

KATHY JOYCE

Happy Ever After

She tugs at her jacket. Is it too tight? It's too light - she shivers. She checks her phone. No messages.

A waiter appears at her elbow. "¿Si, Señora?"

Warm chocolaty vanilla wafts from inside the cafe. "En pocos minutos, gracias." She compresses her lips, working the lipstick. "I am waiting..." But the waiter has moved away and her words, "...for my lover" fade into time.

A man, wraithlike against the low winter sun, enters the passage-way. He is Mark's height and walks Mark's walk. But his metalled heels tick-tock past.

At another table an elderly man dips a churro into his cup, posts it between whiskery lips, then licks chocolate-tipped fingers.

It's cold, even for December. She thinks of moving inside. But twelve years ago, on the twelfth of December they'd pacted to meet again. At the same time and in the same place, they'd said. No matter where they were. She feels the moment, the echo, and catches her breath.

But.

Has he forgotten?

The first of the midday bells sound from the Plaza Major. He is twelve minutes late.

In retrospect, the affair had been inevitable. The departure from deference instilled by her Catholic upbringing, from the strictures of female obedience, from the expectations of connubial conformity. Una aventura, an adventure driven by a growing, gnawing need to grasp and embrace life, to break the chains that fate had decreed her destiny. Mark's arrival in her life, or at least his imminent departure, had been a timely catalyst and their noche de amor had been unavoidable when, finally, there were to be no more reasons for him to travel to Madrid.

He'd been the London analyst and she, his Madrid contact. He'd been husband to Helena, father to sixteen-year old Adam and eighteen-year old Sarah. She, married to José, mother to nineteen-year old Antonio, and daughter of circumstance. Mark's assignment had been to merge the two banking systems, hers had been to facilitate the transition; a five-month project

that had culminated with the one precious night they'd permitted themselves before his final return to London. And in the morning, during breakfast at this Chocolateria San Ginés, they'd sworn to meet at twelve minutes to twelve on the twelfth of the twelfth, two thousand and twelve, a nonsense to set aside the impossibility of goodbye.

It hadn't been love at first sight. They were analysts after all, and though they later admitted to a certain chemistry, a sort of unexplainable magnetismo, the purpose for their escapes to the chocolateria had been to focus on such matters as syntax, validation, and implementation. Once, to be hospitable - she'd told herself - she'd invited him to dinner. José had disliked him. Had he sensed - what? There'd been nothing. Then. But José had barely spoken, claiming poor English, and had played his music loudly. Mark had left early.

The whiskery man finishes and rises stiffly, searching his pockets for change. Watching, Maria wonders how Mark might age. They'd both blamed their generous girths on a weakness for churros and chocolate but had laughed, said it was part of a good life. He'd told her about things called Yorkshire Pudding and Bakewell Tart and she'd told him the secrets of the traditional Tarta de Santiago of her hometown in Galicia.

Summer had become autumn and then winter and the project over-ran. There was talk of penalties and of bonuses being missed. They'd worked late. Then came a day when the end of the project was foreseeable. Unavoidable. Another week. He'd said he'd miss her with a pain in his eyes that had made her cry and then they'd kissed a kiss that hadn't been the kiss of friends.

Another customer is leaving, the waiter hovers. She checks her 'phone and sees ten more minutes have passed. She turns her face, looks away from the waiter. Ten minutes more, then she'll leave. Maybe half past. Sniffing, she wraps her arms round herself, wanting hot chocolate and crisp, sugary churros and considers ordering, alone. Inside.

“Hey!”

She tries not to smile but fails. “Where were you?”

“Inside. Waiting. For twelve minutes past twelve.”

“Past? Doce minutos para doce. Twelve minutes *to* twelve.!”

He kisses silence into her protest. “We both remembered! Happy anniversary.” He hands her a bunch of flowers, six winter-cream roses, one for each year they've been married, and gives their order for dos churros y chocolata to the waiter.