

Once upon a time, in a land far far away, there was a young woman... Aw...fuck. I can't start my story like that.

Let me think. What about...

It was a *lovely* day...

What a load of bollocks. Here am I, wanting to spin you a tale and I can't even decide how to begin. Should I start at the beginning? The middle? Or even begin at the end and then go backwards? I think I'm digressing into some kind of literary cul de sac. Before you know it, I will be using tired old clichés and quoting Shakespeare. Like usual.

What about if I set the scene? You know — paint a picture with words (number one of the tired old cliché brigade). Setting is important, though, isn't it? Gives readers a feel for the story. Without it they will be visually bankrupt...just like I'm feeling verbally bankrupt now.

Okay. Here we go. Setting the scene. Ready my reader. Just a minute...you are ready, aren't you? I don't want to waste ink starting and then find you are still fiddling around in your handbag looking for a mint.

Consider this the beginning...the setting...the start.

Now...to set the scene. Shall I set it with time or place...or shall I go for the gold and set it with emotion?

The latter, I believe. (Metaphorical pushing of glasses up to the bridge of my nose...gives a look of intelligence.)

Right. I'm ready.

Cough.

On your marks...get set...

The Start (or Formally Known as The Introduction)

She said she'd love me forever. For *e* ver. Three syllables. Seven letters. Go on...count them. And those three syllables and seven letters turned out to be a one-syllable, three-letter word.

Lie.

Unless forever was to mean it was okay to treat me like pond life and then shag her work mate. Then I'm sorry, I'm wrong...it is forever. But in *my* dictionary, forever means something completely different. Let's just check...

Forever / fɔr evvar / *adv* 1. *also* for ever FOR ALL TIME for all future time. 2. *also* for ever FOR A VERY LONG TIME for a very long or seemingly endless time (*informal*).

See? 'FOR ALL TIME', and even a 'VERY LONG TIME', if you want to be informal.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not a pedant. I don't usually carry a dictionary around with me and contradict people on their usage of the English language. But come on...when someone tells you they will love you forever, it usually means longer than three and a half years. Doesn't it?

In my own way, I did love Sue. Didn't like the way she treated me, but I loved her all the same. We had only lived together for just over three years when I came home to find her rolling around our bedroom floor with a woman I'd met briefly at her company dinner two weeks previously. The only thought bouncing around my head was *I hope I don't have to steam clean the carpet*, before I turned, walked down the stairs and out of the door.

I'd barely grabbed the handle on my car door when she was behind me, gripping my arm, throwing accusations. Words splattering on my face...literally, words like 'cold', 'heartless', and the blinding one that accused me of 'indifference'.

'Even when you catch me fucking someone else, you just walk away.'

Yes. What else did she expect me to do?

'Why can't you show any emotion?'

Why? Will that change the fact you said you would love me forever?

In hindsight, I should have asked her that, but all I wanted to do was get out of there, flee the scene of the crime, and block it all out. I couldn't see the point in exposing all my shortcomings to all and sundry passersby at something nearing a hundred shrill decibels. Loud enough to make dogs weep.

And that's where my story truly begins.

The True Beginning

Sue was the longest relationship I'd ever had — forty months, to be precise. We met through a friend of a friend of a friend, nearly making our introduction an urban myth. It was lust at first sight, and we barely knew anything about one another before we were inside each other's underwear. We scarcely even made it inside my house before we were at it. The front door clicked, and so did her bra strap.

Sex had always come easy to me — or used to. I wasn't the type of person to form long-lasting relationships, and that suited me just fine. I preferred it to be just my little boy and me. When I say little boy, don't get me wrong. I'm not a single mother...never slept with a man. My little boy had the most gorgeous brown eyes and wet nose any mother could wish for. Unlike most, the child in question had four legs instead of the customary two.

Dudley. Duds for short. Black and tan...fuzzy...with a tail that wagged liked crazy, taking his whole bum with it. His smile was the perfect overshot jaw of the classic Border terrier. We'd been a team long before Sue came on the scene, and I knew we still would be when Sue had gone.

It was weird how it all kicked off...the relationship with Sue, that is. Before I knew it, we were seeing each other every night, and if I said I didn't enjoy having sex with her, I'd be lying. Things just grew. We became dependent on each other, a bit like smoking: You know it's bad for you, but you believe you need it to feel normal.

Duds found her suspect from the first moment he clapped his beady eyes on her. The first time I introduced him, he went to bite her tit. Well, we were in the hallway, and he was just protecting his property. I should've asked her to leave there and then, because dogs are never wrong, but at that moment in time I wanted to bite her tit, too, so I kind of ignored Duds' gesture. I can guarantee that kind of ignorance will not be repeated.

After four months, Sue began to apply the pressure. Why couldn't we move in together? It would be so much easier...cheaper...fun. And on and on and on...and then...on and on and on some more.

I can hear you saying, 'Why didn't you just tell her to sling her hook?'

Ah...easy for you to say, but you weren't the one receiving wonderful, mind-blowing sex, were you? You weren't the one who steadily began to believe that you actually couldn't do all the things you used to do, you had suddenly become dependent on another person. Even washing up...I couldn't even do that right. She systematically broke me down until I thought I would even have difficulty trying not to drown in the bath.

When I agreed to her moving in, she was in, unpacked, and settled in less than twelve hours. She must have been half packed and waiting for me to give her the go-ahead. Duds was not a happy boy, as she banished him from sleeping at the foot of my bed from the very first night, claiming it wasn't healthy.

I missed him. Missed the way I would wake up in the night and stretch my arm down to feel a warm wet tongue lavish my fingers with kisses. Missed the way I would inadvertently tickle his winkle because he was sprawled on his back, snoring away.

The relationship wasn't easy from the start. You might have guessed this. But when she moved in, I began to see a different side to Sue than the one she had presented to me over the previous six months. At first I used to argue (especially when it came to Duds), but then it just became easier to go along with her, and that infuriated her even more. Arguments would start as soon as I got in from work. She didn't even wait for me to take my coat off before she was accusing me of the usual things: not appreciating her, not telling her I loved her often enough, loving that damned mutt more than I loved her. Erm...well I...nah...you get the picture.

Eventually I didn't have the energy, or inclination, to argue. Just took it on the chin, rolled up my sleeves, and began to wash up. Badly. Sex went out of the window after the second year, and I spent more time in the sun room with Duds reading or just 'arsing about', as Sue so delicately phrased it.

I truly believed I did love her. Honestly. Thought it was a blip most couples went through when they moved in together.

Because, you see, she had told me she'd love me forever. And I, like a fool, believed her. It didn't occur to me to wonder whether I wanted her to.

Self-confidence was a thing of the past. I was beginning to believe I was a worthless piece of shit. I'm not saying Sue purposely set out to make me feel this way, all I'm saying is I felt vacant. The only thing I believed was that she would always love me. The most sorrowful thing was — I hoped she was lying.

I felt trapped...caught like the poor fox in the woods, legs stuck in a mantrap and waiting for the end to take it. The pain wasn't physical, more an emotional rendering of the helpless, if you get my meaning. Vacancy developed into hollowness, and hollowness seeped into an abyss, trickling away and leaving me clutching at straws.

Then I came home one day and saw her, saw her on the bedroom carpet with another woman. At the time the reason behind her infidelity wasn't clear, and I wasn't going to stick around and ask her why she had thought shagging someone in our home was the way to go. It was only after a few weeks after the event that she finally admitted she had wanted me to catch her, wanted me to do something to prove to her I loved her like she loved me.

What could I say?

The only thing I thought that made any sense at the time.

'Bollocks.'

The word conveyed an inner strength I thought had died, but by responding to her at all, I believed it also sapped me of what little self-respect I had left. I wanted to keep something; she'd taken everything else. Well, not straight away. She did give me a little time to adjust before she turned up with a removal van and wiped me out. Most of the furniture was now stacked in her apartment — unused for the most part and collecting dust. Not surprising, considering that was nearly six months ago.

When she demanded visiting rights for Duds, she went too far. Duds hated her. At the time I didn't know why, because it isn't in a dog's nature to hate — only humans have that capability. But as time went on, I began to get the whole picture.

Answer me this. Why would a dog, that has been loved from the minute he wiggled his fat little arse into your arms until now, dodge when you lifted your hand up suddenly? And why would a dog hide when you slapped a newspaper on the side of the chair?

Mmmm...is this rocket science? Methinks not.

This is the moment where things start becoming interesting. This is the moment when I thought I could choke the fucking life out of her. But I didn't. Nope. That wouldn't have been satisfying enough for me. And part of me still believes what I did wasn't just for what I thought she had done to Duds. I think it was because of all the times I had never fought back in the past — verbally, I mean. Not an excuse, but at least I'm trying to tell you how I felt and why I did the next thing I am about to tell you.

Imagine the look of surprise when she opened her front door and I smacked her right in the face. The satisfying crunch of her nose under my fist will live with me for the rest of my life. I revelled in the sight of the once straight feature leaning to one side and pissing blood like a soda siphon.

'Cold? Heartless? Fucking indifferent?' I grabbed her by the front of her shirt and felt the buttons tear away from the cloth, then stopped. This wasn't me...wasn't who I was. I didn't fight, whatever the provocation.

Grey eyes looked into mine. One thing stood out above all others: fear. And I had put it there. Duds was going crazy in the car, howling and scratching the window in a vain attempt to join in. I was distracted for less than a blink of an eye, and that's all she needed.

Bang! Knee up and meeting my crotch with the speed and precision of an all-in wrestler. And down I went. Flat on top of her. Face to face. Smearing her blood onto my cheek.

'You haven't heard the last of this, Beth,' she spat into my face. 'I'll get you...and your little dog, too.'

What the fuck was this? A twisted version of *The Wizard of Oz*? Were Munchkins going to clamber out of the flowerbeds and start singing as if they were spaced out on helium?

I tried to pull away, but she pulled me nearer so she could then push me away with force. I clattered onto the paving slabs, trying to stop myself from skidding. Sue shakily stood up and wiped the back of her hand across her nose. And winced. I just sat there. Dudley howled. The neighbourhood sat in eerie silence, well, apart from the demented howling of my little wolfman.

She slowly stepped forward, and I cowered, lifting my hands to my face, believing she was going to hit me. Her shadow loomed over me and stayed...and I stayed in my protective shell.

'You're not worth it.'

And then the shadow left, the sun warming the backs of my arms and drying off the tears that had trickled down my face after the introduction of her kneecap to my private parts.

I can't tell you how long I sat there, but when I struggled to my feet both my right leg and my backside were numb. I looked ancient as I hobbled back to the car to be greeted by a very concerned bundle of fur. Duds washed my cheeks of all the dried tears. He even cleaned all the new ones that raced down my face. Bless him.

Unconditional love. If only humans could do that, I'd be set for life.

But we can't. Can we?

Things went downhill from there, really...as if they could get any lower than they already were. I stopped going in to the office and did all my work from home. The only time I went out was to take Dudley for his walks or to collect more work to do. My boss understood, as drawings and ideas came from within, not from one's surroundings. Well, that's what he said to me, anyway.

He believed in me. More than I did. Told me to take some time to get my life in order, however long that took.

Every day I found it more difficult to get out of bed, and if it hadn't been for the necessity of taking care of someone else, I don't think I would have bothered. What was the point? My life had taken a swan dive off a cliff and hit concrete.

My mum was forever phoning and trying to get me to 'Get my backside' round to her place, as mums tend to do. So did my brother, Will. He wanted to come over...take me out...fix me up with a work mate...anything to take my mind off things. But I couldn't face them...felt too fragile. Even friends came out of the woodwork after realising Sue was no longer on the scene, only to discover I was 'unavailable for comment'. I just wanted to be left on my own to simmer and stew...and sink deeper into myself.

Wait a minute. I need to think.

Let's get the facts of the case on the table. (A quick mime of me arranging my papers...shuffle, shuffle.)

Right.

Firstly, she said she'd love me forever. Secondly...she didn't. Shall I say thirdly? Nah...I should bullet point.

- She hit Duds (fucker)
- I hit her (sound of cheers from the crowd)
- She kneed me in the lady garden (and it still throbs at the memory) and wiped blood and spit all over my face
- The grabber nicked half of my furniture (robber)
- She made me feel worthless and stupid (erm)
- And I had to steam clean my bedroom carpet.

Sorted.

Now all I needed to do was to make a similar list to counteract that one.

- Shower
- Dress
- Feed Duds

- Eat
- Go for a walk.

And this is when we get to the Development stage of my tale.

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