

The Guy in the Middle

The street is packed. Noisy crowds stagger in front of slow moving cars. Vile smelling burger vans greedily occupy valuable parking spaces. Around the corner, rip-off merchants line the front of the display selling sticky, toffee apples and annoying, flashing toys. Never mind. One last night.

I strain to lift the wheelchair from the boot of the car and assemble it for use.

‘Hurry up. We’re going to miss the start,’ Timothy says.

I rush to his aid and manoeuvre the weak man into the seat.

‘Get my blanket.’ He’s cold. I bow beneath him to tuck his feet in. He grabs my hand, his fingers squeeze tight. ‘It’s your favourite time of year,’ he tells me. ‘Hurry before the fireworks get underway. ‘I want to enjoy this special night.’

I trip over a rock and fall to the ground. There’s a clearer path ahead. I remain sprawled on the grass of the chosen football park for this year’s bonfire. I enjoy a few moments relief from Timothy’s grasp. I stretch my fingers and feel the blood pulsating, trying to stimulate some feeling. I’m so cold. The thinning gold band that binds us together could easily slip off. Something always stops it.

‘Penny for the Guy?’ It’s a scruffy child with a dummy Guy Fawkes. Probably trying to raise money for squibs, or judging by his appearance, more likely for a bite to eat. He shakes his can under my nose like a charity fund-raiser. Another emotional blackmailer, heavily reliant on my sympathy.

‘C’mon, take me to the bonfire,’ my husband says. I smile. Wickedly.

The pathetic wood-pile is sodden with rain. It will take some spark to light that heap. The organisers attempt to ignite the fireworks. Timothy’s eyes are on me as though expecting my face to light up at the sparkle between us. Rain pours down. The night is miserable. There’s nothing more than a damp squib.

My thoughts are on the best bonfire ever. Last year, same spot. There were probably loads in the town, yet it felt like there was only one.

It's a struggle to push the wheelchair over the grass.

'This is so uncomfortable. You should be more careful.'

'Sorry,' I say and grit my teeth. And will myself to hang on. Only a few more hours.

The crowds push in closer, waiting for the fire to ignite. Timothy reaches back and grips my cold hand, determined to hang onto me. Not even a flicker. The fire struggles to get underway.

Loving couples plague the grounds, openly displaying their affection. I glare as they publicly hold hands. A couple about our age, in their thirties, squeeze together, arms wrapped tight around each other. A stroke of her hair, a tender touch to his face. Nobody else seems to notice. Why would they?

I wasn't expecting to be noticed last year when I joined that art class. I was like many women, I'm sure, who got together in an attempt to free themselves from perhaps a life of boredom or solitude. I thought it was a lesson on still life. I was good at that. Instead it was figure drawing. A male model, posing for us, naked. I wasn't interested. I felt I had to give it a go.

Melissa was next to me. She was a Doctor and I was a nobody. Formerly a happy employee at the whisky factory. Before Timothy's illnesses. He was my manager, controlled people. He was good at that.

I laughed at Melissa's depiction of a man. Hers had no penis. And mine had no balls.

'Don't push me too close, you know I can't stand the heat.'

I pull the wheelchair back. Away from the kindling trying hard to ignite the dead wood.

'I'm hungry. Get me a hot dog.'

I park Timothy at the bonfire and head off as instructed.

‘Don’t forget the onions,’ he cries.

Melissa was different. She asked me what I wanted when we sat together in a bar after the class finished.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, watching her sweep a stray blonde hair back from her face.

Melissa ordered me a hot chocolate with fluffy marshmallows. I cupped my hands around the mug. Instant heat. She listened to me. Not once interrupting or breaking eye contact. And she used my name, over and over. She reached across the table to take my hand. I decided I wanted something else. Melissa tried to catch the waitress’s attention. She passed by, and then another girl did the same. They frowned upon us. They weren’t ready for us yet.

‘You didn’t get me a drink.’ I’m jolted back to bonfire night.

I about turn.

‘Don’t be away too long this time,’ he shouts.

I had disappeared for a while at last year’s event. Timothy wasn’t in a wheelchair that night. Melissa turned up to surprise me. It was enjoyable, easy conversation with her. Timothy shouted, tracking me. I shivered. Melissa pulled my collar up, wrapped her arm around my shoulders and stole me away to a quiet corner. It was the warmest I had felt on that cold, November night. She slipped my hair back and cupped my face in her hands then leaned in to kiss me. Fireworks went off. I pulled back, startled.

‘There you are,’ Timothy said. I thought I had lost you,’ he glared at Melissa. ‘C’mon, you’re going home.’ He grabbed my arm and pulled me away.

I want to go home now. Get on with the plan.

‘The show is just getting started,’ he says, ‘the best is yet to come.’

A rocket bursts into the sky and erupts into an array of colours.

I'm reminded of the bouquet of flowers I bought Melissa last year. Chrysanthemums. Warm pink. With a sensational smell. I bunched them in my arms, sauntered towards the hospital and waited outside for Melissa to finish her shift. The sun was deliciously beating down on me. I smiled and looked heavenward, creating small furry animals from the feathery clouds. I ran my fingers through my newly-cut hair, exposing my neck to a soft, gentle breeze. Freedom from years of long locks.

An ambulance arrived. Doors thrown open. A man on a stretcher. Timothy. He looked pathetic and in need of some care. As usual. I tossed the flowers aside and ran in after him. Suspected heart attack. Sure. Bloody indigestion. Nevertheless. I had to return to help settle him. The corridors were tight. I felt claustrophobic.

My heart is racing now. Panic. Crowds moving in. Desperate to see the display. I don't like this. Hang on in there, I tell myself. Soon it will be over. I think of something pleasant.

Last summer. Extremely hot. Timothy was left at the telly with his requested cheap beers and his foul-mouthed friends. They shouted at any sports they considered worth a bet. I was in a five star hotel, sipping champagne, snuggled up in Melissa's comforting arms. Until the phone rang. So he knew. Timothy's father had died. I had to get back to take care of business.

Meetings were few after that. That will all change tonight.

A woman presses in behind me. I recognise her smell. Melissa. The bonfire flares. The flames instantly dance. Stunning reds and yellows. My heart pounds. My face feels flushed. Her fingers are discreetly brushing the back of my neck. I tingle all over. Fireworks are going off everywhere. But what's she doing here? This is not the plan.

'Melissa?'

'I told her to come,' Timothy says.

‘Why is he still in a wheelchair? You said it was a torn ligament.’ She reaches for my hand and glares at him. There’s a raging bonfire now. The Guy in the middle sits mightily in his chair. The surface crumbling beneath him. His seat jolts down a fraction. He remains steady. Defiant. Ignoring the heat radiating around him.

‘I saw your bags. You’re not leaving,’ Timothy tells me. His eyes narrow and focus on our clasped hands as though trying to prise them apart with a cold stare. He produces a hospital letter from his pocket, like a last Ace in a poker game. I grab it and examine the contents.

‘Oh, no. Why didn’t you tell me before? Why now?’

‘Didn’t think I needed to. Then your plan... her. I had to be sure.’

‘What is it, Carrie?’

My heart feels as though it has been ripped out and torn apart.

‘Cancer,’ he says. ‘Too far gone for treatment.’

‘I-I’m so sorry. What can I do?’ She’s asking both of us.

I pause before I raise my head to answer. ‘Nothing.’ I whisper and brush my wavering hand down my lover’s cheek then turn back to Timothy. A tear trickles down my face.

‘Let’s stay till the fire goes out,’ he says.

Melissa seems to have disappeared. A gorgeous flame waves through the remains. My heart warms. I push Timothy home to rest.