

The Last Word

by Elaine Weddle

In a small meeting room on the third floor, it's possible to smoke a cigarette out the window undetected if the wind is blowing in the right direction. You have to 'waft' otherwise the smoke loops around your head and sneaks inside setting off fire alarms and sprinklers. You can place your tea on the sill and look out over the roof and into the park. I didn't know this for the first 11 years I worked there. If I wanted a cigarette I'd step outside and loiter by the bins, even in a blizzard. That was how I became friends with Jo. I was surprised when I first discovered her in what became the third floor smoking room, but she just shrugged and smiled and said the simultaneous consumption of tea and nicotine was a basic human right.

Jo had finished her law degree the previous summer, she was quietly ambitious and trying to fit in, covering up her tattooed arms with long sleeves. She was my unlikely friend. And that's probably why I told her, why I mentioned it at all. I had intended to make her laugh. My life was so small, so beige compared to hers that sometimes things I didn't mean to say slipped out.

I just told her the bare bones. I had seen old friends on the cliff path and I knew it was going to be one of those really awkward moments. I didn't speak to them anymore, there had been some falling out over something or other. Although the path was as wide as three lanes of the M25, it was still way too narrow to pass unobserved, so I knew I'd either be forced to hurl myself into the sea or scale the electrified fence that ran parallel to the cliff. I paused and laughed. She turned to me and smiled, she had something.

“Who did you want to avoid so much that you considered throwing yourself over a cliff ...”

“You’re exaggerating...”

“What something or other did you fall out over...?” I laughed again. How had I walked straight into this? It wasn’t as if I’d had to face them because a moment later the couple had stopped walking and looked out to sea. The woman pointed and while they were distracted, I walked on by unnoticed. I had been trembling and my breathing was way too fast, but I kept on putting one foot in front of the other. Nothing had happened. Crisis diverted.

“Spill,” said Jo.

“He’s an old friend.”

“He?” she said before lighting the roll up, taking a deep drag. “Define ‘friend’. School buddy? Childhood sweetheart? Old work colleague? A hook up? Next door neighbour? What do you mean by friend? I will ask you one more time.”

“None of the above...”

“We had the same friends... that’s all.”

“That’s all? Are you seriously telling this court that you were prepared to throw yourself into the sea because you saw someone who was a friend of a friend?”

We did this. Our conversations were a mock trial. We fully examined each other’s actions and motivations. It was revealing, excruciating and strangely compelling.

“I put it to you that you’re lying. What happened the last time you saw him?”

Jo straightens up, there are voices in the corridor, we both move quickly, stubbing out our cigarettes in the old tuna can we use as an ash tray. Jo grabs the emergency air freshener she has placed on a shelf and sprays without stopping for a full three seconds. All I can think about is the last time I had seen him. Jo and I sit down opposite one another, pens in hands, laptops open.

Jack sticks his head around the door.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt, looking for a space. You must be freezing with that window open,” he said.

“You can have it, we’re done,” said Jo.

We stand up and push in our chairs. I pick up my laptop and take my phone.

Outside the meeting room Jo laughed. "Close call. By the way, you're going to have tell me more you do know that."

"Nothing to tell, honest."

As Jo walks off I hear a message on my phone and dip my hand in to my bag to retrieve it.

The message is from an unknown number: *Enjoy your walk? I know that was you.*