

Truth Hurts

Romance

3,500 Words

'Truth Hurts' – Chris Matravers

My latest girlfriend's statement had had that awful, uncomfortable, base truth to it. Do you know what I mean?

I think Douglas Adams of 'Hitch Hiker' fame is probably the greatest exponent of the art. Do you remember: 'The space ships hung in the air like bricks don't,' and, 'the secret of flying lies in throwing oneself at the ground and missing'? Get my drift? Unquestionable, true, statements. The sort of originality and clarity of thought that eludes me.

Her statement was... 'because you're not in love with me'.

Believe me, I choked. Whether on the reply, which wouldn't seem to come, or maybe on the burger I was eating at the time I'm not sure. Then she left, and that is how it ended; not with a bang but with a Wimpey. There I go again, someone else's line – about the Wimpey I mean. Still, it's a good one. She was right of course. I didn't love her. And that's how all my relationships have ended, since Laura. And that's why I need your help, now.

No, don't laugh, I've heard all the jokes about 'Laura's first love'. That twit on the radio has a lot to answer for. Look, I'll tell you all about it, judge for yourself. My name is Hugh, it began like this....

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Have you ever seen the adverts for Navy Rum? The one with a blonde clad only in a half-unzipped wetsuit top with a murderous knife strapped to her thigh? Down at the mostly male sub-aqua club we all prayed that one day a woman of that ilk would walk in and join. A lot of women did but after a few short weeks the true nature of our sport would become apparent and they'd be gone. Then one day our luck changed. Laura joined and stayed.

For true aficionados of the sport, diving becomes a way of life. It takes several weeks, more usually months, to learn to dive safely. The more usual way is by attending weekly meetings at a local swimming pool, slowly learning and acquiring the confidence and physical skills required. But it's worth it. Exploring the wide-open spaces and depths

of the undersea world is a magical experience. It's a world characterised by the sense of peace and solitude it engenders in those who enter it. Well, that's why I dive anyway.

At the club we warmly welcome newcomers but each week, especially in the winter, we note with dismay their gradual withdrawal as enthusiasm fades. Those who are hardy enough to survive until spring are further cropped following their first 'open water experience'. Learning to dive in a swimming pool is no substitute for the real thing. Eventually the time comes to venture outside, which for us, located as we are in Berkshire, means a trip to 'Black Park'. Aptly named, Black Park contains a small lake, no more than 10 meters deep. Ideal and safe for the first open-water test, but a million miles away from the glamour of the idyllic settings depicted in the rum adverts. It is in effect a mud hole and this is where it all really began for Laura and me.

I'm really a shy sort of fellow and although I'd known Laura for the several months she had been coming to the club I'd not made any attempt to ask her out. She was a nurse at the Royal Berkshire Hospital; I was a research student at the nearby University of Reading. All but penniless I was no competition for my fellow club members, many of whom were young professionals. Architects, accountants and solicitors, all of whom clustered around Lauras beauty, like moths around a flame. Each week they waited eagerly for her arrival, all hoping that she would stay the course. During those weeks, Laura was entertained regularly by my clubmates. With one or the other she made the rounds of the local restaurants, discos, concerts and parties but steadfastly refused any inclination to favour one or another. I spent many an evening over a pint of beer listening to my friends bemoan their lack of progress with her and berating myself for my shyness.

Our visit to Black Park began on a Saturday morning; the last weekend of a wet and miserable April. By the time we arrived the rain had mustered strength and fell in large drops which were threatening to join forces and fall as sheets. Contrary to many people's expectations, diving is very much a team sport. Getting ready to dive, 'kitting up' as it is known takes some time. The equipment each diver uses has to be checked by his or her 'buddy' or diving partner. Once attired, a diver is burdened down with equipment and, further hampered by a tight wetsuit, movement on the surface becomes quite difficult. Divers thus help each other and there is no room for the selfish or the

loaner. As you might expect willing helpers clustered around Laura and so I went around the other trainees; many a little nervous and apprehensive as I knew I had been several years before, prior to my first dive.

Diving is also an immodest sport. I'm referring to the problems of undressing and donning a wetsuit in mixed company, pouring rain and with a complete absence of changing facilities. Divers are well used to stripping-off in bare car parks – often to the surprise of other sightseers and visitors – and with complete disregard to weather and a total lack of embarrassment. From the corner of my eye, I watched to see how Laura coped. Despite my fairly constant attention I still do not understand how she slipped from jeans and sweat shirt to skimpy bikini and thence wetsuit without further revelation.

Our first trip into the water did not require full equipment as there was one final test before we would allow anyone to take their first dive. Wearing a wetsuit in a swimming pool is a warm, pleasant experience. In a cold lake it is a wholly different sensation as cold water works its way between rubber and skin before it becomes trapped and then warmed by body heat. Swimming pools also have clear, clean water. The visibility in lakes and the sea seldom approaches this. I have known experienced divers swim head first into the seabed because the visibility, or 'viz', was less than a few inches. Why bother in those conditions? You may well ask, but, as I said, to the dedicated diver the sport is a way of life and the pleasures sufficient no matter what the conditions. So, to test the new divers reactions to this, our first exercise was to swim and snorkel around the lake and become acclimatized. An exercise culminating in a breath-hold surface dive to the lake bed, ten meters below.

As you can imagine this is quite a daunting prospect. Would you be prepared to hold your breath and swim down through thirty feet of cold, muddy, dark water, unable to see more than a few inches in any direction? We figured that those who could were ready for their first dive. To increase the novices confidence, we arranged that an instructor would take an aqualung and sit on the lake bed: watching each surface dive, ready to help anyone in difficulty.

You may imagine this is not a popular task. You will probably have guessed that I drew the short straw and had to sit, shivering for half an hour on the lake bed as, one after another, the novices tried the exercise. Some needed two or three attempts. Laura

took to it like a mermaid. I saw her swimming smoothly, almost effortlessly down towards me and received a cheerful smile as she tapped me on the shoulder before returning to the surface.

I'm sure it was an accident, although I did sometimes wonder later if she'd done it on purpose in an artful manoeuvre to gain my attention. As she pushed off, her fin brushed my shoulder and then, as she kicked, it whiplashed across my face taking with it my mask and mouthpiece. Ordinarily this would not have been a problem, we train to be able to swim underwater with or without a mask but unfortunately I was in mid-breath and in the sudden shock I gulped water.

After a moment I gave up trying to sort myself out and by the time I reached the surface was desperate for air and gasping and floundering like a drowning man. All in all, a classic example of the sort of simple accidents we train to avoid. Laura, being the closest to me in the water, responded as she had been trained and within moments I found myself being life-saved and towed into the shore. This was unnecessary but too enjoyable to resist. As I relaxed in her arms I pondered whether or not to fake drowning in the hope of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. As we reached the bank, however, her obvious concern and distress banished such thoughts from my mind. I calmed and reassured her that I was fine; that it hadn't been her fault and the loss of my mask didn't matter and and ... would she have dinner with me that evening? All in a rush. I'd surprised even myself and then, convinced she would say no, I looked away and fussed with my kit. But she surprised me back.

'Why, yes, I'd like that, but are you sure you're OK?' Her hand was soft on my arm. 'I tell you what, if you'd rather not go out I could fix dinner at my flat?'

I looked up at her smiling face, OK?... OK? I thought, my heart pounded. 'That would be great! I'll bring the wine.' I spluttered, not intentionally but still coughing up lake water.

'Perfect. I'll see you then. 'But excuse me now, Jimmy is taking me for a proper dive, if you're sure you are OK I'll see you later. She smiled and, perhaps by way of further apology, kissed me lightly on the cheek then hurried away to gather her kit.

'You all right Hugh?' One of the others called.

'Couldn't be better,' I replied.

It was early evening before we had completed all the post-dive chores; washing and cleaning kit back at the club house and Laura gave me her address before hurrying home to shower, change and begin preparing dinner. I watched with envy as she climbed into Jimmy's MGB for a lift home. Somehow my battered, old, ex-butchers boy push bike didn't seem adequate competition.

When I arrived at Laura's my heart sank. Not normally a selfish sort of fellow I shook hands and introduced myself with dismay to Laura's two flat-mates; both nurses, enjoying, with their respective boyfriends, a pre-dinner drink. I had assumed that it would be just Laura and me for dinner. Despite the fact that I had dressed carefully in my cleanest jeans, and even ironed my shirt, I felt shabby in their company.

Laura was busy in the kitchen and the small talk, which revolved around jobs and holidays mostly excluded me. To the non-academic, a job which involves counting beetles in flour bins – the subject of the research for my Ph.D.– is not a great thrill and tends to be a real conversation stopper. I had no experiences to compete with their tales of hiking in the foothills of the Himalayas or camel trekking in the Gobi Desert which appeared to be the two most recent holidays enjoyed (?) by the boyfriends. My hopes for the evening were in shreds minutes after my arrival. Then Laura emerged from the kitchen.

I don't know how she did it but gradually she made me feel at ease; brought me into the idle chatter and boosted my confidence. As if this was not enough the others suddenly leapt to their feet and announced they had to be off or they'd miss the table at the restaurant. We were alone at last.

The evening passed all too quickly. We talked, ate, laughed, drank and talked some more. When it was time for me to go we kissed, lightly, relaxed and in companionship more than anything else. It was strange but as I left I had none of my usual fears. Would she want to see me again? What did she think of me? Had I made a fool of myself? Instead, I knew she liked me. I knew we would see each other again and I knew the future was full of promise. And so it was that over the next few weeks we saw more and more of each other. To the despair of my clubmates. We became a couple: first, companions; then friends and then, when it was right, lovers.

How did it happen? Why did it happen? I don't know but it was right. We were as

different as chalk and cheese. Laura liked dancing, parties, discos. I liked quiet evenings at home. Our tastes in music, art, books, films and politics all clashed. The only common ground being a love of Chinese food. Often shared as a take-away with a bottle or two of wine whilst sprawled in bed; each course interrupted by bursts of frenzied then tender love-making.

Perhaps it was because we were so different and complimented rather than competed with each other that the relationship worked so well. Who knows? Hugh and Laura, Laura and Hugh ... we became inseparable, from each other and in the eyes of our friends. With the exception of Laura's parents there was not a cloud on the horizon. I can only guess why they didn't like me, they certainly never said anything outright and always but always were pleasant and, on the surface at least, were friendly whenever we met. But I knew they disapproved.

They tried to persuade her to give up diving, although by this stage Laura was as hooked as me. On sunny, summer weekends the lure of the beach and open sea was too much for either of us to ignore and we spent many exhausting days diving and exploring the Devon and Cornish coast. Camping overnight in my tiny tent to which we returned, after each evening spent in a cosy pub.

Towards the end of the year, I finally completed my research and settled down to write the thesis which, I hoped, would be acceptable for my Ph.D. I hadn't exactly neglected my work during the time I had known Laura but soon found that I could not write and see Laura as much as I had previously.

Writing a thesis, no doubt like other forms of writing, is a lonely, intensive process. Distractions are disastrous and so I had to spend more and more time alone. Laura understood and didn't seem to mind but it was with some concern that I locked myself away in my room whilst Laura went to parties; more often than not alone, but too frequently accompanied by Jimmy or one of the others. It wasn't that I didn't trust her or feared for our relationship, far from it. It was just that I was jealous. I resented our time apart. It was thus with some dismay that I learnt that during one of our all too infrequent times together we would be attending a Ball in London to celebrate her father's retirement. When I say learnt, I mean that this was one of the few occasions when Laura made it clear we had to go and that I could not find an excuse or persuade her

otherwise. And so we went; Laura looking fantastic as usual in a full-length ball-gown, me in a hired dinner jacket, starched and uncomfortable.

Despite my misgivings it was a marvellous affair. By the end of the evening, we had danced till ready to drop. Full of champagne and a magnificent meal, with a beautiful girl on my arm the world was rosy, warm and secure. There were final speeches and then photographs to commemorate the event and the passing of the previous year. A group-photo was organised for Laura's father, mother and family. They gathered, the parents and Laura plus her two sisters and then as the photographer readied himself Laura rushed over to me to pull me into the shot. I was embarrassed, tried to refuse, but could I refuse Laura? Never. Her sisters made room for me and I was self-consciously straightening my tie and surreptitiously checking my flies when Lauras father leant across and hissed: 'Sorry Hugh, not you, family only, be a good chap and move over there'. It wasn't a request and I moved away, flushed with embarrassment; conscious of the gaze from the onlookers. Laura rounded angrily on her father, but, aware also of the other guests swallowed her anger and did her best to smile for the cameras.

There was an icy silence in the car on the way home. Lauras parents were giving us a lift. Laura's mother did her best but at last their true feelings had been shown; to me, Laura and anyone watching. They disapproved of me. I was not part of the family either in spirit or if they had their way ever in fact.

Laura and I did our best to ignore it. I worked harder and harder and finally was rewarded with my PH.D. Laura took great delight in calling me Dr Hugh. It made no difference to her parents and I could see that Laura was suffering. She loved her father, she loved me, she wouldn't couldn't choose, it was hurting her badly.

Later, in the spring that followed the terrible winter of that year, a winter during which Laura and I retreated from the snows into the warmth of each other, I received an offer I could not refuse. There are a surprising number of opportunities each year for those who are young, fit, qualified as both divers and biologists and free from the restrictions of jobs and families, to participate in overseas expeditions.

An offer came my way to spend four weeks in the Caribbean, curtesy of an army sponsored expedition to survey the coral reef of an uninhabited coral island. The army

were sponsoring the expedition as an exercise in logistics for young Staff officers and to provide a rewarding break for their diving instructors who spent all year teaching recruits in the cold waters of Plymouth Sound. They needed a someone to concoct a project for the expedition members and I got the job.

Perhaps the excitement and the preparations that absorbed me, leading up to the trip, made me less attentive towards Laura. I don't know and I certainly was not aware of it at the time. The trip itself was unbelievable; marred only by the absence of Laura. It was the longest we had been apart. Unable to write or receive letters I had no contact with Laura for over a month and I longed for her, spiritually and physically.

She met me at the airport and for the rest of that day and the long night we became reacquainted. I had so much to tell, our bodies so much to catch up on, that it was early the following morning before we just lay, entwined and talked. It was only then that I detected the sadness within her.

It was simple really. She had had time to think, without distraction or interference from me, about our relationship. It was nothing to do with Jimmy or any of the others who had taken her out whilst I was away.

It wasn't the fact that she had rediscovered all the things she used to do before she met me but had stopped, without realising or at the time missing them, because I wasn't interested. Things like going to the theatre, orchestral concerts, art galleries, French films with subtitles (ugh!).

It wasn't because of her father's reaction to me and my colour. It wasn't because she didn't believe in mixed marriages. It wasn't because I'd been seeing less and less of her. It wasn't because I had no secure future, no job plans.

It wasn't any or all of these things. She wanted to end our relationship because she was no longer in love with me. She *loved* me but she realised, now, that she was not *in love* with me. She left me in the lonely, early morning hours.

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So, that's how it ended with my first love, Laura. The opportunity I'd not been able to refuse, left me with a situation with which I've been unable to cope. I can't move on. I hadn't known there was a difference between loving and being in love. I didn't and still don't understand, and I try not to think about it because the whimpering inside me is too

much to bear.

I'd loved her. She wasn't in love with me. It was over. It wasn't fair, but then life isn't. The truth hurts but couldn't be denied. My friends rallied around but are not much help and so that's how it is, now.

Any suggestions?