

TRIP THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

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Lucy fell just short of pretty. She had an acne-free Celtic complexion with a light sprinkling of freckles, lustrous ginger hair that spilled down to the small of her back, sparkling emerald eyes, regal cheekbones, near-perfect teeth, and full, kissable lips. But for some strange reason the sum of her agreeable features amounted to nothing more than an average whole. Too average for Peter.

"Would you like some mustard?" she said, then smiled sweetly.

"Uh, um, yep," he said, studying her face. He realized she might mistake the attention he was paying it for romantic interest and focused instead on the sausage swaddled in bread she was holding. "Yes. Please."

Her smile shrank a little. She squeezed a winding yellow worm along the sausage, then handed him the cholesterol-rich repast. "There you go."

"Thanks."

"Hey, did you hear they're gonna hold a dance at the community center next month?" she said as he walked away.

He turned his head halfway toward her. "No."

She watched behind him in disappointment. She threw on a smile as Ted and Betty Barber, the church's oldest married couple, approached the trestle table she was standing behind.

"When are ya gonna get yourself a girl?" Harry said. He was a truckie by trade who looked like a boulder that had sprouted arms, legs, and a head. His broad expanse occupied two thirds of a bench seat on which Peter had just sat down.

"Soon as I can find one."

Harry stuffed his face with sausage. "What's wong wid Woosay?"

"Not my type," Peter said, surveying the barbecue's modest turnout. All the single females there were either too old or too young for him, except Lucy, of course, who was two months shy of his eighteen years and a bit. A small church was no place for an aspiring stud like him to find a babe. And a small country town wasn't much better.

Harry made a "hang on a sec" humming sound and gulped down some sausage. "Not your type?" Projectiles of meat and bread shot out of his mouth as he spoke. "What's wrong with ya? She's a fine figure of a sheila that one."

Lucy's figure was cloistered inside a dingy gray dress. She was no swimwear model, though. Peter knew that much.

"We just don't have any chemistry," he said.

"You're a bloke and she's a sheila. What more chemistry do ya need?"

Peter sighed. "I'm just not interested in her, Harry." He took an extra-big bite of sausage so he wouldn't have to submit to further interrogation.

Harry gazed thoughtfully at Peter, at Lucy, at Peter again. "You know what you I reckon you should do? Trip the light fantastic. That's how I met my missus."

"You went dancing?" Peter said, a horrid mash joggling in his mouth.

"Nah, mate, I mean in the traditional sense."

"I thought that was the traditional sense."

"Nah, that's what it's come to mean, but that's not what it *really* means. Tripping the light goes back hundreds of years, mate. It's an ancient Romanian ritual."

"Fair dinkum?"

"See, the Romanians reckoned you had to put on your best clobber. Then you had to dance in a field by the light of a full moon. At midnight. Then, once you'd done that, your future wife'd come runnin' towards ya, and if ya managed to trip 'er up, she'd be all yours."

Peter laughed out loud.

"I'm bloody serious, mate. Its full name is trip up the runnin' lady after dancing by the light of a full moon—at midnight—and she'll be your fantastic lover forever."

"Yeah right, pull the other one."

"It's true, I swear."

"Yeah right. So that's how you met your wife? You danced under a full moon and she just appeared outta nowhere?"

"Bloody oath. That's how Mick met his missus too." Mick, also at the barbecue, was Harry's younger and less boulder-like brother.

"Come on, Harry, what kind of a dickhead do you take me for?"

"Ya don't believe me? Fine. Maybe you'll believe Mick, then."

Peter looked at Mick, who was at a hot water dispenser, making himself a coffee.

"Go on, ask him about tripping the light fantastic," Harry said. "If he reckons I'm lying, I'll give ya fifty bucks."

The skeptical grin on Peter's face withered as he pondered Harry's offer. He perked up all of a sudden and said, "Okay, you're on."

Mick was coming away from the dispenser when Peter sidled up to him. "Hey, Mick, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, mate, what is it?"

"It's about tripping the light fantastic."

Mick looked as if he'd sprung Peter standing over his mother's blood-soaked corpse, clutching a butcher knife.

"Who told you about . . ." he lowered his voice to a cautious whisper, "tripping the light fantastic?"

"Um, Harry did," Peter said, nonplussed by Mick's reaction.

"That's supposed to be a secret. I'll bloody kill him."

"I won't tell anyone, I promise."

Mick pointed his finger at Peter as if it were a loaded gun with the trigger cocked. "You better not." He stormed over to his wife before Peter could utter a word.

Static had commandeered the telly, and a sluggish Internet connection had put the download time for the latest episode of *Game of Thrones* at somewhere between several weeks and all eternity. This left Peter with no choice but to do the unthinkable: read a book. His mind kept wandering from its colorless prose, though. *Trip the light fantastic* was a far more vivid and enticing arrangement of words.

What if Harry was telling the truth? Would Mick have reacted as he did if Harry had been telling pork pies?

Peter stuck his head outside his bedroom window and looked up. A full moon, beguiling in its brightness and immensity, had held off the night, putting the deepest twilight on pause till daybreak.

He checked the time on his mobile phone. Seventeen minutes to the witching hour.

What if Harry was telling the truth?

He hadn't danced since he'd taken compulsory dance classes in the first year of high school. What kind of a dance was he supposed to do, anyway? A waltz? A foxtrot? A Charleston? The Macarena? These questions and one or two pertaining to the state of his mental health whirled around and around in his head as he stood in the middle of a field at the back of his house, dressed in the navy blue suit he wore to his sister's wedding.

He glanced at his mobile phone. It was 12:00 a.m. Time to get dancing. He would just have to try a variety of steps and hope for the best.

He began with a brisk two-step, nearly falling over in his eagerness to impress the supernatural force that was supposed to send a hot babe bolting his way, then went straight into a cha-cha, sticking his legs out so far he thought he might damage his groin, then followed that with a spot of lambada.

He couldn't remember dancing ever being this strenuous; he was buggered already. He doubled over and sucked some rasping breaths into his lungs. A scan of the field revealed no babe, bolting or otherwise.

He danced with greater gusto. He wasn't concerned about style now. Exaggerated attention-getting movement was what he was aiming for. He figured that enthusiasm rather than technical proficiency would make the magic happen. He flung his arms about and kicked his legs, like a marionette whose puppeteer was being attacked by a swarm of killer bees, until exhaustion drove him to his knees, literally.

He scanned the field, his face a cascade of sweat. Still no honey heading his way. Unless he counted chirping crickets as company, he was all alone. All that bloody effort and nothing to show for it save a blazing throat and more muscle cramps than the Melbourne Marathon. He was a fool for listening to Harry, for letting wild hormones drag him away from common sense.

And then he heard them.

Rapid footfalls.

A darkened figure, about one-hundred meters distant, was sprinting toward him.

"Bloody hell, it worked," he whispered.

For an electric moment he stood staring, gobsmacked, at the figure, wondering whether he was really seeing it—seeing *her*.

He scrambled behind a round hay bale.

The figure's footfalls grew louder. He waited for them to get closer, then, when it sounded like they were just a few meters away, thrust his leg out. The figure tripped over it and slapped the ground with an *ooof*.

He swooped on his prone bride-to-be like a seagull on a potato cake. "Gotcha! You're mine now!"

With a dazed groan she turned slowly around.

"Lucy?"

"Peter," she said with surprise and delight.

He helped her to her feet. "I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

"I think so."

"What are you doing here?"

"Harry said you'd be here." She brushed her dingy gray dress clean.

"Harry?"

"He said you wanted to ask me to the dance but were afraid 'cause you didn't know how to. Dance I mean. He said you'd be here practicing where nobody could see you making a fool outta yourself."

"Oh right," Peter said through gritted teeth. "Good ol' Harry."

A smile lit her face. "Yes, I will go to the dance with you."

"Oh . . . great . . ."

"There's just one thing. Mick's gonna debut his new band, Tripping the Light Fantastic, there. I'm the keyboard player, so I won't be able to dance with you for long." She paused and got extra earnest. "You won't tell anyone? It's supposed to be a secret."

His mouth squirmed into an awkward grin. He shook his head.

"So let's show you how to dance, eh?"

They swayed gently together to the cricket's monotonous serenade. He couldn't keep his eyes off her average face, which the Moon's flattering glow had given an above-average makeover. "You know, you look really pretty in the moonlight," he said.

Her chest heaved with exhilaration at the compliment. "Thank you. And you don't look so fat."