

Trip the Light Fantastic

Lucy fell just shy of pretty. She had an acne-free Celtic complexion with a light sprinkling of freckles, lustrous ginger hair that spilled down to the small of her back, sparkling emerald eyes, regal cheekbones, near-perfect teeth, and full, kissable lips. But for some strange reason the sum of her agreeable features amounted to nothing more than an average whole. Too average for Peter.

“Would you like some mustard?” she asked, then smiled sweetly.

He was studying her face. “Uh, um, what?” Realizing she might mistake the attention for romantic interest, he focused on the bread-swaddled sausage in her hand. “Uh, yes. Mustard. Please.”

Her smile shrank a little. She squeezed a winding yellow worm along the snag, then handed him the cholesterol-rich repast. “There you go.”

“Thanks.”

He walked away. Keen to extend their conversation, such as it was, she shouted after him. “Hey, did you hear they’re holding a dance at the community center next Saturday?”

Not bothering to stop, he turned his head to one side. “No.”

A disappointed sigh briefly lifted her chest. Ted and Betty Barber, the church's oldest married couple, approached the trestle table she manned, seeking barbecued sausage. She threw on a smile for them.

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“When ya gonna get yourself a girlfriend?” Harry said. Harry was a truckie who looked like a boulder that had sprouted limbs and a head. He took up two thirds of the bench seat where Peter had just parked himself.

“Soon as I can find one.”

Harry stuffed his face with sausage. “What’s wong wid Woosay?”

“Not my type.”

“Not your type?” Projectiles of meat and bread shot out of Harry’s mouth as he spoke. “What’s wrong with ya? She’s a fine figure of a sheila that one.”

Lucy’s “fine figure” was cloistered inside a dingy, gray dress. She was no swimwear model, though. Peter knew that much. “We just don’t have any chemistry.”

“You’re a bloke and she’s a sheila. That’s all the chemistry you need, mate.”

Peter took a big bite out of his sausage, hoping a full

mouth would stop Harry from bugging him about Lucy.

Harry pondered Peter, then Lucy, then Peter again. “Know what I reckon you should do? Trip the light fantastic. That’s how I met my missus.”

“You wen dansin?”

“Nah, mate, I mean in the traditional sense.”

“I tawt dat . . .” Peter swallowed the horrid mash that was mangling his diction. “I thought that was the traditional sense.”

“Nah, that’s what it’s come to mean. But that’s not what it really means. Tripping the light goes back hundreds of years, mate. It’s an ancient Romanian ritual.”

“Fair dinkum?”

“Fair dinkum. Romanian blokes used to do it. Blokes your age. When the moon was full, they’d throw on their best clobber and go dance in a field at midnight. Dance till they couldn’t dance no more. I mean till they were totally bugged. And then they’d wait.”

“What for?”

“For their dream girl to come runnin’ towards them. And if they managed to trip ‘er up, she’d be theirs forever.”

“Theirs forever? How? Did they tie her up and drag her off somewhere?” A look of grave concern came over Peter.

“Did they abduct her?”

“No, you bloody fool. She’d fall in love with them. Right there on the spot.”

“For tripping her up?” Peter spluttered with laughter.

“No, for completing the ritual. A magic ritual. Where magic happens. You know, magic?”

“Oh c’mon, Harry, pull the other one.”

“I’m bloody serious, mate. Look, the Romanians never called it trip the light fantastic. They had a much longer name for it. Something like, er, trip up the runnin’ sheila after you dance under a full moon, at midnight, and she’ll be your fantastic lover forever.”

Peter guffawed.

“It’s true, I swear.”

“Yeah, right. So that’s how you met your wife? You danced in the middle of a paddock, and she just appeared outta nowhere?”

“Bloody oath. That’s how Mick met his missus too.” Mick, also at the barbecue, was Harry’s younger, less boulder-like brother.

“Gimme a break. What kind of a dill do you take me for?”

“You don’t believe me? Fine. Maybe you’ll believe Mick, then.”

Peter contemplated Mick, who was at a hot water dispenser, making himself a coffee.

“Go on,” Harry said, “ask Mick about tripping the light fantastic. If he reckons I’m lying, I’ll give you fifty bucks.”

“Fifty bucks? Seriously?”

“Fifty bucks, mate.” Harry held a hand up. “Word of honor.”

Peter weighed Harry’s offer, then said, “All right, you’re on.”

* * *

Mick was blowing a cool breeze on his scalding coffee when Peter sidled up to him. “Hey, Mick, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, mate, what is it?”

“It’s about, um, you know.”

“No I don’t. What?”

“You know . . .” Peter scanned for eavesdroppers, then whispered, “Tripping the light fantastic.”

“Come again?”

Peter leaned closer to Mick. “Tripping the light fantastic.”

Mick looked as if he’d sprung Peter standing over his mother’s gore-spattered corpse, clutching a bloody knife.

“Who told you about . . .” he paused, lowered his voice, “tripping the light fantastic?”

“Um, Harry did,” Peter said, worriedly.

“That’s supposed to be a secret,” Mick snarled. He glared in Harry’s direction. “I’ll bloody kill him.”

Peter held up his hands in an “I’m innocent” motion. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“You better not.” Mick stormed over to his wife before Peter could say another word.

* * *

Static had commandeered the telly, and a sluggish Internet connection had put the estimated download time for the latest episode of *Superman and Lois* at somewhere between a week and forever, so Peter did the unthinkable. He read a book. A ratty old sci-fi paperback he unearthed from a box of his dad’s books in the garage. But he had trouble focusing on the story. His mind kept wandering back to Harry’s wild claims about a certain Romanian ritual.

What if it was all true?

What if it really was?

Would Mick have freaked out like he did if Harry had been telling porkies? No way. Mick was one of the most down-to-earth blokes Peter had ever met.

There had to be something to it. There had to be.

He poked his head outside his bedroom window and looked up. A full moon, beguiling in its luminescence and immensity, hung in the starry sky. He checked his mobile phone. Seventeen minutes to the witching hour.

What if it was all true?

* * *

Peter hadn't danced since he'd taken dance classes, compulsory ones, in the first year of high school. He was a crappy dancer. His dance teacher reckoned he moved like a drunk stumbling out of a pub. What kind of dance was he supposed to do, anyway? A waltz? A foxtrot? The Charleston? Harry never said. He'd just have to try some different steps and hope that passion alone would make the magic happen.

Dressed in a navy-blue suit, he stood in the middle of the field at the back of his house. Sweat slid down his forehead. The heat and humidity made him feel like he was wearing a woolen kiln. If he felt hot now, wait till he started dancing. Speaking of which, it was 12:00 am.

He glanced around. Please, God, let no one be looking.

He began with a brisk two-step. Five seconds into it, he accidentally kicked himself in the ankle. Next, limping slightly, he tackled the cha-cha. At one point, he extended his

right leg so far he thought he'd pulled a groin muscle. Then he plodded through some disco dance moves like a wildebeest struggling out of a mud pit. Finally, buggered as hell, he dropped to his knees, groaning for breath.

Dancing sucked. He'd forgotten just how much.

A quick scan revealed that the girl of his dreams wasn't running, skipping, hopping, jumping, or doing anything else in his direction. Maybe it was just as well. He didn't have the energy to trip her up. He didn't have the energy to stand up. According to Harry, he had to keep dancing until she appeared. But what if that took hours? He'd be sporting a toe tag long before then.

He lay on his back. The stars were doing a spectacular impression of infinity. Damn. All that effort and not a dream girl to show for it.

And just who was his dream girl?

To be honest, he hadn't given it much thought. She'd have to have a dynamite body. That went without saying. And D-size boobs. Mustn't forget those. As for her face, something like Margot Robbie's would be nice, except better looking.

And, to think, all he had to do to meet her was risk dancing himself into the local cemetery. How on earth did Harry and Mick manage it? Where did they get the energy?

Hang on a sec.

Hang on a sec.

He had an even better question. Why didn't Harry and Mick have super-hot wives? Theirs were average looking at best. Which was being kind. So what happened? Didn't they dream big enough?

Or maybe they did.

Maybe their idea of a dream girl was different, a lot different, from his. Maybe their dream girl was just someone they could stay married to without wanting to guzzle Drano. Someone they could live with.

He got up. His rowdy hormones demanded it. If there was any truth to what Harry had said, any at all, he was going to dance himself up a babe.

Make those boobs double D-size.

Drawing upon his piddling energy reserves, he danced with surprising gusto. If it could be called dancing. He kicked his legs and flung his arms like a marionette whose puppeteer was being attacked by a swarm of bees. His body cried for mercy. But he kept going. Kicking and flinging until his racked muscles called an urgent halt to the frazzling activity. No more "dancing" for him. Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

Lungs ablaze, sweat raining off him, he searched the moonlit field for the chesty girl of his dreams. He searched

and searched. Where the hell was she?

Did he really have to ask?

He knew where she was. *Nowhere*. That's where.

Harry and Mick had to be pissing themselves laughing.

The lying bastards.

He doubled over, snatching gulps of air to ward off nausea and unconsciousness.

Then he heard them.

Footfalls.

Rapid footfalls.

A dark figure, about a hundred meters distant, was sprinting toward him. The figure of a . . . woman!

"Fuck me dead, it worked," he muttered.

For an electric moment he stared at her, gobsmacked, then scrambled behind a round hay bale. His job wasn't done. He had some tripping up to do.

But first he had to reach the bale that lay between her and his current hiding place, since she must have seen him duck behind the latter.

Keeping out of her line of sight, he scurried up to the other bale. *Whew, made it!*

Now, for this to work, he had to time things just right. A split second too fast or too slow could spell involuntary

celibacy. More of it.

Listening keenly, he waited. Then, when he could hear her panting, he thrust his leg out.

Nothing.

A hammering heartbeat later, she tripped over the predatory limb and slapped the ground with an *oof*. He pounced on her like a wino on a bottle of Grange Hermitage. “Gotcha! You’re all mine now, dream girl!”

Somewhat dazed, she twisted around. He jumped back with a gasp. “Lucy?”

“Peter,” she said, both surprised and delighted.

He helped her to her feet. “I’m sorry. Are you all right?”

“I think so.”

“What are you doing here?”

She brushed grass off her dingy, gray dress. “Harry said you’d be here.”

“Harry?”

“He said you wanted to ask me to the dance but were afraid because you didn’t know how to. Dance, I mean. He said you’d be here practicing where no one could see you making a fool outta yourself.”

“Oh right,” Peter said through gritted teeth. “Good ol’ Harry.”

A dazzling smile lit her face. “Yes, I will go to the dance with you.”

A low wattage smile struggled to light his. “Oh. Great.”

“Just one thing. Mick’s gonna debut his new band, Trip the Light Fantastic, there. I’m the keyboard player, so I won’t be able to dance for long. You won’t tell anyone? It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

Grinning in agony, Peter shook his head.

“Okay,” Lucy said. “Well, let’s show you how to dance, eh?”

She positioned his hands in the standard waltz arrangement. Then together they swayed gently, if a bit asynchronously, to the monotonous serenade of crickets.

The moon’s flattering glow had given her average face an above average makeover. He couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“You know, you look really pretty in the moonlight.”

Her chest heaved with exhilaration. “Thank you. And you don’t look so fat.”

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