

## Never Look Back

“You’ve done *what?*” exclaimed Celia, her blue eyes bulging wide, and her nostrils flaring. “I thought we’d always agreed to discuss things like that with the family. What were you thinking?”

“Well thanks for that reception. Not quite what I’d expected,” was Peter’s response, being completely wrong footed. “As it was your special birthday, I just wanted it to *be* special. And I *have* discussed it with Dick and Laura. They both think it’s a great idea. Anyway, they’re grown up with families of their own, family meetings don’t have the same meaning anymore.”

“Oh so you’ve discussed it with the children, have you, but not me.” Celia felt wounded and deflated. Peter was hurt,

“Oh come on darling, how could I have discussed it with you and it still be a secret?” He shrugged and looked out into the back garden, with its depressing drab and dreary greyness, longing for sunshine and warmth to sooth his mild SAD syndrome. He suddenly swung round, and with an unexpected smile said, “OK, not to worry, I can easily unbook it. Come on, let’s discuss it then. What would you *really* like for your birthday? Where would you *really* like to go? What would give you the thrill of a lifetime?” He went to his wife, and bending over, kissed her on her forehead, giving her shoulders the old familiar secure squeeze.

“Oh I don’t know,” she softened. “I just want to be with you. I don’t want a lot of fuss.”

“And you don’t want any surprises.”

“Especially no surprises.” She looked up at her husband of over forty years, and smiled, offering her lips to his. “I’m sorry. I love you. Come on, let’s just sit down with a glass of wine, and talk about it.” She gave him a peck, broke the embrace, and moved towards the log fire, as Peter went to the kitchen in search of the wine and glasses. He brought them back, and placing the glasses on the low coffee table between them, unscrewed the cap of the Chilean Merlot, and carefully poured it. Peter picked up the two glasses, and handed one to Celia, smiling disarmingly. As he exaggeratingly lifted his glass, he offered a toast,

“Cheers darling. Here’s to a happy birthday,” and took a sample, sucking in the air as he rolled it around his tongue. Celia copied him, raising her own glass to him and smiling said,

“Cheers, love. But my birthday isn’t until June and its only January.”

“Exactly, that’s why we’re discussing it now, so that when it comes, it’ll be so, so special.”

“Well what are the options?” Celia asked.

“Options? Absolutely anything. Well *almost* anything; you turned down the Spanish holiday. But a holiday anywhere else? Do you want to go home or away?” Peter smiled his boyish grin at his own pun. “Jewellery? Clothes? A luxury weekend in London? Do a show? Go on a cruise? Buy a new car. Er, no perhaps not,” he stopped and laughed. “Come on darling, tell me what you’d like.”

Celia had been staring into the fire, watching the logs burning, listening to their crackling. She was only half listening to her husband’s litany of suggestions. She suddenly became aware that he had stopped. She turned her head and looked across at him.

“What?” she asked in something of a dazed confusion.

“I said, how would you *really* like to celebrate your special birthday?” There was a long pause, as Celia returned her gaze to the fire and sighed.

“Do you know what I’d really like?” She looked back at Peter lovingly, “I’d like us to go back to Cornwall where we went with the children all those years ago. I’d like them to come with us. Both of them. With their children. I want to relive those holidays through the eyes of our grandchildren.” Celia was warming to her theme. “We could find a big house somewhere, down by the harbour, or up on the cliffs, or we could find two of those caravans side by side for the kids, and you and I could stay in a hotel. We could take them on the beach. You could build sand castles, and dig tunnels, and bury them. They could go rock pooling, shrimping and crabbing. On the cliff tops, up on the moors. Oh it could be wonderful love, what do you think?” she looked at her man just as a she had done when they had first stayed in Mousehole. She was suddenly a generation younger. She was excited and animated. “Come on love tell me, what do you think?” Peter was far from excited, in fact he was suddenly filled with acute apprehension. But what should he say to Celia?

“Another glass darling?” he asked standing up again.

“Hmm. Yes, please.” He needed time to think.

“Just a moment I’ll see if we’ve got some nibbles,” as he gained the brief solitude of the kitchen again. He took his time opening the cupboard and selecting an assortment of packets. He was just going to have to tell her. “Here you are darling. Crisps or nuts?”

“Err, are there any prawn cocktail crisps?”

“Let me go and look,” he knew there weren’t, but it gave him more thinking time.

“Only ready salted, I’m afraid. The kids have cleaned us out,” he called.

“All right, ready salted then. Thank you. Well? What do you think?” He hesitated.

“Darling, do you remember when I was lecturing in Birmingham, and I said I wanted to go back and look at the place where I was born? I hadn’t seen it since I was a small boy. Do you remember how disappointed I was? The house had gone. Everything was so much smaller than I had remembered it. Buildings had been pulled down. New ones put up. The fields had been swallowed up in developments. The sweet shop was no longer. The felled tree in the park which we pretended was a castle, or an island, or an aeroplane ... gone. Remember I said, “Never go back. Never look back. Always look forward. I’m just frightened that if we went back to the same places in Cornwall, we would be equally disappointed. Better surely to remember the wonderful times we had then, and try something new. Somewhere new. Sorry love, but I just don’t think it would work.” Once again, Celia felt wounded and deflated. She continued to study the pictures created by the burning logs in the fire, whilst considering Peter’s response to her idea. Slowly she began to see that he was probably right.

“In any case, we could only go away with the kids during the summer holidays. That’s a couple of months later than your birthday. I just wanted us to do something special, actually on the day.” Peter waited for the reaction with some trepidation. There was a significant pause before Celia responded.

“OK. But I’d still like to go somewhere with the whole family. And ‘Yes’, you’re right it’ll have to be somewhere new.” She hesitated, deep in thought. “I know, let’s get Dick and Laura and the kids here for a family meeting. Let’s see first of all if they think it would be a good idea for us all to go away together. If they are in agreement, then we can let everyone suggest

what they would like to do, and where they would like to go. It would be just like old times.” She looked at Peter with a smiling, questioning, pleading expression. “What do you think of that then?” Peter felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“I think it’s a splendid idea. I’ll get the diary, and then email the kids. We’d better come up with some alternative dates, you know how committed they all are. Then we shall have to find agreed dates for a week in the summer holidays.”

“Let’s just get them here first. Dates for the holiday can be decided when they’re here.” Celia too no longer felt under siege. She held out her hand, “Come on love, take me to bed.”

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The Audi turned in to the drive and crunched to a halt on the gravel. Celia, who had been watching for them, let go of the curtain and moved into the hall.

“Dick and Penny are here Peter,” she called.

“OK. Coming.” He opened the door and beamed. “Hello, my boy. How was it?”

“Hi Dad. It was fine. No problems. Hello Mum. How are you.” Penny ushered in the children Andy and Judy. Introductions, hugs and kisses exchanged, they all trooped into the kitchen. Peter asked Andy how it felt being one of the oldest in the school and did he know where he was going in September. Celia talked ballet and piano with Judy. Penny offered to make tea or coffee for them all.

“So what’s all this about Mum?” asked Dick holding his mug in both hands to warm them. “Why all the secrecy? Are Laura and Ben and the twins coming as well? We mustn’t stay too long, we want to be home before it gets dark.”

“Hey, hold on. You’ve only just arrived. Er, yes, your sister and family *are* coming, and you’ll just have to wait until they arrive, to find out. We’re going to have an old fashioned family meeting over lunch, like we used to do.”

“Oh my, so it’s that important is it?”

“Well it is to us, well particularly to your mother,” offered his father. The children were buried in their personal electronics. “How’s the world of fashion Penny? Still buying and selling?”

“Christmas was fine, but it’s all gone dead now, even the sales aren’t pulling them in. The problem is there are sales all the year round now. It’s not like it was before the recession hit. Anyway, I’ve still got a job thank goodness. Keep looking forward, I always say.”

Laura and Ben and the seven year olds, Becki and Rollo, arrived to more hugs and kisses, and shouting and laughter from the kids who hadn’t seen each other in a while.

“How are you Mum?” asked Laura solicitously, bending down and kissing her mother.

“I’m fine. Honestly.” She smiled up at her lovely daughter, her closest friend and confidante. “How are *you*? I don’t know how you cope sometimes, holding down a job, and twins are expensive and time consuming.”

“Well it’s not nearly as bad as it was. Money’s always tight of course, but we manage, and the twins are so much more self-reliant now. It can only get better. Yes?”

“OK guys, lunch is ready. Come and sit yourselves down, and I’ll dish up,” called Peter. “Dick, can you do the honours with the bottle? See what the children want to drink. Laura look

after Mum would you.” When they were all seated tightly together, Dick filled the glasses and Peter brought in a steaming cauldron of chicken and vegetable stew, and a large bowl of boiled potatoes, liberally sprinkled with fresh herbs. “Before I dish up,” he announced, picking up his generous glass of cabernet sauvignon, “I would just like to say, how blessed Gran and I are, to have such a wonderful loving family; everyone there for each other. People say aren’t we lucky. No, we worked at it, we made it happen, luck doesn’t come into it. Anyway, enough, let’s eat. Cheers everyone.”

There followed much chatter and laughter and words of appreciation for a delicious repast.

“More anyone. There’s plenty. But don’t worry, I’ll turn what’s left into soup for tomorrow,” said Gramps with a laugh, “if not, you can pass your plates down to me,”

“Er, when does the meeting start, we’re all desperate to know what we’re here for?” asked Dick.

“Yes come on Mum, what’s it all about? echoed Laura.” Celia looked at Peter,

“Shall I or will you?” she enquired of her husband.

“You start while I take these things into the kitchen,” Peter replied. Celia took a deep breath, and looking round at her brood, and with moist eyes, she started,

“As you know, in June I’ll be seventy. I know it’s not supposed to be old nowadays, but I’m feeling mortal. I don’t know how long I’ve got for this earth. I can’t do the things I want to do. But there are things I can still do, and I don’t want to waste time. Gramps wants us to do something *special* for my birthday, and he told me he’d mentioned Spain to you. I’m afraid when he told me he’d booked it, I flipped. I know now that it probably sounds silly, but I suddenly felt betrayed, that he’d shared his ideas with you, but not with me. I felt that old fear of the unknown again; could I cope being so far away from what I know and those I love?” Peter came back from the kitchen, and put his hands on her shoulders, squeezing them gently and reassuringly. Celia half turned and looked up at him smiling.

“So I asked her how she *really* wanted to celebrate her birthday. And she said she wanted a holiday with us all together. She said she wanted to go back to Cornwall and relive the holidays we had when you, Dick and Laura, were growing up. I’m afraid I hurt her feelings, I know, but I don’t think going back is a good idea. I think we should just remember things, as we remember them. Don’t try to turn back the clock. But I do like the idea of a big family holiday. What do you all think? Would you consider a week away together? Don’t worry about the finances, Gran and I will help out.”

“But hang on a minute,” voiced Laura, “aren’t you getting things a bit confused here?”

“What’s a summer holiday got to do with Mum’s birthday in June? I for one will only discuss the summer’s possibilities, if you promise to discuss doing something special *on* Mum’s birthday.” It was obvious that she was fired up, and looking for support.

“I agree,” echoed Dick. “These are two separate issues. Which are we going to discuss first? Where shall we start?” He looked at Penny, who seemed to be accenting her approval. So he turned to his children. “Andy and Indy, would you like to go on holiday with the twins?”

There were immediate nods and excited words of approval from them both, as they looked across at two equally excited twins. “Well that’s a good start. Ben what’s your holiday allowance, that’s

assuming you and Laura think it's good idea, holidaying together." Laura and Ben exchanged smiling glances of approval.

"Oh, given enough time, I'm sure I could swing it."

"Laura, Penny?"

"Yes, let's go for it." Agreed Penny. Peter straightened up.

"OK. That's great. We've agreed to plan a joint summer holiday. While I get the pudding, let's hear what the children have to say, what would they like to do. And when should we go?" Andy was the first to voice an opinion,

"Well last year we went back to the same place we went to the year before, and it was still great, but it wasn't as good as the first time; we'd seen it, done it, and bought the T-shirt. I'd like to try surfing." He looked at his sister. Indy said, looking a bit embarrassed as all eyes were now turned in her direction.

"I like the beach as well, but I'd like to go riding." The twins just looked at each other, not knowing what to say. Their Dad rescued them.

"I'm afraid we haven't had a holiday for the last three years, they can't remember what it means." Laura joined in,

"But they'd love the seaside too. I know they would, all that sea and sand and ice-cream and promenades and piers. Mmm, lovely. Where?"

Peter brought in the chocolate roulade and the cream and proceeded to slice it, serve it, and pass it round. Agreement had been reached on the generalities, the animated conversation which ensued, turned on details. There was laughter and banter, about places and dates and alternative accommodation. There was agreement, that they would all email each other with ideas and suggestions, and that Laura would be the recognised coordinator, and *'keep everyone in the loop.'*

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Celia's birthday dawned, bright and warm. The sky was an unbelievable deep blue. Everything was crystal clear. She had slept well. She had breakfasted in bed, a single red rose on her tray. They had been up and down the many narrow alleyways, full of trinkets and souvenirs; she had bought a fridge magnet for herself and bits and pieces and odds and ends for the family back home. They had attended the packed pilgrims' noon service in the cathedral, where, seeing Celia in her wheelchair, the security guard had indicated that she should be pushed right to the front. The service might have been in Spanish, but the atmosphere was palpable, calming, meaningful, deeply spiritual. She had let it all wash over her and felt at one with her Maker. When the six men tugged on their ropes and swung the smoking Botafumeiro, her spirit soared with those of the myriads of pilgrims down the centuries.

They had sipped sangria and sampled simple tapas, at a table in one of the many squares. They had taken a siesta in the room at the Posada where they were staying, now they were seated for the celebration dinner, which was being served in their lodging. Both had dressed for the occasion; both knew how important it was for the other. Peter had ordered a bottle of Cava rosé, which had been brought to the table in an elegant ice bucket on a stand. The waiter had expertly decorked the bottle and poured a measure into their flutes. Peter lifted his, and looked into

Celia's eyes.

“Thank you for finally agreeing to come to Santiago de Compostela. Thank you for sharing it with me. Thank you for choosing me all those years ago. Thank you for mothering our children. Darling, thank you for just being you. I love you, more than you know. Happy birthday darling.” He raised his glass as she did, and they chinked them together in time honoured fashion. “To you. To us. To our future.”

“To us, and the future, whatever it brings.” Celia put down her glass and reached across the table cloth to hold her dear husband's hand.

“Oh Peter, thank *you*, for everything. I love you so much. Do you remember when you first booked this break without telling me, and I went berserk? You were right of course, it would have been wrong to try to recapture old memories. Much better to create new ones. Never look back. It was when Laura gave me the DVD of *'The Way'*, that I knew you were right, I had to make my own personal pilgrimage. From now on the only way is forwards and upwards. Thank you. And we still have a marvellous summer holiday with the family to look forward to.”

Peter smiled.

Howard Brayton

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*'The Way'* starring Martin Sheen 2010