



## Blue

Katie jolts awake.

Something has woken her and she listens, breath stilled, but there is nothing to hear. Was she dreaming? She tries to remember but nothing returns.

Six on the clock. Light peeping through the rips in her curtains. Must put new ones on her list, the list that seems all too long and getting longer and how is she to pay for it all? *Yet the world continues to turn*, she reassures herself.

Flips the quilt and swings out her legs, wonders if she has work today. The bathroom light assaults her as she squints and sits, relieving the night and then she washes her hands, still drowsy, looks distractedly in the mirror, is that a grey hair? She gasps, she tugs. Yep, grey. First one. Her face doesn't look any different to yesterday. Or the day before. That, of course, is the problem, the gradual change from girl to woman and then onto middle age and beyond.

Is forty middle-aged? At Katie's fortieth birthday celebrations last weekend Vi said some people think thirty-five is the start of middle age. Vi is thirty-three and therefore not middle-aged even by her own accounting but she worries about being over thirty.

"Have some kids, Massey would make a great dad," Katie tells her.

Vi replies, "I was waiting for my best friend to go first."

Katie responds, "No point waiting for me anymore!"

But she knows forty is fine. Forty brings experience and wisdom and the chance of a new life. The best is yet to come, she reassures herself. If only she could get regular work. *Faith, Katie, faith.*

She checks her phone. No messages means no work, unless a teacher hasn't rung in yet. She'd always wanted to be a teacher, and when Hamilton finally confessed his ill-considered liaison with The Slut, something in her intuition had whispered, *You knew this was coming*. Perhaps that was why she felt the urgency to start her degree two years before. Since she'd graduated, she'd had enough work to cover

mortgage and utilities, but she needs the guarantee of full-time to get her through her car registration.

And new curtains.

She checks her phone again. No message from Valentino, either. His name isn't really Valentino but she's forgotten what it is, something exotic, something Spanish, and he isn't going to call her, anyway. He has shoulder-length silky black hair, olive skin and an animal stealth. She spotted him at a Friday pub night, Vi telling her, *We'll pick you up so you can let the wild thing run loose*, and her heart skipped the proverbial beat when her eyes found him.

She'd sailed across the room, mischief in her heart and said, *They let men like you in here, do they?* and he'd turned from his group and given her his full and fun attention, the wine Massey supplied doing all the talking and she'd loved it, the words tumbling from her mouth and Valentino's amused and amusing replies stoking the fire.

A woman wearing a low-cut dress and a sour expression arrived and put her possessive arm around him, *Sorry, honey, look elsewhere for your fun* and Katie thought she saw despondency on Valentino's face as she skipped away for more of Massey's wine.

But the weekend before last, Valentino had materialised out of the blue. She'd ordered a coffee for herself and for Vi at their local, and heard at her shoulder, *They let women like you in here, do they?*

Vi observed their interaction elatedly. That was the man who'd prompted Katie's drunken song all the way home from the pub, *Valentino, Where you been-o*, and then giggling, *Eyes so green-o ... Body so lean-o ... Wish he was keen-o, Girlfriend so mean-o*, whilst Massey snored tunelessly along in the back.

Valentino asked Katie out for a meal.

*Girlfriend coming, too?*

*No girlfriend. Yet.*

She'd refused him her number, insisting instead he give her his.



She didn't feel ready to venture back into the land of betrayal and careless indifference. So, she wrestled her feelings about turning forty into shape, got her thoughts about the value of relationships in check, then left a message yesterday.

Now nothing.

Perhaps he's reconsidered. Perhaps someone else has pinched him. Perhaps he hasn't looked at his messages.

Now what? If she rings again, she'll look like a try hard. And she's not trying hard for any man now.

The bright Autumn sun shines in her kitchen window. She drinks a glass of water and wonders what to do with her day.

Gardening? It sure could use it.

Shopping? She looks in the fridge, same.

Work? She checks her phone again; makes sure it isn't on silent.

Nothing from Vi either, and normally she'd have already sent her daily *What's happening with Valentino?* text.

A walk. She needs a walk. She dons her tracksuit, socks and shoes. Puts her hair up. Smiles at her reflection in the mirror. Gets a couple of lolly snakes out of the jar on the bench-top (*bad girl, who cares*), saunters out the door, beams in the sunshine. She walks down to the beach at the end of the road, gives the ocean a friendly grin, lurches into a run.

Yes, a run is what she needs, a woman can change her mind, can't she? As her feet thump the pavement she thinks of her little house and what needs attention, and its surprisingly large garden courtesy of the big old-style blocks of this area.

There are plenty of weeds. Here, as she runs along the path, she sees someone's planted the invasive foreigners she pulled out of the wetlands last month, volunteering instead of pulling up her own weeds to ensure she's part of the world turning.

Anger bubbles up and over goes her ankle, *Om! Om! Om!* Her mood plummets but her ankle is not bad, just enough for a scare and she feels her heart beating fast from the run and the panic of injury. She stops, takes a few deep breaths, feels her anger, lets it blow out to the listening ocean.

Hamilton was an asshole.

Back to this, then. Last month he'd rung to ask for a divorce, and she'd agreed on the condition he and his new girlie pay for it. Hamilton had been incensed: *You were one half of this marriage for fifteen years and you will pay one half of the divorce!*

To which she'd replied, *Yes but it was your half that did the extra-marital shagging and anyway if you want me to pay half you'll have to wait a few decades so I can save up the money.*

Hamilton barked back angrily, *Why did you buy so close to the damn beach?*

*To piss you off, of course.*

But she holds all the cards. The new girlie is pregnant which might mean divorce papers in the mail soon. If she hasn't heard by the end of the month she'll call her solicitor and get everything moving: she doesn't want to pay half but she will if it means getting herself an arseholectomy.

Her mood has sagged. This isn't how she wants her life to run. It's Tuesday, Choose-day, she calls it, every week making sure she's on track and living her life her way.

*Just wait for the world to turn*, Vi tells her on difficult days.

She leans on a balustrade and looks out to sea, drinks in the green of the water and the blue of the sky, a few wispy white clouds on the horizon as she rotates her ankle and then puts weight onto it. It's fine. Everything's fine. There's a lot to do today even if there is no teaching and no Valentino.

She returns home, smiling as she passes an elderly couple going down for an icy-cold swim. Brave. That's what they are and that's what she must be.

She nears her house. Someone is waiting at her fence.

He comes to the gate, and she sees vaguely in the glare there are two others behind him.



*It's the cavalry*, she laughs to herself but then she sees the man is Ross, the principal of one of the schools where she does relief teaching, and she hurries towards him.

“Your mobile network’s down,” he smiles. “Been trying to get you since last night. Sally Harris has badly broken her leg at netball and is likely out for the rest of the term. You’ve got a job for four weeks if you’re free.”

“Poor Sally! Yes, that’s great, thank you for thinking of me, Ross. I can be ready straight away!” She feels jubilant for herself, sorry for Sally.

“I’ll wait with you for a bit, I think.” He nods behind him.

A man she doesn’t know comes forward; the other remains in the shadows. The stranger asks, “Are you Katie Sommers?”

“I am. And you are?”

“Serving papers on you.”

She pulls the envelope from him eagerly, rips it open and smiles at him, shakes his hand joyously. “So wonderful! Thank you so much!”

He’s taken aback. “I don’t usually get that reaction for divorce papers.”

“All good, thank you, thank you so very much!” She shakes his hand again, and he smiles kindly as he leaves.

Valentino appears from the shadows.

“Rafael,” she laughs, his name instantly on her lips, “how did you get my address?”

“A friend of a friend of a friend,” he smiles. “Popular girl, I see.”

Ross is leaving. “See you at school.”

“Yes, thank you,” she shouts, as he drives away.

“You’re a teacher?” Rafael asks.

She turns to him. “Today I am.”

“Same.”

She folds her arms defiantly. “What do you teach?”

“The arts.”

“Painting, drawing and stuff?” She watches him suspiciously.

“When I have to, but it can be too formulaic for my liking. Drama and Dance at the moment, my favourites. A handful of English relief. I am no high-flyer, except on the dance floor. Disappointed?”

“I can see you leaping across a stage.” She stifles a giggle but looks him over with keen interest.

“Well,” he smiles, “not so much leaping these days. Do we have time for breakfast? A quick one?”

“If quick refers to breakfast, then yes. Anything else I’d like to take my time with.”

“Same,” he smiles again. “I’ve been calling you since last night. Didn’t you see the news?”

“That you’d been calling me?” She laughs loudly.

He likes the way her mouth looks when she laughs. “That the NetPlus network was down. It only occurred to me this morning that maybe it was your mobile rejecting me and not you. Anyway, what’ve you been doing this week not to call me?”

“Making you wait.”

He smiles. “I thought you were merely drunk that night you flirted with me. Seems now you’re full of sass.”

“And a career woman who needs to be on the move. You told me you’d buy me dinner. Forget breakfast, where are you taking me tonight?”

“More waiting.” He pauses, thinking. “Pick you up at five-forty-five.”

“I’ve never been asked out for dinner that early. Or that precisely.”

“I don’t like to eat late. See you tonight.” He gets into his car without looking back.

Turning, she smiles and walks inside, puts the envelope on the table, pauses over it, then sticks herself in the shower, throws down some toast and drives to the start of her teaching stint.



The last day of term comes swiftly.

Her love of teaching has deepened. Four weeks of handling Sally's class effectively has prompted Ross to give her a contract until the end of the year for Jenny Blair's maternity leave. Her bank account has pulled back from the precipice, and the money she would've spent on her divorce has been put towards new curtains. Her garden is freshly weeded and planted thanks to help from Rafael.

They have not had sex. She has made him wait. He's proven to have staying power. She hopes it continues in the bedroom. Neither has said, *I love you* but their texts have been signed off with *love*. A good sign, she hopes.

Today she replies to his *Bringing Thai @6 look forward to spending the holidays with you* with a bold *Same. I love you*. He has not replied.

She has learnt much about him. His parents are Spanish but he was born here. He has one sister, older by two years, with whom he is close. His sister has three children. He has two. He has been divorced for two years, separated for five. The woman at the pub was his date for the night. He is forty-two. He rents a unit nearby. He has been teaching for twenty years. His marriage broke down because they argued constantly over finances. He did not want it to finish but was relieved when it did. His daughters, fifteen and twelve, stay with him every weekend from lunchtime Saturday until teatime Sunday, so Katie has continued to be alone each Saturday night.

He comes to the door. She opens it, welcoming him as he walks in with dinner across his arm and love at his mouth. He puts the takeaway on the coffee table and leads her to the couch, kissing her fervently and she pushes off his coat. The lounge-room is warm and they undress quickly, eager for each other.

He whispers, "I love you, too, Katie."

Dinner will have to wait.

Katie sighs as the little blue + appears on the white plastic stick.

She knew when she heard Rafael utter *Oh, it's broken!* that this could be the outcome. She also knew she could've stopped it but how could she give up this possibility at her age?

They talked about the consequences of fragile latex, but no decision was made and they have not discussed it again. *The future brings itself one step at a time*, Rafael has told her.

Now that step is a + on a testing strip. She knows only that she wants this baby. Everything flashes alarmingly at her: her tenuous job prospects, her mortgage, how she'll cope if she has to manage alone, the possible disagreement about what to do, her parents' pubescent worries finally coming true. She gets through the day by modulating the boisterous hormones of the pre-teen class she took over yesterday.

The test strip affronts her from the dining table when she arrives home. She blubbers on and off. She can't even calm herself with a wine. She goes to bed and sleeps.

Now she wakes to a knock and a shout at the window and here is Rafael. It's dark outside, dinnertime. Still Tuesday. Choose-day.

She lets him in. Her face is worn with tears.

He takes her by the hand and leads her to the bedroom, curling up with her, fully clothed under the quilt. He knows without words.

They silently hold each other: she thinks he's in a quandary about the baby growing inside her womb. Six weeks is all they've had together, *Please don't let it be all*. She lifts her head from his chest and stares at him.

He strokes her cheek. "A gift, then," he smiles awkwardly. "A present from the future."

She tries to read his expression. She tries to read his mind. She puts her head back down onto his chest.

They make dinner and eat without talking about the baby; they hardly talk at all. After dinner they make love and she wakes with him the next day.

"I want it," she says over cereal. "I want it very much."

"A gift," he says again. "Who can say no to such a gift?"

They dress and leave for work.

He's waiting for her when she gets home. She's gone to tell Vi her news. Today has been easier, her heart lighter.



Vi's reaction was one of soft delight, "The world is turning, here we go!"

And now here he is. He has staying power. They prepare dinner together and each time she looks at him he smiles and she smiles back. He stays the night and the next and the next. He leaves on Saturday morning. "See you tomorrow night."

Katie spends Saturday washing and watching television and wondering about the future.

On Sunday morning she tells her parents. They are shocked. They want to know how it happened. They want to know outcomes. They want to meet the father of the baby.

Back at home she does not go inside but wanders down to the beach.

She stands leaning on the balustrade looking at the green sea and the blue sky and the wispy white clouds. The air is brisk but she takes off her shoes and goes down to the sand, the faint warmth beneath her toes merging with her bliss and she sinks to its comfort.

She chooses. She chooses the journey, the love, the joy. She chooses the baby. She sees Rafael coming down the steps towards her. He is early.

She chooses Rafael. She wonders if he chooses her.

"I'm here for the week." He sits beside her. "I packed a bag. Do you mind?"

She smiles and takes his hand as he continues.

"I told my girls about you. Their mother. My parents."

Her eyes widen. "About the baby?"

"One step at a time," he laughs and moves in closer, puts his arm around her. "Your sass has vanished. You've gone all cuddly."

"You're staying the week?" she whispers happily.

"Yes," he replies with certainty. "My lease is up for renewal in two months. We need to gather information before then."

She scans his face. He is not daunted by the prospect of a second family or of what the future holds. *Be sensible, Katie.* "Are we doing this too fast?"

He laughs. "One step at a time. The future brings itself to you one step at a time, even a baby."

He kisses her and they sit huddled together in the crisp sunshine, looking out at the endless ocean.

"Rafael ... I want to be careful. I want ..."

"You want to be happy."

"Yes. We both know how unhappy love can be."

He smiles. "Love is never unhappy. It is only our fanciful imaginings of love that bring us undone."

She laughs. "You've been doing too many English relief lessons."

He shrugs. "You can't make other people happy, just yourself. And in the five years I've been single I've never introduced a girlfriend to my girls. But we're family now, Katie. You and I ..." He blinks as if his eyes are about to fill. "We've been given a gift." He shakes his head and laughs. "And you've made me wait too long for too many things."

"But you have staying power."

"Yes," he laughs cheerily. "I have staying power. And now we both have a wait on our hands." He grins. "I wouldn't give up any of my children." He places his hand gently against her stomach. "Not any of them." He shrugs. "We've both learnt from our mistakes. We surely have a better chance of making it work this time. And we made love, a little piece of love," he smiles and rubs her stomach and she nods.

"Valentino!" she laughs, putting her arms around his neck. "If it's a boy we should name him Valentino!"

He laughs back at her, and the world continues to turn.