

A Second Chance at Friendship

The intercom buzzed and my secretary said, 'There's a woman called Nicole calling. Says she knew you at university?'

I stopped dead, pen halfway to the page.

'Put the call through,' I said. Then after a moment, 'Nicole? Nikki?'

'You remember.' The voice was as warm as ever.

'It's been thirty years, but, yeah, I remember.'

'How are you?' she asked.

'Fine, and you?'

She sighed. 'I've been better.'

'Why is that?'

'Before I answer, tell me about you.'

I shrugged. 'I own a small accounting firm with a dozen employees. I'm married with two teenage girls and in my spare time I like to write.' I felt as if I were reading a balance sheet.

'Wow, what have you written?'

'A memoir,' I replied. 'But what about you?'

'Well, that's why I'm calling,' she murmured. 'You were so sweet when we were dating at uni ... most of the time.'

I grimaced, knowing full well the episode to which she was alluding. 'How can I help?'

I heard her gulp.

'It's my husband... I mean my soon-to-be ex.'

'Ah ha.'

'He's an abusive man. I need help separating our meagre assets and re-establishing myself financially. Can you help?'

'Why don't we talk about it over lunch?'

'I'd love that,' she replied.

We met at the *Red Emperor*, my favourite Chinese restaurant. I watched her walk through the door, marvelling how she still moved with such youthful grace.

I wanted to kiss her cheek but held back. She might not welcome that sort of overture after so much time.

Regret about what might have been washed over me. The thing is, I acted like a coward all those years ago. Even now, three decades later, I squirm with embarrassment when recalling my caddish behaviour.

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It had begun with a telephone call. I was sitting at home, a coffee in one hand and Fitzgerald's *Accounting* in the other. Final exams were just a fortnight away.

'Josh, I've rented a cabin at the beach,' Nicole said, her voice bright. 'Can you come?'

'Well, I ...'

'Please?' she implored. 'We can walk on the sand, cook on an open fire. And we'll be alone.'

Alone ... that's what I was afraid of. That if she got to know the real me, she'd no longer care for me. But at the same time, I really wanted her. So, I decided to risk it.

'I'm going to take my easel and you can bring your books. It'll be fun.' She giggled.

'Let me see if I can make it work, Nikki,' I replied.

I phoned the next morning. 'So, you're leaving on Saturday for ten days, right?'

'Yep. So, you'll come?'

‘Not for the whole time. I’ve got exams. But what if I come down Friday morning and stay until Monday?’

‘Sounds good.’ She laughed, and it was good to hear her so happy.

The following Friday I packed my car. A bottle of white to help manage my anxiety, a book on Rothko to boost my artistic credentials and impress Nicole, a few clothes, and toiletries.

On the drive, I fluctuated between anxiety and excitement. Alone with Nicole. Yikes! ‘Think positive, you fool!’ I muttered. ‘Think about lying in bed with her.’

When I pulled up outside the cabin, Nicole emerged and showered me with hugs and kisses.

‘Isn’t this great?’ she said, pointing to some sort of grey cockatoo perched in a nearby tree.

‘I brought a couple of bottles of sav blanc,’ I said, changing the subject before she could quiz me on my knowledge of native birds.

‘Sounds yummy. Come inside. I’ve made sandwiches.’

I followed her into the cabin and dropped my things on a bed.

‘Leave them, Josh. We’ll sort out sleeping arrangements later. Come and have a bite.’

We stepped out onto the verandah, and I noticed a stack of firewood. For a fleeting moment I imagined us in front of an open fire, naked, our limbs entwined. The thought reassured me later as we sat sipping wine and eating chicken sandwiches while I searched for something to say. I watched Nicole out of the corner of my eye, anxiety gnawing at me. Was I aiming too high? It was the first time we’d really been alone together. No one to invade our privacy. No other men to snatch her from me.

‘How’s your painting?’ I asked.

She smiled. ‘It’s going well. There’s a spot by the river. Each day I take my easel down and paint these huge rocks. They’re like giant skulls but stained by rain and lichen. I’ll show you after lunch.’

‘Great,’ I said, taking another sandwich.

After lunch, we strolled towards the river. The undergrowth on either side was thick and damp.

‘Aren’t those rocks spectacular?’ she cried. ‘I love the way the sun shines through the clouds and casts shadows over the landscape. I’m experimenting with watercolour, but it’s so tricky. You really need to know what you’re doing.’

I recognised the scene from her paintings. The watercolour softened the image, giving it a damp, misty feel.

At sunset, I fired up the barbecue and Nicole made a salad. We sipped our wine and chatted. I was relieved the day was almost over. I hadn’t messed up ... yet.

As the sun set, I stoked the potbelly stove and we dragged mattresses out of the bunkroom and set them side by side on the floor.

I talked about Rothko, and his subtle use of colour. He was my favourite artist – a Russian Jewish abstract expressionist who killed himself in 1970. His moody, soulful paintings reflected my own inner darkness and turmoil.

‘I admire his technique and use of colour. But I don’t really get him,’ Nicole said. ‘He’s too abstract.’

‘But there’s a depth to his work,’ I countered. ‘A spiritual quality. You say less is more and in Rothko’s work that’s true. The colours draw you in and I can imagine myself as part of the canvas.’

‘Really?’ she said, sounding intrigued.

‘His paintings can depict ecstasy and tragedy. Mostly tragedy I suspect. Did you know he committed suicide?’

‘Imagine how his family felt,’ Nicole murmured.

Neither of us spoke until Nicole sighed and turned to me. ‘Josh, tell me about your family. You never talk about them. Are you close with your parents?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why not?’ she asked gently.

‘My father was traumatised by the war.’

‘How? What happened?’

I clambered to my feet and went to stand near the window.

‘How about some air?’ I said. By the time I reached the verandah, panic had overwhelmed me. I was hyperventilating.

What could I tell her? That my father was sent to Australia alone, at the age of sixteen? That his parents and two siblings stayed in Poland and perished in the Holocaust? That serving in the Australian army during the war wasn’t enough to quell my father’s survivor guilt? How could I explain that I felt completely alone because my father was consumed with guilt and my mother was consumed with him?

I stood looking out over the river for several minutes, until a watery gust jolted me back to my senses, and then I went back inside.

I lay down beside Nicole and tried to hold her, but she turned away.

‘Why won’t you share your feelings with me?’ she muttered. ‘Why do you always shut me out?’

‘Let it go, Nikki,’ I said, disengaging and rolling over. ‘Now is not the time.’

I tossed and turned throughout the night on the thin foam mattress. The room seemed stifling and airless, and I felt boxed-in. I needed to escape.

I woke at dawn while she still slept and quietly stuffed my things into my bag and crept away.

As I was driving back to Melbourne, the heavens opened – dour weather to match my dour mood. Why couldn't I allow her to know me, to get close to me? Why was it all so difficult?

I longed to hear Nicole's voice, and as soon as it was a reasonable time, I called.

'How are you?' I asked.

'Why do you care?'

'I'm sorry I bolted,' I murmured.

'I don't get it, Josh. I thought we were having a good time. I'm not sure I can forgive you for this.' She hesitated, but I could think of nothing to say.

'Bye.' The phone went dead.

And that was that.

* * *

Fast-forward thirty years. As we sat eating our meal at the Red Emperor, I recalled the anxious and lonely twenty-year-old kid I was then. I wished the current me could have reassured him that he was worthy of being loved.

'I've thought a lot about what happened ... at the beach,' I stammered.

'Me too,' she replied.

'I like to think I'm different now.'

She looked at me, her expression curious. 'OK, well, tell me about yourself.'

So, I did. My children ... their careers, partners, and how proud I was of them. I told her about my wife and my career.

I could see by the expression on Nicole's face that she was surprised by my openness.

'You have changed, Josh. You're not so buttoned up.' Her face softened. 'I'm pleased for you. You seem ... happy.'

I shrugged. 'I guess I've grown up. And I've learned that when you're with someone, you have to risk revealing the real you.'

Nicole smiled. 'Well, I suppose I'd better follow your advice.'

'Tell me about your ex.'

'There's not much to say. We split almost a year ago.'

'May I ask why?'

'He's a womaniser ... and violent too.'

I grimaced in disgust. 'Hitting a woman ... that's unforgivable.'

She began to cry.

'Look, I'm happy to help.' I blurted. 'Pro bono. After the beach, I owe you that much.'

Nicole's mouth curled in a sad smile. 'Thank you.'

A silence ensued as I tried to gather the courage to ask if I could see her again. Finally, I said, 'Could we do dinner sometime, Nikki? Maybe next week?'

Nicole held my gaze for a long time. Then she said, 'I'd like that.'

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