

Not Going There



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Isabel

So many people didn't realise this, but Jim and Debra had actually had three daughters, once upon a time. Katie mentioned this to her friends and workmates in the Red Lion, where the staff were busy preparing for the eldest daughter's engagement party.

"No, you must have that wrong," said Tracey. "Jim and Debs have been coming in here for years. They have two girls, Claire and Maria. Claire's the one who's getting engaged. Georgina, we're about ready for that banner now!"

"There was a middle daughter," insisted Katie. "A year younger than Claire, and two years older than Maria. Isabel. She was in my sister's school year."

Tracey frowned. "You sure? Only I can't believe Debs wouldn't have said."

"How long have you lived in this town, Trace?"

"Best part of ten years. Rupert was six months, when we arrived."

"A long time, but not that long," said Katie. "Like I said, Isabel was in Yvette's year at school. She disappeared."

June 1993.

Isabel arrived at the King's Head just after six. Her local, now that she was living with her boyfriend, Mike.

Isabel had moved into the bedsit with Mike three months ago, the week before her eighteenth. He was eleven years older, which her parents thought was "too old". But then, there had to be something, didn't there? Something to disapprove of. When it came to Isabel and that family, being disapproved of was basically what Jim and Debra's middle daughter was there for.

The King's Head was a dive, of course. Still, the extremely loud heavy metal music, generally blaring from the jukebox, was very much Isabel's kind of

music. And she loved the posters of various metal bands, that covered most of the wall space, and an appreciable percentage of the ceiling.

In truth, all wasn't entirely well in Isabel's relationship, hence her increasing tendency to "quickly pop in" to the pub, after work.

"Hey, Isabel - how's it going?"

Isabel smiled, as she looked up to see Danny, who rented another room in the house where she and Mike lived. Lived? Okay, existed.

Isabel hadn't liked Danny at first. Had considered him to be just another of Mike's dodgy mates. Which view had some validity, in truth. And, yet...

A couple of regulars in the King's Head had heard Danny suggesting that he and Isabel "go for a drive". They had left the pub together at around 9pm.

The remains of a young woman were discovered nine months later, in a remote spot over fifty miles away. No one was ever charged for her murder.

And the family moved on with terrifying ease, hardly even mentioning her name.

Not Going

I remember, with painful clarity, "the boys" turning from, comparatively sweet, kids, into fifteen-year-old thugs. I was seventeen then, and still living at home. And my brothers, identical twins Luke and Damon, would physically assault me on a daily basis.

Our mother, Sue, would laugh. Cackle, actually - like a storybook witch. "I told you one day they'd be bigger than you, and hit you back harder," she'd delight in telling me - a reference to the fact that, as a little kid myself, I had hit the babies a couple of times. Under her own, often inadequate, supervision. And, after all, she had been the adult.

At eighteen, I'd got out. Gone to live in a dive of a bedsit with my then-boyfriend, Farooq. He was twenty-seven, and into "open relationships", and treated me appallingly, but at least he didn't assault me. At least, not on a daily basis. He did hit me a couple of times, after too much to drink, but it was still better than living at home.

I hadn't seen much of my family, over the years. Until, out of the blue, it had arrived in the post. An invitation to the twins' thirtieth. My own thirtieth, naturally, had been and gone. Our mother had shoved a card in the post, which had arrived three days late. Nothing from the boys.

I had never contemplated this before - not giving in. Not showing up, at a family event, at which my presence was expected.

"I'm not going," I said, out loud.

"Not going where?" My flatmate, Teresa, looked baffled.

"Ignore me," I told her. "Just talking to myself."

"First sign of madness, Kelly."

I grinned. "I wouldn't worry, mate. We went beyond 'first signs' a long time ago."

I wasn't going to my brothers' thirtieth. Not attending. My mother had instructed me to jump, and I wasn't politely enquiring as to how high. Hooray for me. This was serious progress.

He's Back

My best friends, Katherine and Louise, and myself, were sitting in our usual corner of the Red Lion, our local. We'd known each other since primary school, which was impressive, given that we were all now twenty-nine.

"So," said Kathy, "you'll never guess who's back in town." Her blue eyes sparkled. Her ash blonde hair, which had generally been long, was currently shoulder-length, which suited her.

"I know," admitted the raven-haired Louise. Which was more than I did.

"Who?" I asked.

"I know something's wrong, Emma. Please, just tell me." The concern in my boyfriend's grey eyes made this even more difficult.

"Tom, it's your cousin, Michael. He's back."

The silence lingered. At length, Tom asked: "Have you seen him?"

"No, I haven't. Katherine and Louise both have, and they told me." I reached out and lightly touched his arm. "It doesn't change anything, not between us. You do know that, don't you?"

I nearly didn't answer the call, from an unknown number.

"Hey, Em - great to see you," he said. "What can I get you? Your usual?"

"Usual"? Was the guy for real? After all this time, how could he possibly know what my "usual" might be?

The fact that it was still a pint of Stella was not the point. He had assumed, and that bugged me.

"Medium white wine," I told him, on impulse. "Please."

I was conscious of being at least a stone heavier, and of having a few grey hairs in the mix. Michael, for his part, hadn't changed at all. Dark brown, wavy hair; hazel eyes; tall and muscular. As gorgeous as ever, let's face it. For a moment, I was overwhelmed by it all, and by being there with the man I had, at one time, been preparing to marry.

"So, how's Natalie?" Cut to the chase.

"No idea." He placed my drink in front of me. "We broke up after six months. I haven't seen or spoken to her since." Which, in truth, was consistent with what I'd already heard, from multiple reliable sources.

I nodded. Took a decisive swig of wine. "Thanks," I said. "For the drink, that is." Like, I needed to clarify that I wasn't thanking Michael for cheating on me with my so-called "sister". Natalie had lost her right to any such claim, in my book, although in truth, I would still reply to a percentage of her various text messages. Mum and our other sister, Clair, were constantly encouraging me to contact her, heal the relationship. Both said that Michael wasn't worth it, which was a reasonable point, but I could never entirely forgive Natalie. Her betrayal had cut deep, and been much more painful to accept or comprehend, even than Michael's deceit.

"Anyway, I guess we're even now, from what I hear."

"I'm sorry?" Had I heard correctly?

"Oh, come on, Emma. My cousin, Tom, the one who's always followed you around, like a lost puppy? Are you telling me it isn't true? That he hasn't been keeping you company, in my absence?" His mocking tone reminded me of that side of Michael...

He always had resented his cousin, and been a complete bully to shy, sensitive Tom. My boyfriend nowadays, and actually, as it had turned out, the love of my life.

"You know what, Michael? I'm not even going to answer that. It was a mistake, my agreeing to meet up with you tonight. Have a nice life. It won't be

with me." That said, I got to my feet, grabbed my denim jacket and handbag, and abruptly, unapologetically, left the pub.

Joanna

Thirty years have elapsed. Precisely thirty.

No one visits the grave any more, not on the anniversary, or any other day. Has she been forgotten?

The yew trees remain. The timeless calls of woodpigeons punctuate the Spring air, warm but with a refreshing light breeze.

Joanna's cheating boyfriend, Daniel, didn't marry the beautiful, raven-haired Carlotta, the girl he cheated with. They were together for a few years, lived together briefly, and then either he dumped her, or she dumped him, or perhaps it was a mutual decision. Carlotta lives with her girlfriend, Yvonne, now. Daniel married Amy, and they have a fifteen-year-old daughter called Molly, whom they both adore.

Joanna's dad died a few years ago, and the remaining family have their "own lives", as Jo's mother, Sylvia, is quick to tell anyone who might, to any degree, question how completely forgotten her firstborn now appears to be.

Having committed suicide, on her own seventeenth birthday.

Joanna's two younger sisters are both married. Patricia married her childhood sweetheart, Darren, as everyone had always known she would, and the couple have two daughters and a son. Clare married a lovely guy named Simon, and they have two boys.

So, Sylvia feels no lack of grandkids. She also has her ninety-nine-year-old mother to consider, of course.

Sylvia doesn't have the time to keep dwelling on the past.

None of them do. They lead busy lives, after all.

And dwell, they most certainly do not, apparently.

The Green Blob

There had been one occasion, and only the one, on which it had still been there, by the time anyone from the housing association had arrived.

She was very young, perhaps early twenties, petite, with short, blonde hair, and she gave her name as Shauna. Of course, Olivia should have pushed her for a surname, but she hadn't.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the girl had said. "I'm the only Shauna in the office. It's not a common name. I've only met one other, in my lifetime."

A week later, when Olivia was talking to someone on the out of hours helpline, she was informed that Shauna had left, and that she didn't appear to have noted anything on the files about a visit to Olivia's property.

A month later still, and no one knew of any Shauna having worked there at all. "Do you have a surname at all?" was always the question, and Olivia did not.

It was lime-green, a blob, of varying sizes. It would appear on the ceiling, of either the bathroom or living room, and it would slide along, making terrifying glugging noises, that made Olivia struggle for breath, and often have full-blown panic attacks.

For over a year, no one but Olivia had witnessed the horrific blob. It was Karen, the psychiatric nurse, to whom Olivia was referred for her "hallucinations", who saw the thing. She reported back, and was taken off the job, and herself signed off as "sick".

Shauna's visit was about a month after Karen's.

Olivia requested that she be moved by the housing association, but she didn't have enough "points". And her current flat was "perfectly adequate", after all.

Hoarding pills, on which she could potentially overdose, was all that kept Olivia going, but a mental health support worker discovered her supply, and now she is being assessed, from a "danger to self" perspective.

Janette

"There was no reason. There was no reason. Just a foolish beat of my heart..."

Such familiar lyrics. June 1991. A much too familiar bus journey, on the Number Nine to town. Back to work. The Debbie Gibson tape plays on. The words resonate in new ways, ones Janette could never have anticipated.

The Walkman is not Jan's own, but her stepdad's. The attackers stole hers. Along with so much else.

Her mind is a hazy blur, overflowing with disconnected images. Shattering realities. Distorted perceptions.

Janette was the one who lost her virginity in a brutal stranger rape. The police officers practically blamed her, because she had been drunk at the time. And the decisions that followed...

Janette's mother, along with Dr. Mary Rollins, the local surgery's only female GP, made the decision, overriding Jan's faint, futile protests. Morning after pill. Too early for pregnancy testing, apparently.

Janette would have kept the baby. Cherished him or her.

Janette had been violated twice: by the rapist, and subsequently, by her mother and that doctor.

2023. Janette's younger sister, Dawn, is married with two sons of her own. Younger brother, Mark, lives with his girlfriend, and they are expecting their first. Janette's mum feels no lack of grandkids. She's happily getting on with her own life.

Jan remains celibate and childless. Her family tell themselves it is by choice.

They tell themselves this, when they occasionally allocate the matter a brief thought in passing.

The New Girl

Zoe had recently moved to a new town with her family. She was excited to start a new chapter in her life, but as soon as she started attending her new school, she felt a sense of loneliness that she had never experienced before.

Zoe had always been a social butterfly, but at her new school, she found it painfully difficult to make friends. She would sit alone at lunch-time, watching the other kids chat and laugh together. She tried to join in with their various conversations, but they always seemed to ignore her or brush her off.

As the days progressed, Zoe felt increasingly isolated. She missed her old friends, and the familiarity of her old school. Longed for someone to talk to, someone who would understand her, and make her feel less alone.

One day, as Zoe was walking home from school, she stumbled upon a small bookstore. She had always loved reading, so she decided to go inside and browse the shelves. As she was looking through the books, she noticed a girl of around her own age, with long, dark hair in a high ponytail, sitting in the corner, reading a book. Zoe recognised her from school.

Although hesitant at first, Zoe mustered the courage to approach the girl. They struck up a conversation about their favorite books, and before she knew it, Zoe had made a new friend.

The girl's name was Lily, and she was just as passionate about reading as Zoe herself. They spent hours talking about their favorite authors and characters, and Zoe felt that she had finally found someone who understood her.

As the weeks sped by, Zoe and Lily became inseparable. They would spend their lunch breaks in the library, reading and discussing their latest reads. They even started a book club at school, which quickly became popular with their classmates.

Zoe no longer felt alone at her new school. She had found a kindred spirit in Lily, and together, they had created a community of book lovers. Zoe realised

that sometimes, all it takes is one person to make you feel less alone in the world.

In the end, Zoe learned that moving to a new town and starting at a new school can be scary and lonely, but with courage and passion, you can find your place in the world. And even, gain a lifelong friend along the way.

The Twins

Lorna was an only child until the age of eleven, when her parents surprised her with the news that she was going to have twin sisters.

Lorna was thrilled at first, imagining all the fun she would have with her new siblings. But as the months went by and her mother's belly grew larger, Lorna began to feel a twinge of jealousy. She couldn't help but feel that her parents were replacing her with these new babies. They were getting all the attention and all the excitement, while Lorna was left feeling like an afterthought. An "also ran".

She tried to be happy for her parents, but the jealousy gnawed at her. When Jessica and Sophie were born, Lorna tried her best to be a good big sister. She helped her parents with feedings and nappy changes, and she even sang lullabies to the babies when they cried. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake the feeling that her parents loved the twins more than her.

As Jessica and Sophie grew older, Lorna's jealousy only intensified. They were always getting new toys and clothes, while Lorna had to make do with hand-me-downs, from her cousin, Sarah, who wore horrible clothes. The younger girls got to go on fun outings with their parents, while Lorna was left at home with a babysitter. It wasn't fair, she thought.

One day, Lorna's jealousy reached boiling point. She was playing with her sisters' toys, when one of them accidentally broke. A bizarre purple elephant, that had never seemed to fit with the various sets of realistic farmyard animals, but that Sophie, in particular, loved. Lorna knew she should tell her parents, but instead, she hid the broken toy, and blamed it on the twins. When her parents found out, they were furious.

Lorna was grounded for a week, and she felt terrible for what she had done. It was then that Lorna realised that her jealousy was only hurting herself and those around her. She decided to be a better big sister, and to stop comparing herself to her sisters. It wasn't easy, but over time, Lorna learned to

appreciate her sisters for who they were, and to love them just as much as her parents did.

In the end, Lorna realised that having siblings wasn't so bad, after all. She had two new best friends, who would always be there for her, and she was grateful for the love and support of her family. And as she grew older, Lorna became a master storyteller, regaling Jessica and Sophie with tales of their childhood, and the adventures they had shared.

The Shoplifting Incident

Since primary school, Jane had been best friends with Mia and Rose. The three were inseparable, and always found themselves involved in some mischief or other.

One day, while they were hanging out at the mall, Mia and Rose came up with the idea to shoplift.

"It will be such a laugh," said Mia.

"These stores make a fortune. They can afford it," added Rose. "Everyone does it."

Jane remained hesitant at first, but Mia and Rose persisted. They even promised to cover for Jane, if she got caught.

So, Jane reluctantly agreed, and they started to steal small items, including sweets and stationery. They were having a great time.

Until, that is, Jane got caught by a security guard. She was terrified, and didn't know what to do. Mia and Rose had already left the store, leaving Jane to face the consequences alone.

Jane was taken to the security office, and the police were called. She was charged with shoplifting, and her parents were called to come and collect her. Jane was devastated. She couldn't believe that she had been so foolish, and had let her friends talk her into doing something illegal.

When her parents arrived, they were furious. They scolded her, and grounded her for a month. Jane was mortified. She'd never been in trouble before, and now she had a criminal record.

Mia and Rose apparently couldn't care less about what had happened to Jane. Some "friends". They continued to hang out together, and act as if nothing had happened. Jane felt betrayed. She realised that true friends wouldn't have put her in that situation, in the first place.

In the end, Jane learned a valuable lesson. She needed to surround herself with people who would encourage her to make good choices, and not lead her

down the wrong path. She also learned that it's important to stand up for what you believe in, even if it means going against your friends.

As for Mia and Rose, they eventually got caught shoplifting themselves, and faced the consequences of their actions. Jane didn't take pleasure in their misfortune, but she did feel a sense of justice had been served. She knew that she had made the right decision by no longer following their lead, and that she had learned a valuable lesson about the importance of integrity and honesty.

Friendship and Love

Lauren, Kate, and Ellie had been best friends since primary school, and had promised to stay in touch as they grew older. But life had taken each of them down very different paths.

Lauren had married her childhood sweetheart, and started a family early on. Although her marriage had ended, Lauren now had four kids, ranging in age from toddler to teen, and her life revolved around her family.

Kate had pursued a career in marketing, and was now a successful executive in a thriving company. She had dedicated herself to her job, and although she was highly successful, she had very little time for a personal life.

Ellie had spent much of her adulthood struggling with mental and physical health issues. Despite her efforts, she had found it difficult to keep a job or maintain a romantic relationship. Her thirtieth birthday was fast approaching, and she had no partner to celebrate with.

When the three friends reconnected, it soon became clear that they all shared this same lack of a successful romantic relationship, despite their other differences. It was a source of comfort to them, to know that they weren't the only ones struggling in this way.

Encouraged by this newfound connection, they made a pact to find love before the year was out. They created a plan to help each other on their quest. Kate offered to help Lauren find suitable dates. Lauren offered to set Ellie up on blind dates. And all three committed to being supportive friends to the others, as they went through the process.

The three friends set to work. Went on double dates, blind dates, and group dates. They laughed, cried, and learned together. By the end of the year, Lauren and Kate had both found partners they were happy with, and Ellie had made great strides in her journey towards self-love.

Although their lives had diverged, the bond between the three had never been stronger. As they celebrated their successes, they made a silent toast to the friendship that had enabled them to achieve so much.

Her Best Friend's Boyfriend

Best friends Ava and Heidi had been inseparable since childhood, sharing everything from secrets to clothes. They were the kind of friends who finished each other's sentences, and knew each other's quirks like the back of their own hands.

But there was one secret that Ava had been keeping from Heidi for quite some time now. Her secret crush on Heidi's boyfriend, Mike. It wasn't something she was proud of, but she couldn't help the way she felt, whenever she was around him. He was charming, funny, and had a smile that could light up a room.

Ava tried her best to keep her feelings hidden, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. Every time she saw Mike, her heart would skip a beat, and she would feel a flutter in her stomach. She knew it was wrong to feel this way, but she couldn't help it.

One day, while the three of them were hanging out at the Red Lion, their local pub, Ava found herself lost in thought, staring at Mike as he talked animatedly about his latest novel. Ava had been ridiculously impressed when she'd first learned that Mike and crime novelist Michael Rollins were one and the same. The surname being his mother's maiden name. But right then, even the actual content of Mike's words was lost on Ava. She was lost in the man.

Heidi apparently noticed her friend's distant expression. "You okay, Ava?" she asked.

Ava snapped out of her reverie, assuring Heidi that everything was fine. But the truth was, everything was far from fine. She was struggling to keep her feelings in check, and it was starting to take a toll.

As the weeks drifted by, Ava found herself actively avoiding Mike and Heidi's company, afraid that her secret would be revealed. She knew that, if Heidi ever found out about her crush, it would ruin their friendship forever.

But one day, while out for a walk in the park, Ava found herself face to face with Mike. It had never been just the two of them before. They struck up a conversation, and before she knew it, they were laughing and joking like old friends. It was then that Ava realised that her feelings for Mike were more than a passing crush.

She had to tell Heidi the truth, no matter how difficult it would be. So, one evening, she sat down with her best friend, a bottle of red wine between them, and Ava confessed everything. Heidi was shocked and hurt, but ultimately, appreciated Ava's honesty. Hugs and tears ensued.

Heidi forgave Ava, and they remained friends. Mike, on the other hand, was a different story.

"I'm going to tell him, Ava," Heidi had said. "I don't think secrets are healthy, and he knows there's something going on with me, and that it involves you."

Mike subsequently confronted Ava, turning up on her doorstep, and was apparently furious that she had kept her feelings hidden for so long. And then again, he told her he couldn't understand why she would risk their friendship for something that could never be. So, was he blaming her for saying nothing, or for speaking up? Mixed messages were hurled in Ava's general direction.

"You shouldn't even be here," said Ava, attempting to remain calm. "Heidi's the one you need to talk this through with. You might want to sober up first, though."

"Are you telling me what to do, Ava?"

"No," she said, but he absolutely reeked of alcohol.

Ava understood that sometimes, it was better to keep your feelings to yourself, especially if they could hurt the people you cared about. That was what she had tried to do for so long. But honestly, Mike's reaction was out of proportion. A little insane. Her feelings for him were dissolving, as the real Mike revealed himself to her. Ava was going to have to make Heidi

understand that, before advising her friend to dump this loser. He wasn't nearly good enough for Ava's best friend, never had been.

Ex-Husband

Ned was my first, and my only, serious boyfriend. We were married in 1992, when I was eighteen and Ned, twenty-two. And no, contrary to the assumptions of many at the time, I wasn't pregnant, although I would have loved to be. Ironically, ten years later, I still hadn't become pregnant, and not for want of trying. It was the main reason why Ned divorced me, and moved swiftly on to, first Ruby, and then Vanessa. He obtained one son via each, and I had not known much beyond this, or particularly wanted to.

Until, that is, the phone call, which I took yesterday, from an unknown number. Ned.

I wouldn't have got through the break-up had it not been for three women. These were my best friends, each of whom I had known since primary school: Amelia, Imogen, and especially, the wonderful, kind, ever loyal Kathryn. So, I turned to the girls now, for support.

Amelia placed my drink in front of me: a pint of Stella. We were positioned around our familiar corner table, in our beloved local. "Thanks, Amelia," I said.

Technically, it was only Immy's local nowadays. The rest of us took taxis there and back or, very occasionally, crashed at Imogen's mum's, where my friend still lived. By the time Immy might have considered moving out, her mother's health had been deteriorating. As an only child of a single parent, Immy had fallen into the role of carer, gradually reducing the hours she spent at her office day job. The caring had recently become full-time.

"How's Natasha?" Imogen asked, looking at Amelia. Natasha was Amelia's eldest daughter, and she had recently had twin boys.

"She's doing well, thank you. The boys are adorable, not technically identical but they look it. Tasha and Ron still can't agree on their names. I have a feeling Ron's mum has strong opinions on the subject, but I'm staying out of it. How's Anne?"

"Mum's okay," answered Imogen. "Good and bad days, you know." Playing it down. Her eyes told the truth, and Imogen was struggling.

"Kathryn, should we ask about...?" I didn't need to finish my sentence.

"Probably best not to. Good and bad days too, I suppose." Kathryn was dealing with the break-up of a seven year relationship with her partner, Julie. That was the simplified explanation. Kathy's situation was complicated, and heartbreaking in so many ways.

"How about you, Charlotte?" asked Imogen, and the focus shifted to myself.

I explained about Ned's phone call, that he was going through the process of divorce again. That he had allegedly realised that it was me he loved, after all.

"Do you believe him?" This from Amelia.

I took a decisive swig of Stella. "Not really," I replied. "I'm more surprised that I don't even want to believe him than that I don't. Of course, it would suit him well enough to be with me now. I mean, he has what I couldn't provide: kids."

"Doesn't say much for his marriages to Ruby and - Victoria, was it?" remarked Imogen.

I grinned. "Vanessa, although given the rate at which he goes through women, it's doubtful that Ned remembers himself, by this point. But yes, I know what you mean. Even with Oliver and Ethan, the two boys, from the way Ned was talking, he thinks in terms of Oliver being the one he can be proud of for his academic achievements, and Ethan the one he will some day be able to talk football with down the pub. That sounds okay, and it kind of is, but Ned sees everything from his own perspective, at all times. It's about what he can get from each person. Still, even though I know all of this rationally, his getting in touch has still rattled me." Confused the hell out of me was more like it, but I didn't have to tell my friends that.

Amelia's taxi came first. Then Imogen left too, saying that she wanted to get back for her mother.

Kathryn caught my gaze. Held it. "Another drink?"

"I'd love that, but let me get this round."

Kathy nodded. "Okay, as long as you let me get the next."

There was a connection there, between the two of us. It was much deeper even than our friendships with Amelia and Imogen, as much as both of them meant to us.

The situation with Julie was messy. But the kiss Kathryn and I had shared, after leaving Amelia's birthday party...

It was early days for us, romantically. But, let's face it, we had been friends for so long. We knew one another, inside out. The attraction was mutual and powerful, and I knew that eventually, we would explore it.

Looking into Kathy's hazel eyes, I smiled. "I'll hold you to that," I said.