

Chapter 2 The Road Not Taken

Home was a small, rented flat in a newly built estate about 5 miles from the school. It was typical of the new estates that littered Britain, comprising houses of varied designs, 1 bedroom apartments, 2 bedroom terraces, 3 bedroomed semis and 5 bedroomed detached all with different coloured bricks. Some were 3 storied, some were single storied; some had bay windows, others had modern, clean windows to maximise the light. Some had dormer windows embedded in low slung roofs. Some had pocket sized gardens, but a lot had to rely on a communal green area which included a kids' park with rarely used play equipment. There were lots of cul-de-sacs which were easy to get lost in. Kiera felt sure that there was some kind of rationale to building topsy turvy streets rather than simple grids, but she could never fathom it. The different designs suggested variety but there was no disguising the underlying uniformity of these houses. The overall feeling was of cramped boxes, tucked and shoved into a given area, with each house precisely calculated to offer as little living space as possible for the largest amount of profit that could be yielded from that space. There was no room for all the cars which littered the roads, gardens and drives. This caused ongoing arguments and resentments over space, especially when visitors arrived and introduced even more cars to the cramped streets. In fact, Kiera reflected again on the lack of beauty in this place she called 'home' and the normalised levels of stress that these kinds of estates seemed to breed. As if to rub it in, she exited her car to the noise of a neighbour's music. She knew where it came from: an aggressive man, tall, heavy, tattooed who lived two doors down from her apartment and glared at anyone if they so much as looked in his direction.

Kiera walked across the yellow bricked parking lot, onto the tarmacked pavement and pushed open the door to her a 4-storied building. She carried a cheap canvas bag which was heavy so she decided to skip the physical exercise and call the lift instead.

As she entered her apartment, she reflected on the blessings of living on the top floor surrounded by quiet neighbours.

As soon as the thought entered her mind, she tensed. Unease settled into her body and starting nagging her.

“You have too much quiet”, it said. “Thirty-one and no partner....loser!”

That word. Kiera thought of Liam, of their common bond. Tears welled and, she noticed, they were for Liam as much as they were for herself.

Kiera felt deeply the lack of a loving presence in her life. Her previous partner, Louis, had split with her over 3 years ago when his job had called on him to move to Germany. She had always felt he put his job before her, but had automatically dismissed her feelings of unease. She didn't want to rock the boat and besides, Louis' focus on career was typical at this stage in life. The twenties were the years of ambition, of bending over backwards to get on, the fusing of identity and career – success at work meant success as a human being. She thought back to the day when Louis had announced the split. She had entered the house and seen him sitting on the sofa as if he were waiting for her to arrive.

“Not working?”

“Keira, I've been offered a promotion”. He said this quickly, abruptly, as if this was an unpleasant task he wanted to get over and done with.

“Hey, congratulations! What is it? Are you pleased?” Keira tilted her head to one side “You don't look it.”

“It’s in Germany.”

“Oh.”

“I’m going to take it.”

“Yes, yes, you must. I get it. We can see each other at weekends. How long will you be out there?”

“Look Keira, I’ve been thinking. I don’t think it’s working and perhaps now’s the time to start afresh – for both of us.”

Keira sat down on the dining room chair at right angles to Louis, so as not to face him directly. One hand clasped the edge of the table as she leaned forward, face pale, eyes alert.

“What’s not working, Louis? You haven’t said anything before. What’s not working?”

“Us. I feel like we’ve settled into a pattern. It’s comfortable but it’s not exactly exciting, is it? I feel like a middle-aged man whose life has passed him by sometimes. You’re always working and marking. I know I work a lot but at least my job is challenging, demanding and takes me all over the world. Your job...is a bit dull. It keeps you rooted to one spot with very few prospects and every year you repeat what you did last year. If we’re not careful, we’ll slip into middle age, with a couple of kids and a life that is predictable and safe. I don’t want that Keira. I like you, I really do, but I don’t think I love you anymore.”

A tiny, hot tear made an appearance as Keira remembered the scene. She had felt humiliated more than anything. It had been surprisingly easy to separate but the feeling of humiliation had persisted to this day.

She felt that secretly he had always looked down on her chosen career; that he would have preferred to have a partner in marketing or PR or even Human Resources – anything corporate. Good money; high status – well, higher than teaching anyway, and ‘prospects’.

Her mind wandered off as she thought about meeting someone. It was difficult to meet men in teaching – the pay and relatively low status put men off. She hadn’t yet resorted to a sustained online campaign – she lacked the energy for it and the necessary hope.

She glanced at her face in the hall mirror. The name Kiera meant ‘dark or black-haired’ and she had medium length, thick black hair that fell just below her shoulders. Everyone had remarked on the thick mop of hair she had displayed from birth and her parents, having looked up many baby names, had thought Kiera was apposite whilst also being a pretty, feminine name. To Kiera, ‘black-haired’ seemed rather prosaic, mundane, but the *sound* seemed light, airy, even spiritual - though her parents had no interest in the spiritual in their lives at all. Her father had been a vehement atheist; her mother never really thought much about it, preferring to leave such arguments to her husband.

Sometimes Kiera thought she could be described as attractive and sometimes rather plain. She had never cracked what made the difference – was it her smile? No, she reflected, not really. Her smile was rather beautiful as she had full lips and white teeth that shone against the blackness of her hair. It was not the smile that made the difference. Was it her skin? Not really, although sometimes she did suffer from spots and her skin was always rather pale. Maybe it was her eyes – but no. For example, today she had not slept well last night but her green eyes showed no traces of tiredness. Yet still the overall effect, today at least, was one of plainness. Kiera sighed. Maybe she should change her image, her clothes, her style, wear make-up? But she felt at a loss as

to where to start. She was not one of those women who knew how to make the most of themselves. She had always been too laid back about her appearance.

Anyway, these were familiar thoughts and it did not do good to ruminate on them. Her mind went to food – what to cook tonight? Kiera had bought some salmon earlier on in the week and tonight fancied salmon, noodles, stir fried vegetables all in some kind of Chinese sauce. She started to prepare the dish, slithering the salmon onto the grill, chopping the broccoli, onion, carrots, peppers and garlic and putting the Chinese noodles on the side – they would only take a few minutes. She was just about to pour the oil in the wok when her phone buzzed.

‘Message’, she thought. ‘Who from?’ Her hand automatically reached for the phone as she poured the oil. It was a text message from Rose.

‘Can Alex come for a morning? To the spa. He needs some down-time too and fancies a massage. He won’t interfere.’

Kiera groaned. Alex was okay – a man in touch with his feminine side, as they say. But this was *her* birthday treat and she didn’t want him around. She did not feel it was unreasonable to assert her needs on this occasion. Alex would spoil the dynamics and she really wanted to talk, to open up. She wouldn’t be able to do that if he was around.

She wasn’t going to reply. She didn’t want a confrontation right now and this looked as if it could result in one. She was hoping that Caroline would answer on her behalf. She continued to chop the veg. She looked at her phone again. Caroline had not texted Rose back; in fact there was no activity for the next 15 minutes.

Kiera could not leave it. She felt irritated and wanted to sort it out. Maybe she could put Alex off – maybe organise some kind of weird girly retreat -

emphasis on *girly*. Kiera grabbed her laptop and typed in ‘weird kind of girly retreat’. But just the usual crop of spas and hotels came up – nothing special. Stumped, she turned back to the cooking – everything was on the side ready for the final stir fry...then, suddenly feeling mischievous, Kiera grabbed the laptop and typed in ‘weird retreats’ and waited. Google did not fail – a list came up. Her eyes rested on the first site: ‘The 13 weirdest wellness retreats’. Kiera clicked on the site:

It's never too late to live a more spiritual and carefree life.

Sounds good, Kiera thought.

However, if traditional spas leave you feeling cold and meditation makes you drowsy, don't dismay – there are plenty of more colourful options out there.

I like the sound of colourful, she mused. She scrolled down to the first on the list.

Orgasmic Meditation. Coming first on our list is the latest mindfulness fad known as orgasmic meditation (or OM as it's known to participants). The premise is simple: a fully-clothed partner methodically strokes a woman's clitoris for 15-minutes - and that's about it.

OM can take place in groups or privately but the benefits of mindful masturbation are said to include increased intimacy, higher energy levels and reduced stress. More information:

<https://www.orgasmic.meditation.com>

Kiera's mind went completely blank as if she were in shock. There was nothing to think because she did not believe what she had just read. She shook her head and went back to the beginning to re-read the text.

No, it was true; she had read correctly.

Kiera must have remained for some minutes just staring at the site in disbelief, not even noticing the tempting blue link. There was no way she could make sense of this as it was so obviously beyond anything she had ever come across before. Women would go on a retreat to have their clitoris stroked by a stranger of the opposite sex? She couldn't imagine anyone she knew going anywhere near this kind of thing. Who would? Was this a hoax? At the same time she felt a rising excitement. It felt like a secret door had opened into an alternative universe – an escape from the mundaneness, an escape from the tramlines of a conventional predictable existence. She felt her heart rousing – a mixture of warmth and tension suffused her body.

She clicked on the link. Up popped a happy, smiling, young woman – tattoos on her upper arm and obviously intended to depict someone who was highly spiritual and carefree.

The thought crossed Kiera's mind that the teachers at her school were not allowed to have (or show) tattoos and she wondered once again, how anyone could have the power to veto this very personal right to decorate oneself as one would wish. She had never wanted a tattoo until the head had introduced this new crazy rule which, to add insult to injury, he just imposed on the staff as if they were his personal serfs. Underneath the tattooed woman were the words:

Happier. Healthier. Smarter.

She could see the happier bit and maybe even the healthier (if you were happier you would probably be healthier). But smarter???

She clicked on the video. She was greeted by another young woman, who had extremely lustrous and bouncy hair and piercing blue eyes. Kiera was surprised to see this young executive type, in jumper, jacket, smart trousers and

boots, extol the virtues of orgasmic meditation; she realised that she had expected some kind of sex icon. The woman was intelligent, articulate and had practised her argument well. She portrayed OM as if it were like another spa treatment or yoga class – a natural way of cultivating wellbeing and reducing stress. The trick was to stay in the moment as you experienced sexual arousal and, most importantly, to avoid jumping into your head. It was almost as if OM were an obvious treatment for young executive women who had stressful jobs and wanted to manage their sex lives as efficiently as they led their meetings and managed their clients. All the people portrayed in the film were around her age give or take a few years.

The video showed the orgasmic meditation take place as a woman laid down on her back and a man sat alongside her hips. The woman draped her leg over the man's giving him access to her clitoris which, after donning some rather unromantic plastic gloves, he proceeded to stroke. There is no hint of an orgasm which, according to the video, is part of the Western goal obsession. Goals take us into our head making climaxing much less likely.

Kiera could not imagine having her clitoris stroked for 15 minutes without having an orgasm. Maybe they followed this with masturbation, or maybe the women went about frustrated for the whole day? Her mind wandered and weird and erotic images seemed to bombard her with alarming and alluring vividness.

Her fascination with the site was interrupted by the buzzing of a timer. The salmon was ready. The uncooked vegetables and noodles lay on the side. Kiera got up, popped the salmon onto a small side plate with a dollop of mayonnaise and started to pick at it.

Next on the list.

Psychedelic enlightenment, Gabon.

In the pristine forests of Gabon, the path to enlightenment is paved with a potent hallucinogen known as iboga. This psychedelic shrub is central to the Bwiti religion, which combines worship of the forest with Christianity, and is taken during their initiation ritual.

Iboga induces a lengthy trip which shamans say help fights depression and, surprisingly, drug addiction. Critics warn that the ritual, which also involves face painting and dancing, is dangerous due to the potency of the plant; where other psychedelic drugs, like Ayahuasca have one mind-altering ingredient, iboga has at least twelve. Nevertheless, foreigners are visiting Gabon in increasing numbers to take part in this spiritual experience.

This did not sound attractive at all to Kiera, especially as, according to a bit of online research, the dangers were clearly under-emphasised. Why would you go to Africa to take drugs when there seemed plenty over here – her students and their parents were testimonies to that. Ridiculous! And what drugs had to do with enlightenment (whatever that was) was beyond her – the whole proposition seemed preposterous.

Nevertheless, she could not help but imagine herself wandering off the main tourist tracks to penetrate the darkest recesses of a jungle in Gabon, stripping naked, painting her body, taking a drug and then going wild into some kind of dance-induced trance. Imagining this from the safety of her flat in England, made her smile. There was no harm in imagination, in fact she felt a lack of it in her life.

However, contemplating the reality of such an experience left Kiera unconvinced and leaving Gabon she scrolled down to open the next door to adventure.

Silent Retreat, India.

Kiera looked at this warily. She wasn't particularly attracted to silence – she spent most of her spare time in it. But she read through the blurb.

At one of the Vipassana (meaning “to see things as they really are”) retreats scattered throughout India, participants are challenged to take a 10 day vow of silence while leading a monastic lifestyle. It's said the practice increases one's self-understanding and improves well-being. Courses are free but donations are welcomed.

Kiera could not quite believe what she saw when she visited the site. Kiera learned that on a Vipassana retreat a strict timetable is adhered to, along with silence at all times - and no eating after 1pm. From what Kiera could make out, participants got up at 4am, meditated for 2 hours, had breakfast then meditated again from 6:30 to 11:00. Lunch was 11 – 12 and you could rest till 1pm, then you meditated again from 1pm to 5pm with an hour for tea finished by another couple of hours meditation...for 10 days!!!

Kiera's head screamed in revolt - how could anyone want to do this? Madness. Pure madness. Kiera tried to envisage someone who would be excited to read about this, who would click on the links and book a place. No images came to mind. Nothing at all. Maybe a semi-naked Indian man with a white loin cloth? But no. She felt a tug of war inside her – the immediate impulse to judge, to dismiss to ridicule battling with some kind of curiosity. Was she missing something?

The other retreats on the list were not as striking or extreme as these. She was drawn to the picture of a giant hot tub full of red wine and jammed pack full of people bathing in it, but after the initial shock of the orgasmic meditation this seemed tame. And sticky and noisy and cramped.

She looked at the left-over silver skin of the salmon sitting on the plate, with a smear of mayonnaise to the side. She then popped the uncooked vegetables into a dish and stored them in the fridge. The noodles went back to the cupboard.

She had marking to do.

Trying avoid looking at the website, she logged onto the school intranet. But she couldn't concentrate. She persisted but felt that her marking had not quite achieved the consistency and concentration it needed. Images of men stroking the clitorises of strange women kept intruding and she began to feel quite aroused. She persisted with the marking for an hour or so, until she was certain she could complete the rest in the morning. She then copied the URL of the website and sent it to Rose and Caroline. No comments, just the link. Then she put the mobile on charge and left it – deliberately. She did not want to see or respond to their reactions right now; she wanted to let this new information brew and make sense of it in her own way without having the others craft the way she might view it. There was a stirring in her and she was intrigued.

She fetched her laptop and once again looked through the offerings – playing the orgasmic meditation video probably more often than she cared to admit. She then started to surf the internet, finding a lot of controversy and criticism of OM, suggesting it was a cult. After an hour of flitting from site to site, she gave up and went to bed.

That night she slept fitfully. Her sleep was light and she kept waking up thinking about the website. It wasn't just the strangeness of the retreats but weirdly, she could feel the physical sensation of her mind opening - both to a world both much larger than she had ever encountered or dreamed of, and yet, just a click away – much smaller, accessible and therefore frightening to her stable sense of self. There was no excuse – if people did these things, why not

her? Simply stating that these kinds of things were only attended by weird non-hoppers was neither intelligent nor wise nor did it do her curious, teaching-learning mind any justice. She wasn't really the small-minded type, she had just imperceptibly, over time, step-by-invisible-step, become one. And seeing what other people did with their time challenged the choices she had made in her own life. Since when had she become so safe, so conservative, so compliant? This website, just like Liam Graham, had got under her skin.

Having eventually got to sleep in the early hours, she awoke with a jolt just after 4 a.m., heart pounding and sweat on her brow. She vividly remembered the nightmare. She was sitting at a bar, waiting to be taken to a room at the back where something was going to happen to her that would change her life but she was not to know what that thing was. In the meantime, the bartender offered her a glass of red wine. As she picked it up she noticed lots of tiny, what seemed like, creatures, swimming in the wine. As she looked more closely, she noticed they were human beings, having fun in the red wine bath.

“What are these?”, Kiera looked at the bartender.

“Extra fizzy bits – I put them in just for you. They taste really nice and bring out the flavour of the red wine. Take a sip – they won't harm you.”

As Kiera drank the wine she could feel the little people swim down the back of her throat, down the oesophagus and land in her stomach where they died, burning to death in her own stomach acid.

Her heart was pounding and images from the nightmare floated through her consciousness. She moved around the bed, pulling the pillow down in front of her chest for comfort and dozed off.