

Growing Wings

When Clifford set off at 10am on Monday for *Mrs Potts' Tea Emporium* he didn't expect to be returning to Lester Ridgemore and Associates by 10.07. He still had 13 minutes of his morning break left. To be frank, it was disturbing, it felt *forbidden*. He played with the knot of his tie in doorway of the staff kitchen, looking at the kettle and jar of Nescafe.

He watched his colleagues chatting whilst spooning coffee into their mugs, all blazoned with witty slogans like 'Thank Dog for Dyslexics' and 'Blow Me – I'm Hot.' There was a mug in the overhead cupboard that he had brought into the office on his first day. It said 'Poultry World 1978'.

He headed back to his desk. Gavin was kissing Freya. Gavin had stated earlier in the week that they loved each other, a declaration Clifford found unlikely given the frequency with which Gavin seemed to fall in love. Before Freya it was Naimh and before Naimh it was Elle. Clifford's parents' marriage lasted more than 50 years. He thought of his Mother when she died. She looked hollowed out, not just by the cancer, but by the years she'd given away to others. He couldn't see Gavin giving anything of himself to anybody. Well, not in the metaphorical sense.

"Cliffy. No raisin toast at Potty's today?"

As Freya straightened her blouse, Clifford found the knot in his tie again. "It seems to be closed."

"I heard they sold it. Maybe we'll get a decent place now. Somewhere that does proper coffee, those fancy meringue things. All the different colours."

"Macarons."

"That's it. Macaroons, Cliffy." Gavin swigged his coffee. His mug said 'The Art of Love' and depicted an image of Leonardo da Vinci painting the Mona Lisa with a brush strapped to his penis.

When Clifford was a teenager, his sister Prudence had decided she wanted to be called Lilah. Mother sat down with such force he heard the bones in her neck crick.

"It sounds like a flotation device. Your Father won't approve."

"It's Lilah, with an H. It means black as the night. And I think it suits my personality more."

Growing Wings

Mother's hand went to the pulse under her throat. "What if Clifford came home and announced he wanted to be called something else, something ridiculous, like Hercules. You'd find it odd, wouldn't you?"

Lilah laughed. "I think I'd love him even more."

Gavin informed Clifford that the new café would be called Buzz. It sounded like an alarm. He wondered how long the other, older shops would last before they too moved with the times. The haberdasher's was long gone. The gift shop shared with the newsagent's. What would become of the butcher's and the baker's? Perhaps if they were renamed Bone and Yeast, they might survive.

"Mrs Potts-whatever-it-was-called was a mouthful. Buzz is simple."

Clifford just nodded. "I've heard there'll be a coffee menu. South American, cold drip, all that shit. Hopefully they'll serve real food too. About time this backwater got a little bit funky."

Clifford's tie knot was very wonky. He gave it a sharp tug. He wasn't going to attend the grand opening of Buzz. Everyone was looking at him when he said, in a polite way he thought, that no, he wouldn't be attending. Gavin told him, yes, he would, and he pinched Clifford's right cheek quite hard, so that it smarted for a few minutes afterwards.

When Lilah began to stay out late, Father would pace the floor of the living room. Mother drew the curtains tight. Clifford supposed she wanted to ensure the neighbours could not see their shame. That's what Father said, that Lilah was bringing shame on the family with her loose ways.

'She's in love,' Mother would say. But her voice was tiny like she was only half saying it and that she could take it back if she really needed to.

Growing Wings

The fascia for the new café was bright pink. Like the pinny Mother wore when she baked. The letters BUZZ shouted out in purple. A menu was chalked on an easel outside. Exotic names like chai, mochaccino and macchiato. Clifford's brain ached. He searched for tea. There were spiders and thick shakes and iced chocolates. He was so caught up with the array of beverages that he didn't notice the rest of the group had already sat down. They called his name, rather loudly, and he stood at the counter unable to move as they laughed and caroused. The young waitress, with a boyish hairstyle and a vine of roses tattooed in a swirl around her arm looked at him.

'Do you want to order?'

He looked at his feet. The others were shouting out to him to join them. If he said no, he didn't want to order, and then he did take a tea later on, would she feel he had slighted her? If he said, yes, the others would feel he had overstepped the mark by putting his order in first.

Before he could decide who to risk offending an older woman appeared behind the counter. 'Are you together?' She cast a puzzled look over at the group.

Looking at the ragtag assembly of colleagues he could see her point. She smiled at him. A warm smile that made his chest warm. The other waitress took an electronic gadget to the table.

'Do you have tea?'

'Earl Grey, rosehip, chamomile, ginger and lemongrass, green, white you name it, we serve it.' She stopped, again with that smile, and let him catch up. 'But I'm guessing you want English Breakfast, with a pot of milk on the side and perhaps a scone and jam?'

Growing Wings

When Lilah was 17 she came home from a secret night out in the city and crept into Clifford's room. She smelled of stale beer and menthol cigarettes. Her eye makeup was smudged and her clothes were rumpled.

'Guess what I did?' Clifford wasn't very good at guessing and Lilah wasn't very good at holding onto exciting information. 'I slept with Ian. I'm finally free of my virginity. And thank fuck for that.'

She told him that in the morning she expected that people would be able to tell what she'd done. That she was a woman now. She expected that you would see it in her walk. She said she felt like she was glowing from the inside out. She said there was no shame in it.

'Don't be such a prude, Clifford. Love comes in many forms. Not just like Mum and Dad. It'll be your turn soon.'

Clifford smiled at the older waitress and his stomach tingled. As he headed back to sit with his colleagues he wondered if they could read his thoughts just by how he walked. He wondered if he was glowing from the inside out. He wasn't sure if there was any shame in it.

Gavin slapped him on the back, quite hard. 'See they've got some hot wait staff, Cliffy. There's even one for you.' He winked at the older woman and she told Gavin he was a naughty boy, but she was looking at Clifford. Clifford said nothing. His stomach still felt odd, squishy and unsettled.

Later, the older waitress came back to clear the table. She brushed Clifford's hand with hers when she picked up his tea cup. He felt so hot that he loosened his tie to the level Father called slovenly.

Growing Wings

There was quite a queue to pay and Clifford found himself at the back. The young woman was at the register. He felt his mouth droop with disappointment, but by the time he fished out his wallet the older woman was in front of him.

‘I’m June. I get the feeling you’ll be a regular here.’ She held out a hand. He stuffed his ten dollar note into it. ‘Oh,’ she said, half-smiling, ‘I was hoping you might tell me your name.’

‘I’m Clifford. Clifford Byrd. I’m an account...I’m in finance.’

‘You must have your hands full managing those colleagues of yours. But a man of your experience would have his ways, I expect.’ She stood back and Clifford sensed she was waiting for a witty response.

Mother had cooked a Sunday roast. A joint of beef, Hasselback potatoes, pumpkin, green beans, carrots, gravy. Father was sharpening the knife. Mother was fetching mustard and salt and pepper shakers to the table.

Lilah had left the house last night, wearing a tight-fitting top in a gold knit and bell-bottomed pants in deep green. She was going to a party. Her hair hung in black lengths either side of her face. When she had walked through the kitchen to leave, Father was reading his paper. Clifford sat in the living room with him, wondering what it would be like to go to a party. He was never invited. Mother told him it was because he was his Father’s son. As Lilah’s perfume wafted over him, he looked at Father. How he read his paper, how he folded each page exactly, how he seemed to remain outside the family yet still in command of it. The door slammed behind her.

Now, steam rose from the meat and each slice revealed a tender pink middle. The potatoes were crisp and the vegetables soft but not soggy. Lilah hadn’t come home.

‘She must learn some respect.’

Growing Wings

‘She’s not a child anymore.’

‘She lives under my roof.’

‘She’s a different generation. Their life is more open than ours.’

‘If, when you say open, you mean cheap, I concur. If she continues on this path, she is no daughter of mine.’

‘Clifford, would you mind walking into town to see if your sister is at the café?’
Mother rubbed the edges of her pinny.

The main road was busier than he expected. Young couples strolled, hand in hand. Groups of single males gathered outside the hotel drinking VB from stubbies. Clifford buttoned up his cardigan. He went to the only café. Billows of smoke hung over the Formica tables. There was a smell of fried onions. He spotted Lilah at the back, nursing a white mug. Her make-up was smudged down her cheeks. The lipstick smeared off her lips.

‘If dad sent you, you can bugger off.’ She didn’t look at him.

He wondered what he could say to bring her home. He stood silent for a while.
‘There’s roast beef and gravy.’

She sniffed. ‘There’ll be humble pie and a large portion of humiliation too. I’m not coming.’

The sight of her in her hunched over the stained table, crying, made him feel squashed inside. He should have sat down next to her until she was ready to come home. Instead, he left her. He returned to the house where the smell of gravy still permeated the air and where Father had returned to his paper. Mother was washing the dishes.

‘Did you find her?’

Growing Wings

He told her, no. He hadn't. A burn of shame shot through his cheeks.

Lilah never came home. She sent him a postcard. From London. She told him he should get away from that backwards country town. To stop being so frightened of life. Grow some wings. When he graduated, he stood in front of the travel agent's window. In his hand, the black leather briefcase his parents had given him for his 21st birthday felt heavy. A burden. The sun behind him shone against the window and his own reflection shimmered. In his place he saw his sister, laughing with a group of people, wings spreading from either side of her shoulders. He looked down at the briefcase, along the road in the town with the familiar shop fronts and the ladies walking their dogs and the men striding with their newspapers under their arms, at the brown hills beyond. He looked at the ticket price to London. He felt an itch down his spine and out across his shoulder blades.

At the counter, June smiled again. He wanted to speak to her. To tell her that he wasn't a manager, he'd be no good at that, and that he'd love to take cake and tea each morning.

'I'll keep the table at the back for you,' she said, saving him from humiliation as his mouth opened but only silence fell out. She pointed to the place where Lilah had sat all those years before. Where he'd sat when it was *Mrs Potts' Tea Emporium*. Where he'd watched other people's lives, as they lived and loved and grew wings. He felt that same itch again and it made him smile.