

Mid-life Madness

by Marion Umney

It was a crazy time. Perhaps she'd been cooped up too long with Giles. She had heard lockdown stories of marriages breaking up, but hers didn't, surprisingly. There was a strange comfort in their relationship during those days of uncertainty. Despite their difficulties, it was solid, or maybe stolid, lacking in excitement but safe, unlike so much else going on around them. She remembered Julie referring to her own relationship with Mike with a laugh when they zoomed, "Well we haven't killed each other yet!" She understood what she meant. All those little irritating things seemed to become magnified because there was no escape.

When the opportunity came to have a break on her own she grabbed it with both hands. The rules had been lifted and travel in the UK was allowed. Her annual painting holiday had always been a joy and now this oasis of space felt doubly precious.

What she hadn't anticipated was how that taste of freedom would affect her; how she would feel she was in the grip of something powerful, over which she had no control.

He treated her with exquisite attention. Something she hadn't experienced in years. She had noticed something in him, something hurt and vulnerable, and it was that which had drawn her to him. He sat next to her in the obligatory first night icebreaker session, quite unforthcoming, and she found herself saying

"If you want to talk, I'm a good listener you know."

He had smiled sadly.

“Thank you, that’s kind.”

Then, the following night in the makeshift outdoor bar he had walked past her with a slight smile as she sat sipping her glass of Chardonnay.

She watched him as he sat by the lake, still as a statue, and felt an almost physical pull to join him. She rolled the stem of her wine glass round in her fingers as she tried, unsuccessfully, to follow the conversation around her. What was she doing here? He was waiting for her, she needed to go.

She slid down on the rock beside him with a “Hi. You OK?”

He turned his face towards her and held her gaze. His eyes were dark and intense, and she felt a frisson of fear and desire rise in her. She laughed nervously as he reached for her hand.

That was when the madness started. They had walked round the lake that night, hand in hand while he told her of his disastrous marriage, his isolation, his depression. She told him about her relationship with Giles, her loneliness in what she saw as a dying marriage. As they came back in sight of the bar they drew instinctively apart, neither wanting to excite any speculation from their fellow holidaymakers.

The next day she was in turmoil. She felt like a lovesick teenager and found herself watching for him, torn between making a beeline for the seat next to him at lunch or dinner, or avoiding him.

That evening she invited him to her room.

“I’ve got some real coffee and a cafetiere if you fancy some.”

She felt awkward, sitting on the bed, not sure how to be, while he leant against the desk, his dark eyes holding hers, quietly listening while she prattled on nervously.

She was sure people noticed and her shame was indescribable. The end of the holiday was torture – to tear herself away from him felt impossible yet she knew she needed space from him; from her feelings; some normality.

Then she was home. To her surprise Giles had made love to her the weekend she had got back. It was the first time in months. She wept when they lay together afterwards. “I’ve missed you; I’ve missed this,” was her response to his concerned enquiry, and it was true.

The only person she told was Julie, in whispers over zoom.

“I can’t explain why I did these things.”

“Sounds like you fell in love.”

“But he was so young. I could almost have been his mother.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a woman falling for a younger man. You wouldn’t blink if it was the other way round would you? Either way it sounds like he woke you up – and Giles too, you lucky bitch.”

She was right of course.