

Learning to Fly by Jacqueline Ward

You know that feeling you get in your stomach when you don't really want to do something, but you have to? Well, I've got it now. My cap's hanging on the hook behind the front door and my coat's slung across the back of the chair ready. Annie would have gone bloody mad. Well, not mad, because she never raised her voice.

'Tom.'

It was the tone of her, I realise now. The tiny movements of her eyes and mouth that I had become used to over the years. You don't live with someone for thirty-five years and not see them. But I'll be honest with you, it's wasn't till she'd gone that I knew that.

The past six weeks I've sat here like a lemon, reaching for my coat and then turning away. I've sat here in silence, the tick of the clock the only thing telling me it's all real. No kettle boiling – not unless I made it. No smell of cooking or that fabric conditioner she liked.

Course, I got angry. It's the stages of grief, or so that bloody nosy woman from the doctors said.

'Come on, Tom. Come out. We'll look after you.'

I know I glared at her because only Annie called me Tom. It was Tommy to everyone else. But I took the leaflet and later that week I felt the anger well up. She'd left me and I didn't know where she'd gone. The la-de-da women at the vicarage talked about heaven and religion but Annie had no truck with all that. Then it struck me. She definitely didn't know where I was half the time. Oh yes, I've had my moments, I can tell you. But she didn't mind.

Everyone has their little somethings, don't they? Things that are theirs. What they do. Mine were bowls and sailing. Me and the lads, well I call them lads because we all were when we used to go in the Grey Mare for a pint, we clubbed together and bought a boat. I'd be away most weekends painting and fixing, then sailing. Two afternoons a week down the bowling green, then the pub afterwards. She never batted an eyelid.

But I did. She spent years bringing up our Peter, then he buggered off to Australia. That was the only time I saw her cry in public at the airport that day. And I didn't hold her. That's the rock in the pit of my stomach now, that weight of what I didn't do when I had the chance.

Then that time when she got her coat on one Tuesday after tea.

'Where you going?'

I tried to make it sound nice, but my heart was worried.

'Community centre. I'll be going there Tuesday nights now.'

I hadn't even looked at her.

'Doing what? And what if I want to play bowls? Eh?'

I sounded peevish, like a child, but I was scared. Scared of sharing her. Scared of being without her. She did it then. That look. It was just a tiny movement. Her lips hard and a slight nod. She'd fastened her coat and gone. It was like time stood still when she wasn't there. Empty.

I look around now. I didn't know what empty meant then. The silence is the worst. It does things to your mind. I keep the TV on most of the time, but as soon as it's off I'm thinking about those days down Miller Meadow and the walks we went on.

I'm supposed to be going out now. Well, every day this week. I've had it all planned. Out of the door. Aye, Annie, I'll close the gate.

*'To stop it banging, Tom.'*

Then I'll walk along King's Road; I'll run my hand over the frog in the wall with a date from the last century and still smile at things that happened before our time. Just like we did for years.

I was wrong to try to stop her doing things. Selfish. She was torn sometimes, I could see it in her eyes. I wonder now how many times she swore at me under her breath. How many times she almost cut the invisible cord that tethered us together, the one that meant we only really saw each other and everyone else was blurred.

She told me once she'd like to go to America. I heard her, but I ignored it because travelling wasn't my thing. I know now though. I know she'd given everything up for me. She'd look around and the world would come into focus, only to be blurred out again by my refusal to let her go.

And in the end I had no choice.

The one thing she didn't let me blur out is the community centre. She went more and more. When I was out bowling I'd see her walking down the road and running her hand over the frog in the wall and smiling a little. I'd pretend I hadn't seen her, but she knew I had. My heart would beat nearly out of my chest even then because she was still beautiful. *She's mine*. That's what I'd be thinking. *She belongs to me*.

She'd be home before me – I always made sure of that. She'd have my tea on and she'd have baked something and be excited to show me a picture she'd been working on or a drawing. She was good. Very good. But I never told her. I never bloody told her.

I don't know how she managed to do it all, but she did. I never went a day without food. Not like now, because that big weight in my stomach and my empty heart won't let me eat. Peter and his wife came over and before they left they bought me some ready meals. Meals for one. I could see her in him, our Peter. Around the mouth, the same quiet look. Head tilted. Oh yes, she was there alright.

It's no use. I know she's gone but I need to find her again. She's here. In our house, but that's only part of her. I know there's another part of her somewhere out there, somewhere she went to fill her heart up and do the things she loved. If she were here now, I know what she'd say.

*'Get them flying lessons, Tom. Go on, before it's too late.'*

It is too late. But she didn't just mean the flying lessons I'd been harping on about for years. I only know now, sitting here, that what she really meant. She had a big enough heart to want me to be happy. Every time I was down in the dumps or a bit nasty she'd shake her head very slightly and say it. *Get them flying lessons*.

I'm clinging onto it now. Onto my lifeline, the only thing I let her do and the one place I know I will find the rest of her. Bunched up in a tight ball of love and joy when it could have been spread out across the world. It's hard to pull myself out of this mire of regret and sadness and fill my heart up

again, but it's what she would want. She'd want me to go out and be with people. To belong, not like I thought she did to me, like a bloody object I was scared of losing.

No. That feeling where you can just walk in and sit down and not say anything and it's still all right. Where you don't need over-dramatic shows of affection and a minutely altered expression tells the story.

I know I can't have that. Not with her. But I can have second best and fill my heart up with the people she loved.

I put my coat on and fasten the zip, up to my chin to keep my feelings from spilling out onto the street. And my cap. I take the leaflet off the side. Art class at the community centre. The weight in my stomach suddenly feels lighter. It's not flying lessons but it's a start.

THE END