

Bedtime Stories

Staring at the unfamiliar teddy-bear wallpaper that Jude had put up last year, he realised he'd hardly ever told the children a bedtime story. He cleared his throat, and the chilly room echoed.

'Lucy,' he said, trying to smile, 'Jack. Once upon a time, a man and a woman fell in love. No, it's not a fairy-tale. At first they were happy – they both had jobs, and they were careful with the little bit of money they had. Sometimes they went on nice holidays, and went to dinner with friends. They had friends then, you see. And these two people, they liked to cuddle and kiss by the fire. And then they had a lovely baby. Later they had another one, so that was two, wasn't it? Babies are a bit expensive, though, and the mummy said to the daddy, that there wasn't enough money. What do you think of that?'

The children said nothing.

He noticed a coffee stain on his shirt, and wondered how long it had been there. 'Well,' he said with a sigh, 'the daddy had to get a better job, so he did. Wasn't that clever of him?' He nodded. 'Yes. He got paid more money, so the mummy could afford things for the children, and then he got promoted, so they could go on holidays to far-away places. But now the daddy had to work twice as hard, and sometimes he came home very late, and sometimes he was away for a long time. Yes, he *was* a silly daddy, wasn't he? Even when he was at home, and even when they went on their big holidays, that daddy would spend a lot of time on the phone, doing work.'

From downstairs, *William Tell* rang out, synthesised, demented. He hung his head till it stopped, and when he spoke again, his voice was raw.

'He was always tired, that daddy, and sometimes he would shout. So, the mummy said it was no use any more, and she took the babies – who were quite grown-up by now – away. Yes, it *is* a sad story. It's sad!' he wailed, and the flat walls and windows spat his words back. 'It's so sad!' Flinging himself onto the nearest bed – it was Lucy's, but no-one was there – he sobbed, his tears soaking the bare mattress and wetting his cheeks, until his neck-muscles ached.

William Tell sounded again. He sat up, gazed around the empty room, nodded. 'Pull myself together,' he said, his throat like congealed porridge. He stumbled down to the unwashed kitchen; the BlackBerry stopped ringing as he reached.

He grabbed a coat, threw the laptop into its case. BlackBerry in pocket. Shoulder-bag, stuffed with papers. Out to the black turbo-diesel Passat, he surged away into the night, wiping the last tears with his sleeve.

In twenty minutes, the office block towered into the night; he ran for the lift. The open-plan office was in semi-darkness, and smelt of stale people and photocopiers. His throat was dry, his thighs weak.

He shoved a few papers aside, set the BlackBerry down on the desk. The laptop on his chair. The papers in the recycling. He grabbed a pen, paper from the printer, then wrote quickly, folding the sheet before shoving it under a door.

Home an hour later, he flung the front door open, a ball of empty chip-paper in vinegary hand. He blinked as he switched the kitchen lights on, drank water instead of coffee.

Then he scrabbled around for the landline phone, an old address book. Eventually, the right page. He dialled, waited.

'What?' Sounding as if she'd just been interrupted.

'Um, hi.'

‘Nick, there’s nothing you can say that you haven’t said already.’

He remembered the lovemaking by firelight. ‘I resigned.’

Pause. ‘What did you do that for?’

He shrugged; no-one saw. ‘Because I want you back.’

Longer pause. ‘You can’t change things just like that. After all that’s happened – ’

‘I know.’ His throat was tight again. ‘But it’s a start.’

‘What will you do for money?’

‘No idea. We’ll think of something, though.’

‘I don’t know . . . ’

‘I want you back, Jude.’ And as he wiped another tear from his own eye, he thought he heard her sniff. ‘You and the kids,’ he went on. ‘And – I want to tell them bedtime stories.’