

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Only Time will Tell

(One of us - part three)

by Elaine Weddle

[Ben finds himself alone and widowed after a virus has reeked devastation across the world. With his grown-up children safely out of the city, he spends his days visiting cafes, recounting stories from a life that everyone is starting to forget. When the Yellow Café is raided, a waitress steps up like a very human old-world heroine. After they are robbed in the increasingly wild Old Tech area of the city, he fears for her safety and leaves her with Dog ...]

Her message came out of the blue - *I'm in the city for a few days, are you home dad?* Ida didn't do spontaneous or even fairly well planned, she only did military-style operations, until today.

What a nice surprise. I'll make brunch ...can you remember where we live?

She responded in seconds. *You're not 'we' anymore.* I stared down at her words.

I had that feeling that I was in an important exam but had forgotten to revise. The apartment would be the wrong place to meet, too many memories, so I suggested the Gaia Garden Café. Everybody loved it and it was on my list. Two birds one stone.

I found her sitting outside in an arbour, surrounded by dark green foliage and exotic blooms, a medium sized suitcase by her chair. Her face pale, eyes puffy. I bent down to kiss her.

“We shouldn’t...” she said pulling away so quickly she was in danger of whiplash.

“I’m careful, I follow all the rules...” I said planting a kiss on the top of her head before she could move. I pulled out a chair. “You look well.”

“Scott says I look old,” she said.

“You look lovely, it’s been tough, Scott is an idiot...”

Why did something stupid fall out of my mouth every time. She raised her eyebrows. Why wasn’t Andrea here to elbow me in the ribs or step on my toe? That woman had all the intricate moving parts of the human heart, where I just had the factory standard pump and valves. She’d have known what to say, she’d have listened and soothed and advised without Ida even noticing.

“How is Scott?”

“You’d know if you visited now and again... how do you stand it here dad?”

“I like this cafe.”

“It’s not real dad, it’s all fake.”

I should have known she would hate it. I just didn’t seem to notice fake anymore. Silky leaves that never dropped or faded, glowing fluorescent flowers, water dripping into small pools that drained out and was pumped back in a never-ending loop. I suggested a walk. Perhaps it would help if we didn’t look each other in the eye. Perhaps we could pretend more easily. We took the Highwire and ambled across a suspended path that ran through the city and alongside the canal, watching a dozen craft move silently through water that was as clear and blue as a summer sky.

“You could live outside the city...” she said.

“I have work to do.”

“Work? ...what work? You’re just avoiding us ...”

“No ...”

“Everyone *knows* you are ...” her voice is shrill, heads turn.

“Is everything alright? Can I help?” A server hovers up to us on an air board. The server is smiling and tilting its head to one side like Mr Green.

“You can mind your own business,” I said.

“Shouting in the street is a violation. It’s everyone’s business, everyone’s business.” The Server appeared to have developed a tick.

“Calm down, you’ll get us arrested!” said Ida.

“You’re the one who’s shouting,” I said, loudly.

“I’ll bid you good day, good day, good day. Politeness costs nothing, nothing ... ”

Ida carried on walking, pulling the case behind her. “This is what I’m talking about,” she said over her shoulder as she strode off. I tried to catch up with her, but the niggling pain in my knee caused me to stumble.

“Ida wait.” She turns to see me doubled up. “The thing is I’m working on my own project ...telling stories about how life was ... so people don’t forget.”

“...its on the web dad, everything is on the web. You don’t need to go round telling people. That’s crazy.”

I felt a twinge in my rib cage. There were tears in her eyes and I know this is the moment when I’m supposed to give her a hug.

“We’re worried about you. It’s got to stop,” she said

There’s barking in the distance and I turn to see Dog bounding towards us, no sign of anyone else. In a second he’s at my feet, tongue hanging out, rolling and sitting on his haunches. Dog is back, alone.

We walk side by side across the park, I know that Dog is leading us to the Airbus. I’m pretty sure that it will take me to Old Tech.

“I have a date but you’re here now so I’ll rearrange it,” I said. She stops and looks into my face and touches my arm.

“I’m so pleased for you dad.”

“Yes, well, early days and all that.”

“Of course,” she said and a smile flickered around her lips. I knew Ida would insist I go. She’d been encouraging me to date for months. She wasn’t subtle but she thought she was. She imagined a service in that tiny Chapel in Algor. She hugs me. A real hug with her head pressed against my chest and I hug her back. She tells me that I can take my time, she’ll wait for me back at the apartment. Adding that if I decide to stay over that’s fine too, then she blushes a little.

We part at the stop for the air bus, Ida gets on tiptoe to kiss me on the cheek. People look, then avert their eyes.

Off the bus in Old Tech, I follow Dog, the streets are quiet, and we walk quickly to the west of the Gig & Byte to Pixel Place where the bins are overflowing. Dog bounds up the steps of an old building where the door is ajar.

It's cold and musty inside, leaves and debris cover the floor of the foyer, there's rubbish on the stairs and something dark and sticky is dripping from the landing above. When I reach the second floor its like a whirlwind has been let loose inside the hallway. Four or five apartment doors are busted and there's bits of furniture and food thrown around. The place is deserted. I follow Dog into an apartment where the door is missing altogether. The place is a mess but seems empty. Dog walks straight into the bathroom and I hesitate, its silent, inside there's a large cupboard and I open the door. Looking up at me is Kara and there's a young boy curled up.

“What the hell's been going on?”