

I Should Say No

by Juliet Robinson

A whole day to myself. No work, no children, no husband. It's like putting on another skin, a different coat, new shoes. A lightheaded sense of possibility. I know exactly what I shall do. First, I am heading to the new Sicilian bakery for breakfast, then it's me and a new book in a café. Nothing else until school pickup.

The bakery queue is insane. I had heard it was good, but I wasn't expecting this. I join, but half-heartedly. Fifteen minutes later and I'm not even close to the door. I sigh in frustration; this was not how my day was meant to start.

The man in front of me turns, he's tall, with auburn hair and light hazel eyes. Younger than me, but not by much. Without my children and grump of a husband, I feel younger. And a glance at my reflection in the window reveals I look it. I 'am just lighter. He smiles and there is an instant spark.

'It's worth it,' he assures me.

'My friend hasn't stopped raving about the pistachio cannoli bites.'

He groans and beats a hand dramatically on his heart, 'To die for.'

We laugh, and a blush paints my cheeks, the way he looks at me quickens my pulse. I haven't been seen like this for years.

Thirty minutes later and we're still talking. He's in town for an interview, we both love reading and he also hopes to see the Donald Smith exhibit. Guiltily I realise I've been enjoying our conversation a little too much. I also haven't mentioned my family once. A flighty sense of panic surges through me. I need to leave.

I make my excuses; bow out of the queue and glance regretfully back at my companion. He watches me with a puzzled look on his face. Hurrying over the road I enter a bookshop and lose myself amongst the shelves.

When I leave the shop, it is with a lightened purse. Books bought for myself and my children, but nothing for my husband. I looked, but a childish sense of resentment stirred in me, so he gets nothing.

As I cross the street someone calls my name, it's my friend from the queue. He jogs over and with a shy smile presents a paper bag, my fingers brush his as I take it. For a second we pause and I glance up at him. His hair is falling forward and I want to brush it from his eyes. Instead, I open the bag and laugh when I see two pistachio cannoli bites.

'Why don't we grab a coffee and a bench?' He eyes my bulging book bag. 'You can tell me about the books you bought.'

My chest tightens. I should say no.

We find a bench in a park near a coffee vendor. One coffee becomes three and the pistachio cannoli bites are devoured. Time passes slowly, as if it wishes to linger in this stolen life. I know I shouldn't be doing this. Occasionally, my children's names rise to my lips, but I don't speak them, I leave that part of me on a shelf. My husband doesn't even stir from the dust of my everyday life. At first it feels odd to omit these parts of me. I don't pretend anything else; I just don't mention my marriage or my children. Most surprisingly without these pieces I am still a whole person.

Time gets away from me and when my phone alarm blares, reminding me of the school run, something inside me bursts. I spring to my feet, hurrying my excuses and a goodbye that hangs heavily. He stands, confused by my sudden rush and asks for my number, but I am already hurrying away. I pretend not to hear him as I cut across the grass. Then I stop.

This isn't how I want this to end.

I turn and hurry back to him. He looks confused, but his bewilderment isn't a patch on my tangled emotions. Before anything can be said or done, I kiss him. For a moment he doesn't respond, but then he pulls me into his arms and then this kiss is all that exists.

Finally with regret I pull away, and as I do a buried truth stirs and dares to take shape.