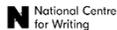


A VERY IMPORTANT PARTY

by
Mary Hargreaves

CHAPTER 4
SAM

INN
CROWD



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Sam can hear the disappointment pulsing through the bathroom door.

‘Leah?’ He raps softly against the doorframe. ‘Come on, come out now.’

The door opens an inch, and Leah puts one red eye to the crack. ‘It’s negative,’ she whispers, ‘again.’

Sam steps back and holds his arms out, and Leah pulls the door open, falling forward and sobbing on his shoulder. ‘There’s always next month.’ He murmurs,

rubbing her back.

‘But what if it’s never?’ She gasps and pulls away, looking up at him.

Sam doesn’t have an answer. What if it *is* never?

#

‘Oh no, it’s Samira.’ Leah tugs Sam’s arm sharply, dragging him behind a bush.

‘You can’t avoid her forever, Leah.’ He wriggles free from her grip. ‘She’s your best friend.’

‘I know.’ Leah watches as Samira passes, Aisha holding her hand. ‘It’s just too hard right now.’

They step out onto the street again, walking arm-in-arm past St. Peter’s Church. ‘We could go to The Shoulder of Mutton tonight?’ He suggests.

Leah shakes her head.

Sam suddenly feels like all the energy has drained

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from his body. When did life get so hard? He and Leah used to have so much fun; they had countless friends around Strumpshaw who they would regularly meet up with at The Shoulder of Mutton for a big meal, a few pints and loads of laughs. Some of his favourite memories are of being at that pub, but they haven't stepped foot in the place for six months now. Not since they started trying for a baby.

It makes him sad, too, to watch Leah and Samira drifting like this. They've all been friends for as long as he can remember, but the two of them have a particularly special bond. Leah is withdrawing, and they are losing their entire support system because of it.

A woman walks past with a spaniel, and it jumps up at Leah, licking her hands. She laughs, and Sam's heart swells. When was the last time she laughed like that?

'Fancy one?' He nudges her once the owner has

wrestled the dog away from Leah's face.

'You know I do.' Leah smiles.

Sam changes the subject. An idea has formed.

#

The track up to Mr Jones' farm is not made for Sam and Leah's tiny car. They bump across stones and potholes, Leah clutching the car door for dear life.

'Just tell me!' She squeals, as they hit a particularly large rock.

'You'll see.' Sam smiles. He's been planning this for weeks. Leah has always wanted a puppy; he doesn't know why he hasn't thought of it before.

They finally reach the front of the farmhouse and pull up; a couple of teenagers are watching them, brushing a beautiful horse as they stare.

'We're not going horse riding, are we?' Leah eyes

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the pony warily.

‘Patience is a virtue, remember?’ Sam winks at her, and they step out of the car and into the mud.

‘What can I do for you?’ Farmer Jones asks brusquely as he opens the door.

‘I’m Sam...’ Sam says. ‘I called earlier?’

‘Right you are. Come in.’ The farmer steps back and lets them into a dark kitchen.

‘I’m sorry if I seem a little confused,’ Leah laughs, ‘he hasn’t told me why we’re here.’

Farmer Jones jabs his thumb in the direction of the Aga in the corner. ‘In a basket there, take your pick.’

Leah walks forward uncertainly, her eyebrows raising as she spots the dog and her tangle of puppies.

‘Oh!’ She spins around. ‘Really, Sam? Are you serious?’

‘Dead serious.’ He laughs. ‘Go on, pick one.’

Leah crouches down on the floor and begins cooing

over the dogs. Sam turns back to Farmer Jones. 'It's a lovely place you've got up here.'

'Thank you.'

'Those your kids outside?' Sam says, making conversation and willing Leah to hurry up.

'No.' Farmer Jones shakes his head. 'No kids.'

'This one.' Leah walks over with a wriggling puppy in her arms, her face bright. 'He's lovely.'

'That's a girl.' Farmer Jones grunts.

'Well, we'll take her.' She beams.

'Alright.' Farmer Jones takes the money Sam offers him. 'She'll need her jabs in a couple of weeks. Get pet insurance. And she'll be grand with kids if you introduce her to them early.'

'Oh, we haven't-' Sam begins, but Leah has already left, unable to deal with the conversation. He can hear the catch in her breathing as she shuts the door behind her.

'Sorry.' Sam shakes his head. 'We're trying at the

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moment. It's been a difficult time.'

Farmer Jones studies him carefully, his rheumy eyes narrowing. 'Come back tomorrow.' He says suddenly. 'I'll show you something.'

#

Leah has been happier this past few days than Sam's seen her in months. The puppy, which they've named Bella, is a tonic for them both. He's left them home alone today while he goes to see Farmer Jones, as promised.

'Come in.' The farmer grumbles when Sam arrives, leading him over to a kitchen table.

'You said you had something to show me?' Sam sits down, accepting a beer and popping off the cap.

'Yes.' Farmer Jones' eyes travel towards a picture frame on the mantlepiece, and he reaches to pick it up. It's

unmistakably him, looking a little younger and a lot happier than he does now. Next to him is a beautiful woman. Her smile reminds Sam of Leah. ‘This was my wife. Died last year.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ Sam feels a pang of sadness for the old farmer, but he feels awkward, too. Why is he here?

‘We never had kids.’ He grunts, laying the photo flat on the table. ‘Wanted ‘em, mind. They just wouldn’t come.’

Sam feels the ball in his stomach get heavier. Sometimes he forgets, but it always comes back.

‘You’re supporting her, are you? Your wife?’ Jones regards him steadily.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘And who’s supporting you?’

Sam doesn’t have an answer for this. He feels tears prick his eyes and looks down, angry with himself. He can’t let his composure fall now. He’s the strong one, the

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one who looks after Leah.

Jones sits back in his chair. ‘It was always going to be just us.’ He murmurs. ‘At one point we had to accept that.’

‘We’ve only been trying for six months.’ Sam croaks.

‘And I pray that it happens for you.’ Jones says. ‘Just don’t lose sight of what you’ve got while you’re chasing what you haven’t.’

Sam stares at his hands.

‘We came to terms with it, and once we did, life was bright again. Slowly, mind. It doesn’t happen overnight. But those years... we were fine, after that. We had the chance to love each other again after we got lost for a while.’

Sam can feel the tears rising again. ‘I have to go, actually...’ He stands up from the table, leaving his

unfinished beer. ‘Thanks for... well, thanks.’

He hurries out of the door, leaving the old farmer and his photograph behind.

#

Sam drives up Herbert Colman Close and pulls into his drive, yanking up the handbrake and turning off the engine. He sits for a second, trying to process everything he and Farmer Jones have discussed this afternoon. It’s the third time he’s been to see the old man; something keeps dragging him back there - perhaps he’s trying to be a friend, or maybe he’s looking for evidence that happiness exists in a childless life. From the stories that Jones tells about his marriage, it seems like it could be possible.

Sam steps out of the car and almost walks straight into Bob, the landlord from The Shoulder of Mutton, who is making his way to their front door.

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‘Sorry, Sam - didn’t see you there.’ Bob laughs.

‘No worries.’ Sam tries to slow his heart rate. He hasn’t told Leah where he’s been going, and he’s on edge. He’s never kept anything from her, and it feels as though he’s sneaking around, talking about their private life behind her back. Perhaps it’s time he came clean and tried having a real conversation. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘We’re holding a party after the steam rally on Saturday.’ Bob hands over a flyer. ‘We’d love it if you came along.’

‘I’d love to.’ Sam stares at the leaflet, remembering last year’s steam rally, and the one before that. What a happy day it had been, before all of this began. He can smell it in the air already.

‘Great!’ Bob looks especially pleased. ‘That’s a relief.’

‘Oh?’ Sam tucks the flyer into his pocket.

‘We’ve not had the best reception, to be honest.’ Bob shrugs. ‘Everyone seems a bit down in the dumps.’

Sam feels bad now; parties at The Mutton are always brilliant, and he’s probably not going to end up going. He wonders again when everything became so heavy.

‘Well, fingers crossed for a big turn-out.’ He smiles weakly.

Bob nods and moves away, back down the drive and to the next house along.

Sam goes inside; Leah is curled up on the sofa, Bella’s tiny paw pressed against her cheek. A quiz show blares on the television, but Leah doesn’t seem to be paying attention to it.

‘Hey.’ Sam perches on the armchair. ‘How are you feeling?’

Leah shrugs.

‘Bob’s outside. He’s just invited us to a party at The Mutton on Saturday.’

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He knows what's coming.

Leah shakes her head. 'I can't. You know I can't.'

Sam feels something inside him snap. It's time for honesty; he can't hold it in any more. 'We can't carry on like this, Leah. We never see anybody. It's not healthy. We're torturing ourselves, hiding away like this.'

'And what do you suggest we do?' Leah sits up and looks at him with bleary eyes. 'Go to the pub and have a nice evening surrounded by children that will never be ours?'

'No!' Sam shouts, everything suddenly rising up inside him. 'Go to the pub and have a nice evening surrounded by people who used to care about us before *we* stopped caring about us!'

Leah stares at him, her mouth open. 'We can't-'

'I've been going to see Farmer Jones.' Sam admits, everything tumbling out. 'He and his wife wanted children.'

They never had any.’ He holds up a hand as Leah tries to interrupt. ‘But they were happy, Leah. Before all of this, we were happy, too. We were enough for each other. But we can’t do this alone.’

Leah runs her fingers through Bella’s fur. The puppy’s eyes open lazily for a second, and then slide closed again.

‘We could take Bella.’ Sam pushes. ‘Everyone would love to see her. A puppy is a brilliant distraction.’

‘Samira might be there.’ Leah whispers.

‘She might. And she’ll probably bring Aisha.’ Sam says, bluntly. ‘But that’s life. What if it never happens? What if it’s just us, forever? Will this be it?’

Leah gazes out of the window, her jaw hardening. ‘No.’

Sam slides off the chair and onto his knees, grabbing Leah by the hands. ‘Come on, then. Let’s take Bella to her first party.’

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She looks at Bella, and then looks at him. 'Maybe.'

A small burst of hope flares in Sam's chest. She nods.

'OK, maybe. Let's see.'

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In Strumpshaw, six characters are living their lives. Gordon is starting to feel his age. Samira is struggling to balance parenthood and a new business. Katie absolutely does not want to start work-experience at the local farm. Sam and Leah are trying to have a baby. Ryan has maybe had a breakdown and fled London for a new life. And Farmer Jones is grieving his departed wife.

Everything just seems so much harder when you're doing it alone.

But there's a big party being held at The Shoulder of Mutton to celebrate the Steam Rally and everyone is invited.

Will any of them go? Over seven weeks, each character's story is revealed. Characters weave in and out of each other's lives, becoming immersed in the stories of their fictional neighbours and discovering that the community of the local pub is very powerful indeed.

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Mary Hargreaves lives in Manchester and enjoys writing and reading things that cleverer people have written. She hates waiting, musicals and Pinot Grigio. Her first novel, *This Is Not A Love Story* was published in 2020.