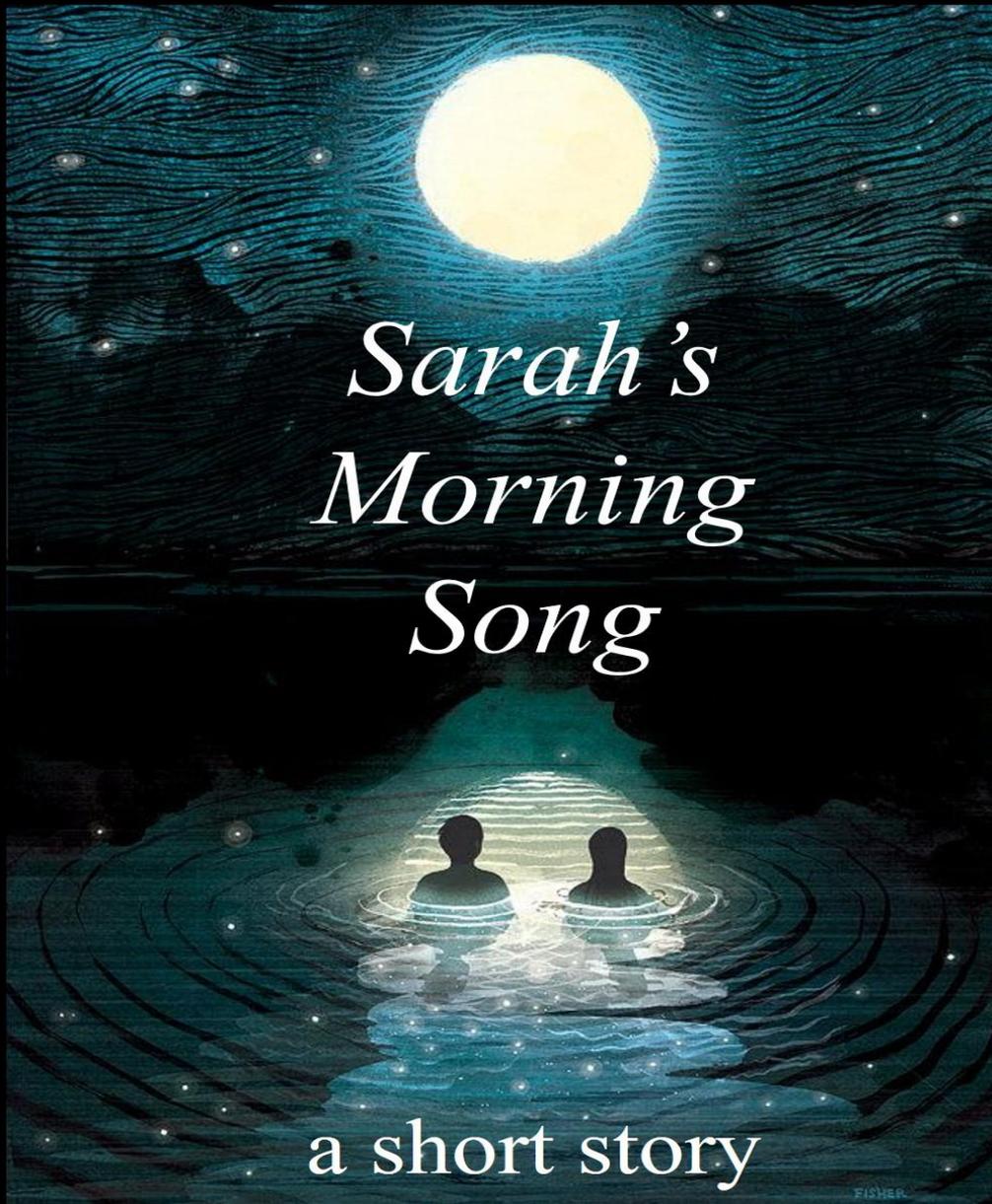


Brian McAleer



*Does music have the
power to heal?*

Friday

1

Taking the CD out of its case ever so carefully, Sarah placed it into the player for the 361st time, and she had to keep count as the one-year anniversary was only a matter of days away. Only one song was on that CD, and it was her song. The morning song. Pressing play, the three second delay before it started felt like an eternity to Sarah, and in that brief moment, she chose her memory of Richard. This morning, it was the way he smiled at her on the last morning they woke up together. The sunlight shone on his face, and his arms Sarah had never felt so warm, or loved. Closing her eyes, the song played, the violins fading in to introduce the melody. Another brief pause, then the song started. The piano keys bashed out with passion by the bands lead singer, who shared his voice right on cue. Sarah drifted away, and for the four minutes and nineteen seconds, she was not in her office.

She was back in the bed, lying next to Richard, feeling his fingers run through her hair, and the cold side of the pillow against her cheek. Lost in this memory, it was clearer now than it had ever been, and it was then that Sarah questioned how much of it was still a memory. Surely, she had added some detail to it, making it the way she liked to remember it as, but if that was exactly how it was about a year ago, she could no longer recall.

The song ended, and her office was plunged back into lonely silence. Seconds later, the voices of other workers walked passed past her room, and as usual, none of them would look in. Alone in her office, she got through her day in anticipation of being able to hear her morning song again the following day.

2

By 9.15am that same morning, the offices of 101 Collins Street were full to the brim. Levels and levels of clerical workers, personal assistants, and students on placement hoping for their big break. Just about everyone in this building had arrived for work on time, but at 9.16am, in strolled a young handsome guy, kicking his heels up as he deliberately got off the elevator two floors earlier, just to walk through the offices of another department, and make a pass at the not one, but two girls he wanted to screw. Only one of them was in at work that day, and he supposed that would do. He said her name this time, “Jenny. Looking lovely today, as always. See you at lunch?” Jason Stein said in that always-cool voice, accompanied by his blue eyes and bushy eyebrows. Hard to resist for a young girl smitten by charismatic good looks. Jenny smiled and nodded, and Jason continued on his way.

Returning to the lifts, he proceeded up to his appropriate level, to complete his grand entrance. His level was split right down the middle by two long banks of cubicles, and at the far end of the level, were three offices, separated by walls and each with a stellar view over the Melbourne skyline. He didn’t own one of these – yet – but walked to his cubicle halfway down on the right, with his eyes fixed firmly on the middle office of glass and leather. It was empty at the moment, meaning Michelle wasn’t in yet.

“Good morning Peeps” Jason said, raising his arms up like the guy directing planes on the tarmac, and he recieved a few welcoming comments in return. He walked swiftly, turned effortlessly into his bank of cubicles and literally fell into his swivel chair.

“Big day Jase?” came the voice of Dean Connor, who shared the cubicle next to Jason’s.

“All over it my man. Ready to smash it” Jason said.

“Good luck. You’ve got some competition... just sayin”

“There’s no competition with me... they just put three other hopefuls through the paces to make the pre-chosen candidate, i.e. Me, think he hasn’t got it until he’s been interviewed. Standard procedure”

“Confident, aren’t you? But Paul is vying for that job just as much, so don’t get *too* complacent” Dean said, finally rising above the wall dividing their cubicles, smirking at Jason.

“Nah, piece of cake mate. Been planning this interview for two weeks. It’s in the bag”

“Well, once you’ve got it, I expect you to promote me this time next year” Dean laughed.

“Ha!” Jason said loudly, then shot his head around before he whispered over the wall

“Consider it done, and consider Paul gone no too long after that”

“Oh snap! Make it happen Jase”.

The two of them busied themselves at their desks, until about 11am when Jason’s phone rang

“Jason Stein speaking”

“Jason, how are you this morning?” said Michelle Watson. She was the Area Manager for the department, and something of a close acquaintance for Jason. She was smart enough to still treat him as equal to the staff but gave him just enough allowance to let him in on a few secrets from the 51st floor from time to time.

“Good Michelle, you’re...sounding lovely this morning” Jason said.

“Yeah, turn it up. Listen, expect a call into the office this afternoon, around 3pm. But I’ve got a tip for you to make management really impressed on top of what you’ve already been doing”

“What’s that?”

“Offer to head down a few levels, and spend some time with one of the lower departments, know what I mean?”

“I think I do, but can you be more specific?”

“There’s a few one-person offices on the 11th floor where some staff work on their own all day, and don’t get a lot of traffic. Mail sorters, incoming call operators, that kind of thing. Work out of there for the week starting on Monday, and mix with the muggles, Harry Potter style”

“You know I don’t watch that crap Michelle, but I catch your drift. Who do you recommend I sit amongst?”

“Any of the staff working solo on... the 11th”

“Thanks Michelle”

“Now get back to work” she said and hung up. Jason laughed at her exit, and then pined a little.

“Talk” Dean said over the cubicle wall.

“Gonna head down in life my friend, spend some time with the lesser qualified people of the company. Michelle thinks it will look good for my promotion interview”

“Have fun with that. I heard there’s a girl on that level who’s so fat, she has to sit on two chairs” Dean said, and Jason tried to hold back a snark of a laugh.

“Hey, I’ll do what it takes”

Monday

3

The following Monday morning, Jason swung by his cubicle to gather a few things, and made his relocation known.

“Farewell all of you. I will miss you” he said, and a few heads turned in confusion.

“Where you are going Jason?” asked Mitch, a first-year loan approver.

“Just downstairs to work with a few different departments. You know, just doing my part for the company”

“You’re ace” Mitch said, looking at Jason in quiet admiration.

“Thanks Mick” Jason said, not noticing the disappointed look on the young man’s face.

Riding the elevator down to the 11th floor was like a journey. It stopped at almost every level between Jason’s 36th floor and his final destination. The lower the level’s he descended to, the less people got on the elevator. Those who did looked at Jason curiously, as if to say, “What the hell are you doing down here?” He half-smiled and nodded to each person who made eye contact. When the trip stopped, and the doors opened to the 11th floor, he walked off the elevator and straight to the desk where a middle-aged woman sat reading a newspaper.

“Hope you’re not too busy” Jason smirked.

The woman looked up, unamused.

“We’re always busy down here. Just a different kind of busy. Jason is it?” she asked begrudgingly. Hurt a little by that, but willing to shrug it off with a charismatic smile, Jason replied.

“I sure am. Here to work alongside, Sarah I’ve been told?”

“Yes, thanks for joining us. Follow me” she said, stepping out from behind the desk. Jason thought she must have been sitting on a high chair, because she must have only been five-foot-tall, if that, and her wide hips waddled with each step. Jason couldn’t help but look at her large behind that went on and on.

The long, dimly lit corridor was cold and echoed their footsteps. Jason felt like he’d descended to the 10th level of hell, or rather the 11th. It was certainly a different vibe down here. There were no phones ringing, no chatter, and no buzz. And where were the beautiful woman he asked himself. Rounding a corner, the woman began to lead Jason down another long corridor, but only for a few strides until she stopped at a door that was open, revealing a small, perfectly square shaped office, complete with two desks, two chairs, and piles of paper folders. At one desk, sat a rather large young woman, who was putting something into her desk drawer.

“Sarah” said the short woman, as Jason stood behind her and peered into the office curiously. Slowly, the chair turned with the large woman in it, who looked glumly back at the two of them. Jason was caught off guard by a woman who was very overweight, but a completing contrasting face; bright green eyes, nice skin, and rich brown hair that hung in curls. She gave half a smile, and Jason nodded back.

“Meet Jason” said the short woman. “He’ll be with us for the next few days. He’ll start with you, so show him the ropes if you wouldn’t mind love?”

“Sure” Sarah said, her voice sounding low and distant, but still audible.

“I’ll leave you to it Jason. You’re in fine hands. Enjoy your stay”

“Thanks, and I’ll tip you on the way out” he said with a chuckle, but the short woman walked around the corner without a glance. “And have a nice day” Jason whispered, then turned his attention back to the office.

“Come on in” Sarah said, and Jason walked in, sitting down on the second seat, which faced the wall opposite Sarah’s chair and desk. Piled on her desk were three trays of manila folders. “Got you’re work cut out for you there” Jason said.

“Just another day. I’ve prepared a handover for you. You’ll find it in the first manila folder on top of your pile. Have a read, it explains everything and any questions, just let me know” Sarah said, then swung her chair around to reveal her rolls of fat on her back. Jason sat quietly, a look of defeat on his face.

“Okay, I’ll make a start” he said, and grabbed his instructions.

The first day in the lower trenches, was the slowest day Jason had experienced since starting at the company. He watched the clock tick by, counting down the minutes till the morning break, then lunch, then afternoon break, then 5pm. He walked out saying “See you tomorrow” of which Sarah replied with the same words. It was the longest conversation the two of them had all day.

Jason left for the day knowing it was going to be a slow week.

Tuesday

4

Day two had begun, and Jason walked in before Sarah. He sat in his chair, spinning around in circles and using two pens like they were drumsticks. Sarah walked in and stopped in the doorway when she saw the cocky guy from upstairs was there.

“You’re early?” she asked in a high voice.

“I like to get started early, get more done. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Of course,” she said, and cautiously walked to her chair. Sitting down, Sarah looked down at her desk for a solid minute, while Jason perused over the manila folders he had started working through yesterday. In this moment, Sarah had a choice to make; start her morning like she had done every day for almost twelve months, or skip it? Skip it because she wasn’t sure how this guy would react. Worried he would ask questions she didn’t want to answer. She worried, not knowing how to end the day if she didn’t play her song. She’d hate herself for skipping even one day. So, like usual, Sarah carefully pulled the CD out of its case, and loaded it into the player. The songs opening violins crept into the room, and Jason swung his chair around.

“Classical music?” he asked sarcastically.

“Not exactly” Sarah responded, and then the silence pauses before the piano solo kicked in.

“Haven’t heard this one before. Who sings it?”

“R.E.M.”

“Heard of them, haven’t heard of this. I remember that song they did that went to number one, where the guys on the freeway, and everyone is in their cars – “

“Be quiet, please” Sarah said.

“My bad” Jason said, turning back to his desk with wide eyes.

*“Nightswimming... deserves a quiet night
The photograph on the dashboard, taken years ago...”*

The lyrics continued. All was silent except for the song, and Sarah closed her eyes. She didn't just listen to it anymore; she felt every word, every key of the piano, and the sweeping violin. Away in her memory, she forgot Jason was in the room.

Not knowing Sarah was off someplace in her mind, Jason tuned out from the song on the CD player. Within a few minutes it was over, and in spite of himself, Jason grew to like the song by the end. Expecting the next track to play, nothing followed. Sarah let out a long slow breath, and said, 'Thank you. I like to listen to that song in silence. It's my... morning thing. I hope you don't mind?'

"Cool. Any more tracks?"

"No, just that one"

"Can we put the radio on or something?" he asked.

"I guess" She hesitated, then clicked the switch on the CD player to bring up the radio. She found a station and turned the volume down low "Will that do?" she asked.

"Whatever. Better than sitting in silence all day" Jason asked, as Sarah bit her fingernails. Hoping her song would break the ice between the two and make her feel more comfortable around Jason, she was more uncomfortable than the first day. She spent that day watching the clock tick by, while Jason worked thoroughly.

For the first night in a long time, Sarah didn't sleep well. She tossed and turned, with the image of her office, and that guy, stuck in her head. Her song played in her head, but sounded distant, like it was escaping from her. One scenario after another ran through her mind, like arriving at work the next morning, and her CD would be gone. Or Jason would be there early again with the radio on, stealing her time to play the song. Eventually she drifted off to sleep but awoke angry.

Wednesday

5

Sarah's morning mood followed her all the way into work. Arriving at the usual time, Jason was already in the office. He was sitting in Sarah's chair. She froze on the spot, and Jason smiled innocently.

"I noticed your chair was different to mine. Just wanted to try it out" he said, getting off and sitting in his own chair.

"I brought it from home. Don't like the chairs here"

"You should see mine upstairs. Much nicer than this one" Jason said, pointing to his chair.

"Yours's comfy too. Maybe you can come up to my level and try mine out?" he said smirking.

"I'll take your word for it. No reason for me to go up there" Sarah said, positioning herself into her seat.

After only two full days together, Jason was itching to get back upstairs. In the silence that had already sunk in, he could hear her song. The tune was stuck in his head, and he caught himself humming it despite not liking it.

"Only a few more days left here?" Sarah said softly.

"Yep, then onto a promotion, I mean... maybe a promotion. They're offering advancement opportunities in my section this week. We'll see"

“Good luck” she said softly again and busied herself at the desk. As she proceeded to open the drawer, remove the CD of her song from its case and ready the player, Jason continued humming the tune. Low at first, then progressively louder. Sarah slowly turned and looked at him blankly.

“Would you mind not doing that? I kind of prefer the real thing”

“Sorry, but it’s quite a catchy tune. I’m starting to like it” Jason said.

“Do you mind if I play...”

“No probs. What’s the song for today?” he asked. Sarah put the CD into the player and recognised it instantly. This time, he listened to the lyrics.

*“Nightswimming deserves a quiet night
I’m not sure all these people understand
It’s not like years ago
The fear of getting caught
Of recklessness and water
They cannot see me naked
These things, they go away
Replaced by everyday”*

As the song wore on, Sarah slowly increased the volume to a level louder than Jason had heard her play that week. Looking at each other, Sarah’s eyes watered up, making her ashamed. This was interrupted by a face at the door.

“Sarah, love. Would you mind turning that down please?” said the short lady from reception. Sarah lowered the volume quickly. The song played to its end, all the while Jason biting his lip not to speak. But curiosity had gotten the better of him now.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but is that song about skinny dipping?” he asked.

Sarah turned around slowly with discerning eyes. “No skinny dipping. Swimming at night. They’ve still got their clothes on”

“Oh okay, I just heard the word *naked*, and I thought...”

“Well, maybe, but that’s not the point of the song. You’re missing the point, it’s about... never mind”

“Why that song, Sarah? What’s so special about it?” he asked squarely. There was a silence for what felt like a few second to Jason, but an hour to Sarah. This was the question she dreaded to hear but knew would be asked at some point. To her, she would prefer this in a session with a counsellor or similar professional, at the time when she was ready to talk about it. She didn’t expect that question to come from a cocky, smarmy and condescending guy from her own office building.

“Sarah?” Jason asked again.

“Because he died!” she blurted out. “My boyfriend died” Sarah stood up, broke into tears and walked out of the room. She did not come back to the office for the rest of the day.

Thursday

6

The next day, Jason arrived at the office, ten minutes late and on purpose, as he felt bad about Sarah leaving in tears. He held his breath walking in but was surprised to see her set empty.

The short lady from reception arrived a moment after he did.

“You’re holding the fort today love. Sarah’s got a cold”

“Will she be in tomorrow?” he asked sincerely, at which the lady looked surprised, but only briefly.

“I should imagine so. She hasn’t missed a day of work in about ten months that girl. Just do what you can today, and pick things back up tomorrow when she returns”

“Will do” Jason said, and was alone in the office. He didn’t get much done that day, as all he could think about was Sarah. Not hearing the song that morning had bothered him also.

Sarah’s routine had become his routine in a way, and even though the talks between the two were brief and not memorable, he could feel her absence.

To relieve his thoughts, he called upstairs and spoke to his cohort.

“What’s going down Jase? Your career, ha-ha?” said Dean.

“Yeah, funny. No, all good here. Quiet. Boring as well. Looking forward to getting back up there tomorrow”

“Have you checked your emails yet?” Dean asked.

“No, can’t log into mine down here. Why?”

“I *heard* some talk this morning coming out of Michelle’s office. Something about the first three interviews for the promotion, and I reckon I heard your name being mentioned. Then I heard tomorrow at 3.30pm”

“Are you sure?” Jason said

“Pretty sure. Want to come up and check your emails?”

“No, I have to stay down here today, the usual girl is off sick. But I’ll give you my login and go into my folder and see if there’s an email. I’ll text you the password. Then just forward the email to my personal address. I’ll text you that as well.

“You got it man, or should I say boss? By tomorrow afternoon, that role could be yours. I mean *will* be yours. And remember, I’ve got your back mate” Dean said artificially.

“Thanks Dean. Just let me know how you go logging in”

“Consider it done”

Five minutes later, Jason received a text message from Dean. It read: Check your inbox. Good news...

Using his phone, Jason logged into his private email account, and saw a forwarded email to him from his own address. Jason opened it. The start of the email read;

Jase. Good news. Read below. - Dean.

Jason,

We would like to extend you the opportunity to apply for the new role of Assistant Supervisor, being offered within your section. You have been shortlisted for the first interview stage. Please be at my office by 3.15pm tomorrow for a 3.30 start time. I’ve had good things about your work from down below. It has not gone overlooked.

Regards,

Michelle.

A small smile crawled across Jason's face. He was happy, but his guilt was rife, and he felt something had to be done before he took himself back upstairs for that interview. Against his initial reservations, he hoped Sarah would be back at work tomorrow. He didn't like to leave anything unfinished; some called him efficient.

Friday

7

Jason's guilt had turned to gumption; he was determined to get the story Sarah had only begun to tell two days ago. Before he left the shoebox he'd reluctantly spend the week in, he was going to get some answers. Arriving early again for his final day, Jason swung by the buildings café, and grabbed himself a Café Late, and a Cappuccino for Sarah, assuming that was her coffee of choice. He placed it on her desk and waited.

It was 9:45am when she arrived, walking in quickly and sitting down without a sound. Until she saw the coffee on the desk.

"Is this for me?"

"Yeah... but it's probably cold now. You could probably warm it up"

"I don't drink coffee" she said and pushed it to the side.

"Feeling better?" Jason asked in a high tone.

"Fine" She turned around to face him, and her face was worn and tired. "Did you get through the work yesterday?"

"Mostly. Just a few files to do today, then back to the office. Plan to leave here about lunchtime. Got a meeting later today"

"For your promotion?" Sarah assumed.

"Yes"

Sarah was appalled Jason had answered that so effortlessly. From trying to cover up that he was there for a promotion the other day, to blatantly admitted it and not realising how ignorant he was being in that moment. She'd had enough of this guy.

"That's what this week was all about wasn't it Jason? Score some points before moving up a few more levels?"

"What?" Jason said, trying to sound amused "Why would you think –"

"Because you're not the first one they've sent down here. You think I don't know how this building operates? I've been here for six years. And even when I was off for a few months last year and came back, nothing had changed. I've seen five of you in my time here. And if this is all it takes to get you a promotion, then you must not be working very hard up there. Or is it hardly working?" Sarah said spitefully.

"Woah, okay. What's this all about? Do you have a problem with me trying to move up in my career? It wasn't my idea to come here, I was just told to"

"Do you just do everything you're told Jason? Did you even know about this level and what we do here? Have you even learnt anything this week?" Sarah said, and returned her face to the wall. Silence filled the room, with an almost dead weight. Jason felt like he'd been kicked in the guts. He could understand Sarah's opinion, but that didn't justify it.

"Yeah, you know what? I have learnt something this week. I've learnt you're hiding something pretty major, that caused you to run out of here in tears the other day. So, let's not avoid the real subject anymore. What was that all about?"

"I told you" Sarah defended.

“Your boyfriend, right? Well, I’ve got some time, and *some* work that doesn’t really need to be done, as you said. So, tell me about him. I’m all ears” Jason said, his voice stern and level. Sarah turned to face him once more.

“You’re not going to drop this are you?” Sarah asked, at which Jason smile back knowingly.

“Fine. Let me go and reheat this coffee first”

“I thought you didn’t drink coffee?” Jason said smirking.

“I lied” Sarah smiled back.

8

“Richard and I had been together for five years before it happened. Met at University. He went on to become a really great chef, and he liked to cook me nice foods. We went camping sometimes, then found this great spot on a lake. Went back every year on our anniversary. The lake was beautiful and perfect for swimming. One night, we were feeling adventurous, and went swimming...in the nude” Sarah said, going a little red “And everything was fine. I was pretty risky back then and said we should swim out a bit. Richard raced ahead, then...he got a cramp. Went under the water, then back up...” she paused.

“Are you okay?” Jason said

“Yeah, it’s just hard to talk about...” she paused again.

“You don’t have to talk about this it it’s too - ”

“You wanted to know, didn’t you? So, under he went, bobbing up and down. I swam out, but it was getting harder to see him in the dark. The moon was out and bright one minute, then some clouds covered it. I could barely see him. He went under for the last time. I treaded water in the spot he went under and called for help. I screamed so loud I lost my voice, then I couldn’t scream anymore. It was about five minutes before help came, and a few men swam out to get me. One went down to try and find Richard, but the lake was deep. The man tried for ten minutes and I watched from the side of the lake. But Richard never came back up. His body was pulled out of the lake the next morning”

Silence filled the room. A phone ringing from a distant office broke the tension. “I’m sorry to hear that, really” said Jason.

“After the funeral, I took some time off work, and just sort of...stayed home. It was just me and my mum there, and she had to work a lot. I slept in most days and didn’t even get out of bed some mornings. I started eating... a lot. I tried to recreate Richard’s cooking, but I never could. A friend then made me a CD of songs, and one of the tracks was “Night Swimming” by R.E.M. I had never heard of it before, and I was kind of mad at my friend at first for picking that song. But after listening to it a few times, I started to like it. For the first two months after it happened, I listened to that song about twenty times a day. Then it went down to maybe ten or five times. Eventually, I came back to work, and I played it on the first day at work. Luckily, I work in this room alone, because I cried my eyes out for half the day.

“But the song helped. It reminded me of that night, and how everything about it was beautiful up until the accident. And everything before that night was perfect too. I know a lot of people say that about their relationship, but ours really was...perfect. Now, I just play the song every morning. And today, is the anniversary of Richard’s passing away”

Silence befell the room again. Jason was morose.

“Should you be at work today?” asked Jason.

“What else can I do really?”

Jason chose to neglect the last few files on his desk, as this story had grabbed him. Despite the change he felt was occurring inside, his habit of being outspoken got the better of him, although he knew he would regret what he was about to say.

“You’re being too hard on yourself Sarah” he said plainly.

“No, I don’t think so” Sarah said comfortably.

“Did you get some counselling after the incident?”

“No”

“Ever been back to where it happened, to like, pay your respects”

“I couldn’t go back there. Never in a million years”

“I get why you listen to that song now, but isn’t it just torturing yourself to keep doing that every day?”

Sarah looked at Jason in dismay. Beneath the surface, part of her agreed with him, but this was a conversation she hadn’t had with anyone before. Thinking she was ready to talk about it, she wasn’t ready for Jason’s questions.

“Have you ever lost anyone?” she asked staring him down, then folding her arms “Not just lost them, but watched them die? Unable to stop it from happening? Then feel the worst fucking guilt imaginable because you caused their death?”

“Why do you blame yourself?” Jason asked

“Have you lost someone?” she repeated.

“Yes, I have actually” Jason said, and held back his words for almost a minute; the longest he had gone without talking in a long time. “My dad, when I was fourteen”

“How did he die?” asked Sarah.

“He took his own life”

9

Sarah watched Jason’s appearance change right in front of her. His usually cocky, self-assured look turned into a face that was sullen, and searching through the past. Jason stared at the floor, his eyes vacant, his face blank.

“I’m sorry” she said, at which Jason was snapped out of his daze. He tried to shrug off his three seconds of being vulnerable.

“Oh yeah, no probs” he said, and turned around to the files on his desk.

“Well...?” asked Sarah

“Well, what?”

“Tell me” she nodded reassuringly.

“I went to boarding school or most of my life. Parents worked a lot, didn’t see them much. Dad in particular was away, a lot. Didn’t even come to my boarding school on visiting days. When mum and dad got divorced all of a sudden, mum spoke to me first. Told me all about dad’s wild behaviours” Jason hesitated, scanning Sarah’s face. She looked placid and open to hearing more.

“He used to have flings with women half his age, and when mum found out about it, she left him. Dad started drinking, then lost his business, then hit hard times financially. Suddenly, out of the blue, I get a call from him at boarding school. Tells me he wants to come and visit me and have his chance to explain some things. After hearing what mum said, and just being angry all together, I told him I didn’t care and didn’t want to see him, then I hung up” Jason said, his face reforming to that previous stare.

“And...?”

“Two weeks later, he killed himself”

“Sorry. Do you mind if I ask how?” She could see that Jason definitely minded, as he rolled his eyes before saying,

“Drove his car into a pole at high speed”. Sarah’s eyes began to water up.

“Don’t cry. There’s more, are you ready for this twist?” Jason said, sitting upright and appearing cocky again. Sarah leant back in her chair finding his sudden coldness distasteful.

“Two years after dad died, I find out mum was also having an affair at the same time dad was. She just never got caught. I rang the home and some guy answered. He put mum on the phone, and she explained she was getting remarried. The guy was only ten years older than me if you can imagine that? At the wedding, I overheard mums new husband and one of his mates talking about the good old days when he was fooling around with her behind my dad’s back. I confronted my mum, after the wedding, and she fessed up. Said she wanted to put it all behind her and move on. I moved on too. Went back to boarding school, and straight to Uni. She sends money sometimes, but not much else”

“Kind of dysfunctional then, yeah?” Sarah said, “Ever get some help for all of that?”

Jason sat up in his chair even more, till he was almost hovering above his seat.

“Help? Like you did?” he said in defence.

“I guess we’ve both lost people. Dealt with it how we could. I blamed myself because everyone else did. At least your dad wasn’t your fault?”

“But I feel bad for what I said to him the last time we spoke. I didn’t even get to say goodbye”

“Me neither. And what’s worse, is that Richard’s family blamed me for the accident. He was their only son; kind of their Golden Child. Well-to-do people, and I was a bit out there back then. It was my idea to swim out in the lake, and when they heard about that, they stopped talking to me. I can’t even visit his grave. His parents won’t allow me to”

“You shouldn’t put up with that. Stand up for yourself”

“I tried”

“Not hard enough” Jason said “Now, I’m getting back to work, that’s enough of that talk”

“Come on Jason, what is your problem? Are you just terrified to show any weakness at all? Man up!”

“Man up? What would you know about being a man? Having to shoulder the responsibility of a family, and a career”

“You don’t have kids” Sarah said confidently, then “Or do you?”

“That’s not what I mean, it’s just... oh forget it. Glad to be going back upstairs today, believe me. I can see why you work alone” Jason said, and turned around to his desk. Sarah watched him work away.

The silence in the room was deadly. Like a brick wall had been dropped between the two of them, each side with large letters saying “Fuck You” written from one to the other.

“What song played at your dad’s funeral?”

“What?”

“What song played. Do you remember?”

“I don’t know” Jason whined “Probably something by The Beatles or The Stones. Why do you want to know?”

“If you can remember, listen to that song today. When you get home. Remember your dad the way you remembered him, before all that cheating, and divorce stuff went down. Everyone makes mistakes” Sarah said positively.

Jason looked to the floor, scratching his head for a short while.

“Wild Horses” Jason said, and looked back up to Sarah. His eyes were watery and red, then he let a single tear rolled down his cheek.

“That was the song?” Sarah asked smiling.

“Wild Horses by The Rolling Stones. There were other songs at the funeral, but that’s the one I remember”

“Beautiful song” said Sarah. “Ever listened to it since then?”

“I try not to. When it comes on the radio, I turn it off. On bad days, I remember my father the cheating husband. On good days, I remember the dad who took me sailing when I was a boy. On other bad days, I realise that I like getting money from mum, and pretend to like her again, which makes me hate dad in return. On other good days, I like being able to outsmart her second husband, who’s a real dumb ass, to be perfectly honest”

Sarah laughed, and Jason chuckled.

“I’m sorry” Jason said, running a hand through his hair, and rolling his shirt sleeves up

“Sorry for being a dick today, and... most of this week. You’re a good person”

“So are you. We’ve just had bad stuff happen to us”

“We sure have” Jason said.

Sarah wheeled herself over to him on her chair, leant forward and hugged him. Jason felt warm under her large arms. Feeling awkward for a moment, he gave in and managed to extend one arm around her back.

“We better get back to it hey? You’ve got a meeting today” she said pulling away and then turned back to her desk. Jason finished off sorting his last three files quickly, then pulled out his phone. Opening his music app, he downloaded “Wild Horses” by The Rolling Stones.

10

“Good luck” Sarah said as Jason walked out of the small office for the last time. He looked back, gave Sarah a smile and a wink, then headed for the elevator.

By 3:15pm, Jason was sitting on the waiting chair in Michelle’s office. Adjacent to her main office, was another room. She opened the door, and invited Jason in.

After the meeting, Jason returned to his desk, where Dean leant over the cubicle wall.

“Well?” Dean asked.

“Okay I think. I’ll find out next week” Jason said, staring out the window.

“You okay Jase?” Dean asked with a dumb look.

“Yeah mate. Good. Pretty good. Might leave early today”

“Good idea. I’ll distract the boss, you slip out. Then call me and pretend to be my mum, sick, and I have to go to the hospital. Then we’ll hit the pub”

“You’ve thought this exit strategy through, haven’t you?”

“Comes from the little book of excuses”

“Give me ten, then I’ll call you” Jason said, standing up to ready himself, then walking casually out of the office. Michelle watched him from her office window, with a curious look on her face as Jason entered the elevator. Jason nodded reassuringly at her, as the doors closed. Alone in the elevator with about a minute’s ride to the bottom, Jason pulled out his phone, with his earphones plugged in. Slowly inserting them into his ears, he touched his phone screen and looked up at the elevator ceiling.

Wild horses couldn't drag me away

Wild, wild horses we'll ride them some day

As the song played, Jason paid close attention to the chorus. It was that part of the song, and in that moment, where he remembered his dad the way he liked to. In that moment, the allure of the office building, the idea of a promotion, and any money coming to him from mum that weekend, drifted away.

Monday

11

Monday morning of the following week, and Dean was getting nervous in his cubicle. Jason had bailed on the Friday exit strategy, leaving Dean to fend for himself till 5:00pm. Jason hadn't shown for work yet either, and it was well after 9:00am. Dean rang his phone, and it went straight to voicemail. "This is Jason, and I am not available. Leave a message if you like" The message had been changed, and Dean pulled his phone away, looking at as if it were an alien device. "WTF?" he said to the phone.

Sarah had arrived on time that morning, like she always did, but before starting work she spent a minute staring at the desk and chair where Jason had sat and recalled the events of the week before. Her weeks often went by in ebbs and flows, with nothing memorable about them, but last week was different. She remembered everything about it, and now, she felt different. A kind of good different, lighter. She liked the feeling.

The morning routine started differently, as Sarah checked her emails before playing her song. Delighted, she received an email from Jason;

Hey Sarah. Nice working with you last week.
Thanks for introducing me to your morning song.
I've got one now too... guess which one? 😊
I might be back at work later this week... maybe. Got some thinking to do.
Take care of yourself.
Jase.

She pulled open the drawer and picked up the CD case. Opening its cover, she looked at it for a moment. The words in black ink said, "Sarah's Mix – To Help You Move Forward" written lovingly by her friend who put the CD together. Sarah smiled, and finally accepted the meaning of those words. She closed the case and put the CD back in her desk.

She never listened to "Night Swimming" at work again.

The End

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[Listen to "Night Swimming" by R.E.M.](#)

[Listen to "Wild Horses" by The Rolling Stones](#)