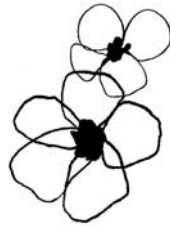


A Touch of Magic

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I sit at a window-seat in Café Paradiso waiting for my lunch dates to arrive. Straightening my slate-grey pleated skirt and fiddling with the buttons on my lambswool cardigan, my gaze drifts to the street outside as I strain to catch a glimpse of Sara's copper mane or Lisa's blonde curls in the mêlée of passing pedestrians. I wish they'd get here. I can't wait to see them after all this time. I hope they haven't changed their minds about meeting me. I've been really looking forward to our reunion, even if I am trembling with a mixture of trepidation and giddiness.

Checking my watch, I see they're close to fifteen minutes late. It's one of those rare moments where I'd love to have a mobile phone. I assume the girls will have every convenience available when they arrive, but in my walk of life we're encouraged to be patient and wait for things to happen in their own time. Modern technology isn't forbidden as such, just gently discouraged.

Lifting the jug of iced water from the table and pouring some into my glass, I attempt to get a piece of lemon to drop from the spout but give up when it refuses to budge! For the umpteenth

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time since arranging this rendezvous, I try to visualise Sara and Lisa as adults instead of the teenagers I knew at school. Do they still wear their hair long, I wonder? Are they still fitting into Size 10? Or has middle-age spread caught up with them too, forcing them to shop for larger sizes?

I'll soon discover how the passing of time has treated them. My heart beats a little faster in anticipation, thumping loudly in my ear. I scan the menu as I try to choose what to have for lunch. For the first time in years my appetite has left me, neither savoury nor sweet options appealing to my senses. In all the challenges and achievements I've experienced throughout my life, nothing has made me feel quite so childishly giddy as the prospect of today's reunion.

Inhaling slowly, I struggle to keep my excitement in check. My face burns with embarrassment as I imagine us together again, hugging one another and squealing with excitement. Physical contact has been a rather scarce commodity for me since our heady school days and in a way today is somewhat of a personal milestone. Am I still the same old me underneath the restrictions of maturity?

It's not that I'm measuring my life against Sara's or Lisa's. This would be a waste of valuable time and energy under the circumstances, but I am curious to see whether we'll have anything at all in common other than polite small talk.

Surely it's too much to expect that any trace of the magical friendship we shared in school can still be alive? Are we kidding ourselves to think we can pick up on a relationship that's been neglected for decades? Or can it still be there, lurking underneath other passions, hidden in the years of events that have unfolded in our lives.

I rest against the soft brown leather-backed chair and fix the

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collar of my starched white shirt, ensuring both sides sit neatly on the revers of my cardigan while I allow my mind to wander as I continue to wait.

It's been more than a few years since the three of us shared a desk at the back of Sr Brigid's maths class. Three heads – one brunette, one redhead and one blonde – gathered together whispering silly secrets while others around us got on with their algebra and geometry! During class we'd discreetly catch each other's eye while Sr Bridget (or Budgie as she was commonly known) had her back to us, chalking her illegible loopy scrawls on the large blackboard. We'd scribble notes and quickly pass them across to each other underneath the desk. I'll never forget Sara's ability to make me laugh out loud at the most inappropriate moments. But the precious memory I cling to most is the way we came to each other's aid when one of us needed support; never judging, seldom critical and always there regardless. Unconditional friendship!

“Excuse me, can I take your order, please?”

A fidgety young waitress hovers close to my table, her brash tone interrupting my musing. She shifts impatiently from foot to foot, her eyes darting around the restaurant as she monitors what tables are ready for clearing and how many diners are still waiting to give their orders.

I reluctantly let go of my happy memories, temporarily returning my attention to the present and the gum-chewing waitress beside me.

“Not just yet, my dear,” I reply, deliberately speaking in a slow steady tone, feeling a little mischievous as I know my delaying is annoying her. “I'm expecting two friends to join me. Can you

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call back to my table in a few minutes, please? They should be here any moment.”

I’d hazard a guess at the silent expletives she’s uttering. She probably thinks I’m sitting here out of loneliness. Huh! She wouldn’t be the first to assume I don’t have real friends to meet! Little does she know I’ve a black book filled with names and numbers of friends and acquaintances that I can call on day or night. Regardless of any progress society has made in accepting each other, some old-fashioned opinions will never change and ignorance will continue to prevail! While a woman in my position invariably attracts unnecessary curiosity, few people venture to invite conversation, instead treating us with aloof hostility.

My normality might surprise them, I think, suppressing an unexpected giggle as I sip my water and smirk cheekily at the waitress. If only she could read my mind . . .

The young girl stops chewing for a split second. She probably thinks I’m a little crazy. Staring quizzically at me for a moment, she shakes her head dramatically, throws her eyes towards the ceiling and turns to walk away. I glance over my shoulder and notice in surprise how the restaurant has filled up while I’ve been daydreaming. I watch my waitress strut to a nearby table, her confident swagger reminding me of Sara, Lisa and me as footloose Leaving Cert students.

The memory of our last day at school comes flooding back; how we excitedly tossed our textbooks and stripy uniform ties into the air, dancing with glee when they landed in rain puddles in the schoolyard. Teachers smiled with sympathetic understanding as we hugged and cried together, vowing solemnly that no matter what happened we’d never lose contact. As far as we were

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concerned, our friendship was invincible. We were thrilled to leave the classroom and its rules and regulations behind. Yet I still remember fearing that I'd miss the uniformity the school environment provided. In our bottle-green pinafores and white-and-mint-check nylon blouses, we were a united force, all but identical for the hours we spent in school. Other than the quality of our schoolbags and belongings, we all looked the same. I felt comfortable there amongst my fellow peers, enjoyed being part of our sisterhood.

Leaving the school firmly behind us, we strolled down the hill arm-in-arm for the last time, clutching the belief we'd step into the next chapter of our lives and nothing would change between us. Who were we trying to kid? All the intentions in the world couldn't save us from our futures and the choices we'd make which would directly result in our separation. Before long, Sara and Lisa had found their niche in the fashion world and, always being more adventurous than I, were venturing to pastures new to spread their wings and follow their dreams. They tried their best to drag me along with them, promising streets of gold at the other end and refusing to accept my string of excuses for remaining behind.

Banging at my mother's front door early one morning, they knocked until their knuckles were raw. Their insistent pounding woke me from a deep sleep, forcing me to jump out of my cosy single bed and scurry down the stairs without even pulling a hairbrush through my tangled knot of hair.

"It'll be fun!" they squealed, waving their airline tickets in the air, begging me to join them on their adventure. "There are still seats left. Please, please say you'll come!" Sara swung me around and around in Mammy's tiny kitchen until my head spun and dots danced in front of my eyes. I begged her to let my hands go and

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very nearly conceded to her pleas, if only to get my balance back.

“Please say yes! Imagine the three of us together having the time of our lives in America?” Sara wasn’t one to give up easily. “Isn’t it what we’ve always planned – to be together no matter what? We’re not going without you and that’s final!”

Lisa had nodded in firm agreement, her pale blue eyes pleading with me to agree to travel with them. I can’t say I wasn’t tempted and more than that, it was a scary prospect to be the one to break away from our tight group and be left behind alone. But standing barefoot on the icy slate floor in Mammy’s cottage that morning, I knew in my heart I would have to let them fly without me. So I begged them to be patient with me and politely declined, suggesting instead that I might follow them when they were settled. At that moment in time, I really believed it could happen.

Looking back on that morning now, I realise with a start that my decision dictated the rest of my life. I could easily have taken the safe option and tagged along but I had my own dreams forming in my heart and knew I needed to take a stand and be an independent individual for the first time.

My eyes stung as I returned from the airport after seeing the girls off. Travelling to join them was never far from my mind in the weeks to follow, but for some reason I could never bring myself to make the commitment and book that flight ticket.

Months slipped into years and an endless stream of overseas phone calls and pages of gossipy letters gradually reduced to an exchange of Christmas cards. Needless to say, I’ve heard snippets through one avenue or another on their lively escapades and risqué adventures, as I’m sure they have about me and how my life has turned out. But the more I hear and the more time that passes, the less confident I’ve become about renewing contact and catching up once again. We’re no longer protected by the

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familiarity of bottle-green pinafores and I'm terrified our differences will be too great to handle.

It's impossible to associate my memory of a shy Lisa, who invariably insisted on sitting in the middle chair at our desk so she'd be hidden from the teacher's view, with the image of a tough fashion critic I've created in my head. My goodness, if rumours are true, she even went as far as challenging *Vogue* magazine on its responsibility towards creating an illusion that Size Zero was the norm! Who is this new woman bearing my friend Lisa's name?

By all accounts, if the grapevine story can be believed, Sara has recently retired and sold all rights to the modelling agency she built from scratch to be able to spend more time with her husband and family.

I'm slightly envious that they've been a part of each other's lives, probably enjoying family barbeques and Sunday gatherings with their husbands and children. I've never been part of that and wonder if there's still room for me in the equation or how I can catch up.

What mystifies me most is that in comparison with the girls, I feel in some way inadequate and mentally require a seal of approval and affection from these two friends more than anybody else in my life. I haven't anything in particular to be ashamed or embarrassed about – quite the opposite in fact. In my own circle of friends and colleagues, I'm deemed a success story, someone who has made a difference to the lives of others.

The passing of time plays funny little tricks on the mechanics of our minds. It distorts memories and is capable of blowing the simplest of things out of all proportion. If you let it, of course! And I think that's my biggest problem; that's why I'm terrified to reunite with my old friends now that they've left the bright lights

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behind in favour of the green grass of home, for however long.

Part of me wants to hold onto the memory of the innocent fun I shared with Sara and Lisa just as it was. The other part of me is vulnerable, however, knowing as I do that these two old friends know the real me and at one time were almost capable of predicting my every move. What a disappointment it will be if today's meeting is a disaster, I think now, my heart sinking slightly. The memories I've treasured for years will be shattered forever.

Sitting straighter in my chair, I look at my watch once again. This is ridiculous. Another ten minutes have passed and I'm still here alone. I raise a hand to the waitress as she passes, not surprised when she ignores me, pretending not to notice my waving arm, and continues to the next table. My earlier anticipation is being replaced by irritation and I'm no longer that concerned about what Sara and Lisa will think of me. I just want this meeting to get underway and end my curiosity for once and for all. Noticing the waitress is finished at the next table, I lean across and tap her on the elbow, hard enough so she's forced to turn around.

"Can you bring me a nice frothy cappuccino, please?" I demand sternly, putting on my special voice that I save for exerting a little authority. "Extra hot milk and four sugars," I add, forgetting any attempt at self-denial or calorie-counting.

From the corner of my eye, I notice two elderly ladies at a large corner table turning awkwardly around in their seats. I frown slightly, refusing to catch their eyes, the nosy old dears. Why are they looking at me like that? Don't they realise it's rude to stare? Surely they've heard someone order extra milk and sugar before?

The lady nearest to me swings right around in her chair so she can get a proper look at my face. I frown slightly and try to avert

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my eyes, but I can't help staring back as she analyses me from head to toe, at least the bits of me she can see! The insolence of her, I think, as her gaze travels from my short snow-white hair to my sedate blouse and cardigan, grey skirt, dark opaque stockings and flat leather moccasins. A cold shiver runs through my body and I turn my back to them and look to the street outside instead. As I watch mothers, children, workers and students walk along the busy street outside, I let out a heavy sigh of disappointment. I may as well accept that Sara and Lisa have forgotten about meeting me today.

I slip my hand into the pocket of my cardigan and take out a creased page of notepaper. Unfolding it gently and laying it flat on the table, I read the words through. If the truth is known, I could recite them aloud without looking at the page, I've read them over so many times. But it fills my heart with joy to look at Sara's handwriting, slightly shakier than I remember from before, but still familiar in its style and tone. I check the details to see if I can possibly have got the date or time wrong, but no, just as I thought, today is the right day and it's now well past the hour. I'm pulling back my sleeve to check my wristwatch once more when I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder.

Turning around quickly, expecting it to be the waitress with my cappuccino, I gasp when I see it's the gawping pensioner from the table further down. I'm more than surprised to notice how pleasant her expression is up close.

"Yes?" I say, my lips pinched. "Can I help you with something?"

"Kate? It's you, isn't it?" the expertly made-up lady says, her voice little more than a loud whisper.

To hear someone call me by my real name is something of a shock. I haven't been called *Kate* in such a long time. It feels as if

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she's talking to somebody else and not me, Eliza, as I think of myself now. As I stare into her face, taking in the intensity of her pale blue eyes, I want to pinch myself.

"Lisa? My Lisa?" I ask, my mouth falling open in amazement.

So much for thinking we'd be jumping around and hugging each other, I think now, as I remain firmly frozen in my chair, unable to move a muscle! I continue to stare.

This older Lisa is smaller in stature than I remember. Her once platinum-blond curls fall in shoulder-length silver waves. Her upper body is slightly hunched in her short brocade jacket and age spots camouflage her once flawless skin. Though she's remained slim and, judging by appearances, life has treated her well, I'd imagine it's been quite a long time since she encased her arthritic body in a pair of Size 10 jeans.

But all these changes are merely cosmetic and when our eyes finally meet and connect, I'm instantly transported to the back row of my Leaving Certificate maths Class.

As my eyes hold Lisa's, her face creases in deep-etched wrinkles and she breaks into a broad beaming smile, a smile that I'd recognise anywhere.

"Sara! I've found her!" she calls to her waiting companion, helping me to my feet and leading me to their table where Sara waits with a big grin on her face and outstretched arms.

And that's what breaks our reserve. Awkwardly we pull each other into one group-hug and instantly we're inconsolable, tears streaming down our faces and each of us blubbing as we try to talk.

"Have you really been sitting there waiting all along?" Sara scolds gently, flopping wearily into her seat once more. "We thought you'd chickened out and stood us up! But when we heard your request for four sugars in a cappuccino, we just knew!"

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She grabs my hand as if to check I'm really here beside them. "It never dawned on us that we wouldn't recognise you! Though we've aged, we somehow thought you'd be just the same as you were."

The intermittent years instantly slip away and we huddle together once again, no longer a blonde, brunette and redhead but varying shades of grey instead.

"So, my good friend," Sara continues in a deep gravelly voice, getting straight to the point as usual, "were you trying to confuse us by dressing so sedately in your skirt and cardi? I thought nuns dressed in black and white? And wore a veil? Explain that one, Sister Eliza! Or," she adds in a tiny whisper, "can we still call you Kate?"

I throw my head back and laugh out loud, my earlier anxiousness slipping away. "You can call me anything you like, girls, and I'll have you know that nuns have changed a lot since the days of Sr Bridget," I tease, the knot of tension in my stomach being replaced by a nice warm glow.

"Thank God for that," Lisa says. "It took us years to believe you'd actually joined a religious Order."

"That's why I couldn't tell you at the time. I knew you'd find it difficult to understand. Now, enough about me for a moment – what I want to know is what happened to your copper hair? I've been staring at every redhead that passed by this window for the last half hour!"

Sara ran a finger through her hair and shook her head. "Oh God! If only I still had my crowning glory!" she sighs dramatically. "But I'm afraid nothing lasts forever."

"Some things do," Lisa interjects gently, looking from me to Sara and back again. "Here we are after all these years," she smiles, "and it's just like old times!"

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“It is,” I say, nodding my head, my voice catching in my throat. “Even though helping the poor and high couture are opposite ends of the spectrum, it seems the magic between us is still very much alive. I can feel it in here.” I place my hand over my left breast and feel my steady heartbeat.

No words pass between us for a moment. We just hold hands and smile.

When the gum-chewing waitress stops at our table once again, I remind her about my cappuccino and introduce her to my companions. “We’ve been best friends since we were your age,” I boast proudly, feeling a sudden urge to tell the world.

For the first time today she actually returns my smile and I can’t help wondering if her teenage friendships will survive as ours did. Or am I just the luckiest woman alive?

