

Peter Bradshaw

Reunion

So I'm sitting here in the hotel foyer on one of the big squashy sofas. I've checked out, paid the bill and my wheelee suitcase has the extendable handle up, ready to go. But the guy on reception says the taxi's going to be another quarter of an hour. This gives me a bit of time to think. And after the events of the last twenty-four hours I've been trying to work something out.

5 I've been in love three times during my life. Once was when I was married in my forties. That was with Sally. We were having an affair, although neither of us said that word out loud. Once before that, was in my early thirties, with Michiko, now my ex-wife. And once when I was just eleven years old, with Lucy Venables, the girl who lived next door. She was also eleven.

I'll quickly tell you about the breakup in each case.

10 Easily the most painful was with Sally. I'd scheduled one of the covert semi-regular dinner dates that often led to something back at her apartment. I'd been a little bit early, sitting at a table, working up the courage to make some sort of declaration to her, trying to think what I might say, when she turned up and started saying to me – even before she'd sat down – that she had fallen in love with somebody else, and they were moving in together.

15 I numbly nodded my absolute and immediate acceptance of this situation. I even did this lip-biting little smile, taking it well, you see, like a reality TV contestant getting told he's not going through to the next round. Sally said that under the circumstances, it was probably better if we put dinner off until some other time, having not actually removed her coat. She had never looked more beautiful, more strong and free.

20 With Michiko, it was some time after that in Tokyo. We had gone there for her mother's funeral. After the ceremony, back at the family home, we sat silently on a black leather couch with ice-cold aluminium armrests. Michiko just asked me, really quietly, where I would be living when we got back to London.

25 And as for the last case, well, there was no break-up as such, but my eleven-year-old's passion for eleven-year-old Lucy Venables was just as real as my other loves. I've found myself thinking of Lucy Venables ever since I arrived here at the hotel for this conference for people like me involved in the pharmaceutical industry.

Last night there was a drinks reception. We had these name-tags, mine was written in biro, "Mr Chatwin". Waiters circulated with drinks. The canapes were meagre. I got quite drunk, and after a while I fancied a cigarette, so I went out through a sliding door onto this large artificial lawn they have, starkly lit with security lights, like a cross between a golf course and a football pitch.

30 There was a woman on the grass, smoking, with her back to me. I got this really strange feeling and headed across the astroturf towards her, with a half-formed idea about asking for a light. My strange feeling got stranger the nearer I got.

Was it...? Could it actually be...? There was nothing else for it. I was going to have to talk to her.

"Excuse me," I said. "I wonder if you..."

35 She turned to face me, and immediately gaped in dawning recognition. Her name tag read: "Dr Venables". She actually pointed at my "Mr Chatwin" tag with the non-smoking hand which she then clapped over her mouth.

"Elliot! Oh my God! Oh my God! Is it you? Elliot!"

"Hi, hello," I said, not knowing what else to say.

40 "Oh my God! Elliot! This is so weird! I was thinking about you this afternoon! Just now! So weird! I was thinking of that time in our back garden! With the darts! And Dad hitting you! Oh my God! And we never got a chance to talk to you or say sorry or anything!"

She was clearly drunker than me. I didn't know what to say, so I just smiled.

"Do you remember me, Elliot?" she asked.

45 "Of course," I replied.

“And all that with my dad... and the darts... I’m so sorry! Gosh, do you know for years after that I used to think about you.”

“Oh, I really don’t remember too much about it...” I then said airily.

That of course was a lie. The whole story came back into my mind, in every detail, with immense clarity and force. Lucy Venables’s family had moved into the house next to mine at the beginning of the baking summer of 1976. I was an only child with few friends. One endless hot day, I was riding my bicycle round and round on the flagstones of my front yard.

Eventually, I fell over and heard someone giggling. I turned around to see Lucy staring at me.

“You’re not very good at that, are you?” she said pertly.

I couldn’t think how to reply. Then she said: “Why don’t you come in, for some lemonade?”

We went through Lucy’s front door, through their hall and into the back kitchen. Lucy poured out two glasses of Corona lemonade from a stippled bottle taken from the fridge and we went out into the garden. Then we sort of played in her Wendy House for a bit until her mum came out into the garden with Lucy’s little sister.

“Hello!” she said brightly. “You must be Elliot. I had a nice chat with your mum yesterday, Elliot. We have to go now. Lovely that you’ve made friends with Lucy. Bye!”

We played a bit more in the Wendy House. Soon it was time for me to go.

Every day this scene would repeat itself. Without ever arranging it in advance, I would hang around outside the house and Lucy would come out and invite me in to play in her garden. We would play doctors and nurses. Silly baby stuff, considering that we were eleven-year-olds.

Soon I was deeply in love with Lucy. There is no other way to describe it. And it was more poignant and intense for the lack of any sexual feeling. Just a hot, sick feeling in my tummy. And when Lucy would start to make fun of me and be cross with me, the feeling was even worse.

It all came to a head one Saturday afternoon. Lucy and I were listlessly playing and little Chloë would try to join in, but she was sharply dismissed: “Go *away*, Chloë!” She hung back, talking sadly to her doll. I was hot and bad-tempered and finally Lucy asked me what the matter was.

“May I give you a kiss?” I asked.

Lucy was silent, and I stared down at the ground, astonished at my own boldness, but smugly conscious of having turned the tables. Suddenly, Lucy said to Chloë: “Come here!”

Obediently, she followed as Lucy led her over to their shed, whose door had a dartboard and three darts. She plucked out the darts, stood Chloë up against it and, taking a box of coloured chalks from somewhere, proceeded to draw a loose outline around the little girl’s head and shoulders, about twelve inches clear. Then Lucy offered the darts to me.

“There. If you can throw all three darts so they stick in the door, inside the line, but without hitting Chloë, then I’ll kiss you.”

Saucer-eyed Chloë stayed perfectly still against the shed door, clutching her little doll.

“OK,” I said, taking the darts and positioning myself about seven feet away. I sized up my first throw, the dart-point lined up at eye-level, rocking back and forth on the balls of my feet. Then I threw.

The dart landed just above Chloë’s head.

“Well done,” said Lucy coolly. “One down, two to go.”

I cleared my throat. After a few more little feints, I threw the second dart.

This one landed just to the left of Chloë’s neck, inside the line. That counted. But now her lower lip was trembling; her eyes brimmed and she was starting to shift alarmingly about.

“Stay still, Chloë!” ordered Lucy. “All right, Elliot. Third and last dart. Get this right, and it’ll be a very big kiss for you.”

My hand trembled. I wobbled my arm freely from the shoulder, to loosen it up, jogging briefly on the spot.

Then I raised it and prepared again. I threw. A clumsy one – in the direction of Chloë’s left eye. She flinched, turned; and it went into her ear. Chloë put her hand up to it; a trickle of blood ran down her forearm.

I panicked. I ran up and pulled the dart out of her ear. She screamed. And Lucy's father ran out into the garden. My little victim ran up to him and hugged him around the waist, sobbing desperately.

"What the bloody hell's going on here?" he thundered.

"Elliot was playing a sort of William Tell¹ game daddy," said Lucy with a sweet smirk.

100 Her father walked up and smacked me once across the face. Then he stood aside as I blubberingly ran out through the kitchen and back to my house. I never dared tell my own parents what had happened and soon after that, Lucy's family moved away and I never saw her again.

It all came back to me with this very attractive woman in front of me.

"Daddy used to talk about you a lot over supper," she said. "I think he knew he shouldn't have hit you."

105 "Oh, I really can't remember," I replied.

We were standing flirtatiously close.

"I don't think you ever got that kiss, did you?" she said.

"No," I said. "Well, I wasn't entitled to it."

"This party is very boring," she said.

110 "Yes."

"Why don't you come up to my room and I'll give you a kiss now."

She turned on her heel and went back through the party and into the foyer. I followed.

We got into the lift, in which we were alone. We kissed.

115 Once at the sixth floor, we got out and headed for her room three doors along. Once inside, we kissed again, rolling on the big double-bed. I began clawing her clothes off and, panting, she plucked at my belt.

"Oh Elliot!" she gasped. "Call me by my name. Say my name."

At that moment I swept up her hair, to kiss her neck, and this revealed her ear, cut and disfigured by my dart. In the next instant, I complied with her request:

"Chloë..."

120 I left her room some time after that. She checked out early this morning before I was up.

Ah. The man on reception says my taxi's going to take a while yet and he wants to know if I'd like a complimentary drink from the bar.

I think I shall ask for a Corona lemonade.

(2017)

¹ *William Tell*: a mythical figure in Swiss history. He was required to hit with an arrow an apple placed on his son's head, which he did successfully.