

## Becca's Boy

"Hurry up, Martin," Sandra shouted from the kitchen. "They'll be here soon."

"Have you seen my new tie?" Her husband's voice floated down the stairs, riddled with impatience and worry.

Sandra shook her head in exasperation.

"You don't need a tie on. Put your new terracotta polo shirt on. That's smart enough."

She set the quiche to cool on the worktop and checked the trifle in the fridge before taking off her apron.

She was ready. If Becca and her boyfriend arrived now, at least they wouldn't catch her up to her elbows in pastry. She heard Martin's footsteps as he prowled the bedroom like a restless animal. He'd be fumbling with his clothes as if his brain, overloaded as it was with the idea of Becca bringing a boy home, didn't have the capacity to control his hands at the same time.

Sandra had been looking forward to this day but, at the same time, dreading it. It was the end of an era. Musical Chairs and Pass The Parcel were distant memories, along with school concerts and nativity plays. Becca was playing women's games now and, at sixteen, she was new at it.

Sandra didn't feel old enough to have a daughter who brought home boyfriends. She wondered where the boundary between youth and adulthood was. She had passed it without having to leap any hurdles and still felt a part of the young generation, resenting the march of time as it dragged her screaming behind it.

The thunder descending the stairs heralded Martin's arrival. He was still fastening his belt, on the last notch as usual, in an effort to convince himself that his waistline wasn't, in fact, expanding.

“That’s perfectly smart,” said Sandra, admiring her choice of shirt for him.

“Wearing a tie will make you look like an old fuddy-duddy. You don’t want to look older than you are, do you?”

Martin gave a non-committal grunt and wandered into the living room.

Sandra smiled at him. Poor old Martin had had no difficulty in finding and stumbling through the generation chasm. Although he was only two years older than she was, he was securely ensconced into sensible middle age, having lamely followed time’s lead, gathering his carpet slippers and tie along the way.

“What time did she say she’d bring him?” Martin asked, looking at his watch and frowning at the impossible time.

“Three o’clock!”

Martin looked at Sandra and back at his watch. “They’re late!”

Sandra nodded. Her mind raced back through the years to the day she had first brought Martin home to meet her parents. He had been drunk. He had denied it, of course, but he had smelled like a beer mat. He’d said he needed some courage before he dared meet her mum and dad. She had almost left him there and then but her confused logic told her that if he was concerned enough about meeting her parents that he had to have a few drinks in order to do so, then he must have been worried about the impression they were to have of him. And if their impression of him mattered to him, then he must have cared about her. The sharpness of her reasoning then had been rather dulled over the years.

“You’d think they’d be on time if they want to create a good impression,” said Martin.

“For heaven’s sake! Becca only said about three o’clock. They’re not tied to a timetable. There’s no food to go cold.”

“He’s probably let her down,” Martin said knowingly. “He won’t have turned up.”

Sandra felt her nerves tighten. “Would that please you, if he let her down? Then you wouldn’t have to go through this rigmarole of losing a daughter – yet!”

Martin made a futile gesture with his arms and sighed. “Look, I’m trying, Sandra. I’m not being obstructive. I’m meeting this boy with an open mind.” He smiled worriedly. “I’m just glad she warned us about the studs.”

“Anyway,” said Sandra, dusting flour off her sleeve, “nothing we can say is going to change anything. You know what kids are like. They’ll do as they please in the end.” She watched Martin wander to the window. “If I’d listened to my mum and dad, I’d never have seen you again after the day they met you.”

“That was different!” Martin protested.

“Why was it? I’m sure you didn’t look very respectable with your long hair and beery breath.”

“Yes...but...well, they could tell I was all right.”

“Not when they first met you, they couldn’t. You couldn’t pronounce your own name.”

“That was nerves. They knew I was nervous. Your mum still laughs at that, now. They saw the funny side of it.”

“You weren’t nervous; you were drunk!”

Martin waved a hand in dismissal. “Well, anyway, I must have made a decent enough impression on them.”

Sandra laughed sarcastically. “Oh, you made an impression on them, and one that wasn’t too far from being correct, I don’t think.”

“Yes, all right, all right! But they could tell, you see. It’s all a matter of

breeding.”

“Breeding?”

Martin nodded. “Of course. You can tell by looking at someone if they’re respectable or not.”

“Well, you haven’t seen Becca’s boy. Give her credit for some sense. She wouldn’t have anything to do with anyone who wasn’t respectable.”

“What’s his name? Cain? He’s even named after a murderer.”

“Kane. With a ‘K’!”

“And he’s got studs.”

“They’re only today’s equivalent of long hair.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that, exactly,” Martin replied, disbelief on his face. “People wore studs in our day, but they were in their jackets, not through their noses.”

He looked at his watch and out of the window again.

“Anyway,” said Sandra, “he can’t be so bad if he wants to be a doctor.”

Martin smirked. “Frankenstein or Strangelove?”

Sandra’s face was expressionless but with a hint of thunder beneath the surface.

“He’s not educated enough for that,” Martin continued. “You know how long it takes to train to be a doctor.”

“How do you know he isn’t educated enough? Becca said he’d got an ‘A’ in his exam.”

Martin gasped. “In woodwork!”

“It’s better than nothing,” said Sandra. “If anything comes of this friendship, perhaps he’ll be able to put me some shelves up that things don’t roll off.”

Martin glowered at his wife. “I see,” he said. “The shelves been fine all these years and now, suddenly, your pans are sliding off them. Or are you planning on

storing ball-bearings and ping-pong balls on them?”

“They haven’t been ‘fine all these years’, but I’ve learned to live with them, like I always do.”

“Wants to be a doctor!” Martin chuckled. “With studs! He’d be handy for making crutches, I suppose. Or a spot of micro-surgery on Pinocchio, maybe.”

Sandra frowned and her voice hardened. “I thought you said you were going into this with an open mind?” she said.

“I am,” Martin replied defensively.

“No, you’re not! You’re condemning the boy before you’ve set eyes on him.”

“I’m not condemning him, but...well, you know what lads are like; they’re only after one thing.”

“Yes,” Sandra nodded her understanding. “Some things never change, do they?”

Martin looked at his watch again. “Thirteen minutes past!”

“Go and read the paper and stop fussing. Pretend nothing out of the ordinary is happening.” She shooed her husband towards an armchair and threw the newspaper at him.

Sandra walked to the dining room table and inspected the small buffet she had prepared and hoped there would be enough to go around. If Becca’s boy was a good eater there might not be enough salmon sandwiches, but there was plenty of egg and cress and salad. Martin had said there would be enough to feed them all week. She had made Becca’s favourite, too – lemon meringue, and an orange flan as well as the trifle. There should be enough to please everyone.

“If Becca was meeting him at half past two,” said Martin, appearing in the doorway like an angel of death, “they should be here by now.”

Sandra gritted her teeth. “They’ll be walking slowly. They might even have gone

the long way round. They won't be running to see us, will they?"

Martin tutted. "Well, it's not giving a very good impression, being late on his first visit."

"We didn't tell Becca they had to be here by three – or else! We didn't say if he was a minute late she couldn't see him again. It's not a high-powered meeting they're late for – it's their tea."

Hands in pockets, Martin strolled to the table and gazed at the spread before him. "The sandwiches will be curling up soon."

"They'll be all right in cling film. They'll last a few more minutes before they start turning green."

Martin took a furtive look at his watch and sidled back to the window.

"Switch the television on," Sandra shouted through the doorway. "It'll take your mind off it. What's on?"

There was a rustling of the newspaper. "*Guess Who's Coming To Dinner.*"

Sandra shook her head. She knew Martin was going to struggle adapting to his new role. He had been so used to having a daughter who didn't cause worry for them, who didn't stay out late at night, and who didn't bring boys home for them to agonize over. This shift in his world was of seismic proportions and Sandra felt the aftershock may be too much for Martin's fine customs.

She walked into the living room to find Martin squinting through the window into the afternoon sun. He pointed at his watch and mouthed silently: "Twenty past!"

Sandra sat down and picked up the paper. "I hope you're not going to question them about their whereabouts when they arrive. You won't want a written report, will you?"

Martin sighed and looked at his wife. "Really, Sandra, I don't understand you, I

really don't! Our daughter's out there, somewhere, God knows where, either waiting on a street corner for this 'alleged' boyfriend, or somewhere with him when she should be here, and you don't seem to care. You seem to think I've no cause to worry. Well, I'm sorry but, until I've met this person, I'll carry on worrying. And probably after I've met him as well."

Sandra stared at her husband. "You mustn't think much of your daughter's judgment if you've got to vet her choice of boy. And by the way, he isn't 'alleged,' he's 'confirmed.'

"Becca's sixteen," said Martin. "She doesn't know anything about people. She can't tell a thug from a saint."

"You don't know your daughter very well."

"All girls of that age are the same."

"You should write an agony column. 'Aunty Martin.'"

Martin grunted and turned back to the window.

"I was sixteen when I met you," Sandra said.

"That was different," Martin said, looking at his wife. "You were more...more... more..."

"Experienced?"

"Mature. The kids in our day seemed older than they do today."

"Only because you were one yourself. And besides, the kids in our day wouldn't take their friends home to meet their parents. Mainly because they had fathers like you."

Martin sat in the armchair and began tapping his fingers on the arm. After a moment's thought he came up with a reply.

"If there were more fathers like me there wouldn't be as much trouble with kids

today. People don't care what their kids get up to as long as they're out of their sight."

He jumped out of the chair when he heard voices outside and went to the window.

Sandra read the same line in the newspaper six times before casting a barbed look at Martin that would have hooked a shark.

"I don't know what good you're doing, standing there like that," she said. "You're only getting yourself more wound up and annoying me."

"I feel better when I'm doing something. I can't just sit around waiting."

"But you're not doing anything now. You're just *standing* around waiting."

Martin looked at Sandra, saw the logic of her argument and sat down. He crossed his legs and tapped his feet aimlessly in mid-air. He drummed his fingers on the chair arm and every thirty seconds or so, stopped drumming to look at his watch.

"Twenty-six minutes past!"

At three-thirty the front door opened.

Martin looked towards the sound and then at Sandra.

There was a silence in the hall and Martin rose from his chair but Sandra put out a hand to stop him.

"Wait!" she whispered hoarsely.

He sat down and waited.

Footsteps could be heard on the wooden floor but there were neither voices nor any of the nervous giggling that might have been expected.

"Look natural!" Sandra said. "Relax! Take that death mask off your face."

Martin smiled but his dry lip stuck to his teeth.

Suddenly the living room door opened and Becca stood there, red-eyed, mascara-streaked, and alone.



Sandra jumped up and rushed to her daughter. “Whatever’s the matter, darling?”

“What’s he done to you?” demanded Martin, jumping out of his seat, thoughts of revenge and strangleholds racing through his head.

“Just be quiet, you!” said Sandra.

Becca snuffled and sobbed and fell into her mother’s arms.

“What’s the matter, love?” asked Sandra.

Her daughter gulped air and tried to speak between sobs. “He...he was...he was drunk!” She wailed uncontrollably into her mother’s shoulder.

Martin’s jaw dropped. “He was what?”

Becca opened a red eye and looked at her father. “He was drunk!”

“You...you mean he’s not coming?”

Becca shook her head and blew her nose. “I sent him home.”

Sandra stroked her daughter’s head. “Come on. Never mind. It’s not the end of the world.”

“It is,” Becca cried, unconvinced.

Sandra looked at Martin and he thought he saw a glimmer of a smile beneath his wife’s sad eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “This could be the start of a beautiful friendship. Don’t you think, Martin?”

