

Celebrate

By Maria Patterson

Sandra kicked open the kitchen door and prepared to meet her mortal enemy. There it was in the corner. It had surely grown overnight. "I wish I could afford to send you off to *Full Steam Ahead*," she screamed at the pile as she lifted the ironing board to horizontal continuing to mutter under her breath and bang things more than was actually necessary. She positioned the ironing board in front of the television so that she could watch 'Get a new life' to relieve the boredom of Friday morning ironing. 'Today we are in Florida' she heard the presenter say. It reminded her of a conversation she'd had with Geoff.

"Can't we go abroad this year for a change?" she had asked.

"What's wrong with Torquay? It's been good enough for you the last twenty years."

"Exactly! Don't you think it's time for a change? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"We can't afford it anyway."

"Well maybe I'll find myself someone who can. If you weren't here I'd be well away"

Sandra hissed as she watched a forlorn Geoff retreat into the garden. She hadn't bothered to bring it up again. There just didn't seem any point.

She lifted a cotton shirt from the top of the pile and then quickly swapped it for a less crumpled t-shirt from the middle instead. Half of the clothes landed unceremoniously on the dusty laminate floor. "I don't care" she wailed glaring down at the mess of sleeves and collars. Geoff had gone to work that morning at six o'clock. He rose at five o'clock prompt and then went through the same routine of showering, eating two slices of lightly buttered toast and drinking two enormous mugs of milky tea. "You're more predictable than Big Ben" she would say when his rigid timetable became too much for her to bear. "It's like living with a robot that's been programmed to do the same boring thing every day!"

Her attention returned to the item in hand. It was a pink mini skirt that belonged to her daughter Jess. "I wish I was sixteen again" she whispered under her breath, fearing that she was well past wearing this type of garment. "Whoever said life begins at forty needs shooting". She began to iron the skirt and a huge cloud of steam melted against her cheeks. It was like being on a production line. Her thoughts turned to Geoff and his job in the car factory. "How he's done that for twenty years I'll never know" she thought. Sandra had left her job at the supermarket when Jess was born. At the time she was relieved and happy for Geoff to wear the trousers. She had liked staying at home and being a mother but now that Jess was grown up and Geoff was always working or tired, she spent too much time alone brooding. Increasingly she shouted at Geoff and blamed him for everything she felt was wrong in her life. If he dared to suggest that it was up to her to do something Sandra slammed doors and sent him to Coventry for the rest of the day.

She held up the skimpy skirt and thought "I wish it was mine". She smiled at the idea of wearing it. She was not as slim as she had once been but felt she was still in fairly good shape for her age. She imagined Jess wearing it and how good it would look on her and was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of extreme jealousy. She felt a twinge tightening in her chest as the jealousy collided with a mother's guilt for even having such a thought.

Sandra had been sixteen when she met Geoff at the local disco. He was tall with dark wavy hair and clear blue eyes and although he wasn't the most attractive man that Sandra had ever seen, she instantly knew that he would take care of her. He used to call for her three times a week at seven thirty and would always get her back by eleven. Her mother had thought he was the best thing since sliced bread and so did Sandra at the time. She hadn't had much luck in the love stakes and she was relieved to be part of a couple like most of her friends. She did love him still, in a comfy slippers sort of a way but she longed for excitement and adventure and these had never been Geoff's forte.

She continued to iron and slowly the pile began to shrink. The telephone rang in the living room and Sandra quickly unplugged the iron and seized the opportunity to escape.

"Hello," she said.

"Guess what?" said the voice of her long standing best friend Maureen.

"You've ran off with the milkman so you can get free milk," Sandra laughed.

"No, no," she said. "Do you remember that disco we used to go to? The one where we used to dress up as schoolgirls?"

"How could I forget" said Sandra, grinning broadly.

"Well, it's on this week, tonight in fact, as a sort of reunion thing. Say you'll come with me San, go on. It'll be just like the old days."

Sandra howled with laughter as she visualised her and Maureen struggling to dance in their six inch platform shoes after consuming huge amounts of cider and blackcurrant.

"Oh, go on then you've talked me into it."

"I'll meet you outside the church hall at seven thirty. Don't be late" said Maureen and then she was gone.

Sandra danced around the perimeter of the living room humming 'Celebrate' by Kool and the Gang, her favourite disco tune. She'd loved those discos and here was a chance to recapture her youth and to feel young and free again. Maureen was vivacious and full of life and that was why Sandra loved being around her. It was difficult not to get enthused when she was around. "I know what I'll wear" she thought and she rushed upstairs and opened the wardrobe. Right at the bottom, tucked under some of her folded jumpers was a bag. She opened it and lifted out a short black skirt. It still had the price label attached to it as she'd never had the nerve to wear it. Geoff had seen it last year and told her she'd catch her death of cold. Sandra knew that November evenings could be chilly but she decided that in the spirit of rekindled youth she would wear it. She took out a crisp white shirt that was just a little too tight for her and then reached into Geoff's drawer of sensible ties and chose a black one with thin yellow stripes. "That will do," she said and she giggled to herself with anticipation.

When she told Geoff he peered over the top of his newspaper saying,

"As long as I don't have to come. You know I can't collect you don't you. I'm fishing in the morning."

"Don't worry! I'm a big girl now." Sandra said. It reminded her of conversations she had had with her father as a teenager. "Good" she thought "now I can really go to town!"

Sandra looked at her watch. It was five thirty. Time to get ready.

At seven fifteen, Sandra emerged from her bedroom. She smiled broadly as she caught sight of her reflection in the landing window. "Not bad for an old 'un" she thought as she straightened her tie and stroked her chestnut brown bunches into perfect position. She stuck her head around the living room door and shouted "I'm off Geoff." He looked up over the top of his newspaper and then quickly disappeared behind the rustling sheets.

"I've paid all the bills up to date today," he muttered through the headlines "and don't forget the heating's due for a service next week. Oh and be careful now, look after yourself."

"And don't forget to have some fun," Sandra shouted sarcastically as she banged the front door behind her.

"Why is he always so sensible?" she muttered as she set off down the road on her tall stiletto heels. "Why bother me with that lot when I'm on my way out!"

After a few minutes, she began to shiver. She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her hands frantically up and down her sleeves. "I wish I'd put my coat on," she puffed as she speeded up. Clouds of her hot breath followed her down the solitary road with just the sound of steel tips on concrete to break the silence. She looked down at her watch as she reached her destination - glancing furtively around at the makeshift 'playground' of people waiting outside but there was no sign of Maureen. "I wish I'd brought some plasters" she thought as she looked down at

a giant blister that was pulsating its way out of the back of her left shoe. “Geoff always has stuff like that in his pocket.” Just then she heard the clicking of approaching footsteps.

“Sorry San, you know how it is, couldn’t decide what to wear, come on.” said Maureen disappearing through the open wooden doors. “You always did keep me waiting,” Sandra whispered under her breath as she followed her inside.

The room was dark with flashing lights at the far end and there were aging schoolchildren everywhere. Boys with stubble and shorts displaying legs that had seen better days, girls with heaving bosoms dancing precariously round handbags to the sounds of the seventies that blasted out of two huge speakers on either side of the afro haired DJ. Muffled voices could just about be heard over the noise. Sandra swayed her hips from side to side in a vain attempt to get her in the right frame of mind for her big night out but it just put extra stress on her throbbing blister.

“Here San,” shouted Maureen waving a huge glass of red wine at Sandra.

“Get that down ya.” Sandra took several huge sips of the fruity liquid and felt a warm glow wash over her.

“That’s more like it Mo,” she said and they laughed heartily as they clinked their glasses together.

Out of the shadows a voice asked “Is that you Sandra Smith?”

Sandra stared blankly at the woman in front of her.

“It’s me, Deirdre.”

Sandra froze on the spot. It was Deirdre Dobbs. At school she had been head girl. She was highly intelligent and popular and she always managed to make Sandra feel totally inferior. Sandra felt herself shrink on her high heels.

“What are you up to these days Sandra; it must be at least ten years since our paths last crossed?”

“I’m still a housewife and mum” she replied as a scarlet glow rose into her cheeks.

“Oh,” said Deirdre “I don’t know how you do it. Being stuck at home would drive me mad. I’m running my own computer software business you know. I’ll give you my card, if you’re ever looking for a few hours work packing we’re always busy at this time of year. Call me?” and with that she vanished into the smoky atmosphere. Sandra gulped her wine trying to take away the feeling of uselessness that Deirdre always evoked in her. After a few more sips Sandra started to relax and soon felt as tall as she was.

“Let’s have a dance San,” Maureen said taking the empty glass from Sandra’s hand and banging it down on the bar.

Both women squealed like excited pigs and threw their handbags onto the dance floor.

They waved their arms excitedly and began to throw themselves around in a rhythmical fashion. After three particularly fast numbers Sandra got herself another glass of wine and took refuge at a table in the corner furthest away from the speakers. She closed her eyes momentarily as her head was beginning to spin. The combination of Maureen’s exuberance with the alcohol and disco music was starting to give her a headache.

As she opened her eyes, there he was – John Ford. She’d longed to be his girlfriend at school but of course he hadn’t noticed *her*. He hadn’t changed much. A little greying around the temples perhaps but he was still tall and lean with eyes that you could dissolve into.

“Oh my God, he’s coming over,” Sandra thought as she saw his long lean legs moving towards her. She sat up straight and pulled her tiny skirt down to cover her cellulite dimpled thighs.

“Hello Sandra,” he said “You haven’t changed much.”

“Neither have you,” she said almost choking on the words.

“Are you on your own? Mind if I join you?”

“Go ahead.”

Sandra held her knees tightly together, suddenly blushing at the thought of how silly she looked in her uniform. After ten minutes of John telling her all about his failed marriage, his love of

kite flying and his devotion to chartered accountancy she realised that he was so into himself that he wouldn't have noticed whether she was still sitting there or not.

"Oh there you are," said Maureen and Sandra quickly jumped to her feet seeing her chance to escape.

"You don't mind if I leave now do you San only I've bumped up with Mick Murphy, you know my old fella and he's asked me back for coffee. You'll be O.K won't you?"

Sandra felt her shoulders tighten as feelings of disbelief welled up inside her.

"Just like the old days," she thought as she kissed Maureen's cheek.

Sandra stood alone in the middle of the crowded room. Coloured lights flashed all around her and the volume of the music pierced her ear drum. Tears welled up in her eyes as an overwhelming feeling of loneliness swept over her. She turned on her heels and fled pushing anyone in her way out of her path. As she stepped outside the cool air slapped her hot cheeks. She suddenly wanted to be home with Geoff. "What a complete idiot I've been," she thought as she walked rapidly along the lamp lit street. "The only person who's ever really put me first is Geoff," and she longed to jump into their cosy bed and feel the warmth of his skin touching hers. "In the morning, I'll tell him how sorry I am for always moaning on at him and I'll even give Deirdre a call about that job. Maybe next year we can celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary by going to Spain or Greece if I can save a bit. Things are gonna be different from now on."

Sandra's feet had new purpose. She marched along the road with a spring in her step suddenly feeling positive about the future. As she passed the rows of familiar terraced houses she noticed a couple sitting closely together on the sofa. She thought how warm and cosy they looked and she hoped that Geoff would still be awake when she got home.

The hinges on the wooden gate creaked noisily. She could see that the living room light was on, so she fumbled in her pocket for her key hoping to catch Geoff before he went to bed.

As she opened the door there was a bag in the way. It was heavy against the door and she didn't recognise it. She opened the living room door to find Geoff red faced and pacing the room like a caged lion.

"What's wrong Geoff?" she asked, feeling the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

"I'm leaving," he said covering his eyes with the palms of his hands. "It's for the best. I don't make you happy anymore. All you ever do is criticise me."

Sandra felt as if her feet were nailed to the floor. Her mouth opened but she couldn't force a sound to come out.

"I've left you some money and I'll be in touch about Jess and whatever else we need to sort out. I can't talk any more now," and with that he lifted the bag and opened the front door.

"Please Geoff," Sandra pleaded, putting her hand on his arm. "You always said you'd be better off with out me," he said. "Maybe now you can meet that Mr Right you're always telling me about," he said stepping outside into the cold night air. Sandra had been right. Things were going to be different.