

## Double Date

It was the Easter break and schools were closed. Lionel was in town doing the family shopping – if he and his Dad could be said to constitute a family. In fact, they were half a family since his parents' divorce two years earlier. His sister, now often away at University, had opted to stay with their mother, but the two halves of the family still lived in the same town and maintained friendly contact.

As Lionel approached a major cross-roads, the pedestrian lights had just turned green, but he could see a car coming towards the crossing at a good speed, so he waited at the kerb-side. Almost immediately he heard a chatter of voices, and two young girls appeared beside him; the nearest one, engrossed in conversation, started to cross the road, oblivious of the oncoming car. Lionel saw the danger. He took a step forward, grabbed the girl by the waist, and lifted her back on to the pavement. The car skidded to a stop, quite close to where she might have been.

The girl was momentarily shocked, but quickly realised that she had been careless. She spoke breathlessly to Lionel, 'Phew, I'm sorry. That was silly of me.'

'The lights were in our favour.'

'Umm, but I should have been looking.' She spoke to him seriously, 'So thank you *very much*. I could have been squashed.'

Other pedestrians were now crossing the road, but Lionel went to the back of the pavement and the two girls followed him. It had occurred to Lionel that the girl he had rescued was very pretty, so he said, 'Why don't we all go and sit down somewhere and have a Smoothie or something. By the way, my name's Lionel.'

The other girl agreed, 'There's a milk bar just back a few doors. Let's go there. By the way, I'm Elspeth and this girl you rescued is Kate.'

Lionel looked at Kate, who had gone a little pale, and asked, 'Are you alright?'

'A little shaky. Maybe a bit of shock.'

'We'll get you something sweet,' Lionel advised. He took hold of Kate's arm as they walked to the milk bar. While he and Kate found seats, Elspeth went to get milk shakes for them all: 'My treat,' she said.

Lionel hesitated, then said, 'Well, OK. Thanks, Elspeth.'

Kate was a bit emotional, 'You're such good friends.' Tears welled in her eyes.

Lionel commented, 'Glad to be included, Kate, but you don't know anything about me!'

'You're a nice guy,' she insisted.

'Well, tell us something about yourself,' said Elspeth.

Over the drinks they found out that Lionel lived on the opposite side of town to the girls. He was nearly sixteen and would take his O-levels in a few weeks' time.

'That's three years ahead for us,' said Kate, 'O-levels seem a long way off.'

They got around to discussing sport, and found that Lionel and Kate enjoyed a variety of games, and that they both went swimming in the town pool. Elspeth admitted that she was not very sporty, 'I find plenty to do – reading, craft, art work and so on.'

'She's a good artist,' Kate commented.

When they had finished their drinks, Lionel said, 'I'd better get on with the shopping.' He looked at Kate, hesitating; then he took the bold step, 'Any chance of meeting up again?'

She blushed but said quietly, 'I'd like to.' She thought for a moment, and went on, 'Why don't you come round to our place? It's only small, but then we can decide what we'd like to do.'

'Shall I give you a ring? I'll have to have your address and number.'

Elspeth opened the small bag she had attached to her belt, and produced a pencil. Lionel found an old letter in his pocket, and Kate wrote the details on the envelope for him.

'Can I ring you this evening?' asked Lionel.

Kate had to smile, 'Yes, you can.' She knew that she would have to tell her mother about Lionel. But she also knew that her mother would like to meet any new friend – especially a boy who had picked her up. She smiled a little at the thought that he had really picked her up.

'Lionel,' she added, 'I won't tell my Mum that I nearly walked under a car. I'll just say you warned us not to cross, and we started chatting.'

‘OK, Kate,’ he reassured her. ‘Be in touch later. Cheers, Elspeth.’

When he had gone, Elspeth smiled cheekily at Kate, ‘So that’s how it’s done!’

Kate smiled and blushed, ‘The trouble is, I like him. But I’m really too young ...’ she didn’t finish the sentence.

Lionel cycled to Kate’s house for tea the next day. Kate welcomed him in and when he had got rid of his scarf and jacket, she took him into a large living-room with a dining table at one end next to the kitchen. Kate’s mother was sitting in a lounge chair at the other end, but got up to greet him. What struck Lionel immediately was how young she was, surely not much over thirty.

Kate presented him, ‘Mum, this is Lionel.’

‘Lionel Drummond,’ he confirmed, turning to Kate, ‘I don’t think I told you my full name.’

She smiled, ‘Well, I’m Kate Morris, and this is my Mum.’

Mrs Morris said, ‘I’m pleased you’re here, Lionel.’

‘Well, thank you for the invitation.’

‘Why don’t you sit down here while get tea.’ She went off to the kitchen, while he and Kate settled in comfortable chairs.

After tea, Lionel and Kate went out for a walk. After half an hour Lionel said that he had to go home to keep up his revision schedule. Before they got back to her house, he asked if Kate would meet him for lunch next day at a small café in town. She became quite serious:

‘Lionel, I’d better explain something. You may have noticed, there’s no Mr Morris around. I can tell you about that some time, but it’s why Mum keeps a good watch over me. But it also means we don’t have a lot of money for luxuries ... ,’ she hesitated, ‘like meals in cafes. That’s in spite of Mum having a good job with a publisher.’

‘I did invite you; so will you let me treat you – this once?’

She said quietly, ‘Yes thank you, Lionel.’

Next day, they both cycled to the café, and found a quiet table for lunch. When they had ordered, Kate said, ‘Can I explain about our family?’

Lionel did not press her, 'Yes, if you like. Then I can tell you about mine.'

'I'd like you to know, Lionel, although we've only just met. My birth was an accident when Mum was what she calls a silly young thing, drinking too much with a gang of friends. She didn't really like my father, so she decided to be a single Mum. He drifted off anyway, and we don't have any contact with him.'

'I did notice how young your Mum is.'

'Now that I'm in my teens, she's a bit like an older sister.'

Lionel laughed, 'Older and wiser?'

'Well she does tell me to beware of men buying me drinks. And I know she was glad to meet you yesterday, just to check you over.'

Lionel smiled, 'I hope I passed the test.'

She smiled back, 'So far, so good.'

They got on with the meal. Then Lionel began, 'Now, about *my* family.' He went on to tell her about the divorce. 'So mine is a one-parent family too – well, more or less.'

After the meal, Lionel and Kate went cycling before he took her home. It was Friday, and Kate visited his home at the weekend, where she met Lionel's father. She and Lionel found that they fell naturally into a close friendship, meeting two or three times each week, cycling or swimming or playing tennis, and sometimes joining up with Elspeth and other friends.

One Saturday, about a month after Lionel had met Kate, he was going to her house. However, rain was pouring down, so his father took him in the car, and Kate invited them both in. The introductions were a little difficult, since Lionel and Kate never used their parents' first names. But it emerged that Mrs Morris was Jane Morris, and Mr Drummond was Peter Drummond. After some polite hesitation, Peter Drummond was persuaded stayed for tea. He didn't want to invade his son's friendship, and so left after half an hour. Like Lionel, he was surprised at how young Jane Morris was, but he felt it helpful that they had met, since Kate did seem, for the time being, to be a definite girl friend for Lionel.

Time passed. Lionel took his O-levels and did pretty well, and began his Sixth Form work in September. Their friends accepted Kate and Lionel as a regular pair, and they gradually began to be more affectionate towards each other. In

October, Jane Morris asked Kate whether she wanted a party for her fourteenth birthday.

Kate looked doubtful, 'Do you mind if we don't have, well, a *children's* party?'

Jane understood, 'No. You're really getting past that. What would you like instead?'

Kate knew that they could not afford to take friends to the theatre, so she said, 'Could we do a nice supper for a few people.'

'Your school friends, plus Lionel?'

'Would it be silly to ask grown-ups as well, like Elspeth's Mum and Dad, and Lionel's Dad? Then we could just serve a supper; I'll help make things. Perhaps a bottle of wine for the oldies?'

Jane looked at her daughter fondly, 'So, a small supper party for everyone? You know, I think that's a good idea. We haven't got a lot of space, so maybe limit numbers to around ten?'

They decided to invite Elspeth's father, mother and elder brother Sam, and after some discussion, both Lionel and his Dad, but not his sister or mother. Kate knew that Lionel's family rarely met up together.

'That makes eight,' said Jane, 'Any one else?'

Kate thought before replying, 'This may be silly, but what about our last form master, the one we call Old Bill. He's just retired and lives on his own. He's such a sweetie, and he was really a very good friend to us all.'

'I remember him at parent-teacher evenings. Yes, he's a lovely man, with his wonderful moustache. Include him in? And leave it at nine?'

'Fine. And thanks, Mum.'

The evening came, and it soon became obvious that they had got the mix right: some good friends and family links, but enough new acquaintances to make the conversation very lively. Jane and Kate had made an excellent supper, and wine *was* provided for the oldies. Around nine-thirty, Old Bill apologised for breaking up such a lovely party, but the other visitors also said that it was time they got home. Everyone started to collect coats and hats in the hallway, and farewells began. Jane stood by the door, and as Old Bill left, she gave him a hug and a kiss. Then she gave a kiss to Elspeth and her parents, and made a little

joke of claiming a kiss off her brother – ‘Can’t let a handsome young man get away.’ As the others departed, Lionel put his arms round Kate and they shared a long embrace. So Jane and Peter were left looking at each other.

Peter smiled and said, ‘You can’t really leave me out, can you, Jane.’

She did not resist when he put his arms round her and gently, but with meaning, kissed her. The delight he felt astonished him. Their eyes met as he let her go; he wanted to kiss her again. Then he glanced at Lionel and Kate, who were holding hands and talking quietly. He looked at Jane again; she looked back with a fond puzzled gesture, asking the question, *Where do we go from here?*

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