

# If You Don't Know Me

by Sally Blackmore

And then I see the jumper. On the floor behind the bedroom door. It lies like a rag, inside-out arms akimbo, body a twisted roll. Through the open door drift strains of Simply Red, one of our favourite songs . The words,

“If you don't know me by now, you will, never, never...,”

collide and fall at my feet. Quietly I close the door and my life snaps into focus. I am empty. My thoughts roam backwards, through the weekend to Friday afternoon...

“Come on Jack, we have been looking forward to this weekend for ages. It won't be the same without you.”

“I can't Suze, I have to get the piece ready for Monday - it has to be perfect. The recording has been brought forward.”

“My husband the perfectionist. You know that you'll be tweaking it for days before the session guys get it 'right' enough for you!”

“It's the oboe. I'm not happy with the oboe. .

“Well Stu won't forgive you. Jules says he has talked of this for weeks. The reunion has been put off so often...

“... Reunion! Hardly a reunion with the triplets in tow and tonight we are only babysitting. I recall no babies at Exeter . . . not that everything is that clear. . . the alcoholic haze is hard to penetrate. God knows how any of us managed to graduate.”

He folds me into his arms. Jack has always been a great hugger.

“I promise that once this is finished I’ll whisk you to London to stay with Stu and Jules for as long as you want. I just can’t make this weekend.”

I relent. I always do. Jack’s arms around me send all reason to the winds. They have from the day he saved me from tripping down the stairs at the halls of residence.

I go alone to stay with our oldest and closest friends in the tiny fisherman’s cottage they are renting just a few miles further along the coast.

The triplets — all talking (usually at the same time) and walking now (usually in different directions) are adorable. Stu looks exhausted, his work as an investment banker is secure, but he is finding it tough being cast as a demon by all and sundry,

“Not to mention,” he says wryly, “investors are hard to find and even harder to please these days.”

Jules ruffles his hair,

“But you’re a genius — remember? The boy wonder - well not so boyish now, but still a wonder. Most men would have been satisfied with one child in their own image — you made sure we had three!”

Her smile includes me in their chaotic family circle before she rushes off to rescue Dominic, the bravest triplet from a tumble down the step to the tiny kitchen.

Dominic, the adventurer, Damon, the thinker and Duncan, the clown — it took until eight that Friday evening to get them all asleep and for Jules and Stu to leave for their anniversary meal. I watch them as they walk along the quayside and I don’t feel the slightest twinge of foreboding. Sure Jules has easily produced the family I crave, but as the doctor had said only days ago, babies don’t appear by magic. Jack and I, as she had quaintly phrased it, ‘needed to find a little more together time’.

As I dial home to say goodnight to Jack, I vow not to mention how beautiful the boys are, but concentrate the conversation on his music,

“Have you knocked the oboes into shape?”

“Not quite but they are relenting. By Monday I should have them tamed.”

“Well, you have two days of uninterrupted composing — just remember to eat.”

“And you revel in sandy sandwiches, sticky fingers and exaggerated tales of the good old days. Give my love to everyone and pass on my promise to visit as soon as this recording is finished. Love you Suze.”

And he is gone.

Saturday is indeed a mess of sand, jam and ice cream, but the boys are a delight and catching up with Jules and Stu is like breathing pure oxygen. We laugh, tease and scold each other as much as we do the triplets. We end the day trundling the beach paraphernalia and each carrying a sleep heavy child as we trail back to the cottage. At one point Stu is lagging far behind. He is studying a chalked message on a board beside an empty mooring.

“I think I’ll go,” he says as he catches us up. “midnight fishing — I fancy that.” Jules and I groan. I’m sure all she fancies is fish and chips, a long soak and an early night.

“You must be joking. You’ve never fished .“

“Exactly.”

“But you can’t even see the boat — it may be a derelict tub.”

“Of course it isn’t,” he looks to me for support, “tell her Suze. Tell her I’m a big boy now and I want to go fishing. You’re the local — explain that even fishermen have heard of Health and Safety. I’ll be Ok.”

“For the price of a fish supper and enough hot water to bathe three midgets and two women, I’ll tell her anything.”

“Done.”

Jules gives in gracefully, exacts a promise to take an extra jumper against the late night chill, and tells him that if he thinks he can sleep Sunday away to get over it he has another trick coming. He promises to be awake for brunch next day, offering to have the boys for the afternoon.

I imagine he crept out at around ten. I certainly didn’t hear him go, or come back. Jules is in the kitchen when I creep down for an early morning cup of and is rummaging in his bag.

“All the males are still snoring. Yesterday at the beach seems to have tired the three Ds beyond my wildest dreams. I can’t remember the last time they slept beyond seven in the morning.”

She hauls out a pair of wet socks and a tee shirt that smells disgusting.

“That smells of something worse than fish.. .but I’ll not enquire further,” she smiles indulgently, “the answer to that kind of question is always far worse and way beyond anything I want to know.”

I think how perfect she will be as the mother of three small, curious and, on yesterday’s form, active small boys.

“I will enquire as to the whereabouts of his jumper though — if he left it on the boat we may be able to get it back before they take another troupe out to sea.”

True to his word, Stu emerges at midday, has no idea what might have become of his jumper, treats us to unbelievable tales of bravado on the high seas, then rounds up the boys, leaving Jules and me free to wander the lanes of tiny shops selling nothing we want, often in the kind of silence only true friendship can afford.

We meet up for cream tea and long goodbyes. I unwind the boys from my legs, remind them all that we will visit very soon, then leave with much waving and blowing of kisses.

Simply Red and a table set with candles greets me as I walk into the open space that is the ground floor of our old house. Jack walks from the kitchen. He looks relaxed and freshly laundered. His damp hair sticks up slightly where he has brushed his fingers through his black curls. I smell shampoo - my lemon shampoo. He tucks me close into a wonderful hug. I wonder if the oboes have finally surrendered and whether tonight we might, for the first time in a long time, manage some of the 'together-time' the doctor ordered.

"Dinner in ten," he holds up ten fingers. I kiss each one and make for the stairs.

"I'll shower in record time then."

The track on the CD changes from 'Love Plays its Tune' to the haunting melody that introduces 'our tune'. I sing along in the bathroom,

"... I know the difference between right and wrong..."

In record time I wrap myself in a towel and head into the bedroom,

"... girl trust in me as I trust in you..." I murmur as I reach for my robe which hangs on the bedroom door. And I see the jumper. Stu's jumper. The one he took fishing. Carefully I lift it and hold it to my face. I can smell Stu, baby powder, a touch of Jules' perfume. In harsh focus I understand. I love Jack beyond reason. He loves me. We are a perfect couple. The best of friends. Sure we can spend our lives together. But passion has never been our strong point. Not that it matters. Didn't matter. I hear Jack's step on the stair. Simply Red have moved on. They are telling me that 'it's only love doing its thing baby', In the next few seconds, I have to decide what I will do with the rest of my marriage.