

Starry-Eyed

Mrs Kenton had looked into Lesley's face as if she were reading a magazine. Her expression was impenetrable and Lesley smiled self-consciously.

"Relax," the clairvoyant said. Her voice was like coffee cream and would have soothed the most tangled of nerves. She smiled in turn, her manner comforting and serene.

"You're going to marry an 'R'," she said quietly. She might have been predicting that tomorrow would be wet.

How did they know these things? Lesley's scalp tingled and a musical scale trickled down her spine. How could this total stranger know so many things about her?

She didn't even look mystical, thought Lesley. She was just a middle-aged housewife with a middle-aged hairstyle and a very respectable, and seemingly expensive, beige two-piece suit. There were no flowing robes nor flashing wands nor magical signs or symbols; no extravagant gestures to emphasize the torment of her visions.

And yet, she had been so accurate. Yes, Lesley was unhappy with her job and yes, she did live alone. No, she didn't have a very successful love life and no, there was no man in her life at the moment. Yes, she did feel awkward in company, and shy, and lacking in confidence. And so many more things, which even her mother would never have known. And yes, her mother did die last year, and she had been with Lesley ever since, Mrs Kenton assured her, even here, now.

"Your mother says you're not to worry. She knows you did all you could for her. She's happy now with Ben. That was your father, wasn't it?" The clairvoyant's voice ladled comfort on to Lesley's tense and weary shoulders.

Lesley nodded numbly, tears stinging her eyes.

It hadn't been easy these last few years; giving up her own life to look after her mother. She hadn't minded most of the time but there were moments of resentment, it was only natural, she told herself. If she could believe her mother forgave her she could cast away her biggest burden.

Mrs Kenton had been so correct about Lesley's past and present circumstances that she might have been a lifelong friend. But no matter how accurate her assessment of Lesley's current situation, the clairvoyant's predictions for the future had put a stone in her shoe which niggled her and, however much she wanted to believe they would come true, nudged her back towards the reality of scepticism and suspicion.

After all, you didn't have to be too observant to accurately deduce some of the things Mrs Kenton had 'seen'. Lesley's ringless fingers gave away her marital status and besides, her physical appearance would make it apparent that no man was likely to show any romantic interest in her. Therefore it was probable that she lived alone and she wouldn't be in a minority if she didn't like her job.

But there were other things, things which were applicable to her in particular and of which only a handful of people were aware: her singing in the church choir, her collection of teapots (antiques, Mrs Kenton called them), her love of Elvis Presley (or the singer who passed on), and of tennis (racquet sport). Then there was her dream (her determination, according to Mrs Kenton) of slimming and doing something about her appearance. She obviously hadn't been aware of how seriously she was considering this transformation, but dream or determined plan, she had been promising it to herself for years.

"You will become another person," Mrs Kenton assured her.

And she was going to marry 'R' – Richard.

A few of her friends had questioned her decision to visit a clairvoyant and had cautioned her with tales of their own second-hand experiences.

“They ask you questions and then draw conclusions from your answers.”

“They just tell you things that would apply to anyone.”

Even Carolyn was sceptical: “They tell you what you want to hear: you’ll be going overseas, you’ll meet a handsome stranger, you’ll come into money.”

None of these things had applied. There had been no mention of money, no trips abroad. Mrs Kenton had asked Lesley no questions other than her date of birth and where she had been born.

Her friends were always telling her what their horoscopes had foretold on one day or another. If they didn’t believe in them, why bother to read them? They said how could the same thing happen to everyone under the same sign? Still they read them; pleased when they were close to being accurate and trying to find some hidden meaning in them when they were further from the truth.

How had Mrs Kenton known about Richard?

Lesley had watched and grown to love Richard from afar over the years. He knew nothing of her feelings and nor did anyone else. From her desk her eyes would follow him discreetly as he talked and laughed with their colleagues, and she could always feel her heart pounding whenever he spoke to her. If he happened to place a hand on her shoulder the imprint of that touch would last for hours.

She had never been in love. She had had crushes in her youth and she sometimes wondered if this feeling she had for Richard was nothing more than an infatuation. But there felt to be something more to it than that; something deeper than a mere passing fancy.

Working in the same office, they had developed a good, friendly relationship but,

whilst she observed him on the telephone or dealing with office problems, she knew her feelings would remain unnoticed and unappreciated and, worst of all, unreciprocated.

Richard was a couple of years older than Lesley but a planet apart in similarities. His immaculate demeanour only accentuated her own dullness and his trim, athletic figure made her feel more uncomfortable with herself. She would never have expected him to give her a second glance and she knew in her heart that her dearest wish could never come true.

But then, Mrs Kenton had been right about everything else.

Apart from his obvious lack of romantic interest in her the next biggest obstacle in the way of them ever forming a passionate liaison was the fact that he was going to marry Carolyn, Lesley's best friend, in six month's time.

It was ironic that it had been herself who had introduced them to each other in the first place.

It had been at the firm's Christmas dance two years ago, when Lesley had invited Carolyn because she hadn't wanted to arrive alone, that she had accidentally thrown them together. As soon as they met they talked and talked as if there were no other people in the room.

Lesley couldn't bring herself to resent their relationship, hoping both her friends would be happy, but there was a tiny part of her which couldn't resist fantasizing about alternative futures.

And now, intriguingly, she was going to marry 'R'.

She looked miserably into her bedroom mirror. Her lank hair hung lifelessly beneath her ears like swamp weed, without a trace of style or vigour. Her cheeks and jowls sank with the weight of their burden and her body bulged offensively from the

confines of her dour and plain bottle-green dress.

When she was younger, in her late teens, ten years or so ago, she had considered herself reasonably attractive. She had even had a boyfriend for a time in those days. But she had had to work hard at being attractive and when the time came that she deemed the efforts not to be worth the results she had stopped trying and slipped into her present state.

In the six months leading up to Carolyn and Richard's wedding she was going to have to do something rather drastic in an attempt to improve her appearance and to recreate her looks from those far-off days. This was an absolute necessity. Not that she harboured any realistic thoughts about winning Richard from her friend (she recognized fantasy when she imagined it), for even if she were attractive enough to be a threat to their relationship, she could no more hurt Carolyn than hurt herself. No, she had to improve herself because Carolyn had asked her to be her chief bridesmaid.

The very next day she rearranged her mind and her new regime began.

She felt strangely happy to be saying goodbye to the Turkish Delights and the Chocolate Fingers, the Cream Eggs and the Walnut Whips. She began satisfying those hunger moments with apples and bananas, grapes and pears, had salad lunches and felt marvellously pleased with herself. She enrolled in the Think Thin Slimming Club, joined the Tight Fit Gym and, on Friday nights, instead of comforting herself with Chicken Satay and Fried Rice, she went to Penny's aerobics class before plunging into the pool for half an hour's rigorous swimming.

It wasn't easy. The energy she expended in two weeks was more than she had used in her entire life. The most exercise she was used to was the casual amble into the local Spar to stock up on her chocolate. At the gym she felt like a marine at the ballet. She couldn't co-ordinate her limbs; she stumbled over apparatus and had to be

helped off the rowing machine and given oxygen.

In time though, it became surprisingly easier.

Carolyn wanted her to have a fitting for her bridesmaids dress but Lesley persuaded her to leave it for as long as she could in order that she might fit into the smallest size possible.

The weight tumbled off her. In three months she lost over two stones and reckoned that by the time of the wedding she would be down to a size ten.

Nicholas, the hairdresser, magically transformed her from frump to (she could hardly bring herself to believe it) elfin – well, almost. She had facials, manicures and pedicures, and even spent five minutes a week on the bed at Samantha’s Sun Spot.

The people at work commented on her radical improvement with enthusiasm (and, she suspected, a little disbelief).

“You’re looking well, these days, Lesley. You’ll have to give me your secret.”

“You look like a new person, Lesley. Are you in love?”

The compliments were much appreciated but the thought of what their impression of her had been before made her grimace.

One day even Richard remarked on her new look: “You’re looking quite stunning, Lesley. I’m almost tempted to go astray.”

Her heart leapt. She was only sorry that she had left it so long before doing anything to improve herself. If she had done something years ago things might have been so different.

Stunning. The word kept returning to her mind like a line from a song. At least her improvement was some consolation for her romantic disappointment, although she hadn’t given Mrs Kenton’s prediction a thought for weeks.

Two weeks before the wedding she had achieved her goal of a size ten. She went

with Carolyn to try on her dress and was ecstatic when it fitted her perfectly without any nips or tucks. She wouldn't now look like a turkey alongside the two young swans who were to be the other bridesmaids. She imagined what she would have looked like next to them if she had stuck to her old habits.

She endured days of eager anticipation in the run-up to the wedding. Her excitement at the prospect of being chief bridesmaid equalled by her high expectations of what she considered to be the launch of her new image.

On the day itself the sun shone from an immaculate blue sky, the air was thick with the aroma of grass and flowers, and the birds sang an accompaniment to the buzz of insects. Only Carolyn and Richard could have arranged such a perfect day.

Carolyn's father smiled at his daughter in the church porch. She looked beautiful. She wore the most wonderful dress Lesley had ever seen; studded with sequins which sparkled like the happiness in Carolyn's eyes.;

A wave of music carried them into the church. Lesley guided Carolyn's train down the aisle, followed by Sadie, Carolyn's younger sister, and her niece, Chloe.

At the front of the church she could see the back of Richard's head, his hair neat, as always, his shoulders straight and firm. She couldn't imagine him being nervous, always so decisive and so much in control. He leaned towards his best man and whispered something and the best man, Marshy, apparently, nodded earnestly.

Behind Richard were his family and friends. One or two interesting unattached men seemed to be in the group, which included the ushers, two of Richard's university friends, it seemed, with the equally unlikely names of Goth and Minty, though Lesley didn't know which was which. Her hopes rose as she thought she might at least have a dance later.

Afterwards, during the photograph session under the horse chestnuts in the

churchyard, Lesley was pleased to notice several husbands and boyfriends casting favourable glances in her direction. She even caught Marshy, the best man, observing her discreetly once or twice.

The wedding meal was delicious: prawn cocktail, lamb and a chocolate dessert which Lesley permitted herself as something of a consolation prize. She was sat at the top table next to Richard, on the opposite side to Carolyn, and enjoyed being a part of what she thought of as their 'Richard Sandwich'.

When the eating was over it was time for the speeches. Carolyn's father began them with embarrassing anecdotes about her youth as is usual and then Richard amused everyone with his wit and impressed them with his composure.

It was only when the best man stood up that Lesley took any real notice of him. He seemed nervous and dry-mouthed as he fidgeted with his notes in his hands, and his vulnerability seemed to strum the strings to a tune which had Lesley's heart tapping.

He looked up and down the table as if looking for a pair of friendly eyes and settled on Lesley's. They stared at each other and Lesley offered what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

He smiled back.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he began, licking his lips and again glancing at Lesley. "I'd better begin by introducing myself. I've known Richard since we were at university together and he always introduces me as 'Marshy'." He looked disdainfully at Richard. "My correct name is Robert Marsh..."

