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The Pursuit of Happiness

by Marion Umney

“We just want you to be happy.” How many times had she heard that? It seemed like hundreds, normally after she’d failed at something. When she didn’t get the grades she needed to go to Cambridge, when she dropped out of University, when she changed her mind about taking articles with a solicitor. Every time there was that edge of exasperation and disappointment, which sent a spear into her guts. She could see they were worried about her. She was a disappointment. She hasn’t lived up to that early promise. She was disappointed in herself.

Then she met Colin. Colin didn’t care about any of it. He didn’t care that she didn’t have a “proper job”; that she was a university dropout, that she didn’t have ambition, hadn’t got a clue what she wanted to do, what she wanted to be. He just loved her and she loved him.

Then she told them.

“Of course dear, if that’s what you want. You know we just want you to be happy but...”

There it was again, that gut wrenching spear of disappointment.

“But what?” she asked, but deep down she knew.

“Well, a musician. That’s not a very secure job you know and, well, I know it shouldn’t matter, but he’s not like us, they don’t treat women well you know these West Indians. Are you sure you know what you’re getting into? There’s children too, they don’t do well at school you know these mixed up children.”

“You could still do really well for yourself darling. It’s not too late. Jane’s daughter just got herself an amazing job in event management and is engaged to this really nice man who’s a management consultant. She seems really happy.”

Years later she found the photo of the four of them outside Buckingham Palace when she got her OBE; she and Colin, a joint OBE for services to music education. Her Dad quietly proud, her mum, the cat who’d got the cream, dying to tell Jane.

The spear in her gut was different now; a spear of grief. It had taken a long time to get to that happy day. Years of anger, frustration disappointment. Disappointment in herself that she was alienating them, and disappointment with them that they couldn’t just love her for who she was, couldn’t see that her version of happiness was not theirs.

She heard the door bang and shut the album. Jodie was home.

She looked at her face, bad news. Jodie thrust an envelope in front of her and looked away, wouldn’t meet her eyes.

She read the sheet of paper then took a deep breath.

“Ok love, what’s going on? I thought you loved the music and you’re so talented, so how come you’re skipping practices? You won’t get into music college if you don’t work at it.”

“I hate it Mum – I just want to play jazz like Dad and they make me play all this other stuff. It’s boring.”

She sighed, “oh Jodie, you know all we want is for you to be happy but...”