

# 1<sup>ST</sup> PLACE

## LYDIA AND WICKHAM

By Katie Chalk, Barton Peveril College

Icy needles prick my skin. Droplets leap from puddles, latching onto my already sodden tights. Beads fly from the tip of my ponytail and trickle beneath my collar. Water crawls down my back causing my shirt to cling. I don't own an umbrella. Maybe it's a good thing, I couldn't be bothered to haul it around anyway. With the mass of books and folders lumbered on us for GCSE revision, an umbrella would split my already worn-out shoulder bag at its frayed seams. Cracks have already formed in its cheap leather, revealing capillaries of white elastic like the scales of a lizard. I whip round a familiar corner and am immersed ankle-deep in what seems like a small river flowing down the centre of my street. My feet cause small explosions at every impact with the ground.

I fly through my front door and breathe a relieved sigh. Just as I close my eyes, I hear a familiar, weak voice.

"Lydia, is that you?" I roll my eyes and peel myself off of the door leaving behind a wet print.

"Of course it's me, mum! Who else could it be?" I yell back down the hall. She's greeted me this way for as long as I can remember - bizarre, considering it's just us in the house and has been for a long time. But that's just what she's like.

Gathering my saturated belongings, I traipse to the end of the little hallway and poke my head into the kitchen and see my mother in her usual state. Thin hair the colour of cigarette ash hangs loose down her back. Chalky flesh sags beneath a crimson flush staining her hollow cheeks. Shadows hang beneath her eyes and over her head. She's spent the last five years pursuing a long-forgotten peace at the bottom of bottles and in borrowed prescription pills. Her dazed expression, nevertheless, always brightens slightly at the sight of me, as if seeing me was the highlight of her day. It probably was. I always found her supporting herself with her spindly forearms printed into the kitchen counter; a half-empty glass of wine in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. She manages a weak smile.

"How was your day?"

"Boring," I shrug.

And that was the end of that. I realise she tries, but I know she couldn't care less about how my boring, teenage life's going. Not with all she's struggling with.

As quickly as I arrived, I scuttle back out and up the stairs, taking them two at a time, snatching my phone from my blazer pocket as I go. I flop down on my bed, a stab of excitement piercing my abdomen. I open my phone and George Wickham's face flashes across the screen. I feel a slight flutter in my chest as always. Charcoal cords of tousled hair graze his coarse brows; slicing the smooth skin of his forehead. The blade of his jaw cuts across his neck whilst I drown in the oily, ceaseless pools of his eyes. They enchant me. I feel their pull through the screen as if they could engulf me and I could take refuge there forever... if only. The caption reads: "You back yet?"

I frantically reply with what I hope is an attractive picture of myself. I arrange my wet hair so it falls over one shoulder, curling with moisture. I draft a caption: "Yeah just back, what you up to?"

Now came the dilemma over kisses. Of course I didn't want to appear *too* forward so I decided three would be too many; however I also didn't want to appear blunt. I mean, he never sent me *any*... but that was just the way he was; shy, reserved, cautious, *perfect*.

Of course I'd never actually met him. He's my older sister's boyfriend's younger sister's ex who'd contacted me on Facebook. Turns out he and Lizzie had been friends before he and Georgia broke up and he wanted to see how she was getting on. He couldn't contact her directly without facing the wrath of my sister's boyfriend, Will, who'd accused him of doing awful things to Georgia and had threatened to press charges. All false of course. Not that my sister knows we're talking as she's bound to disapprove because of the age difference. Not that I care though, George cares about me, which is more than she's ever done. My phone beeps: "What are you doing tomorrow night?"

My heart drops then begins to thunder against my rib cage like a wild animal. Thoughts begin to catapult off the insides of my skull. I should be ecstatic but I can't suppress the aching feeling that begins to throb ominously in the pit of my stomach. My fingers itch to text Kitty or Charlotte or *someone* for advice but none of them know. He's always been a secret. George insists it's "for the best". He doesn't want anyone, not even my friends, interfering. "They won't understand," he says.

"Nothing," I type back with shaking fingers.

"Meet me in Houndwell Park at 9pm."

I don't hesitate. "Okay."

And then he was gone. Just like that.

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The clock's hands crawl round its face lazily. It grins at me mockingly. My attempts to concentrate had failed miserably, numbers swirling into a whirlwind on the page.

The teacher's words blend into a low, constant murmur as if I am submerged in water.

A sharp, piercing noise slashes through my daze. Disorientated, I realise it's the school bell dismissing me. I bolt through the classroom door.

5 hours

I am forced to slow my pace as I pass the pandemonium of buses and cars battling to enter the narrow school gate but when I'm out on the road, I resume a sprint, feeling a peculiar prickling ecstasy as I upset stagnant, murky puddles from the day before. Time, which dragged before, now flies. I let out a squeal as I burst through my front door and glance at the clock.

4 hours

A slow dribble of red blood oozes down my leg as I scramble wildly for a plaster. My quivering hands had caused me to nick the sensitive skin on the back of my lower thigh whilst shaving. My mother enters the kitchen, still in the threadbare pink dressing gown she wore this morning. A quizzical look flickers across her features.

"Going somewhere tonight?" she enquires, quirking an eyebrow.

"A friend's house," I shrug, avoiding her stare.

"Hmmm," is all she says as she ambles to the fridge.

"I'll be back at 12," I add hastily, still concentrating on my injured leg.

She doesn't seem to hear me. She's just started gulping down a glass of god-knows-what and seems pretty consumed. I quietly back out of the kitchen. Just when I'm through the door I hear a strangled voice call after me.

"Lydia, do you have to go tonight? I was hoping you'd stay with me. It's... It's been a bad day," she mumbles.

A low, flickering flame of anger ignites in the pit of my stomach. I slowly reverse back into the kitchen and stare at her, attempting to suppress my burning desire to scream.

"Do you think I'm your babysitter?" I ask shakily.

"Well no, Lydia, I..."

"Then why the HELL am I always looking after *you*?" I force out through gritted teeth.

"You're not!" she cries defensively.

"You don't see it, do you?" I'm shouting now. "None of my friends have to do half the *crap* I have to. How the HELL do you expect me to live my life?!" I pause, breathing hard. "Look, I know you're struggling but you can *not* keep relying on me anymore. I'm DONE."

I dart out the kitchen door, slamming it shut behind me.

2 hours

I stare, horrified at my reflection. Red blotches and white streaks stain my face from the tears. My throat aches from trying to stifle my agonised sobs into my pillow. I doubt my mother would have heard me anyway. I hurriedly cover my face in makeup, aggressively brush out my matted hair and pull on a jacket. I discreetly slip down the stairs, out through the front door and into the night.

30 minutes

A blustering wind roars past my ears, whipping my hair and scraping my skin. Warm breath escapes my chapped lips, forming white clouds that are dragged with the bitter breeze before dissolving. Cold claws at my skin while ice creeps through my veins. Inky blackness is severed by severe strips of yellow cast by street lamps. Any stars are suffocated by a thick block of charcoal cloud.

Southampton is quiet tonight except for the distant groans of car engines and the quiet cries of sirens. Puddles are spilled black tar with little lights trapped within, like a city snow globe; they wink at me sinisterly. I walk briskly, attempting to shake off the prickling sensation crawling over my skin and raising the hairs on the back of my neck. Every sound or shadow causes my stomach to lurch alarmingly before returning to a ball of tight anticipation. A constant, unbearable tingling courses through my muscles, clotting at sensitive points below my ears, behind my navel and on the insides of my wrists. They feel exposed and vulnerable in the bitter air.

I glance at my phone.

10 minutes

I sit on the lonely bench in the abandoned park, restlessly picking at the skin around my fingernails. My phone shakes on my quivering knee.

3 minutes

My breathing quickens as my head spins with frantic thoughts. What if he doesn't like me? What if I blow it and say something stupid? What if this is all a mistake? "I need to snap out of this," I think as I grasp my head in my hands.

2 minutes

My hands come away damp with the sheen of sweat that has broken out on my forehead. I suddenly realise I am burning up and frantically shake off my jacket and press my cool fingers to the back of my neck.

1 minute

My vision flits between the entrances to the park, hoping to see a tall shadow.

21:00

I lurch involuntarily at the loud ring of my phone, which flies from my knee. I lunge for it before it hits the floor and slam it to the side of my face. I hear a slightly shaky, female voice on the other end.

"Hi, is that Lydia?"

"Yes?" I stutter.

"Hello love, it's Gina from next door. I'm afraid your mum's had a nasty fall and we've had to call an ambulance." I feel the blood drain from my face. I feel suddenly cold again.

"My god," I murmur, stunned.

"Don't worry poppet, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about but she's hit her head and isn't quite er... with it. We're on our way to the Southampton General now, do you think you can meet us there?"

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I stare blankly out the hospital window. Mum's asleep and the doctors say she'll be discharged tomorrow. The paper-white sheets are still stained black with mascara from my meltdown yesterday. I clung to Mum and sobbed that I was so sorry and that she could have died and the last thing we would have done was fight. She told me I was right and she does rely on me too much. She knows she needs to sort herself out. She'd talked to the doctors about getting some counselling and she said she was determined to get better, for my sake.

I hear the soft buzz of my phone and slowly take it out of my pocket. Any excitement I used to feel at that sound is gone.

"Lizzie Bennett mentioned you in a comment."

"Jesus Will - Lydia, I knew he was trouble but this?!"

Dimly intrigued, I open the link.

### **LOCAL MAN ARRESTED**

George Wickham, 28, who will appear in court on December 10th, is charged with three counts of sexual assault against underage girls.