

Friends and Sweaters

Sometimes Laura felt just like a gerbil, running around and around on his wheel. She badly needed a break. She just needed a few hours to herself where there were no demands made on her – no kids pulling out of her, no husband looking for his dinner, no mother-in-law with Alzheimer's. Right now, even five minutes to herself with a secret Mars bar would be good. Fifteen minutes with only a gin and tonic for company would be great. And a couple of hours on her own in a dark cinema would be absolutely divine. Then and there, right in the middle of helping her two children with their math homework, she made up her mind. She was going out this evening. On her own.

Laura rang her friend Helen.

“Helen, help! I'm cracking up! The kids are driving me nuts. And as for Dermot, he is no use whatsoever.”

“Geez, Laura, sounds like it's rough with you. But I'm sure Dermot does what he can?” Helen tried to calm her down.

It had little effect.

“Does what he can? He gets home at six, eats his dinner and sits with his arse velcroed to the couch for the rest of the night. And those are the nights when he's not away on a goddamn business trip. And he expects me to look after his mother too. Help! Can I please, please drop the kids around to you for a couple of hours so I can get a bit of a break?”

As always, Helen's voice was calm and soothing.

“No problem, Laura. You poor thing. Sounds like you could do with some ‘me time’. Sure, bring the kids over here. I’ll give them a bite of dinner with my own two and Dermot can collect them from here later on. How would that work for you?”

“What are you, Helen? You’re an angel! That would be brilliant. I’ll do the same for you towards the end of next week, after Dermot is back from his trip to Cork, if that’s good for you. See you around five then.”

Laura still marvelled at how well Helen was doing since the break up of marriage. It must be three years ago now. She worked part-time, looked after the kids and seemed at this stage to be without any trace of bitterness. Laura knew she was lucky to have such a good friend, willing to help her out at short notice. She raced to get the kids to finish their homework and then ran upstairs to put on a bit of make-up. She looked at the clock. It was nearly four thirty. In an hour and a half, she thought, he’ll stride in through the door with that smug breadwinner’s face on him and, if she were here, he would call out, “Hi, Laura. Did you call to see my mother? How is she? What’s for dinner? I’m starving.” Why couldn’t she smile back at him? Why was she no longer able to pretend that she thought everything was okay between them? What was happening to her, to them? Why was she always mad at him these days?

But she had no time to think about all that now. It was Wednesday. He would be expecting lasagne and salad. Instead, he’d find Laura’s note on the fridge door. She wrote it on a blank space at the bottom of a page torn out of one of his precious Concert Hall programmes. She used one of the kid’s luminous green gel pens. She stuck it there with a fridge magnet from the Canary Islands that she had brought back

from a trip with the girls back in the days. It was in the shape of a camel. He really hated that camel.

“I have to go out, just for a while, on my own. The kids are in Helen’s. Talk later. L.”

She’d love to see his face when he read it. She wondered would he read it before or after he went upstairs to take off his suit jacket and put on his hideous green Pringle sweater? His mother had bought the sweater for him the Christmas before she forgot his name. He seemed to think it suited him. He had hardly taken it off since.

Laura was out the door at quarter to five. The kids were delighted with the expedition to Helen’s house and were even happy to kiss Laura goodbye. She gave Helen a hug and thanked her again for being a lifesaver, before she got back into the car and headed for town. She very deliberately put her phone on silent, bought the ‘Evening Herald’ and headed to a small Italian restaurant in the Temple Bar area for a bite to eat. After munching her way through a bowl of minestrone soup and a plate of carbonara, she bought a ticket for a harmless rom-com in the nearby cinema. It was ideal: undemanding and it even made her laugh in places. After it was over, when she went to rummage in her purse for the car keys, she felt her phone. She took it out and was about to put it back to normal mode. It was then she noticed the four missed calls. They were all from Helen. Her heart sank. Something terrible must have happened to one of the kids. What an awful mother she was. She had deserted them and then turned her phone off. Her hand was shaking as she called Helen’s home number.

When Helen answered she said,

“It’s just as well you didn’t see my calls until now, Laura. The panic is over, thank God. Your Ian was bitten by that stupid bloody terrier from next door. Plenty blood and tears, but nothing that won’t be right before he’s married! Dermot arrived shortly after it happened, just after I had been trying to get a hold of you and he took care of everything. He was great, so calm and in charge.”

“Oh, that’s Dermot all right. But tell me more about Ian,” said Laura.

“Well, loads of blood as I said, but the bite was only skin deep. Dermot took him to the surgery and he got an anti-tetanus shot just to be sure and they put a few steri-strips on the bite. But they said he’ll be grand.”

Laura exhaled.

“Oh, the relief. I feel so guilty though. I should have been there.”

“Don’t be daft. It’s me that feels guilty,” Helen protested. “It was all my fault for allowing it to happen. I should have checked that stupid dog was locked up before I let them out into the garden. Anyway, the only lasting damage is to Dermot’s lovely green Pringle sweater that I bought him two Christmases ago. I have it here steeping trying to get the blood out of it. I hope it comes outOh, Christ, what have I just said? I’m upset, Laura, and getting mixed up. I mean the sweater that...was it his mother gave it to him?”

It was then everything fell into place for Laura. The business trips, the late-night texts, his beloved green sweater.

“We both know his mother never gave Dermot that awful green sweater, Helen. She has better taste than that. And she’s the lucky one. At least she will never realise what a lying, cheating bastard she has reared.”