

# EXIT LEFT

Won 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize Hills District ASA 2016

She wasn't there anymore. At first Derek didn't want to see anyone; he felt he was totally to blame. She had gone. That's the baby boomers for you he reflected miserably—we always did what we wanted when we wanted. We thought we were immortal and never wrong. Lizzy was no exception. She was a feminist, and this proved it; he knew that. It was drastic but she'd done her own thing.

He stood in the empty echoing kitchen remembering their angry exchanges. He'd found her resentment almost impossible to deal with. Her memory stretched back decades. 'Don't you have any *happy* memories?' he'd asked once.

'Of course I do!' she retorted. 'But everything has always been about you and now I just feel stifled.'

He repeated this to the counsellor he'd seen a few days ago. She told him it was 'transference.' She told him that Lizzy wanted to blame him for the way she felt. It made her feel better, more able to cope. When he said he was racked with guilt, the counsellor told him it wasn't unusual for people to feel like that.

On Friday evening, he was getting ready to practise his trumpet when he heard the sound of a key in the front door. Lizzy? But it was his daughter Jude, with her children.

'Hello Grandad!' they shouted as they burst into the kitchen.

‘I never asked you ... what were her last words Dad?’ Jude said flinging her massive handbag on the table. Was that a sob in her voice, he wondered?

‘I don’t know. I was out in the shed, practising.’ Reluctantly he put his trumpet away in its case.

‘Dad!’ she stared at him, an overlong stare like someone from the American sit. coms she liked to watch. As if, he thought, she expected to hear a ripple of disapproval towards him from an unseen audience.

‘*Excuse me?*’ she said, hand on forehead. ‘You didn’t hear her *last words!*’

‘No I came in for a cup of tea and she’d ... gone,’ he said. He didn’t mention her mother’s last letter to him. That was their business, his and Lizzy’s.

‘How did she look be ... before ... Dad?’

‘Same as usual. I think she’d put on a bit of lipstick.’

‘That was to get your attention Dad,’ Jude sniffed soulfully. He imagined the unseen audience shuffling and muttering a collective ‘Ahhh ...’

He didn’t know what else to say as Jude stood looking at him, and then he realized she was looking past him at her reflection in the kitchen window. She pushed back her hair and scooped up her toddler from the kitchen floor throwing the crust he’d been gnawing into the bin.

‘Well,’ Jude sighed, her eyes still on the window. ‘Have you thought about things yet? I mean, Mum always had the kids on Tuesdays and Fridays remember?’

‘I’m not minding them for you Jude,’ he said firmly.

Jude looked stunned. ‘What about me, Dad?’

‘Make some other arrangements,’ he said.

‘We’ll discuss that over the weekend,’ she pouted. ‘I’ve got soccer practice now; so I have to take Hugo, Olive *and* the dog with me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, fine, bye Dad.’

Jude’s pained expression lingered with him as he poured himself a large whisky. He’d told Lizzy time and again that she was never tough enough with Jude about the unpaid child care. Well, that’s going to change for a start, he thought.

‘Jude deserves all the chances I missed,’ Lizzy said tersely. He could understand Lizzy supporting Jude’s ‘brilliant career,’ at Australia Post. But why did Jude and her partner Troy *have* to have a two week holiday overseas every year, leaving grandchildren and dog to wreak havoc in his home?

He’d hardly swallowed the first mouthful of Scotch when the doorbell rang. If that’s Jude coming for round two, he thought, I’m not changing my mind.

He shivered as he walked slowly up the hall. It was the middle of May. Four thirty on a wet, gloomy afternoon and there was a distinct chill in the air. What had Lizzy said a few weeks ago? Something about getting the doonas down from a top shelf somewhere? He'd forgotten to do it. 'Please yourself,' Lizzy said. 'It'll be pretty warm where I'm going!'

Another impatient ring on the doorbell made him quicken his step. Through the stained glass door panels he could see the implausibly red hair of one of Lizzy's oldest friends, Cazza. 'The ageing hippy feminist,' he'd dubbed her. Usually when he said it Lizzy smiled wanly but recently it had started to irritate her. Cazza was already talking when he opened the door.

'... so I can't stop, sorry mate,' she said thrusting a blue thermal bag at him. 'No frozen dinners in the freezer?'

'Er, I haven't looked...'

'Yeah well, she wasn't in the headspace. I can't believe she's finally done it Dekka!'

'Did she say anything to you?'

'Got to go,' Cazza answered quickly. '*À bientôt*—sorry—tactless, chuck the containers.'

She rushed over to her little car, wrenched open the door, reversed it erratically up the driveway, flung the car backwards into the road and was gone with a single kiddie car 'toot'. He stood on the porch in the evening drizzle for a few minutes. Across the sodden lawn he watched a few commuters running down the road from the railway station. It reminded him

of his own life; year in, year out he'd done the same thing, up and down ... up and down.

He closed and locked the door. The containers slid around inside the blue bag. Kind of Cazza to do that, he knew she'd never rated him much; 'boring engineer' he'd overheard her say once. He'd fix that screeching loose fan belt on her car next time he saw her, if she'd let him. He shoved the plastic boxes in the fridge. Scouring the cupboards he found a large packet of nuts, the sort Lizzy always hid from him. He slit it open and poured the contents into a cereal bowl. The sofa enfolded him and yielded up the TV remote control from its sunken depths. It was too early for the ABC news so he flicked to another channel, where a blond woman with a smooth face and artificially deep voice was intoning the news.

'Botox,' he heard Lizzy's voice in his head, clear as a bell. 'Look at her; botox, blusher and bleached hair. Is that what the feminists fought for, to go backwards to Barbie dolls and beauty pageants?'

He sighed as he watched in vain for some world news. Footage of the Prime Minister walking round a building site in a hard hat told him nothing. A funeral for someone he'd never heard of made him shudder. Back in the studio the blond newsreader was talking about a *ceremoany* somewhere. He heard Lizzie's voice again, 'For God's sake learn to pronounce your own language! That sentence needs an auxiliary verb!'

Derek switched off the TV and sipped his whisky. His thoughts wandered back to 1976 when he and Lizzy had met at a party in London.

They huddled in a corner, two ex pat Aussies reminiscing about the sunshine and blue skies of home. Lizzy's hair was much longer then. Lovely Lizzy; Francophile Lizzy. She'd just finished studying French at the Sorbonne for a year. She told him drunkenly that the French language was like her second skin. She'd been accepted as a trainee interpreter at the United Nations. She'd decided to have a break in London before she went to New York. Young and fertile, they'd fallen into bed and accidentally made a baby together.

He sighed; Lizzy married him and came back to Sydney sunshine instead of New York snow. They bought this house almost in the same week as Trish and Barry bought theirs across the road. When Jude was born, Lizzy was determined to raise her as a feminist. Somehow it had all gone wrong and Jude had an overdeveloped sense of entitlement. Their son Dylan, who arrived a year later, would be taught to show respect for the female point of view. In Derek's opinion, Dylan was completely hen-pecked.

He sighed—such busy years. He supervised huge building sites, got up early, came home late. Lizzy found a part time job teaching French at the local high school and he thought she was happy. They shared babysitting and barbeques with Trish and Barry and their kids. Lizzy did a water colour painting class on one of her days off and life drifted on. He couldn't believe he was sixty and Lizzy fifty seven. When he suggested a

couple of months ago that she could study for a PhD in French now she'd retired, he thought she'd explode.

'Oh God, Derek! Where have you *been*? I've moved on.'

He swallowed the rest of the Scotch and got up for a refill. He was muttering *I still can't believe it* when the phone rang.

'Call--from--Trish,' the phone announced stiffly in its computerized American voice.

'Go to voicemail!' he shouted at it. He wouldn't mind talking to Barry, his oldest mate, but not Trish. Lizzy had always dealt with her. He'd hardly put his tumbler down on the kitchen bench when his mobile phone jarred against his hip. The solicitor, at last!

'Is that you Derek? Where are you?'

Trish—damn!

'At home.'

'Derek I need to talk to you again. Lizzy was my oldest friend! Barry's no help,' she tutted.

He felt fuddled, 'Why?'

'Why? What do you mean *why*? He's in France, remember? The exhibition of French art for Sydney? Hello?' Derek heard the *call waiting* pips. 'Take that call and ring me back,' she ordered. School teacher! he thought darkly as he took the call. *Dylan* he read on the screen.

'Hi Dad, it's Dylan, I still can't believe it ... Mum! We're gutted, how are you?'

‘Been better.’

‘Lola says you shouldn’t be alone.’

*Lola*, the daughter in law from hell, Derek thought. Lola says a lot considering English is her second language. Lola was under the impression that Lizzy had promised her ‘a few things’: the bed in the spare room, the small table in the hall ...

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he floundered.

‘Yeah well, let’s talk tomorrow. You should think of downsizing now.’

‘Well she ... Look Dylan, I’m still in shock.’

‘Okay, sorry Dad,’ Derek could hear Lola’s voice in the background saying something about a fridge.

‘Why didn’t you stop her Dad?’ Was he blubbering? ‘Bye, Dad.’

‘Bye, son.’

Derek stood with the phone in his hand and a wave of pure anger swept over him. ‘Damn you Lizzy!’ he muttered.

The catalyst he realised now, was three months ago: the special exhibition of French Impressionist paintings in Paris. She’d wanted them to go together. Was that when she’d written in her letter: *‘I’m finally at peace with my decision and I know what I have to do.’?*

He wished he’d talked it over with Barry. He’d worked in the Art Gallery of New South Wales all his life. He knew about artists, and he was in the same art class as Lizzy. Derek couldn’t understand why she wanted



them to go all the way to Paris to see these particular paintings. She mentioned the weekend they'd spent there in June before they came home to get married, had something special happened? He couldn't remember. After all Barry was supposed to be organising an exhibition of some of the paintings in Sydney. When he mentioned Barry she said testily.

'They'll give him what they don't need for their own exhibition, Derek. The Musee D'Orsay is organising an exhibition of paintings from the Hermitage Museum ... St Petersburg ... Russia?' she raised her eyebrows.

He reminded her that he was Chair of the Precinct Committee and they had to make a decision about the kerbing and guttering near the pre-school. He was the consulting engineer and knew how to deal with the Council. She started yelling then about him being the 'indispensable volunteer'.

'I can't let the orchestra down either,' he said stiffly. 'I've been playing first trumpet since Nigel left.'

Now that she'd gone, he remembered how she'd looked directly into his eyes and told him there *was* something else. He'd interrupted her angrily and asked if she realised how much airfares cost. Then he said decisively that he was NOT going overseas this year, end of story.

'I see, thank you Derek, you've helped me make up my mind.'

'Good.'

*Good!* He'd said *good!* He had no idea what she'd planned to do.

Had this been her last attempt to tell him and he'd blocked it out?

As he'd done every day since it had happened, he reread her final letter. It was short and to the point with surprisingly few recriminations. Instead there was practical advice: where she kept all the documents and who their solicitor was.

He wondered again what the 'something else' had been, but there was no explanation in the letter. She wrote that she'd made a decision, she was going to go through with it and *'there'll be no going back.'* Why was I so unpleasant to you? he asked himself, why didn't I listen? If only I could have one more day with you—a chance to make amends.

She was such witty company and so talented, he sighed as he looked across at the exquisite water colour she'd painted. He thought dolefully how her talent had been submerged by her commitments. Now he reproached himself for only hanging the picture on the lounge room wall three weeks ago, just before ... though she'd been asking him for months. Her other pictures were stacked somewhere. 'I'll put them up myself,' she'd told him, but he put her off. He told her he hadn't got round to getting a new bit for the drill. He sat forward on the sofa, put his head in his hands and wept.

He woke the next morning on top of the bed clothes, fully dressed. The bright sunlight pouring into the room speared through his eyes and into his aching head. He showered quickly and pulled on clean clothes. He wandered outside and took deep breaths of the fresh clean morning air as he

picked up the plasticised tubes of the Saturday paper from the front lawn. Across the familiar street he saw Trish sweeping water off the porch of her identical Californian bungalow. He pulled some sodden mail from his mailbox and ducked back quickly into the house before she noticed him and asked why he hadn't called her back.

He made a single cup of coffee and thought with dread about Lola and Dylan sweeping through the place making chalk marks on the furniture like auctioneers. Jude would be next, arguing about the child care. He stood at the French windows in the living room and stared at the garden. For the first time since Lizzy had gone he felt at peace. He turned over the sodden postcard in his hand and re-read the message: *'Arrived safely. I'm fine. It had to be like this. Love Lizzy.'* It was dated ten days ago.

He was about to phone Trish when he heard her unmistakable voice calling his name. When he opened the front door, she fell in, spitting and furious like a wild cat. She was dressed in her Ugg boots and an old track suit.

'Well!' she shrieked.

He motioned her towards the living room.

'Have you heard from Lizzy?' she glared at him waving her mobile phone in his face.

'Yes,' he showed her his postcard.

'Paris!' she spat. 'A postcard from Paris! How DARE she?'

'It's a Monet painting,' Derek offered.

‘The cow! Our generation made feminism work!’ she hissed. ‘And now she’s stolen MY husband. **Your wife** has run off to Paris with **my** husband!’

He was stunned. He started to speak but she held up her hand like a school crossing supervisor. She told him to shut up, that Lizzy was a feminist Judas, that she’d betrayed the sisterhood. She stepped closer to him, her face contorted like an angry cartoon character, ‘It’s all your fault Derek.’

‘What!’

‘You moron, Derek, I’ve just got this!’

She held her phone aloft. ‘It says “*In Paris with Lizzy. Fantastic*” That’s from Barry. MY HUSBAND BARRY!’

Someone else was banging on the door and he backed away from her. Barry’s large frame blotted out the light and when Derek opened the door his friend hugged him.

‘She’s done it mate! She’s done it!’

‘What?’

‘Hi sweetheart,’ he hugged Trish and propelled her into the living room.

‘Lizzy’s won the Prix de Giverny. Only *the* most prestigious water colour prize in Europe—an Aussie’s won it for first time *ever!*’ Barry grinned at their startled faces. ‘*And* she’s the first woman!’

‘What about this text?’ Trish pushed the phone in his face.

‘Damn mobiles,’ he took the phone and tapped the screen. ‘Here’s the rest, “*Fantastic news re Lizzy’s prize*” he read out loud. “*C u soon xxxBarry.*”

He turned to Derek told him he’d seen Lizzy briefly in Paris before he came home. She’d been on French TV, CNN, BBC World ... She was famous!

‘Wait till she gets home!’

Derek pulled the crumpled letter from his pocket and showed it to them.

‘Lizzy’s not coming home,’ he said. ‘She’s left—for good. I’m still not sure why.’

©Cindy Davies