

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

JANE GREEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHEN

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A SHORT STORY

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FRIENDS



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A SHORT STORY

JANE GREEN

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Lucy wishes it hadn't taken an unanticipated divorce diet to feel beautiful. She also wishes she was not here, in this busy, buzzy bar, with a group of divorcées who are spending the night tossing their hair and flirting with (distinctly in)eligible (as far as Lucy is concerned) men, trying to be noticed.

She'd give her right arm to be cozied up on a sofa at home, binge-watching *Love Island*.

But here she is, in jeans that used to be skintight but thanks to her recent divorce are now falling off, platform sandals (Simon never allowed her to wear heels, for he didn't want her towering over his five-foot, ten-inch frame. Incidentally, he's more like five foot eight. On a good day), and an off-the-shoulder shirt.

She feels ridiculous so dressed up, but this new group of women demands glamour. A flurry of texts went round this afternoon, about what they should wear. Lucy's regular jeans, cashmere sweater, and trendy sneakers got a thumbs-down from everyone. So here she is, dressed to impress, even though there isn't a single man in here she would be the slightest bit interested in.

Lucy refuses to call her ex-husband a narcissist, because everyone else's ex-husband is also a narcissist, and really, how is it possible that every single divorced woman in Fairfield County has an ex-husband who is a narcissist? I mean, how many narcissists can there be in the world?

Except she recognizes all the behaviors these women constantly talk about. Husbands who controlled what their wives wore, what they bought, where they went. The diminishment and disdain. The wives growing smaller and smaller, losing themselves because it became just too hard to keep

fighting. When they looked in the mirror, they didn't remember who they were.

All the women there tonight hate their former husbands, each of whom, it seems, tried to destroy them during the divorce. Said husbands hid finances, called the cops on fake child abuse charges, and in one particularly awful case, planted extremely dubious and illegal material on the ex-wife's computer, which didn't bode well for either parent.

Lucy is by no means a paragon of virtue, and isn't the slightest bit fond of Simon, but he is still the father of her daughter. She still has to deal with him. Allowing herself to dwell in a state of anger and resentment is not helpful. She tries not to think of him much at all.

The door to the bar opens, and a group of men walks in. They have the look of married men, in their untucked shirts and quilted vests, but their energy is less weekend barbeque with the kids, more pretend to be singletons on the prowl.

"Married, but *hot*," says a woman called Nancy, a toweringly tall redhead with impressive cleavage. "Black Leather Jacket may have to buy me a drink." She catches the eye of the man in the black leather jacket, and beckons him over with a sly smile and a significant hair toss that catches on Lucy's lipstick and spreads it across her cheek.

Wiping her face, Lucy stands up and excuses herself. "I'm just going to the bathroom." She waits for one of the women to come with, but they are all busy sizing up the new men, so Lucy totters off to the bathroom by herself, wishing she hadn't worn platform sandals, wondering at what time she can leave without being seen as a party pooper.

A quick scroll on her phone shows her that KC is thoroughly enjoying her night with Clancy the babysitter, which, according to TikTok, is

consisting of pancakes and chocolate sauce for dinner and a Taylor Swift dance party. Thank heavens for Clancy, even if she doesn't know how to stack a dishwasher and each time Lucy comes home, the kitchen always looks as if ten thousand bombs have exploded. KC loves her, and that is the only thing that matters.

She washes her hands, wipes the lipstick off, and realizes she swapped purses and doesn't have anything other than her phone and keys with her. No lipstick. Not even lip balm.

Another woman walks in, fresh faced, gorgeous. She leans over the sink and checks her makeup, redoing her lipstick and fixing her already-perfect hair.

She notices Lucy watching her. "Are you okay?"

Lucy shakes herself out of the reverie. "Sorry. I didn't mean to stare. I forgot my lipstick."

"Here. I have a new one I haven't used yet. Have it." She rustles in her purse and pulls out a brand-new NYX lip gloss, then hands it over with a smile. "It's the wrong color for me, but it will look great on you. Do you need anything else? I have powder, perfume, painkillers, tampons."

"Wow. You're so prepared. I bet you were the girl in high school who always had a spare eraser."

The woman laughs. "No. But I was the girl in high school who was sneaking out to smoke cigarettes under the bleachers."

"Aha! The secret rebel."

"Not so secret. Thank God we had no money, or I would have been sent off to one of those scary wilderness retreats."

Lucy lights up. “I was just reading about those. Terrifying.” “In *Paper* magazine?” Lucy nods.

The woman puts her hands together in prayer and looks up to the ceiling. “She reads *Paper* magazine! Thank God! There is at least one other cool woman in suburbia.”

Lucy flushes at being thought of as cool, particularly by this woman, who possesses an innate confidence, the kind of cool that Lucy has always wished she had.

The woman peers at her. “So, what is someone like you doing in a sorry-ass place like this?”

Lucy rolls her eyes. “I’ve been asking myself the same question all evening. Against my better judgment, I agreed to join a group of newly divorced women for a girls’ night out. I was picturing great conversation and a bit of much-needed laughter. I didn’t realize it meant desperately flirting with a bunch of dads who are pretending to be single. More to the point, what’s someone like you doing in this sorry-ass joint?”

The woman sighs. “A goodbye drink for a work colleague.” She looks around.

“Sometimes I really miss New York.”

“How come you’re out here?”

“Initially for love, and when that blew up, I liked the trees, and having a yard, and how easy life is. So I stayed. How about you?”

“Here initially for my husband’s job, and now, divorced, with a twelve-year-old daughter.”

“Hmmm. Happily newly divorced or did the bastard cheat on you?”

Lucy finds herself laughing. Unlike most of the husbands of the other women who have joined her tonight, Simon did not, as far as she knows, have an affair.

“I wish he would have done. Maybe I would have fared better in the divorce.”

“Well, he’s an idiot, but then again, most men are. Let me guess. Narcissist?”

Lucy sighs. “Who knows. I think perhaps all narcissists are just men who can’t help being arses because they haven’t been taught how to process emotions. Are you single?”

“Oh yes.”

“Perhaps not a coincidence that you’re here on what appears to be either singles night, or a meat market.”

The woman laughs. “If only I’d known. I’d much rather be home watching *Love Island*.”

Lucy closes her eyes dreamily. “A girl after my own heart.” She opens her eyes. “Do you work locally?”

“I’m a freelance illustrator, but I also have a part-time job at Terrain. I work in the garden section mostly. Gardening’s a passion of mine.”

“Me too!” Lucy’s eyes light up. “What a great place to work!”

“Come in and we’ll have coffee. I’ll give you my discount if you want to buy anything.”

Lucy smiles as she extends a hand. “I’m Lucy.”

“You’re English, right? My mom’s English.”

“No! Where from?”

“Guildford.”

“No way! That’s so funny!”

“I make a great cup of tea. Milk and sugar. Proper builder’s tea. I’m Elle. I mean it, by the way, about Terrain. I’m working Wednesday and Thursday afternoons this week. Drop by.”

“Done,” says Lucy, with the sense that she and Elle will become fast friends, despite the age difference, for Elle has to be in her late twenties. “By the way, I love your scarf.”

Elle looks down at her embroidered velvet scarf. “Thank you! It was a gift from my aunt.” She looks back up. “Is it weird to suggest we swap numbers?”

“No! I wanted to ask the same thing!”

“Give me your phone. I’ll put my number in.” They exchange phones, before Lucy rejoins her group to say goodbye. She doesn’t need to stay here any longer; finding a potential new friend is the very best thing that could have happened tonight. She is finally free to go.

God, I’ve missed having a best friend, she thinks, waiting outside for the Uber, smiling. She has missed her best friend Sally so much, but Sally is still in London, and the time difference makes it too hard. Not to mention the fact that Sally is popping out babies roughly every twenty months. They barely speak anymore. It’s the daily best friend Lucy misses—the person you call to talk about nothing and everything, several times a day.

Not that this woman is likely to be a best friend. *How ridiculous I am,* she thinks, grateful the Uber is clean, the driver kind, the journey home short. *To think I may have found a best friend after a five-minute chat, an unlikely meeting in the bathroom of a bar.* But isn’t that often how the best friendships start?

Terrain is mobbed as Lucy wanders around later that week, picking up candles, kitchen accessories, things she admires but would never actually buy herself. Into the garden section, then outside to the actual garden, weaving around discounted plants given that summer is over, firepits, and teak garden furniture she wishes she could still afford.

“Lucy!” Elle appears from under a counter in a small wooden hut, her blond curls hidden beneath a wool beanie. “You came!”

The two hug as Elle grabs a package from behind the counter and shouts over to a colleague that she’s taking a break.

Inside, they find a table. Elle slides something in tissue paper across the surface. “Forgive me. I only had tissue paper.”

“What is it? You didn’t have to get me anything!”

Lucy gasps as she unwraps the paper to reveal a scarf much like the one Elle was wearing the other night, the scarf Lucy had admired. She unfolds it, not knowing what to say, how to thank her for such an unexpected and delightful surprise.

“It’s gorgeous. I can’t believe you bought me a gift!”

“I went online, and this is the closest one I could find. Do you really like it?”

“I love it. Thank you. This is the nicest thing anyone’s done for me in a while.”

“Apparently gift giving is my love language.”

Lucy blushes. “That definitely works for me. I have no idea what mine is. I suspect it might be gift giving, too, although acts of service might be in there as well.”

“Good. That means you’re a good person, which is always a relief when you’re meeting a stranger for tea after a five-minute bathroom chat. You’re not a secret serial killer, are you?”

Lucy laughs. “How about you? Any secret single-white-female vibes?”

“Definitely not. I love being around English people. It reminds me of my mom. Here’s to the universe for sending us both to the bathroom at the same time.” “My lipstick heroine!” Lucy raises her tea in a toast.

“To new best friends!” They clink cups as Lucy feels a soft, warm blanket envelop her heart.

Lucy’s phone buzzes. She pulls it out of her bag to see that it is Sally, trying to FaceTime her. This is such a rare occurrence, she usually drops everything to take Sally’s call, but not today. Today she drops the phone back in her bag and smiles at Elle.

“Anyone important?”

“Yes. But I wouldn’t be able to hear her. I’ll call her back.”

“Who is it?”

“Sally. My best friend in the UK since forever and ever.”

“I don’t think I could ever have a best friend who lived in another country. How do you stay in touch?”

“It’s hard. The time difference, and she’s super busy.”

“I have a rule that best friends have to be in the same country, and preferably in the same town.” She winks at Lucy, who feels honored.

“Hey, I’ve been invited to some after-party tomorrow night for a band playing at the Klein. I wasn’t going to go, but . . . would you have any interest?”

Lucy would have to find a babysitter for KC, but an after-party, any kind of party for that matter, might be fun. “What time’s the after-party?”

“Eleven p.m.”

Lucy yelps. “Absolutely not. My idea of a good night is getting into bed at nine. And a great night is bed by eight.”

Elle adjusts her beanie. “That’s why I’m never going to have children. Every mom I know says the same thing.”

They start texting that afternoon. Lucy is her best self during the text exchanges. Funny, clever, pithy, warm. As a longtime journalist, she has always known how to write, but writing is also her job, not something that necessarily brings her joy. This new friendship has lit a spark, and the words flow from her fingers with ease.

What is it precisely about Elle that Lucy likes? Her familiarity with everything English, of course, but more than that it’s her curiosity, her warmth, a sense of ease in her skin that makes Lucy relax when they are together.

They have read the same esoteric books and are now sending novel recommendations back and forth.

Should we start a two-woman book club? Elle writes. Lucy smiles to herself: she was about to suggest the same thing.

Come and see my garden. Lucy invites Elle over. Before it gets too cold and raggedy. I’ve still got Cosmos blooming and it’s lovely. Hot chocolate by the firepit? Tomorrow night?

Only if it’s hot chocolate with a large slug of bourbon.

Deal.

The garden is Lucy’s passion and purpose, her pride and joy. She transformed the builder’s special back lawn into an oasis, planting birch trees

and white Annabelle hydrangeas around the perimeter, placing a gravel courtyard in the center, low-slung all-weather rattan sofas facing each other across a firepit, green cushions—all Home Depot, albeit trying to come back in a future life as Terrain.

Terra-cotta pots frame the courtyard, filled alternately with boxwood balls and white cosmos. It is the garden Lucy has always wanted, rambling and wild on the outside, English order and French pea gravel lending formality and beauty.

She has bought WhistlePig bourbon and Cadbury hot chocolate. Playing on their shared English heritage, she found Hobnobs and milk chocolate digestives in the international aisle at Stop & Shop. Or should she serve cheese? All these years in America and still she feels odd serving cheese platters at any time other than after dinner. Still, she makes one, truffle cheese and fig jam, grapes and Marcona almonds.

She has a momentary fret about what to wear, then scolds herself. *This is not a date*, she thinks. *This is a friend. You don't have to be anyone you're not.* A final check in the mirror as she scoops her hair back in a ponytail, aware of how excited she feels. Sally always said be yourself and you will attract the right people.

Sally! Oh shit! She completely forgot to call Sally back yesterday. She sends a hurried text apologizing.

Wanna facetime now? Kids are sleeping, comes the reply.

Can't. Have someone coming here in minutes. Will call later. Love you.

Xxx

“KC?” Lucy pauses in the doorway of the den, where KC is snuggled up under a fleece blanket, the television on, although she is lost in her phone. “Have you done your homework?” No answer.

“KC! Homework?” This time she looks up and nods. “Okay. I have a friend coming over. Bedtime on time tonight, okay?”

A mumble that might be acquiescence, might just be noise. Lucy walks over and plants a kiss on her distracted daughter’s head, before continuing outside.

“This. Is. Gorgeous!” Elle steps through the side gate, flowers in her arms, which she hands over after the hug. “I wanted to bring you something in a pot, but there were only mums and I hate mums.”

Lucy grins. “Thank God. I hate mums too. These are beautiful. Thank you.”

They smile at each other, delighting in every small thing they share, all the ways in which they are similar, an unspoken sisterhood already forming.

“This is the perfect house,” Elle says as Lucy gives her a tour. “It’s gracious, elegant, and cozy. I would never leave. Well, *hello!*” Elle walks into the den as KC looks up from her phone.

“Who are *you?*”

“This is my daughter, KC. KC, this is Elle.”

KC thinks for a second. “Elle like *Legally Blonde?*”

Elle nods. “Exactly. But it’s a coincidence. Hey, how do you know about *Legally Blonde?*”

How old are you? Sixteen?”

KC twinkles with delight. “Nah. I’m twelve.”

“No way. I do not believe that. Who are you into?”

KC frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Harry Styles? Taylor Swift? Ice Spice?”

“She’s Team Taylor all the way.” Lucy is delighted Elle is so natural with her shy, awkward daughter, can see how KC is almost unfurling in the face of Elle’s attention. “So, what do you think about her and Travis. Forever?” KC shrugs.

“I’m giving it six months,” Elle continues. “What do *you* think? Wanna bet?”

“Elle!” Lucy attempts a reprimand, but KC is loving being treated as an adult, as an equal.

“*What?*” Elle looks back at KC. “I’ll bet you five dollars it’s over in less than six months. I’ll pay you if I’m wrong.”

KC grins and shrugs. “Okay,” before immediately going back to her phone as the two women leave and head to the garden.

“She’s gorgeous. A mini-you.”

“A mini-me she is, although she’s far too attached to the phone. I didn’t want her to have one, but of course her father bought it for her, and now she’s on it all the time.”

“I think all the kids are these days. It’s a different world.” Elle settles herself on the sofa outside and looks around. “This house is magical. You’ve created something really lovely.”

“Thank you. It’s very much . . . me. Which is very different to my old house when I was married.”

“In what way?”

“Oh, you know. We had your standard Connecticut McMansion. Everything inside was gray, white, and huge. I never figured out how to work

the lights or the music properly. Too much technology. No coziness. All I ever wanted was cozy, and instead I ended up with grand.”

“How? Your ex?”

“Yes. But let’s not talk about him. It’s very dull. Except to say I finally have exactly what I have always wanted, and he would never have lived in a house this small. Also, I don’t have to ask permission if I want to buy a new chair, or change the artwork.” Lucy smiles. “I’m often lonely as hell, but I also have my daughter. I’d choose this house and occasional loneliness over my old life. There’s nothing lonelier than being in the wrong marriage.”

“I was married briefly, years ago, which was a mistake. I’m not sure it even counts. We weren’t married long enough for me to have learned anything about marriage. It was in Vegas, on a whim, after what should have remained a six-week fling. Instead, it became a six-month marriage. God, I never tell people that.”

“How old were you?”

“Nineteen. My parents were furious. I’d like to think I know better at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, but I’m not sure. There’s still something so appealing about a bad boy and an adventure.”

Lucy laughs. “Twenty-eight? You’re a baby.”

“I’ve had a lot of lifetimes in those twenty-eight years. Sadly, most of them still seem to involve bad boys.”

Lucy shudders. “Not for me. I have a mortal fear of the dating apps. And singles nights in bars.”

Elle shrugs. “The dating apps are fun, as long as you take it for what it is.”

“For you, of course they’re fun. How are you single? You’re so gorgeous!”

“Thank you. Can I ask a personal question? How old are you?”

Lucy adds more bourbon to each of their drinks. “Forty-four.”

“No!” Elle is genuinely shocked. “I would have said my age, maybe a couple of years older.”

“I’ll take it!” Lucy is delighted.

Two hours later they are still talking, their words tumbling over the other’s, so much to say, so much to share. It is as if they have known each other forever.

“Do you . . . *smoke*?” Elle looks hopefully at Lucy as she reaches down into her bag.

“Cigarettes?”

“Not cigarettes. Weed.” She brings out a joint. It’s pink. With a gold tip.

Lucy snickers. “Where on earth did you get a pink joint?”

“I rolled it myself. I grow *sativa*, which is happy and chill, and *indica*, which I smoke at night to help me sleep.”

Lucy checks KC is nowhere near before gingerly taking the joint. “I don’t know . . . I haven’t done this in years.”

Elle shrugs. “You only live once.”

Lucy pulls once, deeply, before coughing for a solid two minutes.

Elle takes the joint back and pats Lucy between the shoulder blades.

“Yikes. I forgot to tell you it’s stronger than it used to be. Are you okay?”

Lucy nods, finally able to breathe. “Good to know for next time.”

An hour later they have laughed until tears were running down their cheeks, told each other their best stories, marveling at how much they have in common, how alike they are.

“You’re amazing,” Elle says, finally standing. “I don’t want to go, but I have a dog that needs walking. How do you do it? How are you so, I don’t know, so cool, and independent, and fun, and . . . so unlike the women I usually meet here. You know you belong in New York City, right?”

Lucy reels, astounded at what she presumes is a compliment. “Thank you but no. I need nature and green, and lots of quiet, hence no New York City for me. I’m not cool. I’m just a suburban mom doing a bit of writing here and there.”

“What name do you write under?”

“My own. Lucy Brearley.”

“You know I’m going to google you.” Elle gathers her bag, and pulls out one more perfectly rolled pink-and-gold joint. “I’m leaving this for you. This one’s *indica*. You’ll sleep like a baby.” She looks up at the sky, now dark. “Thank you, Goddess, for sending me Lucy Brearley.” She envelops Lucy in a bear hug before skipping out the gate.

“Goodbye, Lucy Brearley!” Elle shouts through the open car window as she guns her Mini Cooper and takes off down the street.

Lucy stands in the doorway and grins.

She doesn’t stop smiling until she falls asleep.

A few weeks later, and Lucy has no idea what she did before Elle came into her life. Her life didn’t seem to have holes in it, seemed to be busy, and full, as happy as it could be when you emerged from a marriage where you had to make yourself smaller and smaller in order to survive.

There is an ease and familiarity in the way they are with each other. The other week, when she and Lucy grabbed lunch at La Plage, sitting at the bar

and sharing mussels and french fries, her neighbor Allyson came over to say hello.

“I’m her sister from another mister,” said Elle, shaking Allyson’s hand. It was true. Elle felt like the little sister Lucy had always wanted.

“Hey, I’ve finished that commission for the greeting cards. Can I show you before I turn them in? Your opinion is the one that matters most to me, Bear.”

Elle has started calling Lucy “Bear.” It felt odd, at first, to have a female friend issue the kind of sweet, silly nickname you have in a romantic relationship, but then again, everything about this new friendship feels like a romantic relationship, but for the fact that there is no sex.

Lucy is lit up with love by this friendship, the kind of best friend she has always wanted, has unknowingly longed for, during those long, lonely days and nights, both in her marriage, and out.

She feels truly seen, and her reflection in Elle’s eyes is the first time she has ever felt truly beautiful. Not just beautiful, but talented, and clever, and funny, and the kind of woman she never thought she could be. Elle’s sense of fun, her joie de vivre, her hanging on to Lucy’s every word make Lucy feel like Superwoman.

They both have what they call “difficult” mothers. They have agreed never to use the word *narcissist*, although they needed a term that wasn’t overused. Elle came up with *naughtiness*. Both agree that their respective mothers were the naughtiest of naughties. Both mothers had white-hot tempers, were unpredictable, would rage at invisible provocations, terrifying their small daughters. As a result, both women have finely tuned intuition,

have learned how to read a room, how to read people: they know who is safe, and who is not.

“That’s how I recognized you,” Elle likes to say. “I knew you were my soul sister.”

Lucy understands that women with difficult mothers recognize each other. She likes to think the universe sent her Elle as a gift of apology for saddling her with Simon all those years.

I deserve a friend like this, she tells herself. I deserve an Elle.

They meet at the Old Mill Grocery for coffee, sit outside in the sun as Elle brings out the cards and hands them over, silently, expectantly, hoping for approval.

The watercolor-and-ink drawings are delicate, funny, beautiful.

“You have such unbelievable talent!” Lucy is delighted by the drawings. She suggests making changes to some of the phrases underneath, shortening them, making them snappier, punchier, which, in turn, amazes Elle.

“We should do a book together!” Elle says. “I’ve always wanted to do a funny book for single women. The kind of thing you’d give to a single girlfriend as a gift.”

“It would be amazing to work together!” says Lucy, knowing what a great partnership they would make, how much fun they would have.

Could life get any better than being with your most favorite person in the world—outside of your family—most of every day? She looks at her phone. “Damn. I’ve got to grab KC from dance. I have to run.”

“Can I come?”

Lucy lights up. “Yes! I’d adore that, and more importantly, KC would adore that!” It’s true, KC is always asking if Elle can come over and hang out.