

A Good Person

Just at the time when Jacqui was beginning to believe that Simon might be the man she'd marry and settle down with, he went and dumped her, without warning, without giving any reason. She was distraught. Friends and teaching colleagues at CanSpeak Language School, when they heard the news, rallied around her in support. "He wasn't good enough for you," they told her. "Bastard!" they called him. "You'll soon find someone else," they consoled her.

Someone else. Yes, that was exactly what she needed to restore her damaged self-esteem and prove to herself and the world - most of all to Simon - that she was a desirable, loveable and loving woman. She chose Trevor.

Trevor was the IT geek at CanSpeak, in charge of the labs. He was single and he was good-enough-looking. Unfortunately, he had about as much sense of fun and adventure as a garden slug, but he was at hand and available. He'd do.

Seducing him was almost embarrassingly easy. It was kind of pathetic how he fitted right into Jacqui's plan, never stopping to ask himself why she would suddenly go and fall for a dork like him. Within a month she was able to announce that she and Trevor were a serious item and she made sure Simon heard the news. She imagined the deep regret he would feel. Realizing his mistake, she figured, he would come running back to her, begging for forgiveness, castigating himself for his foolishness. At that point she would break off with Trevor. That was her plan.

Timing would be tricky. She'd have to allow enough time for regret to sting Simon's heart, but not so long a time that he would despair of ever winning her back. Also she had to take account of Trevor's role in this. He deserved consideration for stepping into the breach when needed. She owed him some time in the sunshine of her favor. Being her steady would probably be the high point of his dull life. Around about Easter, she figured, would be the right time for the break with him. She'd make it as gentle and kind as she could.

Meanwhile, her mother and Trevor were getting into plans and preparations for a May wedding. In Jacqui's view, big weddings were a waste of money. "Uh huh, uh huh; sounds nice," she murmured from time to time while her mother babbled on about *peau de soie* and color palettes and Trevor fussed about the choice of music and the exact wording of their vows. "Uh huh, uh huh," Jacqui said. "That would be good."

Trevor had specific ideas not only for their wedding but also for their life together afterwards: he foresaw a townhouse in a new development to start with, then a move to a suburban single family home once they started a family, finally a fine old home in the Glebe. Jacqui found his aspirations boring. Life is more than a progression through the real estate market, she told him. Maybe she could do the break off sooner, she thought to herself. Definitely by Easter, at the latest.

Unfortunately, there was still no sign of repentance from Simon.

On Valentine's Day Trevor surprised Jacqui with a formal, bended knee proposal, a conventionally dazzling diamond, and a champagne supper. She felt she had no option but to feign delight, take the ring, and answer with a formal 'yes,' just for the time being.

Simon had still not been heard from. Rumor had it that he was dating another woman.

Jacqui let things float along for a few weeks. She even considered going through with the marriage. She could, as her grandmother would say, go farther and do worse than Trevor. If this were an age of arranged marriages, her family would have picked Trevor or someone exactly like him for her. He was a good person. He had a good job. He belonged to the Rotary Club. He sang in an amateur choir. His goofy smile was quite charming in its way. Her family all loved him. He had a steadying influence on her, they said.

But Jacqui did not want to be steadied; she wanted to be rocked. Simon knew how. But now he was rocking someone else. He'd moved in with the new woman. Jacqui felt herself drifting downstream towards that suburban townhouse, with only a brick two-storey in the Glebe to look forward to.

She couldn't do it. She would tell Trevor she did not love him, did not share his ambitions, would not marry him. She would tell him soon.

On Good Friday, a suitable day for bad news, she drove to Trevor's apartment, and, having fortified her resolve with several swigs of straight vodka, told him she couldn't go through with the marriage. She cited a growing awareness of disparity in their fundamental beliefs. She mentioned a new and pressing desire to travel to far places. She told him 'no' as kindly as she could.

Most people, Jacqui knew, would think her a fool to be doing what she was doing. Her hopes of getting back with Simon were dimming and dying. She should face the

fact that he really was out of her life. He had ignored her text messages, had never once called her back.

Why not marry Trevor then? Jacqui had no other grand plans for her future, like entering a convent or studying brain surgery in California. For a life of teaching English as a Second Language at CanSpeak Language School she could just as well be married to Trevor as not.

But it wouldn't be right. She did what she had to do, said what she had to say.

Then she wept with remorse when Trevor insisted on driving her back to her parents' place because she was in no fit state to drive. He was a considerate, caring person, a good man.

He seemed to be taking the blow well. How did one go about informing guests of the change in plans? he asked as he drove carefully along the parkway. Did one send a printed notice? Or a hand-written note? Should he take care of his side of the guest list?

Here was another sea of arrangements. But she had swum clear. "You deal with it," she said. "I'm too upset."

As Trevor made his sensible suggestions, Jacqui thought what a meticulous man he was, how he loved taking care of details. Or perhaps, it occurred to her, he's been thinking of these plans for weeks, hoping he would somehow be able to implement them. Wouldn't it be funny if he'd been longing for release as much as she had, asking himself over and over if there weren't some honorable way out? She smiled at the thought of it at the exact moment when he glanced over at her in connection with a question about cancelling gift registries. "This is not a joke," he snapped. "A lot of people besides myself are going to be hurt and disappointed: our families and our friends."

“It’s a terrible situation,” she agreed. “I’m so sorry.” She allowed herself a face-saving white lie: “I wish I had realized sooner how I felt.”

“So do I,” he said, and turned off at the exit for her parents’ home. He dropped her at the curb. “I can’t bear to go in and listen to it all again,” he said. “Good bye.”

She wondered if she should kiss him. Squeeze his hand. But he didn’t look receptive to affection. “Good bye,” she said.

Telling her family was even worse than telling Trevor, for they were not as controlled and careful as he. They raged and shouted and said hurtful things and made her feel guilty even though she knew she was doing the right thing. Only when she at last escaped to her own apartment could she sigh with relief at a hard job done and over with.

She was free.

But now she was at a loose end. Her family were furious. Her sister, who was to have been maid of honor, wouldn’t even speak to her. “What now?” Jacqui wondered.

“Walk away from it,” advised Mandy, her CanSpeak office-mate. “Let’s go tree planting out West. You need to get out of Trevor’s way. And Simon’s. You need a change. So do I.”

“Tree planting?”

“It’s a good job,” Mandy said. “I used to do it every summer through university. You get big bucks and there’s nothing to spend it on out in the bush. Plus you lose weight and get fit. It’s hard work, but kind of fun.”

“Let’s do it,” Jacqui said.

Tree-planting was hard work. Fun didn't come into it as far as Jacqui could see. Long before the end of her first day she regretted her decision. She wondered if it had even been a decision at all, or if taking this job hadn't been as much of a knee-jerk reaction as her engagement to Trevor had been. Once again by acting impulsively she'd landed in an exceedingly uncomfortable situation, though this time the discomfort was all physical.

The day was cold and overcast. Her hands were stiff and bleeding where she'd grazed them against rocks and roots. The canvas bags of seedlings chafed her shoulders and threatened to bring her to her knees with the weight of them. Her shins were a mass of scrapes and bruises from the tangled slash the lumberers had left on the ground.

Maybe, she thought, she shouldn't have broken off completely with Trevor. She could have suggested postponing the wedding. A natural opportunity to break would have turned up eventually. Or – here was another, better, plan – they could have cancelled the ceremony but gone ahead with the reception. It was already mostly paid for anyway. People could have worn their new dresses and danced and made jokes about the non-wedding. Too bad she hadn't thought of the idea at the time. Instead her mind had tunnel-visioned on the old-fashioned idea that breaking an engagement was like chopping down a tree. It didn't have to be that way, she realized now; you could lop off branches, as needed. Now, because of one bad decision, her back ached, and her shoulders, and her hands and her legs, and there were too many tiny trees still in the canvas bags at her hips.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Mandy showed her how to protect her planting hand by sheathing it in duct tape. That helped get her through till quitting time.

On the second day she dragged herself along the rough ground, groaning aloud each time she stooped to shove another seedling into the ground. Her body ached in every muscle and joint. “You get used to it,” Mandy told her.

On the third day, a cold, steady rain washed away her tears of pain and self-pity and made the ground a little softer to her shovel’s thrust. Or perhaps her planting arm was actually getting stronger.

Jacqui stuck with it. She might have broken an engagement but she was not a quitter. She struggled to find the rhythm of the work and to build her body’s strength. “I am strong,” she encouraged herself. “I am free. I am not trapped in a boring townhouse with a boring husband.”

Yet she missed Trevor in some ways.

After two weeks on the job, she called him. She wanted to make sure he was all right and tell him how she was getting along. She wanted to let his dull, soothing voice wash over her like the healing warmth of hot bath water.

“How are you?” she began.

“Angry,” he said. “Disappointed. Embarrassed.”

“You have every right to those feelings,” she said in a pleasant, sympathetic tone.

“Saying that doesn’t help,” he said. “You let me down, and our families and our friends. You skipped town and left me to deal with the mess. You didn’t even have the decency to return the ring.”

Oh God, the ring! She tried to remember what she’d done with it. Trust Trevor to be concerned about a detail like an itsy-bitsy ring. Probably she’d lost it on the

planting ground among the seedlings and the slash. “If I find it, I’ll send it back,” she promised. “Registered mail.”

Then she started in on what she wanted to talk about, which was her inspiration about the non-wedding reception. “You know, I was thinking this whole thing over, and I’ve realized that we wasted money we didn’t need to. What we could have done is we could have...”

“Could have –” Trevor interrupted. “It’s too late for ‘could have.’”

She sighed. She thought he’d be interested in the idea. But of course he was right. It was too late. As for the waste of money, it was not her fault as much as Trevor’s and her mother’s. She had warned them all along about extravagance. “Let’s keep it simple,” she’d said. “Let’s see how that looks as the time gets closer.” Neither of them listened. But she didn’t want to get into blaming. Trevor and her family would realize eventually that she’d acted for the best.

She changed the subject. “I’m working at this really terrible job planting trees. You have no idea. Let me tell you about...”

“Why did you call? What do you want exactly?” Trevor interrupted.

This wasn’t the old Trevor. Trevor was a good listener; boring people often are. She wanted to explain to him the satisfaction she was finding in hard physical labor. It didn’t just strengthen the body, she was discovering, but also enlarged the mind, broadened one’s sympathies. She could understand Trevor better now. He was a man who liked to see his life plan laid out neat and straight as a row of trees. They could have an interesting discussion about that. But he’d cut her off before she’d even got started. She’d never have thought he could be so rude. “You’ve changed,” she said.

“Of course I’ve changed,” he said. “My life’s been torn apart, my plans shattered, most of my savings gone – and all for nothing. Now you want to chat about tree planting?” He hung up.

With her calloused, grimy, brush-damaged hand, Jacqui closed her phone. Hanging up on someone mid-conversation was really cruel. Jacqui didn’t deserve that. True, her own behavior towards Trevor had not been entirely commendable. Her relationship with him had been, you might say, a little manipulative, selfish even. But she’d been honest in the end, and she had never intended to be cruel.

She re-opened the phone and dialed Simon’s number.

“Jacqui who?” he asked. He didn’t even recognize her voice.

She hung up on him.

Even after she got used to the work, Jacqui was still slower than some others on the crew until, by watching Mandy carefully, she learned a couple of tricks: dumping a few seedlings here and there along the way, for instance. Not too many or it would be noticed and you’d be charged for the lost trees or even fired from the job. Jacqui settled on a one-fifth wastage. That, she figured, was fair to the paper company, to the environment, and to herself. As workers were paid by the tree, her pay climbed.

Unfortunately, the checker caught her discarding a bundle. She docked her pay, the bitch, but didn’t fire her. “I’m giving you another chance,” she said, as if it was a big favor she was granting.

Jacqui cut her wastage to ten percent. No one would notice that.

She learned too how you could move along faster if you dug less deep. Half these trees weren't going to grow anyway, she justified this. And even if they did, who was to say they wouldn't get burned in some forest fire before they were of much use to the world anyway?

The black flies swarmed in and added new torment to the work. Jacqui wore long pants and a turtleneck and a pashima wrapped over her head and face, and still the flies found a way in and covered her sweating, bruised and aching body with the welts of their bites.

Every Friday some of the weaker-willed workers gave up and quit, and naïve new workers came in. Jacqui stayed on.

At the end of July a half dozen Mexicans joined the workforce. Jacqui began to teach them English as they all toiled up and down the vast scrubby hillside. "Trees," she taught them. "Earth. Sky. Sun. Rain." She shouted the words across the rows of seedlings and her pupils shouted them back.

"We are planting," she called. "What are we planting?"

"We are planting trees," they shouted back.

She was their teacher, their mentor in all things. She showed them how to duct tape their hands, how to move forward in the planter's duck walk. In the evenings, in the camp, she helped them fill in forms and figure out long distance cards. Because of their respect for her, she felt obliged to give up dumping trees. "This is an important job," she lectured. "Respect the trees you plant. They are helping to save our planet." If she herself was going to respect the trees, she realized she'd have to plant them to the correct

depth too. She set a good example. Practice had made her stronger and faster. Her pay stayed high.

She felt good about herself. She'd learned a lot on this job, morally as well as physically. She called Trevor again.

"What do you want now?" he asked.

"I think we should keep in touch," she said. "No hard feelings, just because the marriage thing didn't work out." She wanted him to acknowledge that she was a good person who had corrected her mistakes and acted in a responsible way in the end. She really didn't like it when people were mad at her, hung up the phone on her.

"Please stop pestering me," Trevor said.

She couldn't believe Trevor could be so hurtful. She walked slowly back to her tent. She sat on her cot and picked at her bites. She counted them. She compared numbers with Mandy. She had six more. She had more than anyone else in the tent. She suffered most. She worked hardest. She was a good person, kind and helpful. The Mexicans adored her.

She worked all through the summer. She worked through the black fly season and the mosquito season and the cold, wet mornings of late August. She planted a whole forest. Surely that proved her essential goodness.

In September Mandy went to Japan to teach ESL, but Jacqui went back to Ottawa and her job at CanSpeak. Trevor was no longer working there, she'd heard. He'd moved on to a better job with the government. Right away she found the engagement ring; it was in the desk drawer in her office among the red pencils. She sent it to straight off to

Trevor, registered mail, just as she'd promised. Through the grapevine she heard he had a new girlfriend now. Perhaps he could recycle the thing.

With her tree planting money, she put a down-payment on a townhouse. She invited Trevor to her housewarming party. He sent a polite refusal. Thinking it over, she couldn't say she blamed him. She wished they could have stayed friends though. He was a good person, and so was she.