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Lucky Tom

by MaryPat Campbell

Hours and hours before daybreak Matt's freezing body joined up with the chattering in his teeth so he could neither think or speak. Anything he tried to voice sounded like a violent clang in that music they call atonal, and anything he touched felt like tin plates on January nights clanging in the night air.

'The darkness is cheap like this hostel,' Matt thought.

He couldn't think past the next icy minute, which burned his bones with its fiery shards together with all the noise coming from each cubicle - a man in every one. He remembered how he and Tom used to go wild winter swimming when they were teenagers. How they used to cycle to the local pond, strip off quickly and with shouts and whoops echoing round, dive through a crack in the ice and feel their blood boil on impact.

The best bit was when they climbed out again, wrapped themselves in big dry towels, cycled home and drank full mugs of scalding hot coffee with a dram or two of whiskey stirred into the brew by Matt's mum.

Lucky Tom - living a contented life with best mates and a girlfriend who became his wife; working in a job he loved and was paid decently for. Matt couldn't understand what had happened to his own life that had brought him to this place. He supposed it was something to do with his father's demands of him, and how he just couldn't manage it after all. Everything he did was wrong, or not good enough at the very least. Matt couldn't explain it to himself or anyone else, and these days people didn't ask anymore and tended to leave him alone.

He hated the nightly business of clocking in to the hostel but felt grateful at the same time to have a bed indoors most nights, where he could doss down and get a breakfast of sorts in the mornings, only to get booted out cheerfully by the wardens to roam around all day in this slab of a city where he knew no one, except Tom.

He couldn't bring himself to visit Tom or phone him or call round, although he sometimes found himself walking in that part of the city, past his friend's house, determined not to ring the bell, but at the same time drawn like a magnet to be near Tom's house and see the car parked outside, lights in the windows, the sense of family inside; much too humiliating.

Matt thought Tom wouldn't have been able to hide the slow recognition followed by the shocked expression on his face once he realised who Matt was. He wouldn't have known what to say to his old pal who had somehow lost his way in life. He might've blustered and joked and invited him in to the warmth and offered him - something. Or he might not have recognised him, or he might have pretended not to which would have been worse, maybe even dropped him a few coins like a beggar in the street.

Matt closed his eyes on those thoughts and continued to shiver and chatter and hug his body to himself under the thin blanket till the sun came up in what he was sure would be an achingly beautiful purple and lemon morning sky.