



Meeting Millie

by Gabriella Apicella

Read at Storytails on 28th November, 2010

As I turned the corner onto her road, I instinctively drew in a gulp of icy air, that caught sharply in my throat and stung my eyes. We hadn't seen one another for almost three months, and thoughts of seeing her again had been repeating in my head for over a week, regardless of whether I was asleep or not. When awake they would cause a jolt inside my heart as the excitement made me lose my breath for a moment. When asleep, they woke me up suddenly, like those dreams of falling do, but without the panic, just the disorientation.

Would she even remember me? I suppose of course she would once she saw me again, but I didn't want to assume. After all, there are so many people in her life, and most of them are far more significant than I can ever be. It's not even as if we've met that many times before, and I doubt I have had the impact on her that she has had on me. In fact, I know I haven't. After all, in many ways meeting Millie has made me change my whole outlook on life.

Perhaps this may sound as if I'm putting myself down or being overly modest, as I'm a successful, independent sort of woman in my own right. In my own little way I try to make a positive difference to whatever's around me. But then there's a clue in that. I try. And to have any sort of good effect at all, I try very very hard. It doesn't come naturally to me you see. My instincts are often cruel, unfair, and on occasions when I've acted on them, have even been called evil. When I have done something kind in the past, 90% of the time it's been out of guilt at what my hideous alter-ego in some hellish parallel universe would do given a lack of conscience and no fear of consequence. And yet, before kind eyes, I have managed to conceal my prejudices, and not

react to my fears, like a ropey replica of Dorian Gray; but I have always felt I'm putting on an act - making a conscious decision to not behave like a piece of shit.

It has been less like that since meeting Millie. She makes the good feel real, and not part of some roundabout of self-serving exchanges that we're all on.

After I first met her I could feel myself beginning to change for the better, and although I always knew she'd have to go away for a few months, when it came to it, I missed her more than is probably logical. I had become so quickly accustomed to the happiness she'd brought into my life, and selfishly I worried I'd forget all that I'd learned from her.

I don't think I can ever forget meeting her that first time. Her bright eyes gleaming so brightly blue pushed every thought out of my mind, and in that instant I understood that all there ever is, is each moment. How ridiculous that I'd spent so long reading about how to attain that realisation, discussing its truth or not with a highly paid therapist every week for almost three years, spending a fortune on booze, and latterly on yoga to try and understand... And yet, after seconds of meeting, there it was - in Millie's eyes!

Arrangements were made for us to see one another once a week, and those meetings quickly became the high-point of my week. Whilst teaching a patient class of young people how to write poetry, I'd feel myself becoming irrationally angry. Unprovoked retorts would spin in my head, “no that's not what I mean - what's wrong with you?”, “do you realise it's a waste of time you even coming here?”, “actually, I think it's shit!” - but then suddenly, I'd see Millie in my head, and I'd feel calm again. I would count the days until I'd be meeting her again, and before I knew it I'd be smiling to myself.

We would walk around familiar areas together, down streets that may seem unremarkable, but where I began to notice more... The pungency of the roses planted near the local leisure centre, uneven cobblestones just before the traffic lights that have been walked upon for hundreds of years, hanging branches of neighbours' trees that mess up your hair unless you duck right down low... It was as if I'd only been half-alive before - my body had been being dragged around from here to there for the past 30 years, but where had my mind been all of this time, and what had I missed?

By the time I reached her flat, I felt almost giddy, and not just because I had run up the stairwell of her building. When the door opened and I saw Millie, it was all I could do to not let out a squeal. Just launching myself upon her would have been ridiculous I know, especially after 3 whole months with no contact at all - I'm sure she'd have been startled silly, so I quietly said hello, and to my relief, she smiled.

I couldn't say precisely how long I spent with her that day. In the way that only the loveliest of times seem to exist, it felt like we were in a day that was outside of the rules of everything else - with no emails, no phonecalls, and no complications. Time before and after simply fell away.

Millie did look a little different, as I'd sort of expected. Her hair I noticed more than anything else was styled now, brushed tidily to the side, and a curl that wasn't there before tickled her earlobe. But in herself she was the same as I'd remembered. She simply radiated joy, and after less than five minutes I could feel myself smiling wider and more sincerely than I have in any other person's company before. She giggled as I talked utter nonsense to her, and I listened in envy as I heard about her travels to the other side of the world to meet with people she'd never even spoken to. Naturally they all fell in love with her wherever she went, and a smug relief came over me, glad that I was no longer in their position. Then seconds later, I banished that selfish thought, and felt a flush of melancholy that those same people would not be able to

spend the time with her that I can. Looking once more into her shining eyes before leaving that day I felt so very lucky.

Now that she's back I'm able to plan my meetings with her fairly regularly, and each time, I come away with my world strangely re-focused after spending just a couple of hours with Millie.

As she watches the world around her with eyes so wide they seem to soak in the sky, and pays such close attention to every sensation around her, I watch her and learn that this is what it is to be alive. To be open and honest and to experience each moment with your whole being. I swear that even if you could only see her toes you would be able to tell when she's laughing.

I've pondered determinedly on how she can be this way - so completely present in a way that masters of meditation tell us takes decades of study and practice to achieve. But Millie hasn't had to learn any of it. She was born with it. As we all were. You see, she hasn't learned to be angry, or cynical. She hasn't learned to manipulate or to deceive, and she hasn't learned to resent or blame. At only 9 months old, Millie Anne Reading has taught me that life only need be as complicated as you make it, and all a life is after all, is a series of moments to be lived.