

**Dr Adele Parks' short
story competition
in association with
Teesside University**

The winning tales . . .

Inspiring success



Teesside
University



I think where you begin is important but where you end up is fascinating! I wanted to work with Teesside University, a university that is dynamic, energetic and innovative with the mantra of inspiring success because, I believe that the students studying there are a talented, dedicated bunch and their work ought to be showcased.

Whilst I didn't study at Teesside University I am a Teesside girl; Teesside was my beginning. Now, I'm lucky enough to be a bestselling author, translated into over 20 different languages. Being in this position I have the chance to create opportunities for other people and this project is all about opportunities and openings. I wanted Teesside University students and staff to have the opportunity to see their work in print; I wanted my fans to have the opportunity of discovering new writers just embarking on their careers.

University life is all about beginnings, that is why I thought writing the beginning of a short story and asking the students and staff at Teesside University to finish it off would be such a fun idea. I think it's extremely interesting to see how the same beginning can veer off into so many different directions. This creative exercise shows that there are no limits, simply opportunities and directions for us all!

I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I did!

**Best thoughts,
Adele**

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In 2009 Teesside University awarded Adele an honorary Doctor of Letters for her outstanding contribution to literature.

The competition

In April 2011 Adele launched an exclusive short story competition for students and staff. She wrote the beginning of a short story and set the challenge of completing it. The five finalists' stories feature in this booklet. The overall winner, Victoria Brown also received the enviable prize of one-to-one mentoring time with Adele.

About Teesside University

Teesside University is a truly inspiring university. We're growing and inspiring others to do the same. We've achieved eight decades of innovation in education – creating a vibrant learning environment which inspires people to achieve their best. With 28,000 students studying diplomas, first degrees and postgraduate qualifications – and overseas students from over 125 different countries – Teesside is a success story regionally, nationally and internationally.

www.tees.ac.uk



Dr Adele Parks' short story competition

It's got to be perfect by Adele Parks

Jeff thought, long and hard, about the perfect place to propose to Jenni. He wanted perfection as defined by big-budget, Hollywood Rom-coms; nothing less than endless tickertape celebrations and soft focus moments. Jenni with her fabulous sense of humour, honesty, sexiness deserved that much.

Jeff's father had not shared Jeff's view. He'd proposed to Jeff's mother over a bag of fish and chips, as they'd huddled close and looked out at the grey English Channel. Apparently, his father's line of reasoning was that if they married, they could have sex somewhere more comfortable than the back of Jeff's Grandad's van. If Jeff's mother thought the wording of the proposal left something to be desired, she must at least have admired his honesty. She'd replied, 'Okay.'

Jeff would've paid cash not to be privy to this information but his father loved to relay the story and diligently repeated it every wedding anniversary. 'Smelt of salt and vinegar, when I kissed her,' he'd say with a laugh. There had been thirty-eight anniversaries so far.

Jeff and Jenni had lived together for two years now and they could have (or not have) comfortable sex whenever they wanted. But this seemed to increase, not diminish, the expectation that the proposal had to be something splendid and exceptional.


Jeff bought a square-cut diamond solitaire, set on a platinum band. It was hideously expensive but the jeweller told him to suck it up and pointed out that now he was proposing he could expect his credit card to be bashed on a regular basis because weddings, especially perfect ones, cost. The sobering thought dramatically altered Jeff's fantasy about where to propose. The beaches of Barbados, Maldives and Thailand were all dismissed, as was Venice (smelly), the top of the Eiffel Tower (crowded) and Rome (frantic). He didn't want to do it in a restaurant or anywhere public, come to that. It had to be somewhere personal, unpredictable and well, perfect.

After lengthy agonising he decided . . .

The winning ending

Victoria Brown

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‘I liked the humour, tension, character development. It’s a clean script, definitely the strongest. Congratulations Victoria!’

Adele Parks

... “Camping?” Jenni’s tone was hesitant, he could tell he had distracted her even though he couldn’t see her.

Jeff had thought about telling her over dinner that evening but he couldn’t lie to her face, she had this thing where she could tell what he was thinking through his eyes. His mother had the same psychic ability. So the phone call had seemed the better option, he’d even thought about texting her, but he knew that would lead to an inquisitive phone call.

“Yeah, I read an article about it the other day, it’s good for relationships and building stamina, going back to basics and appreciating our life as it is today” his lies were convincing.

“Right,” there was a slight pause “Are we okay?”

“Yeah, I’m only suggesting camping.”

“I feel like you’re suggesting counseling. You hate the outdoors, you’ve always said it’s like a form of torture, why would anyone want to lie in the outdoor air and freeze their bollocks off, they were your words.”

“They may have been.” He wished he’d thought about this more, why did women remember every insignificant part of every conversation. “But after reading this, I thought it might be fun.”

“Are you bored with us?” she asked confused.


“No, not at all,” she must have noted a slight panic in his voice.

“Okay then, can we talk about it when I come home?”

“Of course,” he lied again, the reason he had called her was so she couldn’t see the lies in his eyes. She was bound to see through his deceit, good deceit by all means, but still not a good start to their ‘engaged life’.

He wanted her to pack clothes for the outdoors, rather than a luxurious hotel, as the chocolate room at Alton Towers had remained an option, he still wanted something much more intimate. Walks around Lake Windermere seemed much more appealing than rollercoaster rides to the heavens and back.

Jeff had done his research, searching high and low for the perfect place. He’d found it, a deluxe log cabin that boasted a cosy log fire, old authentic wooden beams with a luxurious outside spa



bath that was surrounded by crisp greenery and natural woodland. He would make sure the champagne was chilled and strawberries were served with chocolate melted dip. It was perfect, unpredictable and it would be just the two of them.

Luckily Jenni didn't quiz him too much, as he munched away on the chewy casserole, pretending to watch the news as she asked a few more questions about the stability of their future together. Jeff could have sworn she had sussed it, especially when she asked 'to see the article'. He nearly choked on a piece of beef that was actually not that big, he lied again about it 'going down the wrong way' and this was followed with another lie about it being in the office and continued to lie about the fact that Matt had taken it home to show his wife. Jenni seemed to accept this was concrete evidence that it must be true, if someone else was using this fictional article to encourage more camping trips for relationship building, it must be true.

After a month's worth of meticulous preparation, it wasn't her birthday or any kind of exclusive date, again a purposed arranged part of Jeff's plan, he thought she would have guessed if he'd arranged the trip on their 'first date anniversary', whereas at the moment Jenni seemed quite worried that their relationship was falling apart and believed he was taking her on some form of team-building/ relationship exercise to ignite the spark.

The journey was hot, the open windows helped the breeze ease through the car. They travelled in comfortable silence, music breaking their thoughts, this suited Jeff as he was very nervous. He couldn't wait to get this over with but he was starting to worry she'd say no. She'd seemed a bit distant since the mention of their camping trip, what if he'd unintentionally persuaded her to think more attentively to their relationship and it was her who was having second thoughts about them. He could feel the beads of sweat start to break as his stomach churned at the thought. What had he done? This was such a stupid plan, he should have stuck to fish and chips like his father. Whitby Pier seemed so desirable at this moment in time.

He placed his hand on her leg as a reassurance to himself they were ok, Jenni smiled lazily at him, relaxed and peaceful as the sun gleamed from her dark shaded glasses.

A couple of hours later, they arrived into the middle of nowhere. Jeff drove into the forested area, taking directions to the campsite. He could see the lodges behind some neatly kept trees that looked like they were protecting a precious entity. They looked idealistic in the autumn coloured setting, the background scenery picture perfect with the lake tranquil shimmering against the rays that flashed over the delicate ripples. Jenni made a comment about the lodges, how much nicer it would have been to have stayed there, Jeff had pretended to be hurt by her comments, she rephrased disappointment overlaying her eyes as she said, "but this will be an experience."

It took Jeff all of fifteen minutes to put the two man tent up, a boy scout in his day, "it's like riding a bike," he said as Jenni commented on his manual handling skills, then finished with "Is that it?"


"It'll be cosy," amused at his efforts.

"Jeff, I'll never get my backside in there, let alone my clothes," heart sinking, this was such a bad idea, she should have listened to her instincts.

"Well, we'll have to leave the cases in the car, obviously they won't fit in there, anyway. I'm going to pop to the chippie to get us some food, you stay here."

"What?" Jenni exclaimed, "Can't I come?"

"No you'll have to man the tent." He was in the car before she had chance to argue.



So, next step, round the corner out of eyeshot, he picked up the keys for the lodge. It was spectacular, a rug had been laid in front of the fire, which Jeff spent ten minutes lighting. The smell of fresh flowers enveloped the air. It was perfect and ready for her arrival.

Jeff was shaking with nerves by the time he got back to Jenni, who was sat outside the tent, picking at strands of fresh grass.

“Couldn’t find the chippie, so jump in we’ll go out.” Reluctantly, Jenni pulled herself from the ground, not saying a word, mainly because she would have sworn at him.

The short journey, made her look at him inquisitively as he pulled outside the cabin.

“Okay, let’s eat here,” he said jumping out the car, Jenni followed confused.

Jeff was ahead of her, as he used the keys to open the door, Jenni followed bewildered and speechless. As she entered, the warmth of the flames hit her, the snug cosy ambience embraced them both.

“Surprise,” he said humbly. Jenni was stunned, she scanned the beautiful cottage, unaware her jaw had physically dropped.

“Why? When? What’s this for? When did you organise this?” She kissed him.

“Because I love you.”

They talked and laughed how he had really fooled her and how worried she’d been about creepy crawlies and lying on rough bumpy grounds. Jeff poured them a glass of chilled champagne and they snuggled on the rug in front of the fire. His heart pounded as he lay with her, watching her delicate soft skin, her nostrils flaring minutely. He thought this sexy, the way she licked her lips after sipping her champagne, the way she flickered her eyes at him naturally. She was perfect.

“Jenni?” she turned to face him relaxed, her eyes deep blue, her fresh skin youthful and spritely, he pulled the box from his pocket, as a look of panic and shock fell upon Jenni’s face. She reached for a newspaper that was amongst the pile that sat beside the fire, striking him hard across the head, he was bewildered as she hit him again.

“What the?” he muttered trying to get away from her. “You just had to say no.”

“Spider!” she shivered, as the dead crumpled black ball fell in front of him, she then noticed the box in his hand and drew her hands to her mouth. “Oh my God.”

Relieved that the attack hadn’t been on him personally, his hand was shaking as he held the box out “Will you?” he couldn’t say anything more, his voice hoarse and dry.

“Oh God, yes,” she screamed excitedly, jumping on her knees, pushing her body into his and hugging him tight, “yes, yes, yes.”

Jeff placed the diamond solitaire onto her soft elegant fingers and he knew it had all been worth it, it was just perfect.

Runner-up

Martin Leyland

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. . . it had been a long time since he had been to Rosewell park. It was there that he had created his first real picture. Subsequently, his art had taken a very different direction and inside of himself, he was rather ashamed of that first effort. A simple watercolour of the gardens with the emphasis on the old stone motif on the fountain that read Amor Sempiternum - Love Forever.

Yes, that was the place. She wouldn't think of it and wouldn't know it. An idea occurred to him. As they walked up the long avenue of lime trees towards the fountain area, he would carry a ghetto blaster pumping out the love theme from Tristan and Isolde. Perfect. He knew the exact timing of the Piece – properly done, they would arrive at the arbour, exactly as the music reached its crescendo and then he could propose, on that first bench where he'd drawn the picture.

When he suggested having the day in the park Jenni gave him an odd look. After all she wasn't stupid.

"What on earth for?" she asked, "I didn't think there was anything there."

"It's a surprise," he smiled, "A special journey to a special place."

She agreed but couldn't resist pumping him for the rest of the week, dropping hints about dresses and once frightening him, by referring to the sound of little feet.

They met at the main railway station in very good time for the train and managed to get really good window seats and a table. About five minutes before the off, the train public address system announced that the train had developed a mechanical fault. They were directed to Platform 4 and the 2pm train.

"Just our luck," groaned Jeff.

This time however, they didn't get a perfect seat. In fact, they didn't get a seat at all. About five minutes before the off the train announcer explained the train lacked a driver and directed them back to Platform 5, this time for the 2.30pm train.


Jenni and Jeff looked at each other in disbelief. She gave him a sympathetic look.

"Well, as long as we get there," she said, "and anyway the path of true love seldom runs smooth or whatever it is."

"At this rate," said Jeff, "we'll get there so late, we'll have to come back at once or stay overnight."

Jenni chuckled. "That would be fun!" she laughed, "Then we can tell all of our friends that we have had a dirty weekend!"

He gave a snort of laughter. "Yes I can just see Bea at work loving that!"



There was no question of a seat this time. Everyone was jammed together and could hardly move. Jenni discovered that this gave her time and opportunity to appreciate Jeff's beautiful neck and the way it cleanly shaded into his upper back and chest. Mmm, those shoulders looked good.

Somewhere outside Thirsk, they came to a crashing halt. There was a long wait. Then the train started again without explanation. Jeff pointed out that the emergency stop buttons were about shoulder height so with everyone crammed in together, it wouldn't be hard for someone to fall on the button by mistake. Jenni thought this was hilarious and proceeded to speculate on all kinds of spurious activity on a train, that might result in the alarm being pushed. They fell about, constrictions notwithstanding, in fits of laughter, while the rest of the passengers scowled and obviously felt, that in the circumstances, no one should be enjoying themselves.

Finally, they arrived at the city. Jeff revealed that the next part of their special journey would be by horse drawn open top carriage. After a fruitless search, Jeff asked the nearby newspaper vendor where he could find them. The man regarded him laconically.

"They stopped those," he said dismally, "they were causing traffic problems and they made no money anyway. You can get a bus from over there," he added helpfully, if unromantically.

Eventually, Jeff hailed a black cab and sat rather disconsolately in the back of it.

"It was supposed to be a bit better than this," he said, "the open top carriages would have added a bit of class."

She gave him a wicked look. "And the ghetto blaster that you're carrying?" she demanded. "Exactly how classy is that?"

He looked guilty for a moment, unable to determine whether she was serious or not, then the corner of her mouth twitching, gave the game away and they both grinned at each other.

He arrived at the park and he quickly found the gates he'd gone through those years ago. On entering however, he found the avenue of lime trees had gone. For a moment he was disconcerted, disoriented. They walked up the new gravel track noting the large groups of children with anxious and stressed adults in charge. A poster proclaimed that it was FAMILY FUN DAY, which gave Jeff pause for thought but then he considered that if everyone was having fun on the open area, the fountain garden was likely to be deserted, which would be perfect.

However as they pursued a side path, it abruptly ended in a wooden fence. The painted sign explained that the garden area was temporarily unavailable. It was dated to the February of the previous year and the letters were peeling.

At first, Jeff was crestfallen but then angry. No one was going to spoil his perfect moment. He looked at Jenni and then asked, "Are you game for a bit of naughtiness?"

Her eyebrows went up. "As in.....?" she questioned and he giggled, as he realised what he implied.

"I'm going to see if there's a way through the fence," he explained, "so we can get to where I want. No one will notice."

She nodded quickly and he began to explore. Sure enough he found a place where the fence had become worn and several panels were missing. He looked at her and then quickly ducked through the opening. She gamely followed, not even protesting, as some girls might, about climbing through the flowerbeds. On the other side he remembered to turn on Tristan and Isolde, which had slipped his mind. As the music blared, up he slipped an arm comfortably around Jenni's waist and smiled at her.

"Now you'll see," he declared. He brought her along the path and into the arbour and stopped dead. The fountain was not running and didn't look like it had run in several years. The basin was empty and stained and even had some plants growing through the bottom of it. The flowerbeds were ragged and the bench to one side was cracked and worn and desperate for a coat of paint. The only thing that remained unchanged was the old stone carving AMOR SEMPITERNUM, which could still be seen, set in the ground, beneath the crumbling basin.

It was this point that the cassette tape thoughtfully strangled itself in the inner mechanism of the ghetto blaster and came to a sudden halt. He looked at her.

"This was..... what I mean.... it wasn't.... I mean it was all different...." his voice trailed off and he made his way to the bench where he sat down unhappily.

"This is where I painted my first picture," he murmured mechanically, "the fountain playing; the birds and the flowers. No one was here and it was quite perfect. And the carving, AMOR SEMPITERNUM which means love forever."

He looked at her, the pain and disappointment evident in his eyes. "It was all supposed to be so perfect," he faltered, "and then the train and the carriage and the park; it's all gone wrong somehow."

She shook her head vigorously and threw her arms around him. "No it hasn't," she objected, "it's a lovely sunny day and we're here and this is brilliant! Is it really where you did your first picture? I wish I'd seen it!"

He grimaced. "It wasn't that great," he admitted, "but it caught someone's eye and that led to the work I do now, where I met you, so when I needed a special place, I thought of it and the carving."

She kissed him lightly, guessing where he was leading. "Well if it led to where we are now," she pointed out, "then it wasn't bad at all, it was great. And I love the inscription on the fountain that's just perfect!"

"Not quite," he said softly, looking into her beautiful brown eyes, "but maybe I can make it so."

And he drew from his pocket the ring.

Her eyes formed into large Os of excitement and wonder, love and tenderness. Without a word she slid the ring on her finger and then turned to him, their lips drawing closer together, an invisible orchestra in their heads, swelling to crescendo, to seal that perfect moment.

"Ere! What are you doing here?" interrupted an old male voice. The orchestra paused. They looked round to see a park worker, as gnarled and worn as the bench, regarding them with a mixture of outrage and contempt.

"This part isn't opened to the public!" he exclaimed, "and certainly not for heavy petting."

This sent Jenni off into fits of giggles while Jeff jumped to his feet attempting to let annoyance override his embarrassment at being caught.

"You'll have to move," ordered the ancient gardener. "We're not having that sort of thing go on here."

"What happened?" demanded Jeff, "what happened to the park?"

"Changed it," said the gardener unnecessarily. "Council got some money. Decided to make it more family friendly. Do away with all these nooks and corners which people were using for in...appropriate practices." He fixed them with an accusing look. This sent Jenni off again.

"This area's all been cleared away. There will be a school activities centre on this very spot."

"What about the old fountain?" protested Jeff, "they can't just dump it." The worker sneered at him.

"Broken up for hard core," he said heartlessly. "Now you have to move." He pointed in an authoritative way, back to the open area.

Jeff look down at Jenni helplessly. She looked up at him, ripe with mirth, and said simply, "I'm hungry."

A deep vein of laughter rose somewhere within him and the orchestra in his head reached its climax. Stuff Hollywood. His eyes twinkled with memory, as he looked at her.

"How about some fish and chips?" he suggested.

Finalist

Helen Victoria Anderson

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. . . to go for the thoughtful, meaningful approach.

“It’s the thought that counts,” Jenni would say when pressed for gift ideas in the run-up to Christmas and her birthday. After a few attempts to astound her with grand gestures, he realised that she honestly believed it. She wasn’t just claiming to be un-materialistic to catch her man.

For Jenni, it was all about attention to detail. Those little things which showed Jeff cared. That he had taken notice of her idiosyncrasies. Jenni’s take on romance required Jeff to develop keen powers of observation and unstinting focus – like a personnel specification for his dream job. She could be scarily independent but Jenni liked to feel special, just as much as the next girl. Outmanoeuvred by matchmaking aunties at his cousin’s wedding, Jeff had been shocked by the strength of his feelings for her, so soon after Naomi.

Naomi had left him a broke and broken man, with her high-maintenance ways and emotional blackmail.


“Don’t you think these rubies would bring out the colour of my eyes/ hair/ nose, Jeff?” she would plead. “A new phone would cheer me up, Jeff.”

He had tried to feed Naomi’s habit for Dead (Red/ Black?) Sea algae body wraps and 5-star city breaks but she was insatiable. The more Naomi got, the more she needed. He had been careering towards sexually-satisfied destitution when Naomi unceremoniously dumped him, spotting a shiny new Porsche Boxster in the office car park. Like his Peugeot Coupé, Jeff became last year’s model.

In the weeks that followed their ‘impromptu’ introduction, Jeff had scoured the web for tips on places to wine and dine a woman as discerning as Jenni. She had joked about the portions – the higher the cuisine, the more precariously balanced – and the poetic descriptions on the wine lists – “custardy top notes and a hint of freshly snuffled truffles”. In an attempt to express his respect, admiration and – yes, let’s be frank – his lust for her, he bestowed increasingly exotic treats on an increasingly irritated-looking Jenni. He had been sure she was going to get rid of him, too, when she told him, over aperitifs, that they needed to talk.

He could have cried with relief into his amuse-bouches when it dawned on him that she was not giving him the heave-ho. On the contrary, she loved him – she actually used the word “love” – for who he was, not the size of his wallet. Just as well – it was looking rather deflated. Jenni’s slender cream legs dangled from the barstool as she explained that whilst she was not averse to being treated to the odd glass of Shiraz or even a cheeky Screaming Orgasm, it was a question of striking the right balance between harmless spoiling and wanton waste.

Besides, they should be saving their money for more important things, like their future. Jeff didn’t even feel panicky. Serious stuff, indeed. They had moved in together with haste that some people declared indecent. Neither Jeff nor Jenni saw the point of hanging around. After a couple of days of polite familiarisation with each other’s domestic quirks – eased by the ‘christening’ of every room in their townhouse – their lives slotted effortlessly together.



Just lately, though, Jenni had not been herself. Work had been manic and home was a place to crash and recover, with quickies thrown in when the gaps in their sex-life became embarrassingly wide. He didn't think Jenni was going off him – she would have said something, wouldn't she? Unable to bear even a momentary thought of a Jenni-free existence, he assured himself she was just tired. Her Mum wasn't helping by constantly texting with updates on her Dad's gambling and complaints of being taken for granted. Jenni refused to take sides – they were grown-ups, for pity's sake. But Jeff saw the pain in her eyes – the lifelong ache of a tug-of-love child needing magic medicine.

Jeff wanted Jenni to know he would never take her for granted. And she was right; they were grown-ups, not toddlers in a Wendy house. Time to open a new chapter. To stop treading water. To stop mixing metaphors. Friends were getting less subtle by the day with their probing about nuptials but if he was going to do this thing, he would do it because he wanted to.

For once, he had no weekend paperwork. He was debating whether to Hoover (earning valuable sex bonus points) or watch telly (Top Gear or Star Trek?) when Jenni phoned to say that, thanks to an intranet malfunction, she had an unexpected Friday flier. Fate was up to something, he decided. A self-proclaimed agnostic, he wanted to believe.

The prospect of an uninterrupted weekend was tantalising. No well-meaning but uninvited guests and definitely no communications from Jenni's mother. He fired off a group text to announce that they were going away. Country cottage. Barely room for the two of them and notoriously dodgy reception. He pulled down the blinds and waited for Jenni to come home.

Jeff gathered together the necessary props. He did not want this to be like one of those earnest zero-budget films, which everyone agrees is so clever, pretending not to mind the single camera angle, the 'ironic' scenery and the same actor playing three parts. He was aiming for 'tasteful-but-sophisticated'. Not 'trying-too-hard', but definitely 'has-given-this-proper-consideration'.

Kicking himself for not paying more attention to Jenni's musings about candle scents, he plumped for Pebbly Shores and Laundered Linen, then lit a last-minute Caramel Lemon. He hunted out a bottle of champagne left over from his twenty-first. Does champagne go off? He discounted the M&S ready-meals in the fridge. Very tasty but not indicative of great forethought. Jeff rooted out his student cook book, "1000 Meals In 1 Pan", and knocked together a seafood risotto and a gooey, unmistakably homemade Belgian chocolate mousse.

Jenni arrived home, looking shattered. She kicked off her heels and slid over the floorboards in sweaty black opaques, throwing her briefcase next to the front door. She was now officially in leisure-mode. She undid the button on her skirt as he threw open the French doors to reveal the lights twinkling at the bottom of the garden. Good job he forgot to take those down last Christmas. Jenni was a sucker for fairy lights – they reminded her of sitting with him on the terrace in Crete; of eating crisps in the beer garden as a child, blocking out her parents' arguments as they wafted out of the pub window.

The Mama Mia DVD was loaded and he was glad he had resisted the urge to accidentally-on-purpose scratch it, the last time it made her cry. For now, he put the iPod on shuffle, triggering an eclectic sequence of handpicked tracks, each one with a moving melody or goosebump-inducing lyrics. Jenni seemed overcome with emotion. Excellent. She had just noticed the flowers, too. He had considered ringing Fleurs Tout de Suite for something luxurious but contemporary. Not too spiky and nothing involving fruit. Then, he had spotted the sunflowers growing up the fence – so cheery, so intricate but so simple. Snipping off six stems, he slotted them into Jenni's treasured vintage-shop majolica vase. Just the job.

"Please tell me you bought those!" she shrieked. "Please tell me you didn't chop my sunflowers down!"

“Er, well..”

“What were you thinking? After all my efforts, growing them from seeds! You know your problem?” She paused for breath and emphasis. “You just never think at all.”

As Jeff reeled from her attack, Jenni was gripped by a renewed surge of fury.

“You could at least have hoovered.” How he wished he had hoovered.

“And this house stinks of garlic.” She was howling, her nose running. There was no garlic in the recipe. He always stuck to the recipe.

Jenni grabbed a can of air-freshener from the sink cupboard, spraying it wildly upwards. Doused in Meadowgrass Mist, it was hardly surprising when Jenni pushed her prawns round her plate and said that the rice tasted of soap. The mousse was also pronounced ‘perfumey’. Jeff did not offer the champagne. Jenni wailed that she was tired like never before and snorted uncharacteristically at the prospect of Meryl’s Aegean antics.

He snuggled up to her on the sofa, cupping her breasts in a companionable but hopeful manner. She batted his hands away. He racked his brains for recent misdemeanours but drew a blank. It was as if her body had been possessed by an alien. Jenni was usually so straightforward – unlike Naomi, who could sulk for England and always gave him big fat Fs for effort and achievement. With Jenni, he’d felt like an A-star student, but he was beginning to doubt his hold on reality. Maybe an early night. Perhaps all was not lost.

Jeff dropped a fizz-bomb into the swirling bath water. Steam was crucial but would it snuff out the tea lights? Maybe Jenni was right – he didn’t think things through. He couldn’t fit all the words on and he had to wait for the mirror to mist back up again. He decided on a direct request. “Mar...”. Jenni hammered on the bathroom door and charged past him. She thrust her head down the toilet bowl and he chivalrously held her hair as she retched. He hoped he hadn’t poisoned her.

Afterwards, he bathed her and wrapped her in a fluffy towel. Helping her thread her leaden limbs into her fleecy cow pyjamas, he looked up at her green-tinged face and whispered “I love you, Jennifer Anne.”

“Mutual, Jeffrey Alan.”

The relief. He’d been planning to try again in the morning with rose petals, but he was getting nervous around flowers now and it came spilling out.

“I understand if you don’t want to..... but...I got you this ring..”

“Well you can take it straight back,” she barked.

How could he have got it so wrong? Grade: Unclassified. Thoughtless and meaningless. And now the phone! Jenni’s Mum’s number flashed up on the display. He didn’t trust himself to answer.

“And ask for a less fancy one,” Jenni bellowed over the shrill ringing.

That snotty jeweller was going to love that. Hang on, though...

“We’ll need the money for Bump.” Jenni finished with a cautious burp.

“You mean..?” Thank you, Serendipity. Yesssss!” He punched the air. Whoops – uncool.

“You’re happy?” Jenni’s red-rimmed eyes stared into his. He kissed her. She tasted of...uurgh...oh, what the hell!

“Perfectly.”

Finalist

Diane Leake

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. . . Of course! Slapping his forehead, he questioned why he hadn't thought of it before. It was so bloody obvious.

To date, Jenni's favourite place in the whole world was down in the wreck. It may not be as warm as the Maldives or Thailand - it certainly didn't conjure up the idea of bronzed, oiled bodies entwined in acts of amour on palm-frilled beaches - and, it didn't sound as romantic but, fiscally it was the most sensible option. More importantly, he knew that Jenni would jump at the opportunity to go and, as they went down there fairly frequently, she wouldn't guess the reason for the trip.

"Anglesey, here we come," he crowed. None of their friends would dream of going there for such a special occasion. It was a one-off.

Just over two years ago, when the tall, leggy blonde - all pert boobs and biteable butt - appeared at the edge of the Leisure Centre pool, Jeff knew instantly that she was 'The One'. For a whole week, until the next meeting of the Sub-Aqua Club, he'd dreamed about her, and fantasized about making love to her in every conceivable scenario, and position. All he needed was a plan of action.

Unfortunately, the plan hadn't gone quite as it should have done. He wasn't meant to knock her unconscious, merely to bump into her as they dived from opposite sides of the pool.

His first thought, as she lay limp and lifeless on the edge of the pool, was whether or not she was brain damaged. His second, as he took in her long hair coiled around her tanned shoulders and she'd opened the most magnificent pair of dreamy azure eyes, involved drowning in the blue of those fabulous eyes while performing day thirteen of the Cosmopolitan Kama Sutra (not that he read Cosmo; one of the girls in his office had left it on her desk, turned to the appropriate page). Of course, in retrospect, he realised that much of Jenni's dreamy gaze was due to concussion.

As it turned out, Jenni could daydream for England. But, her favourite daydream involved the wreck's Captain. Tears would roll down her cheeks as she related how the Captain of the wreck had perished, to leave the love of his life to walk the cob at Liverpool for eternity - much like the French Lieutenant's Woman.

They were laid on the taupe leather sofa, her head on his chest, watching Jenni's favourite film, 'Sleepless in Seattle' - for the three-millionth time.

"Fancy going down to Anglesey next weekend?"

Her head shot up, her eyes wet with tears shone into his. "Do I ever?" Resting her head back on his chest she added, "She's still waiting, you know."

"Well, she must be knackered by now. How old is she...about one-hundred-and-thirty-four? She must have one helluva good battery in that motorised scooter of hers. Ouch!" Jeff held up his hand to ward off another indignant blow.

Jenni laughed. "Where's your sense of romance?"



“You know me. Not an ounce of romance.”

“True.” She giggled. “Anyway, she doesn’t have a motorised scooter. It’s a Zimmer on wheels.”

“Worn to the metal rims.” Jeff chuckled.

As they drove down the hill that overlooked the shipyard at Bangor, with lush Anglesey on the opposite side of the Straits, Jenni clapped her hands and squealed with excitement. Jeff was buzzing too; his plan was taking shape.

Geraint and Iwan, whose boat would take them out to the deeper waters of the Irish Sea, were waiting for them with grins so wide they could just have stepped out of a Colgate advert.

“It’s a perfect day for diving,” stated Geraint, indicating the calm turquoise-blue water that glistened with diamonds as the sun bounced off it.

“God, I just love this place,” said Jenni, as they headed out past Llanddonna to the sea beyond, and climbed into their wetsuits. She turned to Jeff. “Help me, will you? I’m all fingers and thumbs.”

Iwan cut the boat’s engine as they reached the area of the wreck. After a few words of caution about the undercurrents from the brothers, Jeff and Jenni tumbled back into the waters.

For Jeff, nothing could describe the alien world’s tranquillity; the sheer magical timelessness; he also knew how cruel and treacherous it could be. But, as a shoal of herring parted to allow them a pathway, and a thornback stingray glided by over head, he thought it was heaven. And, as the seals checked them out, before performing a clownish floorshow, he chuckled aloud.

Down and down they went until the lady they had come to see came into sight. Jenni’s cry of delight nearly burst his ear drum and shattered his earpiece, as she swam off at mermaid-speed to meet her long-lost captain. Jeff smiled; he’d definitely made the right choice in bringing her here. Perfect.

As they boarded the mollusc-covered wreck, her back broken from hitting the rocks, Jenni went straight to the cabin, and he followed. This was it. This was where he’d envisaged taking out the ring and asking Jenni to marry him.

Jenni’s disappointment came through his earpiece. “Oh, Jeff, look.” She pointed at the Captain’s desk where she’d always imagined him scribing love letters – blow the fact that he had a ship to navigate. The desk had been in a sorry state when they’d last seen it, now the shipworm had taken over and the desk had disintegrated. So much for perfect. “It’s not the same, Jeff. It’s all gone.”

“It’s still the Captain’s cabin,” he told her, hoping that the cabin hadn’t been down-graded in her dreams.

“No, Jeff, no, the Captain’s not here anymore.”

Now what? There was no point proposing to her when she no longer liked the place. “Come on then, let’s go.” He felt as deflated as she did, only for a very different reason. It would have to be Luigi’s.

The plan had been that they would go down to the wreck where Jenni would be all gooey and romantic as she talked to her Captain. He would pull out the ring, attempt to get on one knee – current allowing – then he’d planned to have a candle-lit meal later that evening on the cordoned-off pier. It was all arranged with Luigi.

In order to get her to put her best clothes on he'd had to tell her that Luigi had family over from Italy, and was having a party. Begrudgingly, she'd complied, her mood had plummeted. But, when they pulled up, and Luigi was there to greet and guide them onto the pier, which was lit with round, white, overhanging lamps – rather like beaming benefactors – her mood took an upturn. She was pleased to see Luigi, and happily accepted his triple-kiss welcome.

"What've you done?" She asked Jeff, her eyes large, reflecting the light from the lamps.

Jeff feigned surprise. "Me? Nothing. Why?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You're up to something."

"Okay. You're always accusing me of not being romantic enough, so I decided to have a go."

Jenni flung her arms around him. "Oh, Jeff, you're the best."

He nodded. "I know. It's hard, but it's something I have to live with." Jenni cuffed him.

Luigi did them proud. He'd arranged a violinist, who played from a distance allowing them some privacy and, as always, he supplied the best Italian food in North West Wales.

"Happy?" Jeff licked the garlic infused olive oil from his fingers.

"Yes. Very." Jenni grinned at him.

"Come on. Let's walk down to the end of the pier." He knew that she loved to look over at the island, its small winding roads lit up by the occasional headlights.

As they reached the end of the pier Jenni looked out over the Straits, and Jeff reached in his pocket. He got down on his right knee. "Jenni, will you...Jenni?...Jenni!" He heard a loud SPLAT, and spun round in a circle.

They decided not to prosecute the highly embarrassed, and extremely apologetic, fisherman who'd left his line dangling off the end of the pier to get caught up in Jenni's strappy sandals, making her tumble into the mire of deep mud below. Thankfully – or, unthankfully, according to one's point of view – it was low tide.

So, they got their wish of a quiet 'do'. Once Jenni had been rescued and was safely tucked up in a hospital bed – "In case there's any concussion," the doctor had explained – she couldn't wait to have the ring on her finger. Not very romantic, certainly not planned, but Jenni glowed with happiness.

Later, when they told their falling-about-laughing friends of Jenni being covered from head-to-toe in slimy mud, 'like a creature from the deep', they both agreed that at least they'd have something to tell their children. Jeff added smugly, "Yep, she fell for me; hook, line and sinker."

Roaring with laughter, Jenni added, 'I sure did. He left me bog-eyed and legless.'

Finalist

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Hayley Hart

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. . . where better than in the comfort lavishness and privacy of their own apartment.

Jenni would know something was going on when she saw Jeff in the kitchen cooking, this would never happen – the closest thing Jeff could do to cooking was cheese on toast, and even then he had a knack of burning it.


“That’s it,” he thought to himself, the night was sorted, Jenni would walk through the door and be greeted by a hallway filled with candles and rose petals guiding her to the candle lit table, fine wine and the warm smell of home cooking (what was on the menu had yet to be decided).

“How could she resist,” Jeff said out loud with a Hollywood smile that slowly spread across his face. “This will be the perfect way to propose,” he thought but he was more surprised with himself that he never thought of this before.

This was it, this was the day. Jeff packed Jenni off for the day with her friend. He told her she may as well go and have some fun, as all he would be doing was work and really where is the fun in that? After he had watched Jenni walk down the street Jeff’s work began. He walked in the kitchen, his first mission was to find where Jenni kept the cookery books. Once this was accomplished he started thumbing through the pages to try and find the perfect recipe and just then he spotted it, the exact same thing they had eaten on their first date. He went to his desk and started writing what he would need to get and then with shopping list in hand and a few butterflies in tow he picked up his coat and set on his way.

Meanwhile Jenni was having her own butterfly condition to contend with. Not only was she out with her friend she was out with the friend who she was having an affair with! Jenni did feel guilty this morning when Jeff told her to go out and have some fun with her friend as he would be working, but Jenni got the feeling this wasn’t the sort of fun he had in mind.

She told Jeff that they were spending the day at a nice hotel having a few spa treatments and would be having a few drinks and some lunch and just a general chill out. Well she wasn’t totally lying, she was at a hotel and they did have a few drinks and lunch it was just the kind that they had provided themselves. This suited Jenni down to the ground. She wasn’t really into all this big fuss, yeah she liked nice things and Jeff gave her that, but this was what she really liked, the intimacy and being in someone’s company where you don’t have to feel you’re being someone you’re not. All this materialistic stuff meant nothing to her, it felt like she was trying to be moulded into this perfect person, and let’s face it no one is perfect. As she lay in the arms of her lover Jenni was trying to work out if the butterflies she was feeling were to do with all the excitement or if it was the panic of being caught.




Having found everything he needed Jeff had set to work on making the perfect white wine and mushroom risotto with parmesan cheese. Ok it wasn't the most technical of dishes but this coming from someone who can burn cheese on toast, it would be a miracle if he didn't burn the Arborio rice (that he had just been out and bought). Jeff decided against doing a starter, ok he chickened out of doing one. "Right, now for dessert" he reached up in the cupboard for the plates to put the cheese cake (bought) and coulee (homemade) on. "There," he said, "I know it's only main and dessert but in the words of Meat Loaf 2 out of 3 ain't bad." He chuckled as he walked out of the kitchen to make a start on getting ready. "After all Jenni would be coming back in a couple of hours and it takes time to look this good," he thought walking across the living room and into the bedroom.

Back at the hotel Jenni was woken from her doze by a gentle kiss on the back of her neck; it sent goosebumps all over her body, she turned over and gave her lover a kiss, then one small tear ran down the side of her face and collected in her ear. "Why could this not last forever?" she thought. Just then she felt the tear being wiped gently away and in that moment she knew what she was to do. They had spoke about Jenni leaving Jeff before but Jenni would never leave him. She felt like she needed to be with Jeff, that she owed him for all the nice things that he had given her. But deep down she knew what she needed to do, and this was going to be the day. The gentle touch of her lover's hand and the comforting arms that she was wrapped in along with the loving words that were being whispered into her (dry) ear made her whole body feel limp and defenceless and her heart melt. "This is true love," she thought snuggling down further in her lover's arms, and with the most tender of kisses she enjoyed those last few hours of true love before the horrible deed had to be done.

Jeff told Jenni that it was probably best if she was back for 6.30pm. That way it was giving him enough time to get all his work finished.

It was 6.15 pm and the butterflies were going wild not just for Jeff but for Jenni too. As Jenni and her lover walked the last few streets, before it was going to be too risky for them to be seen holding hands, they held each other so tightly that it felt like they didn't want to let go. Then they were there. As Jenni and her lover said goodbye and the final tingling touch of their finger tips, Jenni's butterflies started to feel like birds flapping around in her stomach.

Jeff was just doing the finishing touches, all the rose petals were leading to the candle lit table and the ring..... "The ring," Jeff thought in a panic. He hadn't put the ring on the placemat in pride of place in front of Jenni. He looked out of the window and saw Jenni walking the final few paces up the street before she would be walking through the door. He quickly ran to his drawer in his desk and then placed the box on the table and lit the last of the candles. Then he heard the key in the front door, then Jenni. "What the..." he heard as Jenni pushed open the door, then the sound of her heels coming down the hall to see her standing in the doorway of the dining room looking at the dining table lit up like a Christmas tree. Her eyes were as big as saucers. Jeff took her bags and pulled out the chair and motioned for her to take a seat.



Jenni walked over to the table. “What is going on?” she was thinking as she sat down. She didn’t see the box on the table, all she kept thinking was, “does he know? Is he trying to make me feel guilty?” Just then she jumped as she heard Jeff say, “So did you have a nice time? Did you manage to chill out?”

“Err yeah, thanks. You manage to get your work done?” Well what else could Jenni say. In her head she was thinking she could just go straight ahead and tell the truth, but what was going on? What was Jeff planning? Then it happened, Jeff was on one knee with a small royal blue square box in his hand, and then came the words that most women would love, but not Jenni.

“Will you do me the honour of being my wife?” asked Jeff with a quiver in his voice.

Jenni then looked around and started to see what work Jeff was going on about, she could see the effort he had made. “Why has it taken so long for him to make so much of an effort?” she thought as she was just looking at him unsure of what to say. She could feel tears welling up in her eyes, as she was looking at Jeff on one knee in front of her in his Armani suit this huge rock inset on a platinum band and not a hair out of place. All she could think to say was “So did it take you long to get ready?” In her head she was cursing herself “What a stupid question!”

“Yeah hours. It takes a long time to look this good you know,” Jeff said with that Hollywood smile again.

The tears were rolling down Jenni’s cheeks. Jeff must have taken this as acceptance to his proposal because just then she felt his hand on her knee, and that was when she knew for definite, there was no spark. She didn’t have that tingle she felt just an hour ago with her lover. Jenni cupped her hands around Jeff’s face and looked him in the eye. “I’m so sorry I can’t accept. I know you always say you admire my honesty so I have to be honest now, I’m in love with someone else,” and with that she got up to walk out.

“Who? Why? Please just tell me why?” asked Jeff in shock. Jenni turned around and simply said, “All this is the problem. This is not me. You’re making me into someone who I’m not.” Then turned again and walked out of the door with a smile on her face that was not painted on for the first time in a long time and started down the street to her lover’s.

As Jeff watched out of the window still in shock, he simply shook his head and said, “Well Jen you have no idea what you’re missing out on,” and then sat down and started drinking the wine. Well no point in letting it go to waste.

There was a knock at the door. It opened and then Jenni fell into the arms of her lover, and smiled with such contentment. She felt a huge weight had been lifted, and with a kiss that made her feel weak, she closed the door behind them.



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