a list of thoughtful questions, but at the time it had felt right to just sit and be.

As a result, I went to the park, and then back to the park, and then again and again and again, for about a week. Park. Park. Park. Like a dog with a speech impediment. Every afternoon, about the same time as the day we'd met Amy there, Duds and I trekked to the park on the off chance we would spot her and maybe have a chat.

No such luck.

But I persevered, and Duds thought I was the bee's knees and the cat's pyjamas for taking him out for walks in his favourite place. And I was beginning to make an effort to look halfway human—not wearing my scruffiest jeans, and even combing my hair. It didn't matter, though, because within five minutes of being out in the exposed elements, I always looked like something the cat had either dragged home or thrown up.

Of course, I was definitely following the first rule of dog walking and the one for bird watching—always be on the lookout for something, or someone.

It was exactly one week later when Duds decided it was high time he dropped his ball into the river, and then he apparently expected me to go in and get it. Thankfully, it was in a shallow section, although the string of non-biodegradable words coming from my mouth would have indicated otherwise. The stick I found was huge, almost a caber, and way too big to be using to fish for a little ball.

Wrestling with the stick was no easy feat, especially with an excited dog spurring me on with high yaps of encouragement.

The ball seemed to be laughing at me when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“You’re not jumping in again, are you?”

I spun around, nearly going arse over tit into the water.

Amy grabbed my arm to stop me, and the branch escaped and drifted away in the current.

“Thank you. Again.” I could feel a blush colour my face and hoped she hadn’t noticed.

“You’ve gone all red.”

Shit.

“Do you think you should sit down? Maybe you overdid it.”

I nodded, taking on the role of “She Who is Close to Passing Out” with gusto.

Amy helped me lower myself to the ground and then plonked herself down next to me. Dudley looked at us both with disgust, and then continued to stare at the spot where his ball was bobbing.

It was lovely just to sit there, taking in the surroundings, listening to the birds. The view was beautiful, absolutely breathtaking. The park grounds weren’t bad either. Amy was facing the river, profile in view, fingers draped over her raised knee. And I was mesmerised.

It was a good job that Dudley whimpered, because just as I turned away from Amy to look at Duds, she was turning to face me. A split second earlier, and I would’ve been caught gawping.

But I didn’t get up; she did. Without a second’s hesitation, she kicked off her trainers, pulled off her socks, and waded into the water to get Dudley’s ball. She bent down out of my view, and then suddenly stood with the errant ball clutched tightly, water trickling off her hand. My little man went mad, excited mewling noises emanating from his mouth.

“Here you go, fella.”

The ball whizzed past me, followed by a black and tan streak.

Her laugh was heart-warming, and my face nearly split in half with the smile that came from the place deep inside which is the source of smiles for perfect occasions. Before I knew it, she was beside me, trainers and socks in hand, her glistening feet looking decidedly blue.

“How did you know?”

She turned to me, her brown eyes so deep and enchanting that I nearly missed the half smile on her lips.

“It didn’t take a genius. You with a huge stick, stabbing the water, and him,” her head tilted towards the returning hero, “whinging at the side the whole time we were sitting here.”

It was simple when I looked at it like that.

She wiped the water off her feet, but the moisture clung to them and kept her from putting her socks back on.

Then I thought of the clean white handkerchief in my coat pocket. “Here. Use this.” I passed the linen to her and nodded at her feet. “The least I can do.”

Why did I feel like a teenager—full of self-consciousness and hormones—when she smiled at me? Then I said the only thing I could think of. “He loves his ball.”

Classic me. I wanted to tell her she had the most enchanting eyes I had ever seen and her smile could warm the coldest heart, but I was still in teenager mode. I was surprised I didn’t shove her over, or worse, put her in a headlock.

She was tying her laces and didn’t see me slap my forehead.

“Fancy a coffee?”

“Yap!”

Trust Dudley to get in there before me. Thinking about it now, he was just as entranced with Amy as I was. His eyes were full of adoration, his ball almost forgotten. Almost.

“Well, that settles it. Coffee, it is. Isn’t that right, Duds?” I chucked his chin, stood up, and offered her my hand.

She paused before she took it. Or should I say hesitated? Then she grinned and slipped her fingers into mine, nearly pulling me over as she got up.

“Let’s see if we can stay dressed this time, eh?”

Bugger. The image of her sprawled on the floor with her bits and pieces exposed and then me, being me, ending up on top of her, was nearly my undoing.

“I’m sure you’re coming down with something. You’ve gone all red again.”

Double buggeration.



One coffee turned into two, and it was bloody wonderful. Amy was so entertaining, so attentive...so full of life. And for the hour we spent together, I forgot how shite my life was. Unlike our first meeting, I found myself asking questions about her and her life. For the first time in ages, I felt some semblance of involvement, maybe even a modicum of control. And it felt good.

Thirty-four. Single. Full name Amy Marie Fletcher. Single. Part time lecturer of history at the university. Single. Originally from Stratford, or just outside of. Did I mention she was single?

And straight.

I didn’t ask her; I just knew. There was no way she was like me. She was just too...too... I don’t know how to finish that sentence. I can’t identify the classic lezzie look, or even what one sounds like. If I ever had gaydar, it failed me. I usually waited until someone picked up the invisible rays I was sending out into the world, unbeknownst to me. You know, the gay juju vibes.

Therefore, I should change my statement to “I think she was straight.” Although I hoped she wasn’t.

Before we knew it, I could see the owners of the café clearing their stuff away, readying themselves to close up. Amy, Duds,

and I were the only ones left, so I stood to go. I made it a point to thank the owners for letting Duds come in, as I knew that bringing pets inside was usually against the rules, even though he'd been in before.

Back at the car, I hovered half in and half out of the door. I wanted to ask Amy if she would like to meet again, but something held me back—my confidence, I guess, or my lack thereof.

“Do you fancy meeting up again?”

Thank God one of us took the initiative.

“Maybe take Duds to the beach...erm...or something?” Amy said hesitantly.

“He'd love that.” Huh? “I mean we'd love that.”

She laughed as she fished in her pocket for a pen. “Have you any paper?”

The only thing I had was a receipt from the local pet store, but it served the purpose. In less than a minute she had given me her home number, work number, and mobile, with a comment that I should call her to make arrangements when I had a spare minute.

I had too many spare minutes, that was the problem, but I didn't let that faze me as I slipped the paper into the inside pocket of my jacket.

The smile I sported on the way home is sometimes described as a “shit-eating grin.”

I have realised that I go on too long. I should be writing “Climax” or “Dramatic Scene” by now, but I don’t think I should rush this tale. Therefore, instead of moving on to the next stage, I’ll opt for...

Extended Development

Me being me, I looked at that slip of paper a thousand times. Me being me, I slipped that same piece of paper into the side pocket of my purse, only to sit and stare at said side pocket of my purse for God knows how long before getting out the same slightly worn piece of paper and starting the process all over again.

I wanted to pick up the phone, sluice sexual vibes through the slim black instrument, and fix a time to meet. But, truth be told, I was scared, petrified even. I hadn’t even gone out with old friends since the split, and somewhere deep inside me there was an element of fear, fear that I had forgotten how to just “be” with other people.

I know Amy and I had shared a few coffees, and she’d accidentally grabbed my girly bits. I’d seen hers, too, for that matter, but those were all chance encounters, spur of the moment incidents, however nice.

Yes, I remember I purposely went out to see if I could spot her in the park again, but that wasn’t the same thing. She might never have turned up. This time it would be a *definite* meet.

And I still didn’t know if she was gay. What if I went along and got the wrong message? You know—ignored the little red flags that spout “Back off!” I would feel a right tit, when I was trying to feel the left one, too.

Even if she was on my team, it didn't necessarily mean she would fancy me. What did I have to offer her?

I didn't feel strong enough to deal with any of it—the waiting, the deliberating, the uncertainty, the fact she might be another Sue in sheep's clothing. I think that was it. I wasn't ready for anything that might demand an emotional attachment.

But I liked her, liked her to talk to. Duds liked her, too, and that had to be a sign, hadn't it? Dogs are never wrong. And I had promised myself I would never again ignore the cues from my little man.

“I'm doing this for you, Dudley.”

Yeah, right.



Saturday. Nine o'clock. Up. Showered. Dressed. Duds fed. Me fed. Picnic made. Stomach in knots.

I had done the deed, called her. Put myself on the line for my child.

Amy had answered after the third ring, sounding out of breath. What was initially supposed to be a quick call lasted fifty-six minutes. I checked. We arranged to go to Wells Next the Sea, a huge beach that allowed dogs in both the winter and summer. And she was picking me up at eleven-thirty.

I know it was only nine, but I was nervous, okay? Ask my bowels. Ask my stomach, if you could get it to stay still long enough, when it wasn't practising a rolling hitch or a sheepshank. At other times I believed I would be better served by getting some time in on tying a noose; my large intestine was free for training purposes.

By the time eleven-fifteen rolled around, I was pale and sweating. The carpet in my living room seemed to have lost its lustre as footprints made by my boots had scuffed all the shag.

Duds lay next to the door, his harness on and ball wedged as far as he could get it in his mouth. For once he wasn't yapping and trying to open the door himself. He seemed calm, serene even. Maybe because I was fidgeting like someone who had tried to OD on caffeine, everything else seemed calm in comparison.

When the doorbell chimed, I nearly peed my pants. She was early. Fifteen minutes early. I wasn't ready. Didn't feel ready. Felt exposed and naïve.

My fingers refused to act naturally, and the usual lifting off of the chain took longer because I couldn't seem to grip the bloody thing for long enough to slip it out of its slot and then dip the slender, oblong handle.

She looked beautiful. Her long hair was tied into a loose ponytail, and stray bits played at the sides of her face. Or maybe it was the wind that was brushing past her. Her smile was stiff, and I wondered if she was having second thoughts about our meeting, but then I realised she was nervous, too.

I'm not saying I thought of that straight away. It was her voice that betrayed her—slightly high pitched and with a noticeable quaver at the end of her greeting. Call me old fashioned, but that made me feel more relaxed. Not by a lot, but decidedly more relaxed than I had been feeling a couple of minutes before. My stomach even opted for a simple bowline knot.

Things were looking up. It's a pity the English weather didn't cooperate.



The beach was empty. Not surprising, really, considering the enormous rain clouds scudding towards us at a steady pace. The beach at the end of October was not the best choice of venues to have a day out. We could barely hear each other above the din of the wind.

But we were there together, and that's all that really mattered. That, and the fact Dudley was having the time of his life. He dug so many holes all over the beach, it was likely that future visitors would think there had been a mole invasion. He looked so cute with his backside stuck in the air and his front paws going ten to the dozen, accompanied by little snorting sounds. When he looked up, his face was covered in sand and he honestly looked as if he was grinning.

We walked for miles, or so it seemed. The car park was quite a trek away from the beach in the first place, but at least we were sheltered on the way in. Standing out on the sand, we were totally exposed, in more ways than one.

For some strange reason, I did feel a little at a loss. Maybe because I wasn't too sure what I should call our outing. Was it a date, or just an innocent walk along the beach? And why did it matter? Why couldn't I just accept our time together at face value and enjoy it? Why couldn't I stop asking questions?

Amy was fun, what I could hear of her anyway. She spent time with Duds, quality time— throwing the ball, chasing him, or letting him chase her. I laughed, really laughed, at their antics. I joined in, and in no time I was sweating underneath all of my layers.

It was Fate that decided it was time to move things on a little.

Black clouds gathered over us, until it seemed like night. The wind dropped. Kaput. Gone. And the scene changed from a crappy English day to something out of a Stephen King novel. Even the seagulls had bugged off, and their squawking was painfully absent. The air was full of tension, and if I had brought the proverbial knife with me, I bet I could have spliced through the collecting pockets of electricity.

Splat. A huge drop of rain hit me right in the face, ice cold and out to shock. Splat. Splat. Splatter. More quickly now, and seeming to increase in size and weight.

“Shit.” Our exclamation rang out in unison, and then melted into the growing wetness.

Duds just looked at us, as if to say, “What’s the problem?”

“Run!”

And we did. Like greyhounds. Soaked greyhounds, less than twenty seconds later. The problem arose when we realised we didn’t have anywhere to go. The beach was just that—a beach. There were no cafés nearby, not even a public toilet where we could shelter. But we kept running, and the sky kept pelting us with gobbets of water.

After a few minutes, Amy began to slow down, then stopped. I caught up with her and just stood in front of her, the rain running down my face in rivulets. Then she did something that surprised me—she took off her coat and covered our heads with it. I couldn’t understand why, because we were drenched already, so why didn’t she just keep it on and stay warm? I know—ungrateful.

The thing is—have you ever been underneath a coat with someone, especially when you have to huddle together closely to make sure you are both covered? If you have, you will understand how close we were. I could feel her breath on my face, warming my skin. And you will also know it is nearly impossible not to look that person in the face, and that close proximity was nothing short of intimate.

The sound of our breathing was deafening, more like panting. I don’t know if it was the exertion of running or...

“Errrrrrruummmmmmmgh.”

That broke the spell.

Dudley was between our legs, trying to keep himself from getting blown about by the elements, and he did look a sorrowful sight.

“Here. Bend down.”

Amy’s words seeped into my head, but I couldn’t quite grasp what she meant.

“Like this.”

Her left hand settled on my shoulder, and a gentle pressure pushed me downwards. Then the penny dropped. She was trying to get us closer to the ground so Duds would get more shelter, both underneath the coat and from our bodies.

It was like being inside a tent, with the battering of the rain on her coat sounding as if we were being pelted with stones, but the atmosphere inside was quiet, expectant. Amy rested her forearms on her knees so the coat was draped over us. I was holding on to Duds, rubbing his wet back to try to warm him up. I was freezing, soaked and freezing.

“You’re shaking.”

And I was. But I didn’t know whether it was because of the cold, or because I was underneath a coat with Amy. Nerves are funny things sometimes. I just couldn’t shake off the feeling of being so close to her and still wanting to be even closer.

It was hard. Hard because I had no idea whether she felt the same way, and hard because I knew it was too soon to be wanting to become involved with someone else. My emotions, everything, were still so raw. I didn’t want any interactions with Amy to be a reaction to what had happened with Sue. I was still in the first stages of trying to cope with being me again and getting on with my life. I didn’t yet have the strength to start it all over.

“Come here.”

She didn’t wait for me to comply, just slipped her arms around me and pulled me close. Duds was pressed in between us, so I didn’t get the full impact of her body next to mine, and I can honestly say I am glad I didn’t. The feel of her arms around me was initially uncomfortable. Stupid, I know, but it was, mainly

because I wanted to pull back and run. Thankfully, I didn't, because in just a few seconds I felt like I belonged there, *really* belonged there. It was a feeling of safety I had been lacking for so long, not just the warmth of her, the essence; it was the *everything*. Nothing could hurt me whilst I was in her arms.

It was just Amy, me, and Duds. Nothing else mattered. Being stuck on a beach in the middle of a storm was nothing. Being underneath a coat in her arms was everything. And the scent of wet dog had never smelled so sweet.

The storm lasted all of fifteen minutes. Rain petered away to drizzle, and then to a mist. Wind lashed against our frozen legs and made heavy jeans truly uncomfortable. All I wanted to do was strip off and climb into a vat of steaming, bubbly bath water, to soak and relax. But that was at least an hour and a half away, as we had to get back to the car and then drive back to Norwich.

We were all chilled to the bone, but at Wells Next the Sea, proprietors being anal about health and hygiene refused us entry to cafés to get a much needed coffee and warming. Not because we were wet; this is England, remember. It was on account of Duds: "No dogs allowed."

Not all was lost, though, as The Ark Royal Public House let us all in without protest. Thirty minutes after getting off the beach, Amy and I were tucking into a hearty lunch, drinking coffee, and warming up next to the fire. The landlord even served Duds some meat in gravy, which he devoured in under two minutes. I didn't care that I had prepared a picnic; I was getting warm.

After our plates were empty, we sat in silence, totally at peace with the world. Life seemed perfect. The day seemed perfect. All was once again well and good in Bethany Chambers' world.

"So, tell me about you. I hardly know anything, apart from you've recently split up with someone."

Fuck.

“What was his name?”

Double fuck. Even a fucky fuck fuck fuck. She must have seen my reaction. You know, the one where all the colour drains from your face and you squirm like you’ve just messed your pants.

“If it’s still painful...”

“No. It’s...erm...”

“Hey, no problem. You can tell me when you’re ready.”

She sounded so sincere, so honest and open. Should I come clean? Should I come out? Should I run? “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

“Was he married?”

“Erm.”

“Never mind. Look, it doesn’t matter. Fancy another coffee?”

I nodded, and she was up and at the bar ordering whilst I sat and stewed. Would she be disgusted? Shocked? It’s amazing how we respond to people finding out whom we sleep with. I mean—does it change the person they liked as a friend? Unfortunately, yes. Some people can’t accept the fact that when you leave them, you have a life that is different from theirs.

She was barely back in her seat when I began. “Sue.”

“Excuse me?”

“Her name is Sue. My ex. Sue.” I tried not to look at her face, tried not to know if she was reacting in a way I would add to the growing list of insecurities I was collecting. But I couldn’t avoid it. I had to know.

“Sue?”

I nodded.

“As in a female Sue?”

I nodded again. “And the fact I said ‘her.’”

Amy sat back on her chair, her lips pursed in consternation until they broke apart to reveal a brilliant white smile. “Good. We’re not that different after all.”

The relief was overwhelming. I didn't want to lose this budding friendship, and I didn't want to lie to her either. Then it dawned on me. She was gay. Amy was gay. The woman sitting in front of me was gay. Gay. Relief was replaced by...erm... relief? I want to say joy, happiness, euphoria, but I won't. Not that I didn't feel those things, but because relief was still the most overpowering emotion racing through me.

"I can't tell you how much better I feel by telling you that." I grinned at her and picked up my cup. "You too, huh? I would never have guessed."

"Why? Don't I look like the typical lesbian?"

It's amazing how a room suddenly goes quiet just as a word like "lesbian" appears in the conversation. I could feel the stares from a couple of people in the pub, and I wanted to say "Why don't you pull a chair up? You'd be able to hear everything then." Instead, I said, "I'm gaydar retarded," and took a sip of my coffee.

"We're not that different after all," she repeated.

The coffee in my mouth spewed into the air and all over Amy, who just sat there, coffee beading on her face. And that made me laugh again.

"Go on. Laugh at my expense."

So I did, head back and emitting throaty laughs until she had to join in. It felt so good. So good. Amy made me feel so bloody, fantastically good.

After we had allowed the relief to come out in the form of a good old laugh—about something that in the light of day, or to anyone else but Amy and me, could not be seen as that funny—we settled into comfortable silence.

Amy apparently decided that ten minutes was long enough to sit and stare silently into the fire. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I looked straight into her face, and I knew I would be safe. So I told her. No elaboration, just the facts—clinical, removed. And she listened, sipping her drink and nodding at all the right places. It felt good getting things off my chest, as I had not told a soul about what had happened, really happened. I usually said that Sue and I just drifted apart, thought it was for the best that we split up. I didn't believe people needed to know the nitty gritty...or that they would be interested in my shortcomings.

“You know what you need, don't you?”

A spine? I shook my head.

“Fun. Something totally distracting. Do things you would never usually do.” Her face became animated, and I was definite I saw a gleam of the devil dancing behind her gorgeous eyes. “And you know something, Bethany Chambers?”

I shook my head again.

“I'm good at fun.”

I bet you are. I couldn't wait to find out.

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ONCE

BY L.T. SMITH

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