

# Hide Your Heart

by Barry Charman

‘How long has it been, do you think?’

He knows she’s asking about when they were last together, but her short hair – so startling to him – makes him think of other things. He used to sit at the back of the class, staring at it. So innocent, in hindsight, the things you fixate on.

Her hair had *tumbled*. Past her shoulders where little curls made it look like it was trying to change direction, rush back up. He smiles at the memory, then thinks of the word she’d thrown into conversation earlier like a grenade: *remission*.

He snaps back to the present. How long *had* it been? He sighs. ‘Lifetime.’ The word is a shrug. It says enough.

Helen smiles slightly and nods.

She looks down at the glass between her hands and he marvels. They were adults now, late twenties, knocking on thirty. Sitting in a beer garden, drinking to whatever that meant. They should still be teenagers. His whole life suddenly feels like some cruel trick.

How did he get to be twenty-nine without it *meaning* anything?

She looks up and a smile blooms. ‘Can’t believe I just saw you like that.’

He smiles back. ‘Did a double take. I thought, *there’s no way that’s Helen.*’

‘Oh,’ she frowns. ‘Why couldn’t it be?’

His lips part. He feels a strange pressure, as if a dozen sentences are vying for release. What to say. What not to say.

‘Guess I just thought, wherever you were, you’d be well out of here.’

Helen scowls. ‘Yeah. I was – got married, moved south.’

She doesn't offer any more. He tries not to, but he looks down to make sure the ring has left her finger.

'What happened?' he asks, tentatively.

She can't focus. Just looks at him, then away to the hanging baskets swaying in the breeze. The flowers are fake, yet they are still wilting.

'Do you ever think...?' She pauses; he finds it hard to breathe. 'Do you ever think *how did my life become the exact opposite of what I planned?*'

He exhales, nods.

She runs a hand through her short hair. Matt imagines the coarseness. He imagines no one else touches her scalp. No one was there to stroke it when she was feeling sick.

'Here I am, back where I started, like I wasn't *meant* to get away. Sorta feel used up... Spat out...' She trails off. The harsh words have let her down, revealed too much of something bitter she has been avoiding.

They're just catching up, two drinks after ten years, and it's suddenly become a confession. He talks quickly before she can apologise. 'Or, when things don't work out, you come home. Take stock. It's a pause, that's all. A delay. A refuelling.'

She grins. 'Is that what I'm doing?'

'Why not? After a while, you'll go soaring off again, leaving us behind...'

She laughs, for the first time. 'I won't go *soaring* off.'

'Okay, well that's good too.' He gives her a smile, hopes it's reassuring. Hopes it's something to come home to after all those years away. Hopes she might build a life using such small smiles as cornerstones for whatever comes next.

Old thoughts, these, old ideas.

Helen shakes her head. ‘Hate it here,’ she says, quietly. ‘Hate it *so* much. Like it’s dragging me down. I can *feel* it.’ She seems suddenly so drained, as if the girl he’d known has been poured out.

‘I was thinking of staying with Julie for a while.’

Her sister. In Canada.

Matt remembers his mother sitting him down when Helen left the first time. ‘Hide your heart,’ she’d said, as if that would protect him.

He puts on a smile. Adjusts it, so it fits. ‘Yes, Julie would love that. It’s a beautiful country.’

Helen strokes her scalp again. She’s staring into space. ‘It’s somewhere *new*.’

‘Yeah. It’ll be good for you. Peaceful. A fresh start.’

She nods. Her eyes are there already, waiting for the rest of her. A quick smile lights her up, as if a heavy decision has become a little lighter, a little more *hopeful*.

This one smile he will treasure. The rest go into the collection. The vault of memories, dreams and regrets. Almost thirty years’ worth.

She keeps smiling and, smiling back, he hides his heart.