

It was during Ladies' Choice at the Fiesta that Marie first met Jack. He had had his back to her all night, so she had not really seen his face, but she was intrigued. He was dark haired, extremely tall and immaculately dressed, and he looked as if he might be able to dance a bit, even though he had not done so all night.

Marie loved to dance, so she decided to pluck up the courage to ask the tall stranger to join her on the floor. She always liked to find new dance partners. She had discovered that once her male friends had girlfriends they were rarely available for dancing. She smoothed the skirt on her turquoise taffeta dress and took a deep breath. She loved to hear the rustle of the petticoats as she walked; she'd been told by the sales assistant in Brand's and Norman's that it was a copy of a dress from Hollywood. Marie loved American films, especially the big musicals, and she particularly loved Debbie Reynolds, Doris Day and Judy Garland. Some people had even said she herself looked like a young Jean Simmons. She went to the pictures as often as she could, and while watching, imagined that one day her life would be just like it was in the films- bright, colourful, with a perfect husband, house, and children, so happy you would want to sing all day. It was just a matter of finding the right husband first. Marie's dream had always been to get married and have children- anyway that was the expectation- that's what everyone did in the fifties- met someone, courted, went steady, got married, lived happily ever after.

In the meantime, there were the dances: the Fiesta, the Plaza, and the Orpheus. Marie tapped Jack on the shoulder and he turned to face her. She was surprised by how handsome he was; not conventionally attractive in that 'movie star' way, but he had something about him. When he smiled she noticed he had great teeth and a sensational smile. Jack's smile got him into all sorts of trouble. He readily agreed to the dance, and he was flattered that she had chosen him, and of course it didn't hurt that Marie was slender, dark haired, and pretty. Jack loved women, and that got him into all sorts of trouble too. Later Marie would wish she'd known a bit more about Jack's dark side before she'd lifted him for that dance, but by that time it was too late, and life hadn't turned out like the movies.

They went out together for a few months, and then Jack got bored with being exclusive. Marie didn't really mind, she had lots of suitors too, and a good job where the social side more than made up for the strict environment. The money was good and there was potential for advancement, until a woman got married that is; once you were married you were required to leave. Married women were not considered reliable by the company executives. Their view was that after marriage women had other things on their minds, like the desire for children, and what to cook for their husband's tea.

Marie wasn't expecting to ever see Jack again; it had been eighteen months since they went out together, and since then she had been dating Norman, a newly qualified schoolteacher from Carrick, who was very light on his feet. Marie knew he really liked her, and she wondered if he could be the one. She thought she might quite like being a teacher's wife. Norman had good prospects and she knew he was ambitious. He had told her recently he would never let her down, and she believed him. They had arranged to meet outside C&A in Royal Avenue after she finished work. They planned to head to Isabeal's for a bite to eat, and she was looking forward to it. He made her laugh, he was a gentleman, respectful, and she liked being with him. There was just the nagging doubt that something was missing. "Maybe that'll change," she thought.

She freshened up in the ladies' at work. It took less time than she expected- a puff of powder, some light lipstick, and a quick comb of her hair, so she was very early for Norman. She crossed the road at City Hall and was surprised to see him waiting for her already. She thought it was strange- his bus wasn't due into Oxford Street for twenty minutes. Then he turned towards her and she realised it wasn't him- it was Jack.

He laughed: "What are you doing here?"

"Well I'm not waiting for you, am I?" Marie was annoyed with herself. She was blushing and flustered, and she knew Jack was amused at her discomfort.

"It's good to see you" he said, but before she had time to reply a very glamorous woman appeared at his side. He kissed the woman on the cheek and then led her by the elbow towards High Street. Marie was reminded of how it had been when they'd been together. The woman looked quizzical, but Jack didn't say anything further, not even goodbye. They left Marie behind, laughing together in a heavy cloud of 'Coty L'Aimant'. Marie was smarting at the deliberate snub. She wished she'd made more of an effort with her appearance. She felt dowdy and unsophisticated compared to Jack's girlfriend.

By the time Norman arrived she was thoroughly miserable. Their evening didn't go well. She couldn't get the image of Jack and the woman out of her mind. It was then that the green-eyed monster began his grip on her. If she'd known that night it would never let her go, she might have accepted Norman's proposal.

Three days later the phone rang in Marie's house. She picked it up.

"It's me, it was really good to see you the other night....".

That was when Marie and Jack became a couple again. After that things moved very fast, and they arranged to get married. The week before the wedding Jack told her that while they'd been going together he had been friends with other women. He wanted her to know he wouldn't see them again. Once they got married he wouldn't see his other women friends. Marie didn't know what he was talking about. She thought that getting married didn't mean you had to give up your friends, but she thought it was sweet that he was being so considerate. It didn't take long into the marriage for Marie to understand the significance of Jack's 'friends'.

It was coming up to Christmas, 1966, and the little house was decorated with all the latest furniture. There was a beautiful green artificial tree with bushy branches like green brushes and imitation snow that looked like plaster of Paris on the top. The twinkling lights were flower shaped and coloured, and shiny glass baubles shone brightly hanging from the branches. Everything gleamed in the firelight. Marie looked at the scene; it was just how she had imagined it would be. Their little baby daughter was sleeping in her pram, and Deborah, their eldest daughter, who was five, was playing in her room.

It was time for tea. They ate fish fingers and home made chips together in the lemon painted kitchen off the yellow and black patterned formica table. Deborah hated the pattern on the table -she thought it looked like ants, a bit scary really. These days Jack was rarely home for tea. He worked odd shifts- he was a policeman now- he'd always had an interest in fast cars, and he was training to be a police driver. He'd joined the local golf club too. The job was very stressful, he said, and he needed time to unwind and relax.

"It's nearly Christmas Deborah, you've been such a good girl, and Santa is sure to bring you what you want".

"I want Chatty Cathy, Mummy- she is such a pretty dolly, and she talks. I can't wait to play with her, I hope I will get her, I really do", Marie smiled. Chatty Cathy was on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom, along with a Wendy House, and some soft toys for baby Gill. It was going to be a good Christmas.

The police Christmas party was in the church hall near the police station at the bottom of the town. Banbridge was a small bustling country town, where everyone knew everyone else, and they referred to the city as 'The Big Smoke'. Marie loved living there. They were part of the community, and she was the Peeler's wife who lived on Cline Road. They were respected. A lot of the other houses were occupied by the men Jack worked with; they were all very close and everybody looked after everybody else.

Marie dressed Deborah in her party dress and new shoes. The annual Christmas party was only for policemen and their children. It was supposed to give the wives and mothers an evening's break from the run up to Christmas. Jack took Deborah's hand and led her out into the frosty night. She sat in the back of her father's black coloured Austin A40 with a blanket over her knees. There was a nodding dog sitting on the back window; Deborah hated that stupid dog. The huge vaulted roof church hall was decorated with paper chains and balloons, and there was a massive real Christmas tree in a pot, decorated with lots of tinsel and twisted coloured foil decorations. To eat they had sandwiches, sausage rolls, crisps, little iced buns with teeth-breaking silver balls, Rice Krispie buns, butterfly cakes, sweets, chocolate and orange squash. They laughed and danced and played party games, and then they all had to sit down on chairs round the edge of the hall to await a 'special visitor'.

Deborah noticed that all the other boys and girls had their daddies with them. She wondered where her daddy was, but then her breath was taken away because there was the sound of Jingle Bells and the lights dimmed and a red coated man with a white beard entered the hall and sat on a big chair under the huge Christmas tree. One by one their names were called and the children sat on his knee while he asked them what they wanted for Christmas and gave them their presents. When it was Deborah's turn one of the other policemen led her up to the tree. She sat on Santa's lap and he asked her what she'd like to find under the tree on Christmas morning. She was startled by the sound of his voice, and when she looked into his eyes she gasped. She pulled on the bottom of the cotton wool beard and unveiled him, and he roared with laughter, as so did all the other men in the room. Deborah felt like the most special girl in the world: her daddy was Father Christmas!

On Christmas Eve Marie made mince pies, and the stuffing for the turkey, and boiled a ham. She wasn't an accomplished cook, but she had a go, and she was able to put a decent meal on the table. She was looking forward to Christmas Dinner. They had been given a lovely turkey by the local butcher who looked after the men in the station. In return they turned a blind eye to his various indiscretions. All the local businessman found it was a good idea to keep the officers sweet- it oiled the wheels, so to speak. Jack came in about teatime. Jim Reeves was singing Christmas songs on the radiogram. Jack was just in time for tea and they had a meal together for the first time in ages. He was in good form, and they all laughed at the Christmas party story. He went to change out of uniform and came back wearing some of his best clothes, a black polo neck, straight legged trousers, and a suede jacket. Jack's favourite singer was Gene Pitney, and he liked to dress like him. Marie's women friends would often comment about what a good looking big fella he was. There was no doubt about that, but Jack knew it too.

He made no apology when he announced that he was going to the golf club for a Christmas Eve drink. The children were going to bed, and he would be back later. Marie knew there was no point in arguing- Jack would go anyway- but she pointed out that she needed him to build the Wendy House, and he promised he would be back to do it before midnight. Marie tucked her babies up in bed, and poured herself a sherry. She never drank normally, but it was Christmas, and the house looked so beautiful: the presents were under the tree,

everything was organised, and she couldn't wait to see their little faces when they saw the Wendy House. Little Gillian had just started to walk, and they could play in it together; tomorrow would be a great day.

The alcohol and the firelight made Marie drowsy, and when she woke it was two o'clock on Christmas morning. The fire was out, and there was no sign of Jack. She wondered if something had happened to him, and then felt ridiculous, because who would be told first if anything had happened? A policeman's wife, of course. It was frosty, but she had an idea, the Wrays were always at the golf club too. They lived in a house across the road, so she'd go and ask if they'd seen Jack. He was probably in one of the local bars on the Main Street. The publicans were always happy to dispense a free drink, and it was Christmas after all. Billy Wray was a local businessman with a couple of dry-cleaning shops, one in Banbridge and one in Newry. Dry-cleaning was a new-fangled American thing. It cost a solid fortune to have anything dry-cleaned, so Billy was making money, lots of it, even in those wee country towns. His wife Audrey was significantly younger than him and from a moneyed country background. She was said to have married well, but she was forty-two and Billy was in his late fifties, so it would be hard to say what about it was good, but she certainly had a nice life. Audrey had the best of clothes and shoes, she considered herself sophisticated and stylish, she had great haircuts, and wore dark sunglasses a lot of the time. She smoked cigarettes from a long ebony holder, and Jack was teaching her to drive the new sports car Billy had bought her for her birthday. She was dismissive of Marie; they tolerated each other, but Jack was getting extra money from the lessons and that had helped to pay for their nice Christmas, so on the surface there were pleasantries.

Marie walked towards the house. There were lights and music coming from that direction, the Wrays were known for their ability to party. As she approached the house Marie noticed the downstairs window was open and the curtain was flying in the breeze. She rang the doorbell three times, but she knew that because of the loud music they would be unlikely to hear, so finally she decided to try the window. She stood outside in the garden and pulled back the curtain. 'Spanish Eyes' was playing and there was a couple dancing. Marie looked into Jack's eyes as he looked over the shoulder of Audrey Wray. Marie could see the back view of Audrey's tight dress and beehive with the French pleat. She was pressed tightly against Jack, and there could be no doubt about what was going on. Billy was obviously drunk- he had passed out and was sleeping in a chair. There was no one else in the room. The hairs on Marie's neck were standing on end. She'd been with Jack for eight years, and she'd always known, but she'd never seen it before. There were other women who thought they were important to him, including poor Collette who got pregnant and was taken away by her brother the priest. There could be no sorries this time.

Jack's eye's widened and then narrowed. Marie turned on her heel and walked quickly towards their house. She could hear his footsteps quicken behind her as she opened the front door and closed it. Then she did something, and even years later she never knew why: she locked the door from the inside. She heard him rattle at the lock, and she could tell he was furious, so she walked towards the door to unlock it, but just as she got in front of the glass panel in the door there was a loud crack and shards of glass surrounded her legs and feet. He snarled at her from the other side of the door and she thought she saw murder in his face. He pushed in past her and stood in the middle of the room, looking defiant.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

Marie heard herself say: "That depends on what you are going to do."

He smirked at her. "If either Audrey or I decide to end it, we'll let you know."

Marie felt weary. "Jack, you won't be with me *and* have a girlfriend."

Suddenly she felt very tired. She made her way into bed and pulled the covers around her.

What seemed like hours later he came to bed. He got in, deliberately waking her, and arranged things so he was on top of the sheet and she was below it, like there was a membrane between them- just another way to make her feel worthless. This time, though, she really had had enough, and she decided she had nothing left to give.

Marie got up the following morning to the excited shrieks of their little daughters. When she went into the living room she saw their excited little faces as they explored the brightly coloured Wendy House assembled in the middle of the room.

"What happened to the door, Mummy?" Deborah asked. "There are bits of cardboard on the window".

"Just an accident. Don't worry. Open your presents. What have you got from Santa?"



Deborah opened the biggest one first. She took the wonderful blonde doll out of the box, and there was the coveted 'Chatty Cathy'. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she pulled the string at the back of the doll which said the phrase: "I love you Mummy".

Deborah laughed and hugged her mother. "Oh Mummy, this is the best Christmas ever!"