

Rachel Crowther has written this sparkling short story especially for the "Friend".

Lunch At Pauline's



BIG NAME AUTHOR

FIVE MINUTES WITH RACHEL CROWTHER

Q "The Things You Do For Love" isn't your first novel, is it?

A "The Partridge And The Pelican" was published by Hookline in 2011, after winning a competition judged by book groups. It's about two girls who find a baby abandoned in a phone box.

Q You had a career in medicine before becoming a writer. Have you always written as well?

A Yes, ever since I was tiny. My medical job (in Public Health) ended up involving lots of writing, but I'd dabbled in fiction for years before an Arvon course set me on the way.

Q Do you have a notepad in every pocket and handbag?

A I actually write most of my notes on my iPhone, then e-mail them to myself. But I also scribble thoughts and ideas down on concert programmes, bus tickets, receipts – anything I have to hand!

Q Are you working on book three, and how many more novel ideas do you have stored in your writing file?

A The next novel is coming out later this year – it's called "Every Secret Thing" and it's about a group of students who sing in a choir. I'm working on two more at the moment, but there are dozens waiting in the wings...

It had been a long time since the three friends had been together . . .

IT wasn't a long drive, only a couple of hours, but when Marjorie suggested breaking the journey, Tricia didn't object. They were both glad to spin things out a bit, she thought, although neither of them said so. They weren't sure what to expect when they got there, and they weren't sure how to admit it to each other, either.

There was a Welcome Break near Junction 14, and Tricia felt her spirits lift as she pulled off the motorway. This felt more like an outing now, a pleasure trip. They had time for a cappuccino; Pauline wasn't expecting them until 12.

She swung into the car park, looking for a space, but it was fuller than she'd expected. And that's when they saw the lorry. It must have broken down, because it was parked right across the cars-only section, blocking at least six spaces.

The slogan down its side looked enormous this close up.

Watercress Makes A Meal.

Tricia knew Marjorie was going to comment on it even before she opened her mouth. She saw her friend's eyebrows going up, the quiver at the corner of her mouth that made amusement and disapproval look exactly the same.

"Funny thing to pick," she said. "I mean, you could say eggs make a meal, or chicken; but watercress?"

"That's what they're carrying in there," Tricia pointed out. "They haven't got eggs or chicken."

"Obviously," Marjorie said. "I realise that."

"Perhaps they mean that it makes a meal in the same way as making your day. You know, like a watercress garnish? The final touch."

"Pauline used to make watercress soup," Marjorie said as the car-door lock clicked behind them. "Do you remember? Bitter, I always thought, unless you added a lot of cream."

Neither of them had seen Pauline for a couple of years, but they went back a long way, the three of them. They'd been at secretarial college together years ago – in the last century, Pauline used to say

with a wink.

But now that the last century was almost two decades old the joke didn't work so well.

Pauline had got a job in London, had moved on and up, while Marjorie and Tricia stayed in Colchester. But they stayed in touch and saw each other from time to time.

Pauline would come home every Christmas, often engaged but never quite married, with a different shade of lipstick and a new coat.

* * * *

"How did she sound?" Tricia asked, when they were underway again.

She wasn't sure why Pauline had phoned Marjorie and not her. Maybe it was because Marjorie worked in a doctors' surgery, she thought now. Maybe there had been some medical details she'd wanted to discuss.

"Just the same as usual," Marjorie said. "You know Pauline."

"Is she having treatment at the moment, or . . .?"

"She didn't say. I didn't like to ask."

It had started to rain and Tricia turned on the windscreen wipers, which squeaked a little in mid-sweep. Squeak – pause – squeak – pause – squeak. There wasn't enough rain to silence them, but too much to do without them.

"I've got some mints in my bag," she said, after a few minutes. "Do you fancy digging them out?"

Tricia's bag had several pockets to keep things separate – purse, keys, glasses – but even so Marjorie had to scrabble around.

Tricia could see her inspecting the contents, wondering whether to comment then deciding not to. But she did lift Tricia's mini-umbrella half out of the bag with a little smile to show she'd noticed it.

Tricia had always collected things with her name printed on them, ever since her auntie Jill gave her a set of personalised pencils when she was six.

It was partly because she had a thing about the way her name was spelled.

People writing her name as Trisha was one of Tricia's pet hates.

"It's C-I, not S-H," she'd say. "It's short for Patricia."

"Here you are," Marjorie said, holding out a mint. "Shall I keep them out?"

Tricia had just been thinking about her name, as it happened, by a roundabout route.

First, she'd been thinking that they'd



hardly seen Pauline since this new man – her partner, she called him – had come on the scene.

And then she'd thought about the boyfriend she'd had five or six years ago (hardly a boy – he'd been forty-nine and so had she) who had called her Patty, and how she hadn't minded, although she'd never let anyone else call her anything but Tricia.

She had thought Patty sounded like some smiling tennis-player type, and she'd quite liked that. It went with the new dresses she had bought, the highlights in her hair. Even Pauline had approved of him.

Tricia had tried calling him Eddie in return, but he'd stuck to Edward. He hadn't stuck to Tricia, or Patty, for long, though.

She hadn't been all that surprised, but she had been sorry. For a while she'd thought he might be for keeps, but it seemed she hadn't cut the mustard in one way or another.

She had never been quite sure in which way, whether it was her clothes, her opinions or maybe her friends, but clearly she was missing something.

Marjorie glanced across at her then and Tricia realised she'd been sucking her mint noisily, the way she did sometimes when her mind was occupied.

"You could make a quiche with watercress," Marjorie said.

Tricia nodded.

"Or an omelette," Marjorie said. "That might be nice."

* * * *

The last time they'd been to Pauline's house she had just planted a new hedge

out the front – a series of forlorn-looking bushes it had been, back then.

They'd had a growth spurt since: you could hardly see the house from the road any more.

"Hedge has grown," Marjorie observed as they turned in through the gate.

Pauline, on the other hand, was a bit smaller in every dimension than they remembered, though otherwise much the same.

"Hello!" She threw her arms wide. Her movements all had exclamation marks, as well as the things she said.

"Welcome!" She was wearing lots of drapery garments in different shades of purple. Pauline was keen on colours: she had theories about it, what you should wear in different moods and so on.

As she hugged Pauline, trying not to notice the boniness of her, Tricia wondered what purple meant. Regal, she'd always thought. That could fit.

"Before you come in, I must show you my roses," Pauline said. "Can you bear it?"

They followed her round the side of the house – not a cottagey sort of house, although it was in the country, but a neat, boxy one with a fair bit of garden spread around it.

September wasn't the best time for gardens, but Pauline's didn't have the neglected look they often got at this time of year. The beds had all been tidied ready for the winter.

"Ted's keen on gardening," Pauline said by way of explanation. "He put the roses in, but I chose them. White and pink."

They'd expected bushes in bloom, late-flowering varieties still going strong despite the chill at night. But Pauline's roses were newly planted, stumpy-looking things stuck into the bare ground.

There were dozens of them, a whole flower-bed dotted with cropped stems.

Tricia and Marjorie stared, baffled.

"Lovely," Marjorie said eventually.

"What a lot of work." "Of course, I may not be here to see them next spring," Pauline said, as though that was a small inconvenience. "But you have to keep looking forward, don't you?"

The house was less tidy, strewn with throws and cushions that gave an impression of cosiness but also, perhaps, of housing an invalid.

"We've just redone the kitchen," Pauline told them. "You didn't look out on the garden before. I couldn't understand why anyone would arrange it like that."

"Much better like this," Tricia agreed, although she couldn't remember the previous layout. The work surface was marble, a pinky-grey marble that looked expensive, and the cupboards were bleached wood, slightly shiny.

"I've made soup," Pauline said, lifting the lid off a saucepan. "Watercress."

"How funny!" Marjorie exclaimed. "We were just talking about your watercress soup in the car."

Pauline looked pleased.

"I remembered you liked it," she said, although they all knew that was a lie. "You don't need much, do you,

in the middle of the day?" There was cream to add to the soup, but it was crème fraîche, and the flavour was still a little bitter, in Tricia's view.

"I love the colour, don't you?" Pauline said. "So restful, that dark green."

She didn't eat much of it, though. Tricia felt self-conscious, swallowing spoonful after spoonful while Pauline just stirred hers, swirling the crème fraîche into patterns.

Tricia wished they'd had something to eat at the service station so she wouldn't feel so hungry now.

After a bit, Pauline let her spoon drop altogether.

"I wanted to say," she said, "that there will be a little something coming your way, both of you. In my will, I mean."

"Oh, Pauline!" Marjorie began, and Pauline held up her hand with its thin, purple-clad wrist.

"It's not much," she told them. "I haven't got much to leave, but it's an opportunity to show people they matter to you, isn't it?"

"But don't you –?" Tricia began.

"Ted doesn't need it all," Pauline explained. "He's quite comfortably off already. If you can't leave a little token to your oldest friends . . ."

Tricia could feel her eyes filling with tears, and she knew Pauline would notice, and that it was the reaction she'd hoped for.

Pauline was smiling. She was a good friend, Tricia thought. You couldn't deny her that.

But beneath the generosity there was a glimmer of satisfaction in Pauline's face. Tricia hated herself for seeing it, but she couldn't help it: that was part of Pauline, too, and you had to go on seeing people for what they were, didn't you?

Pauline had always thought of herself as a little bit above Tricia and Marjorie, and now she was pleased she had something to leave them, pleased that she could be generous.

Pleased about having a partner with means of his own, too. You couldn't begrudge her that, but you couldn't help noticing, either.

Conversation didn't flow very easily for the rest of the meal. Marjorie started talking about the trip to Spain she'd planned for next summer, how she'd always wanted to go to Barcelona and there was this tour company she'd found that promised a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Then she stopped suddenly.

Tricia asked if Ted was working today, whether he worked every day or if he could be a bit flexible if, you know . . . And then she stopped, too.

Pauline told a witty story about the nurses in the outpatients' department, one very fat and the other very thin, that skipped around the reason she'd been at the hospital.

She offered more soup, but none of them took any.

* * * *

They were having coffee in the living-room when they heard the front door open. Tricia noticed Pauline's face, the way she looked pleased and surprised and anxious all at the same time.

It was the first time Pauline had given anything away since they arrived, she thought. The first unguarded expression, between the roses and the soup and the will.

This time Tricia felt really sorry for Pauline. She had a sudden flash of what it might be like, in her situation.

"Ted?" Pauline called. "I wasn't expecting –"

And there he was, in the doorway.

Ted, or Edward. Or Eddie. A little older, but otherwise the same as Tricia remembered him, wearing a tweed jacket over a pair of jeans.

She felt her face fill with revelation.

"A cancelled appointment," he said. "I thought I'd pop back."

His eyes had already circled the room. Tricia knew he'd seen her. He stayed in the doorway, jingling his car keys in his pocket as though he might have to go out again any minute.

"This looks a jolly party," he said at the same time Pauline spoke.

"This is Marjorie, and I think you know Tricia."

"Yes," Tricia said. "Hello."

Men's faces, in Tricia's experience, weren't good at showing what they were feeling unless it was something straightforward.

Anger and amusement they could do, and "I know I'm right". But not "This is awkward, bear with me".

Pauline's face, on the other hand, told her everything she needed to know. Catching her smile, Ted moved across the room towards her like a schoolboy drawn to a plate of buns.

Oh, yes, Pauline cut the mustard, Tricia could see that. Regal purple and exclamation marks. Even at this stage.

"There's soup on the stove, Ted," Pauline said, "if you haven't eaten."

* * * *

They left early, before the rush hour. Pauline was tired by the end, sinking down among the cushions until she looked like a length of purple silk draped over the arm of the sofa.

"Come again," she said, as they made their goodbyes.

"Of course we will, Pauline," Marjorie said.

Tricia didn't speak as they retraced their route through the village. She expected Marjorie would, in the end.

"Was that –?" Marjorie said as they turned left by the church.

"Yes."

Marjorie hesitated.

"When did Pauline –?"

"Water under the bridge," Tricia said. "I don't blame her."

"You can't help but wonder," Marjorie commented a bit later, "whether it would be better if she'd married him. More secure, in the circumstances. I mean, you can't help but wonder whether she wouldn't have liked to be married."

Tricia knew she wouldn't have said it if the circumstances had been different. Marjorie approved of marriage, but not of malice. A gesture of solidarity, she thought.

"There's the will," she said, and she allowed herself a little smile. "He's got the will to think of, hasn't he?"

The traffic was clear on the motorway and in no time they were approaching Junction 14.

They hadn't talked about

stopping, but Tricia turned up the slip road again and pulled into the car park. The watercress lorry was still there, but neither of them mentioned it this time.

Tricia headed straight for the McDonalds counter. She hesitated for a moment, more for effect than reflection, then ordered two Happy Meals.

"Burger, Marjorie?" she asked. "Or would you rather chicken nuggets?"

"Cheeseburger for me, please," Marjorie said, "with full garnish."

The boy who served them didn't look in the least bit surprised. Perhaps other people ate Happy Meals every day, Tricia thought.

"We don't need the toys," she said as he reached for the little boxes.

"Oh, go on, why not?"

Marjorie cried, and they both laughed.

Marjorie delved in her bag as he rang it up on the till, but Tricia put a hand on her arm.

"Let me," she said, taking out her purse.

Pale blue leather, with *Tricia* embossed on the flap. A birthday present to herself, last year. What did pale blue mean, she wondered. Blue-sky thinking?

Back in the car, Marjorie stuck a chip in her mouth as if it were a cigarette, just as she used to 30 years ago.

"I hadn't realised how hungry I was," she said.

Tricia nodded. She'd never really liked fast food, but the Happy Meal seemed, just then, like the best thing she'd tasted for years.

The End.

"The Things You Do For Love" by Rachel Crowther is out now in Zaffre paperback, £7.99.

