

Just the Way You Are

Nicola took a deep breath and stepped onto the bathroom scales and watched the dial swing into action. It lurched backwards and forwards, tantalisingly down to 8 stone and then sickeningly past 11, before finally settling on the weight that would decide her fate.

It was 9 stone 13 pounds.

Nicola couldn't believe it. She's been so careful with her diet over the last month. She'd meticulously counted every calorie and yet, there it was, in black and white: 9 stone 13 pounds.

With a big sigh she stepped down from the scales and viscously kicked them back under the cupboard as if somehow that would change what she now had to face: 9 stone 13 pounds. It was a disaster.

How long would it be before Ian noticed? Maybe he had already. He was not an observant man at the best of times, but neither was he stupid. They'd been together nearly ten years now. They'd married only three months after meeting at a party on a Thames riverboat. He was, at the time, tall and good looking and held a high-paying job in the city. He was, if Nicola was honest, a little bit out of her league.

At the time, Nicola had been approaching her thirties and beginning to resign herself to a life alone, broken up by the occasional romance that never came to much and certainly nothing near marriage. She worked in the same bank as Ian but while he frequented the dizzy heights of the top floor she was a clerk labouring at a boring job on the second.

She was still living at home when they met and, though she loved them, she'd always wanted move away from her parents and find her own place. The trouble was, on her meagre salary, she'd never be able to rent, let alone buy.

Only two months after meeting, Ian proposed to her. He sat her on the sofa and began pacing back and forth. He said that he was very happy with Nicola in a way he hadn't been with previous girlfriends who had been attractive, superficial, vain and often a little too interested in Ian's bank balance. The inference being that Nicola was none of these things including, she noted, attractive.

Nicola thought she knew what was coming. She'd heard of these 'prenuptial agreements' where you signed away the rights to your husband's wealth in the event of a divorce. Not that there would be a divorce. But just in case.

But surprisingly, that wasn't what he was after at all, as he gradually explained in his roundabout way.

'Nicola,' he said, 'You're a very beautiful woman.' Which wasn't true of course but it was a good start, 'But I've noticed something that tends to happen when people get married. There's no easy way of putting this. But the wives tend to let themselves go. You've got a fabulous figure Nicola.' which was true, interestingly, 'But the thing is,

I couldn't stand it if you.. if you..'

'If I what?' Nicola was by now all ears

'If you got fat.'

Nicola stared at him uncomprehending.

'I just want to say. Just so there's no misunderstanding. I want us to get married and I will be a good husband to you, I promise, but if you get fat, then I'll.. have to.. have to.....'

'Divorce me?'

'Yes. I'm just trying to be fair.'

Nicola was more intrigued than offended.

'How fat?'

'I don't know'

'So I've got to stay exactly the same weight.'

No of course not. Well not exactly. I mean how much do you weigh now?'

'I don't know. About 7 stone 12, I think'.

'Well if you got to, say, 10 stone,'

'So if I weigh ten stone you're going to leave me?'

'I know it sounds hard...'

But it didn't sound hard. Weird maybe, but Nicola was about to marry a man who was going to rescue her from a life in a small bedroom in a grey suburban semi. Not putting on weight seemed a small price to pay. So she accepted his proposal and gave the weight issue no further thought. She was a fit and active 29 year old. She had no trouble keeping her weight down. She ate a good healthy diet and 10 stone was too far over the horizon to give her any concern.

They married and Nicola settled down to a new life of sophisticated friends, dinner parties, skiing holidays and summer cruises. Nicola's parents would purr approvingly over the photographs which Nicola took around after their holidays. After a suitable period Nicola gave up work and looked after their house in the country. There were no children but there were dogs and horses and it didn't seem to matter very much.

It looked as though Ian and Nicola's marriage would outlast those of their friends, whose divorces and re-marriages seemed to be an inevitable part of life. Nicola had everything she had dreamed of and felt that life was smiling on her, until the day she

stepped on the bathroom scales, that had lain forgotten under a bathroom cupboard, and discovered she weighed just under 9 stone.

She couldn't believe it at first, but when she thought about it she realised the dinners at fancy restaurants, the cruises where there was little to do but eat, and the bottles of expensive wine every evening had taken their toll. Her figure that had once draw approving whistles from building sites and surreptitious glances on the tube had become strangely invisible to men.

She wondered if Ian had noticed. He'd never said anything, but he was a man who rarely forgot things and she knew that, somewhere in the back of his mind, the steadily growing dress sizes were being logged for future reference.

She needed to somehow take control of her weight. So being careful not to let Ian notice, she started on a diet, started running every day and joined the health club in the village. At first it seemed to work but when she weighed herself a month later she had gained, rather than lost, a pound. So she signed up with Richard, the trainer at the gym.

Richard knew everything about losing weight. He knew the number of calories in a glass of wine, in a slice of garlic bread and in an avocado pear and he knew how many miles you needed to run off a Caesar salad and how many hours you needed in the gym to compensate for a night on the Chardonnay.

And for a while Nicola really was losing weight and with all the exercise and the carefully controlled diet she began to feel better about herself than she ever had before. She made sure Ian didn't know what was going on but he didn't seem to notice, except on the occasion she arrived covered in sweat and found him home early. She invented some story about being chased by dogs in the village which he, being Ian, seemed to accept without comment.

She really thought she had solved the problem and for a while didn't bother with the scales so it came as a great surprise when she did finally weigh herself again. She was way past nine stone. She stepped on the scales to check they hadn't somehow jammed but the result was just the same. She wasn't losing weight. She was gaining. And the pounds just kept going on.

And when one morning the red line crossed exactly between the one and the zero, Nicola knew she was tottering on the precipice. She now weighed ten stone and her life with Ian, like her weight, was in the balance. But still nothing was said and she began to wonder if the ten-stone limit had been forgotten and Ian had mellowed with the years.

He hadn't and, when he sat her on the sofa and began to pace, just as he had done when she proposed, she knew exactly what was coming.

'Nicola. I want to know how much do you weigh.'

'I don't know, I haven't weighed myself recently.'

‘Now I don’t think that’s true, is it?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘The bathroom scales under the cupboard. They’re always in a different place. Every day. You weigh yourself every day. I know you do.’

He was right. The game was up. A man who tracked the exact position of the bathroom scales under the cupboard every day was hardly going to miss two stones of additional padding however evenly distributed around her frame. There was nothing Nicola could do. She could have denied it but she knew if she did she’d be marched up to the scales for the inevitable showdown. So she owned up

‘10 stone 2. I’m sorry.’

And then Ian launched into a speech that Nicola realised must have been rehearsed many times. She couldn’t look at him. She looked down at the carpet that had cost fifty pounds a square metre and tried to hold her emotions in check.

The marriage, Ian told her, was over. He was sorry but he’d made himself clear from the outset. Nicola was no longer the woman he had married. Nicola thought of the injustice of it all. Hadn’t Ian’s once taught figure now slackened. Didn’t his stomach, when he forgot to hold it in, roll unattractively over his belt. But this wasn’t about Ian. It was about her. And she said nothing.

He told her he was going to move out. He’d move in with his parents temporarily and he’d come back for his things later. Papers would be sent for her to sign. He would let her have the house and enough money to ensure her life alone would be a comfortable one. But that would be it, unless she wanted lawyers involved, and neither of them, Ian assured her, wanted that sort of unpleasantness.

He said he was sorry for possibly the fifth time, kissed her gently on the cheek and walked away. She heard his BMW start up and the wheels crunch through the gravel on the drive as he drew away and he left the house, the solar-heated swimming pool, the attractive little gazebo tucked away in the corner of the garden and Nicola’s life forever.

She sat and stared, gradually absorbing the significance of what had just been said, a small lonely figure in a big, brightly lit, now empty house. There was a long silence and when she finally stood up and walked into the kitchen her footsteps on the flagstones echoed around the house, She opened the fridge door and her white face was bathed in pale light. She took the bottle of expensive champagne, saved for a special occasion, and twisted off the wire holder. The pop of the cork sounded like a gunshot and she almost dropped the bottle.

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A mobile phone was lying on the kitchen table. She picked it up, pushed three buttons and held it up to her ear.

‘Hello Richard’

‘Hi’

‘Has anyone ever told you, you’re the worst personal trainer in the world?’

By now Nicola had moved into the hall and was frowning at her reflection in the mirror. She grabbed a handful of flesh through her blouse.’

‘I mean, look at me.’

‘Worked though, didn’t it. I presume he’s gone.’

‘Home to mummy and her nasty little dog.’

‘He’s going to see you alright though.’

‘I’ve got the house. And some money. I might even buy you a new pair of trainers.’

‘Fancy a work out?’

‘Absolutely,’

‘I’ll be round.’

‘I definitely need to lose some weight though. Tomorrow I’m starting on a real diet.’

‘You don’t need to do that,’ said Richard, ‘I love you just the way you are.’