

WHY DID I HAVE TO ASK TWICE?

It was 1985 and Sue was in her early fifties. She had decided to leave her job to become a National Trust guide. Sue had not had a serious relationship for many years. Her one true love had been Steve, but Sue had turned down Steve's marriage proposal, having been pressurised by her now-deceased father who insisted that, as an actor, Steve's job had been far too precarious. In his eyes, Sue, as a dutiful woman, needed to settle down and have a family, and Steve could not have fulfilled the role of being a reliable 'provider'. Instead, her father persuaded Sue to accept a marriage proposal from George, an accountant, who, tragically, was killed in a road traffic accident two months before 'The Great Day'.

On the day of the accident Sue had wept tears for George and for the decisions she had made. Months later, Sue had tried to make contact with Steve again, but without success.

That afternoon, years later, in her role as National Trust guide, Sue stood in Belton House. Smiling, as she had been taught, Sue was approached by a man, roughly her own age, his face shielded by sunglasses and shrouded in a grey beard.

He pointed at Sue's favourite artefact, a Chinese incense burner from the Ming period, over five hundred years ago.

'Can you tell me the story behind this?'

'Well, the story is fascinating. It is all about the worship of ancestors.' Sue continued to go into some detail, as the man's face displayed no emotion. 'It has been with us for a very long time.'

'It took me a very long time, you know.'

'Yes, it took the historians a long time to discover the truth,' replied Sue, who had learnt the art of steering around ambivalent comments, often from men.

'No. It took *me* a very long time.'

The man stared into Sue's eyes, his face remaining still, as he waited for a response.

The sound of Sue's embarrassed laughter filled the ensuing silence.

Then the man thrust a note into Sue's hand and turned away. The note began:

'History is not just about facts and dates. It is about real people and their emotions. We all have deadlines, and mine is coming soon. I have been diagnosed with cancer, but I am praying it is not terminal. I have come to ask you the same question again, for a second time. I cannot face hearing your response today, so I am leaving you with this note. I hope I have the courage to return next week, to hear your reply.'

Not able to read on, Sue stared at the paper and then at the empty space in front of her.

Sue understood. The word 'deadline' can mean literally that. Now a free woman, Sue owed it to herself and to him to make the right decision.

The tears ran down Sue's face again, but this time they were tears of happiness and sadness, mixed together as one.