

What Friends Are For by Peter Davies

6:59 turned into 7:00. The radio alarm clock switched itself on to let the newsreader into the bedroom. Lisa sat up in bed and looked down at Steven.

“I think we’d better call it a day, don’t you?”

Nothing seemed different about this morning: no arguments the night before, no particular strain. They’d been to a drinks party at Mike and Fiona’s on the Gloucester Road, had dinner with half a dozen others at La Fringale in Hollywood Road and come home at about midnight. They had been doing the happy couple act for some time. Often, on the way home, they *had* argued, but they hadn’t last night. When they had a row, it was pretty much always about the same thing: Lisa thought Steven was not making enough money, not forcing his career forward the way all her property developer friends were. Steven, who hated confrontation, could never think of an answer that would shut Lisa up.

He was badly paid; she was right about that. But he was in charge of his little editorial department, even though it wasn’t going anywhere very fast. Although he’d qualified as a lawyer, he’d fallen into publishing, rather than face up to the hard grind in ‘the profession’. It was laziness really that led him to a small company, running a modest list of books on shipping and international trade law, and turning out the odd new title on charterparties, bills of lading and documentary credits. Gripping stuff. It was pretty much nine to five, they gave him a small car and he had business cards with the grand job title of “Publisher, Law Books Division” on them.

“Oh, Lisa, I don’t know. I hate the idea that we’ve failed. I really want it to work...”

“Yes, I know you do, but let’s be honest, we’re not going anywhere are we?”

It was presumably a sign of how inevitable the split up was, that there weren’t any recriminations or arguments. They went through the “I’m really sorry it didn’t work out” stuff pretty quickly, and then they both set about the morning routine. Steven showered first while Lisa organised her muesli. Then Steven went down and made himself a piece of toast while Lisa showered and put her make-up on. As he ate his toast, Steven guiltily

realised that he was thinking more about where he was going to live than about the breakdown of the relationship itself. Lisa, with help from her mum, had stumped up about 70% of the deposit on the house. She clumped down stairs with a large cardboard box and a battered leather briefcase. She had got there before him on the accommodation question.

“Don’t worry about moving out. I’m going to stay with Marjorie for a while.”

“Are you sure? It’s mainly your place after all. I’ll need my money out once we’ve sold up, but ...”

“No really, you stay – I need a change of scene. I’m going to take a few things around to Marjorie’s on my way to work”.

Although the parting of the ways had been sprung upon him that morning, it came as no surprise to Steven that Lisa had made all her arrangements in advance. She was *organised*. She loaded her case and the cardboard box into her car and set off. Steven watched her disappear down Clanricard Gardens and then headed for the tube.

He bought his Guardian at the station and read it without taking any of it in, until he reached Kingsway. Once in the building, and to avoid conversation, he rushed past Carol his receptionist/secretary and slumped at his desk. Among other things, and frankly quite near the front of his mind, he felt a sense of release from Lisa's endless whining, but he still hated feeling like he’d failed. Would he ever find anyone who just liked him, without going on about his weak points? Being as objective as possible he felt that these were few in number and pretty minor for the most part. But women had no sense of proportion about things like this - all bad points, however minor, were equally undesirable and deserved to be harped on and hounded relentlessly out of existence. The only women who hadn’t behaved like this had gone hopelessly far the other way and been in love with him, to a degree that made Steven wonder if they were altogether balanced, mentally. There had been two of these and it had been worse than being nagged, if anything. He could never be the godlike being they thought he was, so he ended up disappointing them more than the ones who wanted to improve him. Worse still, he’d been unattached both times, but the two women concerned had both been married, well one married and one on the brink of, and both had thrown themselves at *him*. He would never make the first move on a married woman if his life depended on it. The strain and effort of carrying on an “affair” in the strict sense of the word struck him as painfully exhausting. And so it had turned out, even when it was the woman in each case who needed to do the deceiving, rather than Steven. He’d started going out with Lisa on the

rebound from the last of these adventures, finding the lower emotional temperature a relief.

Lower emotional temperature was right. Lisa was not the emotional type: she was handsome rather than beautiful, strong willed and businesslike. She had hesitated to take up with Steven at first, which hadn't unduly bothered him. He liked Lisa's company, and if they weren't going beyond trips to the pub and holding hands in the cinema, well that was still time well spent. Lisa had a research job at Great Ormond Street with Marjorie, who had been at university with Steven and who had introduced them at a fund-raising 'do' at the hospital. Steven was very taken with her striking smile, and a no-nonsense attitude that owed something to having been brought up in Australia. Lisa finally came round a bit and they started going out seriously. There was money in her family so that, in spite of her rubbish salary as a researcher, she had a black MG and a circle of posh friends. Most of these seemed to be in the property business and were making, as the saying went at the time, Serious Money. As he slowly infiltrated Lisa's life, she reluctantly decided she could be seen in public with him and they spent the next four years doing the rounds of drinks parties, dinners and weddings. They were invited to so many weddings, Steven bought a morning suit to avoid serial rentals from Moss Bros and it had paid for itself in a single summer. Well that was over, along with Lisa's unflattering comparisons with the Porsche-driving go-getters they saw so much of. As her MG sped off down the road he couldn't see very far into his future, but the near term did at least offer the prospect of a bit of peace and quiet.

He gazed out of his office window into the dull December morning. In the manner of someone who prods a bruise to see if it hurts, he did a bit of gentle emotional stocktaking. He was sorry about Lisa but it was her decision to go, and it was almost certainly for the best. He wouldn't be sorry to withdraw from the circles they had moved in together, though he would make an effort to stay in touch with the one or two individuals he liked. He wasn't homeless, though he'd have to sort something out, probably soon after the New Year. His share of the house could just about serve as a deposit on a one-bedroom flat in the same neighbourhood. He looked out over Kingsway and found he was less upset for having gone through this exercise.

He ventured a little further and started to consider some practicalities. Christmas loomed. He and Lisa had spent it each year with their respective families and Steven had already arranged to go back up north the day after his office party tomorrow night. He'd tell his folks at some point, but they didn't keep close tags on his love life so that wouldn't be a

big deal. And then there was the office party. He dreaded it but it wasn't something he could really miss. Lisa didn't like his staff much with and only rarely showed her face at the office, so nobody would ask after her or require Steven to reveal the break-up. He wasn't wild about the people he worked with either, but at the wage levels the company allowed him to offer, he had little choice.

He sat, listening to Carol, at her desk outside his office, making last minute arrangements with the wine bar where the office party was to take place.

“Are you sure there'll be vegetarian options on the buffet, Franco? And we can order extra drink if it runs out? Well how much do you generally allow per person? ...Oh no, I don't think that'll do at all. ...well at least double that I'd have thought...No, I think I said about thirty people altogether – yes I'm sure I said thirty when I booked. Well is that going to be a....no, forget it. If you've catered for sixty we'll invite a couple more hangers-on or just make pigs of ourselves....Don't be bloody cheeky Franco, I'm not planning on getting pissed,...No! ...and I'm keeping well out of your reach for starters..”

There wasn't much work getting done. Carol's voice floated down the badly-lit corridor, to join up with the noise of the editors and marketing people at the far end making personal phone calls and getting their own Christmases organised. Steven idly turned the job pages of the Guardian on his desk. He browsed the theatre listings and glanced at the cheap flights and holiday offers on the travel pages. Out of the mass of blurred print, one of the ads seemed to stand out from the others. Why was that? The name of the travel company looked familiar. Where from? He read the ad and remembered Mike and Fiona mentioning it last night at the restaurant. They were offering 4 nights in Venice over the New Year, plus flight from Gatwick for £550. Mike and Fiona were going, another couple they knew were thinking about it, and they were meeting up with some friends of Fiona's parents to celebrate the New Year.

Steven stared at the ad and felt weary. It was all very well for Mike and Fiona: they were both freelance commercial artists and could take off whenever they liked, *and* set off a good of the cost against tax just to add insult to injury. Then it dawned on him that whatever ties or commitments he thought he had, weren't there. When it came to holidays, and indeed most things, Steven hadn't made a decision on his own for years. They had decided everything together. More accurately, Lisa proposed things (though not in a bossy way, let's be fair) and Steven had gone along with them. Freed suddenly from any sense of others, apart from his feckless

staff, relying on him for something, he felt odd. He felt like he'd lived for a long time under a dreary sense of obligation to others. His mother expected him home regularly, his boss expected *results*, his staff expected more money and a decent Christmas party. Lisa expected...well Lisa expected sod all now of course. He was so used to feeling guilty about her and his failure to rise to her expectations, that he barely recognised the absence of the guilt, even though Lisa herself had removed it by driving off down Clanricard Gardens in her MG. It was lifted from his shoulders like a heavy overcoat on a warm day.

Venice. Steven had already told everyone he wasn't planning to be back in the office until after New Year, so why not? The bit between Christmas and New Year was grim any way. After his Boxing Day lunch at his brother's, there was just the round of drinking sessions with old friends who'd stayed close to home. He'd made arrangements to fill in the time, but nothing he couldn't get out of. If he thought about it for too long he'd find reasons why he couldn't go, so he quickly dialled the number in the ad and got out his credit card.

Having done the deed, he phoned Mike. Just as the phone was picked up, Steven realised that he hadn't told anyone about Lisa, and that he would have to do so now, to account for the impulse booking for Venice.

"Mike Potter"

"Mike, it's Steven"

"Hey there! Are you alright after last night?"

"Oh yes. It was a bit late, but it's nearly Christmas so what the hell"

"I've only just got up actually – Fi had to go to a client's, but I got a lie in thank God."

"Er, I've got a bit of bad news I'm afraid – about Lisa and me. We're splitting up". Steven's mouth had gone dry as he'd said it, and he may have sounded more cut up than he actually was. It barely mattered, as Mike's tone didn't alter in the smallest degree.

"Oh sorry about that old boy – not a huge surprise though really is it?"

"Well not to Lisa – she was business-like about it. It all seemed sudden to me this morning, but I suppose I have to say I could see it coming"

"Well everyone could I think. We weren't all taking bets, but you get the picture"

"I know you've known Lisa a lot longer than me, but I hope..."

"Look, you know what you should do? Take Julia out!"

"Good grief, I'm still getting used to the idea of not er....y'know. Anyway Julia wouldn't be interested. And even if she were it would look a bit frantic wouldn't it? Lurching from one woman to another without pausing for breath"

"You're wrong about her not being interested in you, by the way. She's always been a fan of yours. She told me you were the only person who talked to her when Nick took her to her first drinks party with all the property crowd."

"Well, I doubt that – she was young and a bit intimidated, that's all."

"Well she's moved on a bit since then. She told Nick where to get off in no uncertain terms"

"I think Nick's the only person less capable than me with women"

"He thinks they're after his money, so he feels he has to act like a bastard to test them".

"Well, maybe I'll call Julia in the New Year. Actually it was New Year I was calling about really."

Mike again beat him to it,

"Come to Venice!"

"Well, I'm ahead of you this time – I've just booked. I couldn't get the same hotel as you lot, but I'm not far off according to the travel agent. I hope you don't mind, I won't cling to you and Fi all the time."

After swopping information about flights and so on, the conversation ended with Mike reading out Julia's work phone number. Steven stared at it for a long time. He'd already made one impulsive call and he wasn't the impulsive type. He decided he'd see if she was free for lunch; not much chance at such short notice, he supposed. On a corner of the Guardian he

jotted down alternatives in descending order: lunch today, dinner tonight, drink after work tonight, lunch tomorrow, ending with a lame proposal to meet up some time in the New Year after all the partying was over. His phone rang.

“Steven, hi it’s Julia! Am I disturbing you?”

Steven felt his grip on things evaporating further,

“Er... no I was just...”

“I just heard about you and Lisa – d’you want to have lunch?”

He stared straight ahead at the bookcases opposite his desk, with his mouth hanging half open.

“Well, ahmm...sure! How did you find out by the way? Was it Mike?”

“No. I called Fiona this morning and she told me – Lisa was meeting *her* for lunch and she broke the news. I’m sorry. Are you devastated?”

Julia had a gift for considering everything that came her way in the same matter-of-fact tones. She came from a “good” family, but there was very little of Sloane Square about her. She worked in a photograph library and in Mike’s phrase, she was “just what he needed right now” – someone who was good company, not too demanding and, according to Mike, (who sounded like he knew whereof he spoke), “able to do things in bed you’ve only read about in books”. Steven tried to force this thought from his mind and cleared his throat rapidly.

“No. I’m not devastated – I should be I suppose, but maybe it’s for the best” He winced as he caught himself in full cliché. “Actually, I’d love to have lunch if you’re free – where’s convenient?”

“D’you know Les Amis du Vin” in Covent Garden?”

“Intimately. Shall I book?”

“No, I’ll do it – I’m inviting you after all. Twelve thirty?”

Steven put the phone down and looked bemusedly across at his bookshelves. He’d woken up that morning alongside his girlfriend of four years and by lunchtime he was a free agent, booked for Venice and

contemplating lunch - well rather more than lunch really - with a beautiful blond.

Just beyond his office door Carol shrieked.

“Franco you dirty sod! I’m hanging up. No, now, I’m hanging up!”

He took a draft contract out of his in-tray and, pushing his Guardian to one side, took out his pen. There was work to do. He’d invite Julia to his office party. If things went well he’d raise the possibility of Venice.

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