

# **A Bit of a Change**

by

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Genre:

Psychological Literature

I used to think that October be consigned to the scrap heap of redundant months. Nothing in all my life had ever happened in October, until that is, I decided to leave Frank.

It wasn't really my idea. I'd have been just as likely to drift along for another twenty years, half asleep. It was other people, pointing out this and that about him, things I hadn't noticed to be honest. I hadn't looked at Frank properly for a long time.

His greatest crime was being nondescript, apparently. That was my sister, Flo, who'd never warmed to him because he didn't like football.

'He's not even nondescript in a way you can feel sorry for,' she was fond of saying. 'He's just there, in the background. A waste of space.'

The children had taken to criticising him too.

'I love him to bits and all that, but look at him, Mum,' Sara would say on her increasingly rare visits home. 'He doesn't do anything since he gave up work. Unless you count digging up weeds exciting. He's no fun.'

'How can you stick it, Mum?' Dan said, the last time he swung by with his laundry. 'He doesn't say much; he never wants to go out. It's not healthy.' He was doing psychology at university. 'He's more interested in his birdwatching, I mean who birdwatches these days?'

I tried to study Frank properly, when he wasn't looking, and supposed they must be right; them and the magazines I read. A relationship based on exasperated fondness didn't really cut the mustard these days.

So I decided to leave him. It was autumn, the leaves were turning gold in a way that filled me with despair, and I was tired of trying to fathom it all out.

'You should go while you're young enough to start over,' my friend, Dee, had told me knowingly. She'd left Geoffrey two years ago, when her youngest immigrated to New Zealand. She'd sold their house, lost two stone and seen a bit of the world before moving in

with a builder from Croyden. ‘You and Frank never had that spark, that chemistry you read about, but it’s not too late, Mo. Look at me and Kevin.’

So I packed a small suitcase, fed the cat and got a bus into town. I would phone Frank when I got wherever I was going.

I sat in the park for a good half hour. There was a band playing near the river and I let the music wash over me. People in jeans were dancing in a carefree way and I longed to join them, but years of being inhibited held me back. Reluctantly, I moved on and hovered outside the travel agents on Bridge Street feeling silly. What now? My heart was pounding uncomfortably. I had a suspicion that being impulsive didn’t suit me. I stared at my reflection in the window and saw a bubble perm, a lined face and an overweight body in a belted mac. Why was I wearing it? It wasn’t even raining. On a whim I shrugged it off and stuffed it in a rubbish bin, then ducked through a set of double doors. I’d spotted a neighbour, pounding efficiently down the pavement towards me. I couldn’t cope with questions. I stared at the spotless counter in front of me and willed her to walk past.

‘Hello Madam, my name is Lucy. What time’s your appointment?’

My head jerked up. A pretty girl with a pierced eyebrow tilted her head.

‘Doesn’t that hurt?’ I said, without thinking.

‘This?’ She twiddled the tiny stud. ‘Not really. Just had it done; I fancied a bit of a change. You know? Do you like it?’ She smiled, openly.

‘It’s lovely,’ I said and it was; it was smooth and shiny like her skin. Lucy looked pleased.

‘Now, what time did you say your appointment was?’ She adopted a businesslike air and flicked through a diary, shaking her stripy hair and I realised I was in the hairdressers. The big, expensive looking one with tinted windows and intimidating posters of models.

‘Oh, I, er, don’t have an appointment,’ I said, hot with embarrassment. They wouldn’t be used to old fogies like me in here.

‘That’s alright,’ Lucy said, kindly. ‘We’re not very busy today. I can do you now if you’ve got time. What was it you wanted?’

That stumped me. I hadn’t set foot inside a hairdressing salon for nearly fifteen years. I usually trimmed my own fringe and did a home perm every six months.

‘Come and sit down and we’ll have a look at you,’ Lucy said, coming out from behind the counter. She loomed over me in clumpy shoes, but her touch was gentle. ‘Bring your suitcase through. Going away are you, is that why you fancy a new hairdo?’

‘Sort of,’ I said, following her across the wooden floor and letting her settle me into a soft leather chair. She moved her fingers through my tangled curls and it was so relaxing I forgot to feel mortified. I concentrated on a row of shiny bottles and jars that looked full of promises.

‘We could really do something with this,’ Lucy said softly, eyes narrowed in the mirror. ‘It’s quite long now the perm’s almost grown out. I could put some colour in, warm it up. Maybe get Karen to tidy your eyebrows.’

I stared at her transfixed and started to feel something that might have been excitement.

‘A new image,’ I said, and in the mirror a woman with flushed cheeks and bright eyes sparkled back at me.

‘Your husband won’t recognise you when he sees you,’ she said, catching my mood and squeezing my shoulders. ‘He’ll see you in a whole new light!’

I had time to think about Frank a lot as Lucy worked her magic. Maybe I’d become a habit for him too. I kept seeing him in his beloved garden nurturing my favourite plants year

in, year out, tending them in his careful way. Careful. That was the word, not nondescript after all.

Lucy was saying something above the noise of the hairdryer.

‘Where is it you’re going then?’ She nodded towards my suitcase, propped guiltily by my feet.

‘Birdwatching,’ I said, without missing a beat. ‘We’re going birdwatching together.’

END.