

Best Friend

The day began just like any other Wednesday, quite unremarkable and immediately forgettable. But as they so often did, matters heated up considerably during an argument with his daughter. She wanted an insane amount of money for a dress she'd seen at Boutique Funari because there was this incredibly important twenty-first birthday party for a girl whose name he'd never heard before. Perhaps he should have just gritted his teeth and handed over the three thousand Rand but something in his soul rebelled at the cavalier way Tamara seemed to simply expect him to dole out cash for her pleasure.

"How much are you contributing toward this little extravagance?" he asked mildly. All his employees knew that when he asked mildly, he was seething inwardly and liable to bark or bite but, strangely, neither Tamara nor her doting mother seemed to take him seriously, no matter how he asked.

His wife was no help. "Oh give her the money!" she raged, "All you ever do is complain about how much everything costs. Anyone would think we were paupers if they could see how mean you were!"

"Sonia, we would have been paupers long ago if you two had your way!" he said. "I can't believe you're serious about encouraging our daughter to spend more than a month's wages for one of my factory cleaners on some silly dress!"

"It's not a silly dress!" Tamara protested, "I simply can't go in one of my old dresses, I just can't!"

"That wouldn't be because you can't fit into your other dresses, could it?" he asked.

"Daddy! That's mean!"

"When you talked me into the Virgin Active gym membership you promised faithfully that you would be going to gym every single day. I note from the latest account that you haven't been once this month. What statement does that make about your promise?"

"Oh leave her alone!" his wife snapped. "She deserves a few pleasures in life."

"She has a great deal more than a few pleasures in life," he responded. "Tamara's total monthly allowance is slightly more than the total cost to the company of our very hard-working and efficient receptionist. And let's not forget last year's gap year, and the three months in London." He bit into his toast and waited for the next salvo, surprised at his calm.

"Daddy, you're so mean!"

"Tamara, you're so extravagant," he responded, chewing his toast, bored with the senseless bickering.

“If you won’t give her the money I will!” his wife threatened ominously. “And you know what that will mean.”

“Give her whatever you like,” he said, his patience almost at an end, “I really don’t care.”

“You will!” his wife said venomously.

He kicked back his chair and stood up. “Then do it,” he retorted, angry now. “Tamara receives a very generous allowance and I refuse to dish out three thousand Rand on a dress for a birthday party for someone she hardly knows. I’ll be home late.”

“Please drop me off daddy!” Tamara called as he stalked towards the door.

“What’s wrong with your car?” he demanded.

“I ... I forgot to fill up.”

“Pardon?” he said mildly. “It’s the twentieth of the month. Are you telling me your petrol card has reached its limit already? We’ve had this discussion before.”

“I had to go to extra classes last week!”

“We live two kilometres from campus and today is only the twentieth of the month. You must think I’m completely and utterly stupid Tamara.” he called as he walked from the room. “Walk, Tamara, I have a business to run.”

He spent every second Wednesday afternoon at the hospice. An old school friend had roped him in to serve on the committee and three years later he was still involved, now chairing the finance subcommittee. At the meeting that afternoon debate centred on the repainting of the exterior of the building, described by Adams, the painting contractor, as being in very poor condition. During the tea break he walked slowly around the building inspecting the walls and the eaves.

That was when he met her. She was sitting on the balcony in a wheelchair, enjoying the afternoon sunshine and he felt awkward at invading her privacy.

“Good afternoon,” he said politely.

“Hello,” she replied and their eyes met. Hers were blue, like no blue eyes he had ever seen. He stood transfixed, speechless. It was as though there was a connection between them, some invisible link that made time meaningless.

He babbled something about the painting and she nodded understandingly.

“Winter is on its way,” she said, “it’s better to paint in summer isn’t it?”

“It’s been a while since we painted so I suppose we’d better get it done as soon as we can. You’ll see, the place will look a lot better.”

“Perhaps I will,” she said quietly and he wished the earth would open and swallow him for his careless and insensitive choice of words.

“I’m sorry,” he began awkwardly but she silenced him with a shake of her head.

“Don’t be,” she said softly. “It’s been nearly two years and I’ve made peace with the fact that I won’t be around a lot longer.”

“That couldn’t have been easy. I’m not sure I could be as calm as you are.”

She gave a tiny smile and their eyes met again. “First there is anger and denial. Self pity follows a little later until you decide to fight. Everybody encourages you and tells you that you’re doing wonderfully and at first you believe them.” She gave a little shrug. “Eventually you come to terms with reality.”

He felt a lump in his throat and could only nod understandingly. He wanted to say something but there wasn’t anything he could find to say. She had said it all.

“I’d better get back. I’m sorry to have disturbed you,” he said eventually.

“I enjoyed our conversation,” she smiled. “Perhaps we’ll meet again when you’ve finished your painting.”

He couldn’t get her out of his mind. Her eyes, those blue, blue eyes and her shy, fleeting smile would not leave him. Nor would the thought that she was dying. It seemed so wrong. He lay awake that night thinking of her, wondering about her, and realised he didn’t even know her name.

Matron told him her name was Nell. She had no family and her medical fund had long since been exhausted by all the medical treatment she had received. She was a charity case, and had no-one in the world except an aged aunt in Natal.

“What about her friends?”

“There was a girl who visited once or twice in the beginning. It’s a sad thing but when you’re dying and really need your family and friends, so often they aren’t there for you. We see it a lot. So many people seem afraid to visit the terminally ill.”

“Would there be any objection if I popped in to see her?” he asked after he explained how they had met.

“Objections! No, not a one!” Matron exclaimed. “She’d love a visitor. The volunteers do what they can but it’s not the same as a real visitor, you know how it is.”

He nodded. He didn't know, and he couldn't begin to imagine, but in that instant he decided he would be her real visitor.

She was twenty-eight, she told him. Her father had died when she was nine and her mother had been killed in a car accident six years ago. Her eighty-two year old great-aunt was her only living relative but she lived in a retirement home in Durban.

"Thank you for coming to see me," she said when he had to go, "I enjoyed your company."

"I'll visit again Nell," he promised. "I enjoyed your company too."

"Goodbye Mr Painter," she joked and they laughed. And that was how he became Mr Painter.

Tamara looked beautiful in her extravagant dress. He kissed her cheek before she left for the twenty-first birthday bash and she hugged him briefly and fled.

"I've had to fetch and carry Tamara all week," his wife complained when he sat down, "and I had to pay for her dress too. Its quite ridiculous that I have to live like this."

"Life is hard my darling," he said sanctimoniously. He'd heard Ray McCauley say something similar when being interviewed on television some years before and trotted it out when the occasion demanded. Most people laughed but Sonia didn't. He listened with half an ear, but his thoughts were of Nell.

"You haven't heard a word I've been saying!" Sonia screeched furiously, which made him realise he must have missed the question she'd asked.

"Sorry, I was thinking about something that happened today," he said in his most contrite manner. But it was too late and Sonia stormed out of the room and slammed the door with such force that Blackie, their old Labrador, scrambled to her feet and ran to him, alarmed. He stroked her and talked to her until she calmed down.

"Good girl," he said. "Now why can't women be as obliging as you, Blackie?" She licked his hand and lay down on his feet. "You're getting tubby, old girl," he said, 'you'd better not go swimming or Greenpeace will mistake you for a whale and drag you out to sea." The old dog thumped the carpet with her tail and rolled onto her side, and soon her gentle snores told him his conversation for the evening had just come to an abrupt halt.

"Hello Mr Painter," Nell said, but her voice was weak and he could sense her pain.

“Not a good day?” he asked and she gave a little shake of her head.

“I’ve been better, but that’s how it is. You learn to take one day at a time. How was your day Mr Painter?”

“Compared with yours, just fine,” he said. “Can I get you anything?”

“Matron has just given me a painkiller. Perhaps I’ll feel a little more human in a while,” she said, her voice so soft that he had to lean nearer to her to hear.

“Shall I read another chapter?” he asked. She looked up at him with her eyes so blue and he seemed to know her answer even before she spoke.

“Tomorrow,” she murmured, “but please stay and talk to me for a while.”

So he told her about his day and she listened, making little comments from time to time. But he could see she was tired and when she closed her eyes he stopped talking and sat with her, aware of nothing but her, wondering what it was about her that had so touched him.

When he was sure she was asleep he stole from the room and bumped into Matron on his way out.

“She’s on the last lap,” Matron said frankly, “at this stage she’s likely to have many more days like today. But please, don’t stop visiting, she so looks forward to your visits. It’s a great comfort to know that someone cares.”

“I’ve been reading to her,” he said, “she seems to enjoy that very much.”

“What are you reading?”

“A Mills and Boone,” he said, embarrassed, “she chose it.”

“Most women enjoy those,” Matron smiled, “perhaps they see them as an escape from the reality of life.”

“In her case that’s probably true,” he said and she gave him a strange look.

“Try and finish the book,” she said softly, and he understood.

Sonia had been having a bad day and told him so in no uncertain terms. There hadn’t been shady parking at Cavendish, Stuttafords had mixed up her account, Woolworths had run out of her favourite chocolate éclairs and the service at Pick ’n Pay was getting worse by the day. He thought of telling her about a young woman called Nell who would give anything to have her problems, but didn’t bother.

“You’ve been getting home so late these last weeks,” she complained, “surely you can’t be at the factory so late every evening?”

He wondered whether to tell her about his visits to Nell but almost immediately decided against it. He knew she would never even try to understand and couldn’t help thinking that she hadn’t always been as self-

centred. So he made some vague reply, which must have satisfied her because she launched into a detailed account of what her hairdresser had told her about the mother of one of Tamara's friends who was having a torrid affair, but he had stopped listening. He poured the wine and realised that he didn't know Sonia any longer. Oddly, he found the realisation didn't bother him and he questioned what it was that made him return to her every evening. Perhaps it was habit; perhaps it was a sense of duty. He didn't think it was love. He didn't think he understood what the word meant any longer, perhaps he never had.

"Hi Pops!" Tamara's cheery greeting startled him from his reverie and he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her.

"How's my girl?"

"Happy!" she laughed. "You must be in a good mood, we haven't argued!"

"I don't like arguing any more than you do," he said. "Why do we argue?"

"Because I'm naughty, but I love you daddy."

"And I love you my darling and I always forgive you. Perhaps I shouldn't, perhaps that's why you're so naughty?"

She looked at him for a long time, her head tilted to one side in the way he knew so well. Their eyes met and he found himself suddenly thinking of Nell.

"You look sad daddy," she said softly. "Are you sad?"

He forced a laugh and made a flippant comment that seemed to put her at ease but he realised there was a sadness that seemed to have gripped his soul. He felt as though he were slipping into a deep melancholy and not even a third glass of wine helped. During dinner he became aware of Sonia watching him and he looked up at her to see her hurriedly avert her eyes. Perhaps it was the wine but he knew he no longer cared.

He paged through the remaining chapters of Nell's book, Matron's words echoing in his mind. By his reckoning, the book would be finished by Christmas. Perhaps, just perhaps, they could begin another.

Nell was so much better during the next few weeks that they took to sitting out on the balcony in the last rays of the afternoon sun. He read to her and she listened with rapt attention, her eyes half closed, following his every word.

"You read so well Mr Painter; it's almost as if the story is happening in my head."

“We’re past halfway,” he said, “you’ll have to choose another book fairly soon.”

She looked at him with her blue, blue eyes and he knew immediately that she understood because she just smiled her shy smile. “Perhaps,” she said softly.

“I telephoned your office this afternoon and they said you’d already left,” Sonia said aggressively as he walked into the house.

“I was at the hospice,” he said abruptly, his good humour gone in an instant. Nell hadn’t been very well and he was in no mood for Sonia’s belligerent and antagonistic attitude.

“There’s always something isn’t there?” she demanded.

“What is it this time?” he asked wearily, “has your hairdresser been telling you that there are exotic dancers at the hospice? Or did she say it’s a drug den? The truth is, it’s a shebeen and we all get totally drunk every time we go there.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me and the five hundred naked lap dancers I carry around in the boot of the car,” he said, leafing through the post.

“That’s not even funny,” she snapped.

“It’s not meant to be. People don’t go to the hospice for a holiday; they go there to die, Sonia.”

“That’s depressing.”

“That’s life,” he said.

Tamara’s car needed servicing so he fetched her from the service station the next morning and they set off for the university. She was very quiet and he wondered why. The traffic light at the freeway off ramp stopped them and he pulled on the handbrake and resigned himself to a long wait. That was when she turned and looked at him.

“Mother is convinced you’re having an affair,” she said calmly. He felt as though the wind had been knocked from him and stared at her.

“An affair! Are you serious?”

“Very,” she said. “Are you?”

He thought for what seemed like a very long time before turning back to her. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose I am having a sort of an affair. Would you like to meet her?”

Her eyes widened in disbelief and she stared open-mouthed at him.

“What time is your first lecture?” he asked.

“Eleven,” she stammered.

“Good, let’s go.”

Nell was sitting in the wheelchair wrapped in a blanket when the nurse showed them into her room.

“Hello Mr Painter,” she smiled, “I’m waiting for the morning sun. You’re early.”

He introduced her to Tamara and there was an awkward silence. “You have your father’s eyes,” Nell said softly. “He’s my best friend.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, daddy?” Tamara asked when he drove away.

“I didn't think you'd care.”

“How can you say that?” she demanded.

“You live for your friends, parties, and having a good time. Your mother lives for chocolate éclairs, soap operas and gossip at the hairdresser. I’m just there to pay the bills. Why would either of you have been the slightest bit interested?”

Neither of them said another word until he stopped the car at the university.

“She said you were her best friend,” Tamara said quietly.

“Matron said she doesn’t have any other friends.”

“She told me how you met and why she calls you Mr Painter and that you read to her every afternoon.”

“What are you going to tell your mother?”

“The bare minimum,” she said, turning to face him, “you’re right; she wouldn’t understand, would she?”

Their eyes met and he saw her tears. He held her tightly and stroked her hair, calming her, and the memory of his last conversation with Blackie made him smile to himself. He wiped her tear-stained face and kissed her forehead.

“Better?” he asked and she nodded.

“I’m so ashamed,” she whispered, “I’m partying and she’s dying. Life is so cruel.”

“Life is beautiful too. Think of all the good parts, its not so bad is it?” he said, trying to shake her bleak mood.

“It’s so unfair, she’s so young. I’m so glad you’re her friend, daddy, it must be terrible not to have friends.”

“You could be her friend too. You could talk girl talk. Men aren’t any good at that, as you well know. Ask your mother.” She smiled at that and an awkward silence followed.

“Who’s your best friend daddy?” she asked. He looked away, not wanting his feelings to show but knew he had to answer her.

"I don't think I have one," he said, and she nodded as though that was precisely the answer she had expected.

"You'd better go to the factory," she said firmly, "and I have to go to lectures. I'll read to Nell this afternoon. Perhaps you should get home on time today, before the soaps begin. And don't forget to mention that I'm visiting a sick friend." He looked at his daughter, his beautiful, spendthrift, clever daughter and was totally lost for words.

"Good thinking Batman," he managed eventually, remembering the phrase she'd used so often when she was his little girl in pigtails with braces on her teeth. She laughed and opened the door, then leaned over to kiss him.

"Bye Mr Painter," she said, "I love you."

Nell was sitting in her wheelchair in the afternoon sun and looked up when he approached. "My best friend has come to see me," she smiled. "How are you, Mr Painter?"

"I'm very glad to see you looking so well young lady," he said, "tell me your news."

"Another good day," she said softly, "and I'm so lucky that my best friend is here to share it with me. My life is very uncomplicated, isn't it?" Their eyes met and he took her hand in his.

"No reading today?" he said and she shook her head.

"Tamara read to me yesterday and the day before," she said, hesitating before continuing. "She also told me a little about her mother. I hope I'm not a burden to you Mr. Painter."

"Never," he said firmly, "you're my best friend and you'll never be a burden, never."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "So it's just me and my best friend. We'll talk as we watch the sun go down over the mountains and we'll be happy to have shared a beautiful evening together."

They chatted as the sun sank and despite her reference to Sonia, he felt strangely at peace. Her hand grew cold and he felt her shiver so he wrapped the blanket around her. She smiled her thanks; and it seemed to him that they understood each other so completely that he thought that she was perhaps the best friend he had ever had in his life.

A few short weeks later Matron telephoned just after he arrived at the factory one morning.

"It's nothing serious," she said, "Nell's doctor ordered a minor surgical procedure to help relieve her pain. She'll be back from hospital after lunch but

she's bound to be a little groggy so you might want to pop in tomorrow instead."

He thanked her and rang off but he knew he would visit Nell that afternoon. That was what best friends did.

He arrived early and found Matron busy when he arrived so he waited impatiently for her to finish, pacing up and down the corridor. Eventually she called him into her office but when he saw her expression he knew immediately.

He drove home and sat alone in the garage for perhaps an hour. He knew Nell was gone because Matron had told him so, but some part of him needed more time to understand. When he eventually went upstairs to change he bumped into Tamara on the landing.

"Hello daddy," she said softly, putting her arms around him, "Matron phoned and told me about Nell. If you need a new best friend I would like to apply."

He held her close and kissed her. "Hello my girl. You've always been my best friend but I was too blind to see it."

"I love you, Mr Painter. Come downstairs so we can drink a toast to Nell while we watch the sun go down. Afterwards we'll share a bottle of wine and listen to Beethoven's Fifth because we need to cheer up.'

He kissed her cheek and stroked her hair. "Very good thinking Batman," he said.

Barry Kemp