

Found and Lost

Paul's table was tucked away in a corner, while Lydia's was nearer the middle, directly in his line of sight, eye contact just a blink away. Lydia would not recognise him, even if she looked up and caught him watching her. Just an unexceptional middle aged man, thinning grey hair, grey suit. Easy to dismiss.

His heart thudded as he prepared himself. So many years in the making, this moment. So much research, so many Googles and Facebook pages. So much waiting, concealing, revealing. So much patience. Now here she was, metres away, entirely unaware of him, while he knew everything about her.

Lydia's focus was on her dining companion, a man who leant forward and spoke softly to her. She laughed, a low, musical sound, and extended a graceful hand to pick up her glass, the two of them close, then separating to drink their wine. She was wearing a carefully chosen dress, Paul guessed, dark red silk, fluttery short sleeves and an elegant cowl neck. It drew attention to her toned shoulders and the line of her collar bone, her smooth skin.

Paul took a gulp of his own wine as the waiter approached and hastily ordered something from the middle of the menu, not even sure what it was. Lydia, twirling pasta on her fork, had a glow about her, and Paul was stricken by a blaze of anxious jealousy. Had he underestimated the other man? Was this the date when Lydia's world shifted and she slipped from the cliff edge and let herself tumble into love, with this man, this *other* man?

As his meal arrived, Paul dropped his gaze, disturbed by the way his high emotions curdled into shame and guilt. Now was the moment to leap up and declare himself, but something about the way the couple intertwined without touching, touched Paul. Then the man produced a small box, which he opened and placed in front of Lydia. She gasped, her gaze transfixed by what Paul concluded must be an engagement ring.

They kissed, an intimate celebration which drove a shard into Paul's heart. Just as he found her, so she slipped away. He felt a profound sense of loss after coming so close, a recognition that after all this time he had left it too late. But whose fault was that? What had happened so many years ago was because of him, and now these complicated, ambiguous feelings of triumph and failure were his to endure.

He summoned the waiter and thrust a wad of cash into the startled man's hand.

"For my meal," he said, then glanced towards the couple, "and for theirs. Is it enough?"

The waiter nodded. "Any message?"

Paul looked over at Lydia, finally with a man she could admire.

"No message."

He took a last look at the face of the daughter he abandoned as a child. So much like her mother, but the eyes – the eyes were his.

It was enough.