

One

There is nothing more pathetic than the sight of a bunch of inebriated journalists bitching the night away after work. Unlike most of them I had a home to go to and children to play with. From time to time I forced myself to make an appearance at some of these bitch-fests to keep up my credibility in front of my illustrious scribbling colleagues. So that night I joined them at Dirty Dick's near Liverpool Street Station to prove to them I wasn't as stuck up as they thought, and could hold a pint or two. I even took part in some bitchy banter to show them I could be one of them.

I joined the *Financial Review* a couple of weeks before Tom. The editor always hired youngsters in twos in case one of them failed their probation period. I looked after engineering and mining while Tom wrote about pharmaceuticals. Tom arrived late on his first day, wearing a reefer coat, polo neck and a five-day stubble. In his hand was a large canvas duffel bag. He was around six foot in height, heavily built and had reddish hair with a fashionable quiff. I was slightly shorter, slimmer and already seeing my mousy hair thinning at the temples.

He'd come straight from Weymouth, direct from his yacht. Yes, he owned his own forty-foot ketch at the age of twenty-seven. I was two years older and all I owned at that time was a second-hand Ford Fiesta.

Storms in the Channel had apparently delayed his arrival. Charles, our editor, didn't seem to mind a tiny bit. In fact, he was damn right paternal towards Tom, asking him questions about his boat and how many days it took him to sail from the South of France. I couldn't hear everything, but they looked so relaxed in

each other's company. Then Charles brought Tom over to where I was sitting to show him his desk, which was juttied up against mine.

Tom and I stretched over the desks and shook hands. Just a cursory glance at each other, although I couldn't help but notice his dazzling blue eyes. My wife would have killed to have a pair like those. She never thought much of mine, a sort of muddy brown.

Charles was coasting towards retirement, and did everything without any sense of haste. He was a tall willowy man with a prominent forehead full of socialist ideas, swept back grey hair and a matching Karl Marx beard. Charles always wore an old moth-bitten cardigan in the office and would fidget with his glasses, whirling them in his hand like a parade flag when throwing out new ideas or sucking on them when deep in thought.

'I'll leave you in the good hands of Martin, who can show you where everything is,' he said, pointing the arm of his specs around the room. 'Come over to my office around twelve-thirty, and I'll take you out for a spot of lunch.'

Charles always bought the new boys (and girls) lunch on their first day. I would have gone to mine on my first day had there not been a bit of a crisis at home. My wife, Pippa, had rung me in a hysterical state to say that she'd pranged the car, and from my panicked reaction Charles offered to take me out on another occasion. Of course, he never did.

From that morning, Tom became known in the office as Popeye because of his nautical entrance. He seemed to like it. Even when Bunker, the office dogsbody,

randomly sang out the cartoon's theme tune, along with all the sound effects, it didn't upset him. Charles never called him Popeye, and neither did I.

It was a bit of a balancing act, bringing the drinks back from the bar. I had to leave some behind on the counter as I was frightened to spill them on my tan corduroy jacket, a bargain Pippa had picked out for me at a local charity shop. But as I approached our office encampment, I could see Linda and Jenny patting Tom's back. Charles was also there, smiling. He must have arrived when I was at the bar buying a round for everyone. Then more pats on the back from Faisal and Bill.

'What have I missed?' I asked, unloading the drinks into grateful hands.

'Charles has just given Popeye the industrial correspondent's job,' said Linda, a pint-sized woman who was not to be messed with because of her sharp tongue. She was in her early thirties and thought she could fool everyone about her height by wearing long flares over her multi-storey platforms.

After taking a sip from her glass, she looked up at me and said, 'The sod.'

I wasn't too sure whether she was referring to Charles or Tom. 'Congrats Tom,' I shouted over the heads of the others surrounding him. He didn't hear me.

I turned to the bar to get the rest of the drinks when Charles offered to give me a hand. When we reached the bar, I remembered I hadn't bought him a drink because he'd arrived late, presumably to tell Tom the *good* news.

'What will you have?' I asked.

'Martin, it was a close thing between you and Tom, but on balance I thought he'd give more time to the job,' he said, tilting backwards and looking down at me, his glasses resting on his forehead like an Alice band. 'Imagine attending all those

union meetings, conferences, door-stepping ministers and bosses, CBI jamborees, strikes that could go on for weeks on end. You'd have to give up your home life completely to spread yourself around, you know. And you are doing such a marvellous job in mining, why spoil a winning formula, I told myself – I'll have a Scotch, by the way. Make it a double, we're celebrating.'

I just had enough change in my pocket for the whisky and followed Charles back to the pack, careful not to spill a drop, handing out the remainder of the drinks.

Then I raised my glass and gave a toast to the new industrial correspondent.

When I reached home I broke the news to Pippa that we'd have to put on hold any ideas of moving to a bigger flat with the twins.

'I thought you said the interview went well, and that he liked your ideas of more profiles on industries and the people behind them,' she said, taking my plate out of the oven. Some sort of risotto with sprigs of burnt broccoli.

Pippa was in her pyjamas that made her look like a six-year-old. Her auburn hair was in need of a wash and her face looked tired. The twins were already in bed, but she still had some marking to do.

'Charles was very nice about it,' I said, with my mouth half full. 'He said the correspondent's job wouldn't have suited me, and I distinctly got the feeling he's lining me up for something more senior.'

'That sounds exciting. Managing the office, you think? Because that would pay well, wouldn't it?'

'I think Tom is a bit pushy. So Charles had to please him in some way. It's the perfect job for him really as he hates being in the office. Our last industrial

correspondent, Trevor, hardly ever visited the office. He just lived out of a suitcase. His hotel expenses were legendary.'

The risotto was as dry as sawdust, but it helped soak up the alcohol. Cooking wasn't Pippa's thing. I swallowed another forkful and said, 'I know you don't like Charles, but he's been straight with me. He's right, the industrial correspondent's job is a young man's job.'

'You're only a couple of years older than Tom.'

'But he's footloose and fancy-free.'

'Meaning?' Pippa's eyes were fixed on mine, waiting for some sort of retraction.

'Nothing,' I mumbled. 'Family always comes first.'

'As long as you don't think I'm holding you back.'

I shook my head.

'But we do need the money, Martin, if we're ever to get out of this place.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'You shouldn't take it lying down. You should prove to Charles that you're better than the likes of Tom, or otherwise you'll be looked over when another job comes up.'

'You really think so?'

'Just leave the dish in the sink and come to bed when you've finished.' She pecked my cheek, and moved towards the door.

'I thought you were going to do some marking.'

'I'm too whacked out.'

I didn't follow her to bed as I wasn't particularly sleepy and switched on the TV to watch Sky News instead. But my mind kept wandering back to the industrial correspondent's job. Not getting that promotion was a serious setback to my career because I needed it as a stepping stone to landing the big one – that plum job in journalism we all dreamt about but could never quite define.

I'd never bothered to look up anyone I'd worked with before, but that night I felt an extraordinary urge to do so on my laptop. This was the start of my obsession with Tom de Lacy.

All his bylines popped up on the screen, both from the *Review* and his previous mag as well as sites he'd worked on. Articles about drug companies mostly, deals, product news and the ubiquitous *People and Places*. I skimmed through them, paying little attention to them. His writing style was very laboured and stilted. The intros were frankly limp, and my God was he verbose. His writing had become much better since joining the *Review*, mind. Shorter, neater sentences that got straight to the point. But I have to say, his writing was in no way better than mine. No competition really. Pippa was right: I shouldn't just take this on the chin.

While I continued to scroll down the page I noticed there was something on a Sir Meredith de Lacy. Any relation to Tom? Sir Meredith was chairman of the brokerage firm, De Lacy Lang; married to Mary Theobald, granddaughter of the great Arctic explorer Peter Theobald. Lived in Hampshire, sat on various charities; hobbies included: painting, writing choral pieces, climbing, sailing, flying, half-marathons, motor rallying, parachuting, martial arts, *fighting bears, swallowing swords, riding bulls bareback*. Oh, and one son, Tom – journalist *and sailor*.

Poor Tom, he had a lot to live up to. My world and Tom's world were quite different.