

Walking the Tightrope by S J Wilson

As we sit down to eat, I think of last year. Three hundred and sixty-five days ago. We'd sat at the same table, in the same room, the candle between us probably bought at the same time as the one that burns there now. We sipped from the same glasses, eaten our dinner off the same plates, and Ted had probably said the same thing then as he'd just said to me now. 'Happy anniversary, darling. Dinner in our own home. This is better than any restaurant, don't you think?'

Last year I'd have agreed with him. I probably laughed, like I just did, and said, 'Why do we need to go to a restaurant, when it can come to us?' I'd have glanced appreciatively at our friend Chris, who was cooking the meal at our stove using ingredients he'd brought from the restaurant he runs in town, or I'd have smiled at his wife, Lucy, who was about to dish it out. Just like they are now.

It was true, then. A year ago I didn't mind. Not really. In 22 years together I could count the number of times we'd eaten in a restaurant on one hand, and we haven't at all since Ted had a reaction in the Italian on the high street almost a decade ago. That's another evening I won't forget. We were discussing children, and I remember I'd said it was time we thought about it again. He said he didn't want to. I remember I was getting quite upset as our starters arrived - it was clear that he was becoming more entrenched in his belief that there was no room for children in our life, just as I was starting to feel more certain there was - but then, without warning, he pitched forward and began to clutch his throat. It was terrifying, much worse than the other attacks. 'The salad,' he was saying, gasping. 'The salad!' Later we realised they must have used nut oil in the dressing, but at the time I didn't know what he was talking about.

I shouted, cried out, then recovered enough to say 'Your EpiPen!' He began to scrabble for the bag he takes with him everywhere, getting as far as taking the case out before dropping it as another diner began to smack him smartly on the back. 'He's not choking!' I said, grabbing the pen as it was about to roll to the floor, sending the wine I'd barely begun to drink flying across the table, 'It's an allergy.' I unsheathed the device and flipped the blue cap, then stabbed it in his thigh, just as we'd practiced so many times. 'Ted?' I said as I massaged his leg. 'Ted?' And then, 'Will somebody please call an ambulance?'

He was fine that night, eventually. He recovered, and I was relieved. But now, as Lucy ladles soup into the bowls my mother gave us for our wedding present, as Ted begins to tell me all about his day walking the tightrope (which is a ridiculous image, he works in the back office of a bank), I find myself wondering what might have happened if he hadn't.

Recovered, that is. If the swelling in his airway hadn't gone down. If he'd fallen to the floor, clawing at his throat, if he'd turned blue, choked to death. I'd have been devastated, yes, but it was ten years ago. I'd have been over it by now. Even back then I was beginning to wonder what it might be like to live a life of my own, to go home, from a job, to a man who didn't think he knew best about everything, every decision, every purchase, every tiny little

detail. By now I might be sitting, in a restaurant no less, opposite someone else. We might even be married. We might even - and this is a thought that jolts me - have children. I look up at him. At Ted, the man I married, the man who thought I meant it literally when I said I'd give my life to him. He's stopped talking, and I haven't been listening. He's smiling. Chris and Lucy are smiling, too; maybe he's said something funny. One of his jokes, most of which relate to cooking and are at my expense. Or perhaps he's commented on my clothes, or the perfume I'm wearing.

The funny thing is, this year I don't care. Not after the email I received, not after what I saw last week.

'Do you regret it?' I say as he begins to eat. 'Our marriage?'

It's as if someone has pressed pause. His soup spoon hovers above the bowl, though of course he doesn't spill a drop. His eyes narrow, in anger, or disappointment. It takes him a moment to find his voice, and when he does he laughs. 'Darling?'

'No. I'm serious. Do you regret marrying me?'

He glances at Chris and Lucy; dimly I'm aware that they've retreated, one to the oven, the other to the dishwasher. 'Sally,' he says, quietly, and quickly, with a downward inflection so that the word is an admonishment.

This time, though, I refuse to be reprimanded. I put down my spoon. I speak loudly. 'This is enough for you, is it?'

I look around the room, as if it's the sum total of our marriage, which in many ways it is.

'It's just, you always told me it was. This home. Me and you. You always said you'd be a fool to want more, and I thought you meant it.'

'Now, listen,' he begins, but I'm still speaking, shaking my head as I do. 'How could I have been so... stupid? Why did I let you convince me it was enough for me, too? I wanted children. You always knew that. But they weren't sensible, you said. The desire would pass.'

He stands up. 'Sally. Let's have a bit of decorum, now. Chris and Lucy are here, and -'

I speak over him. 'Good. I want them to hear this.' I haven't planned any of this, yet somehow it feels as if I have. It's like the words, the sentences, have been there for year, sitting within me, fully-formed. 'It never did, you know. The desire? Even now, now it's too late, I still wish...' I feel myself begin to get upset. I swallow the rest of the sentence down. I won't get upset, not this time. 'I still wish I hadn't listened.'

I look up at him. Tell me you're sorry, I want to say. Tell me you wish we'd talked more, gone on more holidays, had a life in which I was more than your one-woman support team. Tell me you wish we'd stripped off, run into the sea naked, made love that night our car broke down on the Clee Hills, while we waited for the AA. Tell me it's not too late.

But he doesn't. He begins to shake his head. Disappointed. In me. Save yourself, I want to say. You still can. And it's true. All he'd have to do is tell me he wishes he hadn't met her. That woman, Natasha. He could tell me he regrets asking her for a drink, or a coffee, or whatever it was they did before the first time they screwed in his office. Or the car, or wherever it was. He could tell me he regrets taking her for a meal last week, to the Italian on

the High Street, where Lucy saw him before emailing me to find out whether we'd still need them tonight now he was eating in restaurants again. So many things he could say.

But he doesn't. Instead he just smiles. He looks over at Chris and Lucy, and then begins to laugh. 'I think someone's had a bit too much to drink!' he says, and it's in that moment I realise two things. One, I hate him. Two, I'm serious. I'm going to do it. Later, when Chris and Lucy have packed up and gone home, to talk about us, no doubt. I'll do it. I'll eat the bag of peanuts I have in my bag, and then, once we're in bed, I'll kiss him. Properly. As if we're about to make love for the first time in almost two years.

And it'll be enough. I know it will. 'My pen!' he'll say, but he'll find it isn't in his bag, and the spare isn't in the bedside table. He'll turn to me for help, and I'll ignore him. As he gasps and claws, and turns blue, I'll ignore him. Just as he's ignored me.

He'll know, I suppose. He'll know what I've done. But by then it'll be too late.

'You're right,' I say, now. I put my glass down. I turn to Chris and Lucy and apologise, and then to Ted. 'I'm so sorry.' I smile. 'You're right. I've had far too much to drink. Far too much. Sit down. Please. Let's enjoy our dinner.'

1. Who cooked the meal?
2. Why did Ted & Sally have their anniversary meal at home?
3. How many years have Tom & Sally been together?
4. Why did Lucy send an email to Sally?
5. How does Sally imagine her revenge?