Sin, Solace And Sugar

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Summary: *A harmless outing to the park to escape the claustrophobia of COVID lockdown lands Tom with a sprained ankle and a ruined week. But of course his sister is there to make everything 20% worse but at the same time 80% better, and an impromptu trip to Manchester makes room for conversations they usually tend to avoid.*

Author's Note: Just some more of my two favourite things where the Ronstadts are concerned: A bit of light whump and a whole lot of sibling bonding. It's a shame that John Simm and Olivia Colman haven't been in anything together since, because they had such a great dynamic.

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Sitting at the picnic table that overlooks the lawn of the local park, Nancy takes a swig from the beer bottle that has gone just a little too warm. They arranged this more or less spontaneously because all of them are going crazy during COVID lockdown and she hasn't seen Tom in person since around March when this whole mess started.

She had to try not to laugh when he rang her doorbell because his now mostly grey hair is longer than she's seen him wear it in forever, and he looks a little unkempt from not having access to a hairdresser for the last few months. He also sports a beard that he's at least trimmed into something neat and normal.

He looks very different and it'll take her a while to get used to that look. Not that her own hairdo is anything to boast about. At least everyone's going through the same thing of not looking their best during this bloody pandemic.

From the bench she's sitting on, she's watching Leo kicking a ball around with her brother, both seemingly enjoying the activity. Tom has taken him to a few football matches in recent years and they've bonded even more strongly over it. She'd never admit it, but it makes her heart swell a little.

Tom had been absent from most of her adult life. She visited a few times when he lived in London, but he'd been aloof, had suggested all kinds of high-brow activities that she had little interest in, and would behave like an arrogant prick a lot of the time. She'd always come home, wondering if he was truly happy with the high-profile life he seemed to have settled into.

From what she witnessed, it was pretty clear he liked expensive liquor a little too much, and she'd found leftovers of what she assumed was coke he was snorting. It had her a little

worried, but at the end of the day he was a grown up and it wasn't her place to tell him how to live his life.

But then he'd come back up north when their father's health was deteriorating to the point that she couldn't do it all on her own anymore. And while that had been rocky and had prompted him to dig up mounds of dirt that eventually revealed a shocking family history, it had started closing the rift between them, bit by bit.

She never expected that he'd be the 'Uncle Tom' type whom his nephew loved, the type to carve time out of his day to spend it with a young kid, the type to help her change nappies, deal with baby puke, read books out loud in different character voices or play on the floor with toy cars or LEGO.

Nancy wasn't sure if perhaps it was some kind of lingering guilt that he'd fucked off to London and let her shoulder their father's care for all those years. Maybe he figured he needed to make amends or make up for lost time, to help her out so she could have some alone-time here and there. Or maybe he'd just found that he liked the simpler life better than he thought.

She was glad he'd returned to his roots, had found some peace of mind up here and left that old life behind that he'd confessed to her he actually hated. He'd called himself a washed-up, embittered hack. *Like father, like son*, he'd said with contempt. Ironically, it turned out that he was nothing at all like his father – the one whose DNA he had inherited.

She takes another sip from the beer, and when she looks up, she sees that Tom has gone down, the ball rolling away from him. His hand is on his ankle and it takes a while for him to get up. He holds out a hand to gesture to Leo that he needs a break, and he's limping when he comes to join her.

He plops down on the bench opposite her with a groan.

"You alright?" she asks.

"Rolled my ankle. I'm getting too old for this."

"Want me to take a look?"

He raises his eyebrows. "You hold a degree in orthopaedics that I'm not aware of?"

She chuckles. "No, but you do know that I work in healthcare, right?"

"You work in dentistry." He props his leg up on the bench next to him, probes the ankle with his fingers and makes a grimace as he does it.

"How bad is it?"

He probes some more. "Not too bad, I don't think."

"We can drop by A&E on the way back, make sure nothing's torn or broken."

“With COVID going around? Fuck no. I’ll be good with some ice and arnica.”

“You sure?”

He shoots her a pointed look. “Yes, very sure.”

“Just saying you don’t have the best track record when it comes to taking care of yourself.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Just then, Leo abandons kicking the ball around by himself and comes to join them at the table. “I’m hungry.”

Nancy gives him a look. “We’ll have supper when we get home. You can have some snacks.”

“What do we have?”

She looks in the bag. “Salted crisps, Bear Yoyos, dried mangoes and rice krispies.”

He makes a face. “I don’t like any of those.”

“Since when?”

His face pulls into another grimace, so Nancy shrugs. “Suit yourself, then.”

Leo rummages around in the bag, pulls out the Bear Yoyos and sits down next to Tom. He looks at Tom’s outstretched leg as he opens the sweets. “Are you hurt?”

“Sprained my ankle,” Tom says simply.

“Does it hurt a lot?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Nancy throws Tom a look. “It would help if you actually answered the question.”

“Fine. Yes, it hurts a bit.”

Leo inquires, “So you can’t play any more football today?”

Tom sighs. “Yeah, sorry, mate. Not today.”

Leo’s clearly unhappy about this but doesn’t say anything else. Nancy gives Tom an apologetic look. Tom gives her a look back that says, ‘Don’t worry about it.’

They hang out another half hour with Leo going off to try out some of the equipment in the play area that’s adjacent. He eventually starts whinging that he’s bored, so Nancy starts packing up their stuff.

Tom has a look on his face that says very clearly he’s dreading the walk to the car park. She shoulders the bag and goes over to Tom’s side of the bench, holds out her hand. “Come on, Sir Limpalot. Let’s get you to the car.”

He makes that expression that simultaneously says 'fuck off' and 'I'll never admit it, but thanks', but he does take her hand and lets her help him up while he tests the waters. It doesn't seem to be anything major since the foot can still bear weight, but he does limp quite noticeably.

His gait improves a bit as they keep walking, but their pace is quite slow. The way the park is set up, there isn't really any opportunity to drive the car any closer and make it easier for him. By the time they get there, he gingerly arranges his legs in the passenger seat, looking decidedly unhappy.

Nancy looks at him. "There's still time to change your mind about A&E. No need to play hero, Tom."

"Will you stop going on about bloody A&E?" he snaps at her.

She lifts her hands defensively. "Alright, alright. But I'm taking you home. No way I'm going to let you drive your car with that foot."

He just grunts and looks out the passenger side window.

On second thought, Nancy adds, "Do you have ice or cool packs at home? Ibuprofen cream? A bandage?"

His sigh is the long-suffering kind. "Just take me home."

She ignores it and drives them to her home anyway. She can see Tom isn't a fan but he wisely doesn't say anything and just keeps grimly staring out the window until she parks the car as close to the front door as she can.

"Can I wait in the car?" he asks her.

"Nope. I have plans for you."

He sighs. "Christ on a stick," he mutters.

"Come on, slowpoke. In the house with you."

He looks like he wants to complain some more but he peels himself out of the car and slowly limps his way into the house with Nancy on his heels. Leo has already dashed up the stairs to his room so Nancy follows Tom into the kitchen where he's gingerly lowering himself into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Please don't make me move again in the foreseeable future," he grumbles.

She ignores it and says, "Okay, up with the foot. Let me see."

He makes a grimace. "Nance..."

“Come on,” she says cheerily, which makes him relent because he knows she won’t take no for an answer.

He extricates his foot from his sneaker and peels down the sock. There’s a clearly visible bruise forming on the outside of his foot below the ankle and the swelling is quite apparent, too.

“Alright,” she says and gets to work.

The ibuprofen cream is in her medicine box in the bathroom cabinet. She takes some ibuprofen tablets for good measure. There’s also Comfrey salve which she thinks might work better than arnica. She has a vague recollection that she owns a Velcro ankle brace from a previous injury and she has to dig through two dresser drawers to find it but finally produces it with a triumphant, “A-ha!” Thankfully, it’s for the right foot and not the left. She finds an elastic bandage alongside it that she didn’t recall she even owned.

Downstairs she deposits it all on the kitchen table. There’s a clear look of dismay from Tom that she knows is just a disguise for gratefulness that someone’s taking charge and helping him out.

Next, she opens the freezer and produces a cold gel pack that she hands to him, together with a tea towel.

He holds up the ankle brace to her. “That’s awfully convenient.”

She shrugs. “Rolled my ankle on a hike a few years ago. Should’ve seen me go down like a stranded walrus when I slipped off the bloody side of a nicely tarmacked road. Had a massive bruise on my arm to show for it, too.”

“Since when do you hike?” he asks as he straps the cold pack to his ankle, then adjusts the chair next to him to put his leg up on it.

She gives him a pointed look. “Well, you missed a few things while you were in London.”

“Apparently.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, we actually live in a really lovely part of the country.”

“If you discount the wind turbines.”

“Ah, Mr. Negativity has come out to play.”

From a kitchen drawer, she produces a plastic bag and stuffs all the equipment from the kitchen table into it, then holds it out to her brother. “Your care package for the next few days. Don’t be an idiot and use it. Comfrey salve three to four times a day. Elevate and ice it as much as you can.”

Instead of giving her a snide remark along the lines of ‘duh’, he looks actually appreciative. “Yeah, thanks.”

Nancy busies herself with putting on the kettle to make them some tea, seeing how he doesn't seem to be in a rush to go anywhere, which she assumes also has to do with the fact that the cool pack is actually giving him some relief.

He scrubs a hand down his face when she sets the mug of tea in front of him. "I'm supposed to be interviewing someone in Manchester tomorrow."

"So take a sick day."

He sighs. "I can't. Some bigwig for a high-profile story. Had to really fight to get this one. Guy is only there tomorrow and he only barely agreed to this interview. Was a struggle and a half to get it all set up, what with the social distancing and all."

"Okay. So take the train and a taxi."

He sighs again. "That's a lot more inconvenient. And pricey."

She frowns. "Why? Do you have money problems or something?"

He gives her a 'Christ, sis' look.

"What? It's a legitimate question. It's not like it's gonna cost an arm and a leg."

"No, just... I really didn't need this."

"No one *needs* this." She looks over to the fridge door where a calendar is pinned. "When is this interview? Maybe I could drive you."

"Nance. It's an hour each way."

"So?"

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?"

"Wednesday is my day off, remember? I can find someone to watch Leo." She flashes him a grin. "Besides, I like driving your brand new, shiny BMW."

"Who said we could take my car?"

"Who said we can't? Unless you prefer the train and the taxi..."

"No," he says in resignation, then looks at his foot. "This is really going to suck."

She takes a sip from her tea. "You men are such wimps."

He glares at her. "You wanna swap places?"

"God no. But if we did, I wouldn't be whinging remotely as much."

He gestures at his foot. "How am I going to get this into a pair of leather shoes?"

"Just wear bloody sneakers. It's 2020 and we're in the middle of a lockdown. No one's going to give a shit. Besides, the limp should make it pretty obvious."

His expression says 'fair point'. "If you could pick me up at 5:30 tomorrow..."

"In the *morning*?"

"Yeah."

"Are you serious?"

He grins at her. "No. Eleven is fine. Or maybe make it 10:30, might need some extra time to deal with this."

"Alright, 10:30 it is."

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Nancy decides to drive out to Haslingden a little early the next morning after she texts Tom to announce just that.

He lives on the third floor of a converted commercial building. It's modern and a little too sterile for her taste, but Tom's always had a penchant for stylish. Though this is definitely a step down from his hip and no doubt expensive London loft.

She opens the entrance door with the key she has, knocks on his flat door when she's made it up the stairs. "Tom, it's me. I'm gonna let myself in, okay?"

After she's closed the door behind her, him nowhere to be seen, she hears a muted, "Fuck," from the bedroom, so she goes to investigate. Gently rapping on the door, she announces herself. "Tom? Can I come in?"

"Go away," he says, clearly irritated.

She cracks the door, peers in.

He's sitting on the edge of the bed, his right leg in a pair of greyish green dress trousers, his face not betraying that he's annoyed about something. "Everything alright?"

"No, nothing's fucking alright," he snaps at her. "Almost bloody keeled over, trying to get dressed."

"Are you wearing the ankle brace?"

"No, I'm not wearing the fucking ankle brace!"

"Why not?"

"Just fuck off, Nancy."

“And what? Have you injure yourself more? Come on, can’t be so hard to get into a bloody pair of trousers.”

There’s clear annoyance and frustration in his expression. She softens her voice. “Tom. Let me help.”

“Fantastic,” he says sarcastically. “Going on fifty and I can’t even get into a pair of trousers without my sister’s help.”

“Going on fifty with a gammy foot. There’s a difference.”

“Which, if we’re being honest, is actually *your* fault.”

“Oh, I'll shoulder the blame if it improves your mood.” She holds out a hand. “Here. Lean on me.”

Begrudgingly, he accepts the help and it doesn’t take long until he’s in a suit that she has to admit looks very smart on him. She looks around. “Where’s the brace?”

“I’m not wearing that thing. It’s way too bulky.”

“Then at least bandage it up.”

“Was hoping you could help me with that.”

A-ha! Nancy thinks. Finally he’s asking for actual help. “How is the ankle anyway? Can you walk on it?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you ice it last night?”

“Yes, Nurse Ronstadt. Used the ointment, too. Did fuck-all, for all I know.”

“It would be worse today if you hadn’t done it.”

“Yeah, well, this is bad enough.”

“Do you want some cheese with your whine?”

“Ha-ha, very funny.”

She shrugs at him. “There’s still A&E...”

He glares at her. “Nancy...”

She grins. “I was joking.” Then she points at the open-plan living room. “Go and sit at the table, let’s get you sorted.”

She follows and pulls over a chair, carefully inspects his foot. The bruise has gone an angrier shade of purple, but that was to be expected. The swelling has also increased somewhat, but it doesn't look alarming. He'll feel it for a few weeks, though.

She applies some of the ibuprofen cream and he winces when she gently massages it in. "Sorry," she tells him apologetically.

He just closes his eyes and then blinks a few times.

His foot is all bandaged up within the next five minutes, and Tom seems to be happy with it as he stands up and tries it out. He nods. "Yeah, I can work with that."

"Good." She looks at her watch. "You all ready to go?"

"Provided I can get this foot into a pair of shoes, yes."

She helps him pick a pair of navy suede shoes that are halfway between sneakers and dress shoes and that also happen to go well with the dark blue shirt he picked. She gives him a quick once-over and raises her eyebrows. "Very dapper."

"Shut up," he says good-naturedly.

"No, seriously. I don't even know why you worried about shoes. These work perfectly."

"Says the woman whose wardrobe consists entirely of beige tops and cardigans."

"Not *entirely*."

"Yeah, you have one red and one pink top to mix it up."

"Well, maybe you should take me shopping some time."

He smiles. "Maybe I should. When I can walk again."

"God, I fear for my wallet."

Tom gathers up his things and Nancy slings his messenger bag over her shoulder as they make it down the stairs. She'd been a little worried he was downplaying the whole thing, but he seems mobile enough that she's now somewhat reassured it's really only a moderate strain that'll heal on its own.

He pulls out his phone when they're in the car to set up the navigation and then they're off. They drive the first few minutes in silence with Tom fiddling around with the entertainment system until he settles on music that isn't familiar to her. Alternative or indie rock of some sort. She doesn't mind it.

He's the one to initiate the conversation. "So you found someone to look after Leo today?"

"Made Kevin pick him up from school. Of course he complained endlessly. Can't fathom what I ever saw in that man that I had sex with him."

"Was it good, at least?"

"The sex? I don't see how that's any of your business."

"So the answer is no."

She scoffs. "Most boring man on the planet. Vanilla all the way."

Tom makes a grimace and a sound that's somewhere near an *ugh*. She wonders what his own romantic interests are these days, or if he's even had any recently. His relationship with Mandy didn't last, though they were very grown up about it when they realised they were both looking for escapism from very different kinds of unhappiness in their lives. As far as Nancy knows, they're still friends.

"How about you?" she asks outright.

"What *about* me?"

"Any hot sex recently?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I wish."

"Nothing going on in that department?"

"Nothing recently. Met a guy a few weeks ago. Didn't last."

"A *guy*?" Wow, Nancy thinks. That's new.

He throws her a look. "What, you didn't know I was leaning both ways?"

"How would I know? I've only ever heard you talk about women."

"Yeah, well, it mostly was for a while."

She raises her eyebrows. "Okay, I need a minute to get my head around that."

"You have a problem with that?"

"No, of course not," she says quickly. "It just... never occurred to me that that's you. Since when did you..." She trails off, not sure how to phrase this exactly.

He shrugs. "I don't know. Early twenties, maybe."

"How did I not know this until now? Any more life-altering revelations you've been keeping from me?"

"You mean like the furry conventions I go to every few months."

"You do *not*."

He chuckles. "No, I don't. My life up here is the kind of mundane and ordinary that I used to resent with a vengeance."

She sets the indicator and starts overtaking a lorry, liking the way that the BMW's high-powered engine responds immediately. "Any regrets?"

He takes a moment to answer, then shrugs. "Not really."

"I'm glad you found your place."

"I'm not even sure I have."

"Haven't you? You seem pretty settled. Leo loves having you here. So do I, by the way."

He seems genuinely touched by that, abashedly says, "Thanks. And ditto."

"Are you not happy here?"

"What does happy even mean?"

"Are we really going to have a deep philosophical talk about happiness while I'm driving down the M66?"

"Hey, you started it!"

She chuckles. "Yeah, I suppose I did. This car is great, by the way."

"Yeah, that's why I bought it."

They continue talking about this and that the rest of the way. He tells her a little bit about this story he's working on. She talks about a particularly obnoxious colleague who's been driving everyone mental. They discuss a TV series they both like. The time passes quickly and before Nancy knows it, they've arrived in the location that the Satnav indicates is their destination.

When she's stopped the car, she turns to Tom. "So I suspect you want me to spend time elsewhere while you do this."

"Yeah. Sorry, was that not clear from the start?"

"Don't worry, I'm a big girl, Tom. Go do your thing. Call me when you need your chauffeur to come pick you up."

He flashes her a quick grin. "Will do. Thanks, sis."

"Sure thing. Now out with you."

He doesn't need to be told twice and she watches him limp to the entrance of the building they're parked in front of, strapping a mask to his face as he goes.

And then the next hour or two are hers. With everything locked down, there aren't that many enticing activities on offer here in Manchester, but she's long wanted to do the Ancoats Marina Loop, so she finds a place to park the car and takes a stroll.

Tom texts her just about 45 minutes later, which Nancy already thinks is odd. 'Come pick me up' it simply says.

She types, 'Already?'

His response is one word. 'Yeah'

She replies, 'Give me 30 min, need to walk back to the car first.'

He doesn't reply and she makes her way back to his BMW.

When she gets to where Tom's waiting, he doesn't look happy. The impression intensifies when he gets into the car with a look that could kill, and Nancy thinks, *uh oh.* She braces for impact.

"Didn't go well, I presume," she probes.

He lets out a frustrated grunt. "Bloody arsehole was a no-show. Didn't even have the fucking decency to call in."

"That's shitty."

"We drove down here for fucking nothing."

"Well, I had a nice walk along the New Islington Marina."

"Good for you," he says sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"Yeah," he says in a clipped tone. "Bloody story's shot now. God, this was such a fucking waste of time!" He slams his palm against the dashboard in front of him.

"Don't punish the car for it. Or your hand."

He shoots her an angry glare. "Keep your fucking wisecracks to yourself!"

"Tom..."

"And don't fucking 'Tom' me!"

Nancy stays quiet, starts the car and gets out of the parking spot. They drive in silence for a minute or so until Tom notices that they're not going in the direction they came, so he asks, still clearly irritated, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere that's hopefully going to make you a little less aggravated."

He grumbles something under his breath that she doesn't comment on, then asks, "Do I have to walk for it?"

"A few yards. Ideally not more than fifty."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not in the mood for Nancy's Magical Mystery Tour."

"Oh, I've noticed."

It's another ten minutes until Nancy stops the car by the pavement on a double-yellow line. She nods to the burger joint they're standing in front of that has street-side seating. "Find us a table and pick your poison. I'm buying."

Tom doesn't exactly look enticed but he gets out of the car and hobbles over to the restaurant while Nancy moves the car to find parking.

He's got his nose in a menu when she joins him. He looks up as she sits down opposite him. "You just happened to know that there was a place open in this exact spot with outdoor seating."

"No, I have eyes in my head. Plus I'm hungry as shit and I bet so are you. If motherhood has taught me anything, it's that less hungry man means less cranky man, and so—" she indicates the area around them, "—ta-da!"

"Brilliant," he comments dryly.

"You want us to leave and go home?"

That makes him soften. "No. I *am* hungry. And this looks good."

"I'll count that as a win."

He smiles at her. "What would I do without you?"

"Starve, I suppose."

"Come on, I'm not completely incapable."

"Most you can do in terms of cooking is ring the nearest takeaway. I've seen the flyers in your flat. Must be every single place in a ten-mile radius."

He shrugs. "Guilty as charged."

Nancy takes a menu of her own and studies it. "Have you picked already?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"Why? Were you going to be compulsive about it and order the same thing?"

"No, I'm just curious."

"Let me have my own mystery for a second."

"Okay, fine."

Someone comes to their table within the next minute, keeping a respectable distance, and they both order a burger. Nancy opts for the sweet potato chips as a side. Tom then changes his mind and orders that, too. She grins at him. “Now who’s being compulsive about it?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“See, you’re already less cranky. Another win.”

He sighs. “No, but seriously. This whole thing has been a fucking shitshow.”

“Yeah, I know. Let’s not talk about it until we get home, though, yeah? I wanna have at least one afternoon without someone yapping in my ear about how this sucks and how that is impossible to deal with and how the world’s going to shit.”

“The world *is* going to shit, though.”

“Yeah, and it can keep doing that quietly without me having to hear about it for the next two or three hours. And just in case you’ve forgot, I’m the one currently in possession of your car keys, and the alternative is still the train.”

“Ouch. How you wound me, Nancy Ronstadt.”

“I’ve learned from the best.”

The food is brought to their table after what feels like a long wait they pass with more banter. They end up bickering about whether fruit belongs in savoury food or not. The takeaway queue outside the burger place starts getting longer.

The burgers are not the best she’s ever had, but they do the trick in terms of filling their empty stomachs and providing distraction from a day that didn't start out great and didn't significantly improve as it went on.

And just because she feels like they deserve an extra treat, she orders two pieces of the chocolate fudge sponge cake to take away. As promised, Nancy shoulders the bill, even though Tom is actually the one who tends to have more spare cash at his disposal. And usually he’s the one buying.

They’re back in the car before long, Tom actually braving the walk all the way to the car. Nancy figures maybe he’s finally sucking it up. Or maybe he thought she’s carved enough favours out of her day for him already.

He dozes off with his head against the headrest ten minutes after they left the city and Nancy smiles to herself. The ankle probably kept him up quite a bit during the night.

The drive is uneventful and he finally wakes up somewhere around Ramsbottom, tiredly scrubs both hands down his face, looking out the window. “Where are we?”

“Just coming up on Ramsbottom.”

He lets out a long-suffering sigh.

"Didn't get much sleep last night?"

"No," he just says.

Nancy points behind the passenger seat. "I have a bottle of Coke in my bag if you wanna dig for it."

He shakes his head. "No, thanks."

As she keeps driving the last leg of the way, he gradually perks up, and then the old *Pulp* song 'Disco 2000' comes on the radio. Nancy turns up the volume. Tom looks at her and starts nodding his head to the beat.

They both sing along to the lyrics in unison, and they take cues from each other as the song dials up. By the time the chorus comes on, they go at it full force.

> *Let's all meet up in the year 2000,*
> *Won't it be strange when we're all fully grown?*
> *Be there 2 o'clock by the fountain down the road.*

They look at each other and laugh when the song fades out.

"Blast from the past," she says with a smile.

"Yeah, Christ, when was this?"

"Isn't it in the title? 2000?"

"No. Has to be earlier than that."

"Didn't you date a Deborah in school?"

"Deborah? Nah, I don't think so. I dated a Tara."

"Oh, right. Mandy's sister."

"Yeah."

"God, you were sleeping around a lot."

"As opposed to you, who had, what? One date all of sixth form?"

"Two," she corrects him. "Both terrible. Not the best way to lose your virginity."

"God, yeah. Mine wasn't that great either. Toilet stall with a dark-haired girl whose name I don't even remember."

"Your first time was in a toilet stall?"

"Yeah," he says, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

“Maybe I can compete with Kevin for most boring person on the planet...”

He chuckles, then sobers a little. “Yeah, well, look where it got me.”

“You mean at least I have a kid to show for it? Not sure that’s a massive achievement.”

His voice is uncharacteristically solemn when he asks, “That something you regret?”

“Having Leo? God no. Best thing that ever happened to me. But if I’m being honest, it hasn’t always been easy.”

“You’re a great mum, though.”

“Thanks,” she says a little abashedly. She isn’t great with compliments. Especially not from her brother who doesn’t give them easily. “Where’s all this coming from?”

He makes a shrugging gesture. “Maybe you don’t hear it often enough.”

“I never hear it.”

“All the more reason you should.”

They’re now pulling into Tom’s street and she stops the car in front of his tenement. “Go on,” she says. “I’ll catch up, Limpy.”

“Not funny,” he grumbles, but she knows he doesn’t mean it.

There’s a parking spot conveniently up the road that she claims, and she lets herself into the building with her keys.

Tom’s still working on conquering the staircase when she reaches the last flight of stairs. He looks a little green around the nose by the time that he’s made it up the last step with his hand clamped a little too tightly around the banister while Nancy unlocks his flat door. She thinks he might have also gained a few pounds since she last saw him, his midriff looks a bit more rounded out.

Under her wary gaze, he hobbles into the flat and over to the couch to sink down on it. With his back and his head fully reclined against the backrest, he sounds very exhausted. “Please kill me now.”

She closes the door behind her, puts the takeaway box with the cake on the counter, his messenger bag on the floor and takes off her cardigan to drape it over the back of one of his chairs. Then she walks over to him. “At least get out of the suit jacket and put your foot up.”

He sighs and wrestles himself out of the thing, which he then holds out to her. It goes on the back of another chair because what’s more important than a rumpled suit is that he gets some ice on that ankle that has been aggravated more than it should have been today.

Tom is now dutifully peeling his foot out of the sock and unwraps the bandage, accompanied by an unhappy noise. Nancy brings him the ice pack from his freezer that he puts on it, then she goes back to the counter.

She has to open two cupboards to find the side plates while she says over her shoulder, "Tell me what happened earlier. In Manchester."

He sounds slightly annoyed. "You know what happened."

"So the guy just didn't turn up?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

She unearths the two pieces of scrumptious-looking chocolate cake and puts them on the plates.

"You said the story is shot. What's the plan now?"

He scrubs a hand down his face. "I don't know. Look for another angle, maybe. There's always one, you just have to find it."

Next, she fishes two forks out of the drawer. "That sounds a lot better than 'everything's ruined'."

"Yeah, well. Hard-earned journo skill, I suppose."

Back by the couch, she hands one plate to Tom and sets hers on the glossy surface of the designer coffee table. Tom only has the one couch and it's currently occupied by him and his outstretched legs, so she gathers up two of the sofa cushions, puts one on the floor, sits down on it and arranges the other one between the side of the couch and her back before she starts digging into her own piece of cake.

"Mmh," she says between bites. "This is good."

"Don't you have to go pick up your son?"

"Nah. He can spend some quality time with his actual bio-dad. Bloody man's not around nearly enough."

"Bio-dad makes it sound like there's another dad in the mix."

"Isn't there?" She stuffs another piece of cake into her mouth, is scoffing the thing way too quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"You, Tom."

"*Me*?" he asks incredulously.

“Yeah. You’re more of a father to Leo than the guy who actually sired him.”

There’s a pregnant pause when she stuffs the last piece of cake into her mouth. She looks up at Tom. He’s stopped chewing and his face is doing something complicated.

“Did I say something wrong?”

He swallows visibly. “No,” he says, and it sounds a little choked.

She puts her plate away and turns sideways so that she can face him better. “How have you never noticed that he absolutely loves spending time with you? Keeps asking all the time when you’re dropping by next.”

“Really?” There’s something thick and emotional in his voice.

“Tom. He admires the hell out of you.”

And then he has actual tears brimming in his eyes, and that’s both sweet and a little confusing. She puts a hand on his thigh. “Didn’t realise it was that big a deal.”

His voice is a little wet when he says, “How could you not, after all that happened with Dad…”

“Yeah,” she says in a whisper, because she had never actually considered that angle. “Were you afraid you couldn’t be that—a father figure?”

He sniffs his nose, wipes his hand at a tear that dislodged and rolled down his cheek, the cake now all but forgotten in his lap. “I don’t know. I just never thought…”

“Hey.” She gently strokes her thumb back and forth on his thigh. “You make a great surrogate dad.”

He smiles a somewhat crooked smile. “That’s great to hear.”

Silence settles between them again, the moment laden with something weighty and profound – a rare occurrence in their conversations these days. Their history used to be complex and complicated, their years spent apart a chasm that she wasn’t sure they could ever truly bridge. But then he’d returned to Bacup just before she got pregnant and it had changed everything.

She looks at her hand that’s still resting on his thigh. “You know, I’m really glad you came back. Even with all the… The stuff that happened.”

“Yeah, so am I.”

She gives him a long look, takes in the grey hair and the wrinkles around his eyes that make him look just a little wiser. And then there’s a strange feeling in her chest, too. “You know, no matter what some piece of paper says, we’ve always been family. I mean, I think you know that, but maybe I’ve not said it out loud enough.”

His brow furrows with emotion and his voice is low and quiet when he says, "At the end of the day, I got really lucky. Because when I think about it, my life could have gone a whole lot differently, and what would that have looked like?"

"You mean if Mum and Dad hadn't taken you in?"

He nods. "Yeah. Because what would the alternative have been? Being sold into some rich-arse family who wanted a trophy kid to show around?"

"I mean, how would you ever know? You could have ended up with another loving family."

"Or I could have ended up with a really horrible family."

"For what it's worth, I'm glad you ended up with us."

"I still wish it hadn't happened like it did, though."

"When you left?"

"Yeah. If he'd told me—*us*."

"How could he tell you, Tom? The whole thing was all tangled up in scandal. I mean, you know that. You wrote it up. How would he have told you?"

"You know that quote he had on his desk?"

"About shaming the devil?"

"Yeah." He looks over to the shelf on the opposite wall where the picture frame with the Walter Lippmann quote now stands. "There's something in there about telling the truth. He was always very gutsy. I don't know why he didn't have the guts to tell *us*."

"Come on, you know it ate him up. All these years. Decades, even. And you were gone and refused to speak to him. What did you expect him to do? Call you and say, 'Hello son, I need to tell you something. You're the product of a series of rapes that I helped keep quiet because your mum really wanted a child. Can we talk about this?'"

"No, but he could have at least told me that I was adopted."

"And how would that have gone down after what had happened before you left?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. At least it would have been a fraction of the truth."

"Didn't explain why he got physical with you, though. Don't you think that was what you really needed? An explanation for why he did that?"

"Yeah, probably."

"I know it haunted you all those years. Haunted him, too."

"Yeah, and I still don't know what to do with that."

“Make your peace with it, maybe? Somehow I thought you already had.”

“Somehow I thought I had, too.”

“This may sound like an odd question, but did you ever consider talking to someone about it?”

He frowns. “You mean a shrink?”

“They call it therapist, but yes.”

She expects him to make a snide remark and deny outright that he needs therapy, but he surprises her and says, “Once or twice.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He shrugs. “Just seemed like a big hurdle. And with the NHS being what it is... Come on, you know it’s not that easy.”

He’s right, of course. “I could help you figure that out. If you want.”

He stays quiet for a moment, then says, “I’ll think about it.”

“Just say the word. I’ll fight tooth and nail to find you someone nearby.”

His face does that complicated thing again, but then he pulls his legs to the side, puts his plate with the half-eaten cake on the floor and says, “Can you get up here for a moment?”

Nancy frowns. “Why?”

“Because I really wanna give you a hug.”

She lets out a short laugh. “How can I say no to that?”

He makes room for her to sit next to him and then she’s in his arms, held tightly against him, his chin over her shoulder. “I love you,” he mumbles into her ear.

“I love you, too,” she mumbles back. “And so does Leo.”

He pulls back and she adds, “Although he probably won’t tell you that in those exact words. At least not for maybe another ten or fifteen years, provided you don’t screw it up.”

That gets a chuckle out of him. “I have absolutely no intention of screwing that up.”

“That’s the spirit.” She playfully jabs him in the upper arm. “You big old softie.”

He grins at her. “It’s not like you don’t like it.”

“Maybe I do, but I’ll never admit it.”

She looks at her empty plate on the coffee table, then looks at the one on the floor that has half a piece of cake left on it. “Are you still going to eat that?”

He smiles. “Oh, you bet I will.”

She flashes him a cheeky grin. “I’ll fight you for it.”

“You’re gonna fight a man who’s already injured? That’s a real low blow.”

“One tiny piece.” She pouts at him. “*Please.*”

He laughs. “Christ. You know I can’t resist that face.”

She bends down to pick up the plate, then holds it out to him. “Fine. It’s yours to conquer.”

He pries a piece loose with the fork and holds it in the direction of her mouth. “Say aah.”

She doesn’t have to think twice and scoops it up with her lips. It still tastes like a heavenly mix of sin, solace and sugar.