

## What If? Stephanie Roberts

She'd found him in White Pages, which also listed a partner's initial.

'Hello?' And with that one word the decades fell away. *How can someone's voice have not changed, in all that time?*

'Hello,' she answered, 'It's...'

'I know who you are,' he interrupted, 'You're the only woman I ever loved.'

*Whoa, that was unexpected.* 'You're married, should you be saying that?'

'It's alright, I'm going out into the garden. I must see you. Where are you?'

*Mid-1960s' Beirut was their teenage paradise, days spent with friends, sometimes in the mountains but mostly at their favoured beach club, with their new surfboards, the two of them sharing a lunchtime bowl of fresh hummus pooling in local olive oil, green and peppery, mopped with warm Arabic breads. Evenings along the Corniche, freshly squeezed oranges and the waft of frangipani flowers, then one of any number of nightclubs. Everyone said they were ideally matched, they looked right together.*

*Yet at the end of that summer she returned to college, and walked away.*

He drove north to the Gold Coast and they met, touching hands through the car window as he pulled up, laughing as the evidence of time was accounted for and the familiar surfaced. For old times' sake they bought a selection of mezzes from a Levantine deli and ate at a picnic table by the beach, a warm early summer shower gently pattering on the shade above them.

He came looking for her when she was in Dubai, he said. *Had he found her then, she would have gathered her children and left with him. What if?*

He had an elegant wife and beautiful daughters and had achieved everything he said he would, and she found she was happy for him.

From somewhere she heard herself ask: 'Have you been faithful to her?' Words spoken cannot be unsaid and so she waited for one of two possible answers:

*Yes:* which would please her as it meant he had distanced himself from his father's influence and belief that women's purpose was to gratify men; or

*No:* well, at least that would show him to be honest with himself.

But he contrived a third answer, one that made her swallow a laugh.

To her question, *Have you been faithful to her?* he answered, 'Almost.'

Perhaps the girl who walked away fifty years previously was less foolish than everyone thought.