



The Grasmere Grudge

REBECCA TOPE

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2019.

Copyright © 2019 by REBECCA TOPE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2430-7

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

Not even the late arrival at Manchester airport, or the screaming toddler in the next row on the plane, or the pouring rain when they got outside could sully the euphoric mood. Simmy and Christopher had just experienced the best week of their lives in the sunny Canary Islands, and nothing could dampen their spirits.

‘And we still have all day tomorrow,’ sighed Simmy, when they were in the car. ‘Isn’t that wonderful!’

‘Just make sure I don’t fall asleep between here and Troutbeck. It’s been a long day. It’ll be two in the morning before we get there.’

‘I could sing to you,’ she suggested.

‘Maybe not. Lord – look at that rain! In June! The farmers will be in despair.’

‘Aren’t they always?’ she laughed.

They fell into Simmy’s bed in the small hours of Sunday morning, and didn’t wake until half past nine. Outside, it

was cloudy but dry. Christopher's car was parked crookedly in the road just past Simmy's cottage, there being no space for both his and hers inside the gate. Troutbeck had not evolved with vehicular traffic in mind. Large delivery trucks or lorries transporting animals had to inch between parked cars and stone walls. Drivers unfamiliar with the place were liable to find their wing mirrors cracked and their tempers frayed if they did not quickly adapt.

'Must have rained all week,' said Christopher, looking out of the bedroom window. 'There's mud everywhere.'

'What a ridiculous place to live. Can we emigrate, do you think?'

'Nowhere's perfect,' he told her. 'Although I always think Tangier is close. It's got a lot going for it.'

'Yes, you said.' After a partnership of six months or so, they had reached the point of repetition. Simmy didn't mind that, but now and then she pointed it out.

'Sorry. I know I'm a boring old fart.'

'You are,' she said happily.

'And you love me for it.'

'Fool that I am.'

'And if I'm old, then so are you, remember.' They had been born on the same day, their mothers bonded in the maternity ward; a fact that created a sense, at times, that they were more siblings than lovers.

She rolled out of bed and joined him at the window. 'Bit different from the mountains of Lanzarote,' she said.

'Still mountains, though. Sort of.'

Wansfell rose before their gaze, its detail blurred in the unseasonably poor light. 'Not a flicker of sunshine,' he complained. 'It's a disgrace.'

‘Don’t take it personally. It’ll make it easier to go back to work tomorrow if the weather’s bad.’

‘Don’t mention work,’ he groaned, with exaggerated drama.

‘We should tell people we’re back.’ Simmy had parents and Chris had siblings – none of whom would be particularly anxious for news of them. ‘And check for messages.’ They’d agreed to leave their phones behind for the duration of the holiday, as a boldly unconventional move that would horrify most people they knew. A holiday meant leaving everything behind, Christopher had insisted. He had roamed the world in his twenties, never telling anybody where he was going, and the habit had stuck.

But it had been harder for Simmy. ‘What if my father has another stroke?’ she’d worried. ‘Or the shop burns down? Or my house is burgled?’

‘It’ll have to wait until you’re back,’ he replied. ‘It’s only a week, after all. I used to drop out for *months*.’

‘Those were the good old days.’ It seemed almost criminal to simply disappear in this brave new world of the twenty-first century.

When they finally checked their phones, Simmy had no meaningful messages at all, but Chris had several. ‘Grasmere again,’ he sighed.

‘What?’

‘That house clearance I told you about. There are complications, evidently. I *knew* there would be. There’s been too many people involved, right from the start.’

‘Do they need you to do anything?’

‘They did, three days ago. With any luck, they’ve sorted it without me by now.’

Simmy found the whole subject of house clearances profoundly appealing, as well as somewhat melancholy. It seemed there was a burgeoning number of them, as old people – almost always women – died in their nineties, leaving good-sized houses stuffed to the rafters with treasures. Their space-limited descendants closed their eyes, held their noses and called for the professionals to dispose of it all as best they might. Much of the treasure found its way to Christopher Henderson's auction house. 'Not so much treasure as junk,' he'd said more than once.

But now and then there would be something worth fighting over, and the descendants belatedly realised their mistake. The scope for conflict was considerable when a rare Japanese brush pot emerged from the depths of a forgotten cupboard and earned hundreds of pounds for the house clearance men, because nobody in the family had spotted it. For this reason, many clearance specialists travelled to other regions of the country with their well-filled vans, to use salerooms far from the original house. That way, the descendants would never know how much Mum's old rubbish sold for. They might already have taken the grandfather clock and Victorian oil painting that they believed to be the most valued objects in the house. 'Most people are always about ten years out of date when it comes to what's making money,' said Christopher.

But the Grasmere house contents were due to be sold nearby in Keswick, because there were no descendants to cause trouble. An old lady had died, and her friend, left to deal with the aftermath, was a frail old man known to Christopher. 'Leave it to me,' the auctioneer had said.

‘Where should the proceeds go? Did she leave a will?’

‘Sadly not,’ the old man had replied. ‘Just a little note to say I was the main person to contact if anything happened. She didn’t think she was ever going to die. She was very keen on dogs. There’s a local charity she supported. Maybe they should have some of it. In fact, I believe she already donated a few items to them.’

‘Poor old Philip,’ Christopher had sighed. ‘He really doesn’t want to be bothered with all this business.’

‘Won’t there be horrendous legal complications without a will?’ asked Simmy, when she heard the story.

‘Probably,’ said Chris.

He had gone off on holiday, hoping his friend Jonathan could see to everything. The old lady – Kathleen Leeson by name – had died about a year ago, her house untouched since then. Everyone agreed it couldn’t stay like that, but there were legal issues that lumbered slowly into action, forcing everyone concerned to wait for the deliberations to be completed. Christopher had elaborated bit by bit during the holiday. ‘And on top of all that the old dear wasn’t at all keen on Jon. He visited her a time or two, trying to get her to part with a few things, and she took against him.’

‘Tricky,’ Simmy agreed.

‘I expect it’ll be okay in the end. Jon really is the most obvious chap for the job. But I’m not sure how the neighbours are going to feel, if they see him loading it all into his van. It’s no secret she’d gone off him.’

Simmy’s phone suddenly pinged in her hand. ‘Oh – it’s Ben,’ she announced. ‘He says “Welcome home. Exams all finished. Driving test tomorrow afternoon.” He’ll pass, of course.’

‘Sheldon didn’t,’ said Christopher, shaking his head. ‘Don’t count your chickens.’

Christopher’s admiration for *The Big Bang Theory* had at first amused and then irritated Simmy. He would quote from it constantly, focusing particularly on Sheldon. ‘That’s so *old*,’ moaned Bonnie, Simmy’s young assistant. ‘It must have started when I was about seven.’

‘He’ll tire of it eventually,’ said Simmy. ‘He thinks it helps him to understand Ben, because he’s so like Sheldon.’

‘Except he isn’t,’ argued Bonnie, who was Ben’s beloved. ‘He’s *totally* nothing like him.’

Simmy had watched enough episodes to judge for herself, in the end. Ben himself favoured the even more superseded series *Bones*, seeing himself as the boy assistant in the forensic laboratory, more than any other TV character. ‘None of them are much like real people,’ Simmy concluded.

Now she said, ‘Ben’s not Sheldon, Chris. I keep telling you that.’

‘Yeah, well, I’ve hardly seen him, have I? All I’ve got to go on is what you’ve told me.’

‘He’s free now for the next three months. His dad’s quite likely to get him a car. If you’re not careful, he’ll be bothering you up in Keswick every five minutes, asking you how an auction house works. He’ll probably drive you mad,’ she finished cheerfully.

‘How do auctions link to forensic whatever-it-is that he’s doing?’

‘I hope it doesn’t,’ she said with feeling. ‘He’s just interested. That might be because I’ve talked about it so much lately. I’ve whetted his appetite.’

‘He’ll be bothering you in the flower shop even more with his girlfriend there all day,’ Christopher countered. ‘Are you going to phone your mum, then?’

The change of subject was the result of their lazy mood, aimlessly taking biscuits to nibble and leaving half-finished mugs of coffee to go cold. Conversation was desultory, neither of them putting much thought into what they were saying. Picking up the threads of normal life was still not urgent. Midday came and went, and still they were half-asleep.

‘We should find something to eat,’ said Simmy, with very little conviction.

Chris wrinkled his nose. ‘Sunday roast in the pub doesn’t really appeal,’ he said. ‘I’m actually not very hungry, anyway.’

‘We will be, though. I suppose we could go to Ambleside or somewhere and buy something.’

‘Food is such a bore. Haven’t you got any baked beans? Eggs? Frozen pizza?’

‘All of the above. Sounds a bit depressing, though.’ She thought of the exotic meals they’d enjoyed on holiday. Fish done Italian-style. Spanish tapas eaten on the pavement in a tiny village. Salads thrown together at a moment’s notice. Everything enhanced by the sunshine and the sense of liberation.

‘England *is* depressing. Surely you knew that?’

‘No, it’s not. Or only when you compare it to somewhere with a better climate. We both love it, most of the time. After all – you came back, didn’t you? You saw the world and came right back to where your whole family lives. You *must* love it. Your actions prove it.’

‘I took one look at Coniston Water and that was it,’ he mocked. ‘Trapped for life. Except for when I was nineteen and desperate to get away. I came back because I couldn’t afford anywhere else. I was over thirty by then and didn’t have a pound coin to my name. Sophie made sure of that.’

‘Okay.’ Simmy had no great objection to mentions of Christopher’s ex-wife, but she had no intention of encouraging a revisit to his marriage. ‘Let me rephrase it, then. We both arrived here after we’d failed up to that point. We started again, and so far it’s working out pretty well.’

‘You’re talking about the Lakes, not England. If I have to be an Englishman, I choose Cumbria as the best place to be it in.’

‘Good,’ she said.

Then she phoned her parents, calculating that they would have finished their midday meal – which was unlikely to be a Sunday roast. They ran a busy bed and breakfast in Windermere, which Simmy feared was making them old before their time. Angie Straw spent her days changing bedding, keeping the dining room clean, buying ingredients in bulk and keeping the diary organised. Russell, her husband, was of minimal help since the onset of an ill-diagnosed mental condition, which had been exacerbated by a ‘TIA’ – what most people called a ‘mini-stroke’. He required little actual care from his wife, but he had become more of a hindrance to her than the help he had been initially.

‘Was it nice?’ asked Angie.

‘Lovely. Wall-to-wall sunshine. Bit of a shock coming home to all this cloud.’

‘Must be. It rained for four days in a row. There’s mud everywhere.’

‘So I see.’

‘You haven’t seen my rumpus room. There’s been an Old English sheepdog in there, shaking itself dry all over the jigsaws.’

‘Do you want me to come over after work tomorrow? Or should I leave it till Wednesday, as usual?’

‘Entirely up to you. It’s busy here whenever you come.’

‘How’s Dad?’

‘Same as usual. He’s been swotting up on the Canary Islands, so he’ll be wanting to talk to you about it. And he thinks you’re taking him to the auction next weekend. Is that right?’

Simmy hesitated. ‘I’ll have to be in the shop until two. It’s probably not worth going after that. When did I say we could go to Keswick?’

‘Don’t ask me. He seems pretty sure about it, though. You’ll have to let him down gently.’

‘I’ll come tomorrow, then,’ she decided. ‘And sort it out.’

‘Good. Nice to have you home again.’

‘I’m not sure it’s nice to be back,’ Simmy laughed. ‘We could easily have stayed there all summer.’

‘You’d get bored,’ said Angie, and finished the call without another word.

Christopher was in the living room, thumbing his own phone, when she went to find him. ‘Weather all set to improve from tomorrow,’ he reported.

‘Good news for the farmers. My mother sounds exhausted. I’m going there after work tomorrow. My dad thinks I’m taking him to your auction on Saturday. I don’t see how I

can. There'll be loads of catching-up to do at the shop.'

'You remember we were supposed to be going to the evening sale near Kirkby Lonsdale, do you? It starts at five on Thursday. You said you might come with me, if you can close the shop a bit early. It's a small two-man enterprise in a village hall. I want to see how they've set it up. It's all quite new.'

'I had completely forgotten about it,' she admitted. 'It does sound like fun, but I'm not sure I ought to take the time off. What time would we have to leave Windermere?'

'Three-thirty or thereabouts. We should try to get there by half past four, to have a look at what they're selling. Bonnie can handle things at the shop for a couple of hours, surely?'

Simmy's head was buzzing. It was unusual for Chris to try to organise her in such a way. He'd gone on playing with his phone as he spoke, and now he showed her what he'd found. 'Here it is, look,' he said.

She read the few lines of information, which said hardly anything more than he had already told her. Sellers should deliver their items by midday and take away anything unsold by ten the next morning. Buyers, likewise, should remove their purchases immediately. Fifteen per cent commission. 'I'll think about it,' she said, with scant enthusiasm.

'Ben could go as well,' he added, which surprised her even more.

There followed five minutes of easy silence, as Chris slumped comfortably into the sofa cushions, and Simmy opened the modest pile of junk mail that had arrived during her absence. She took it out to the recycling bin by her gate, pausing to scan the sky for signs of

improvement. Troutbeck was quiet. A scattering of walkers was visible on the slopes of Wansfell and sheep were bleating not far away. From where she stood, she could see into two gardens up the road, both vibrant with colour. Her own little patch at the front needed weeding. She had been experimenting with sweet peas, and their supporting bamboo poles looked somewhat askew. Wind, she supposed, along with the rain of the previous week.

She drifted back indoors, thinking she really should try to produce a meal of some sort. It was well past lunchtime, and they'd had nothing substantial since the previous day. Scrambled eggs and baked beans were about as good as it was going to get, she thought regretfully. The village shop would have closed for the day, so there was no chance of buying milk or bread. What a *bore* it was, she thought irritably, echoing Christopher.

He had got off the sofa and was standing in the little hallway. He didn't move out of her way as she went in. Instead, he reached out and took her right hand. She frowned, wondering what in the world was going on.

'Simmy . . . Persimmon . . . will you marry me?' he asked.