



Leap Of Faith

By Welshdreamer42

Published on Stories Space on 07 Aug 2019

© Welshdreamer42 2015 - 2020
No part of this material may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, mechanical or electronic, or used in any other fashion without

the express permission of the owner.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/romance/-/leap-of-faith-.aspx>

It didn't look this high from below.

"That's it, take it nice and steady."

Nodding at the instructor, I lean back, gripping the rope tightly, and ease it through the cleat. My feet slip on the wet rock as I struggle to find purchase, heart hammering fit to burst. Below, Anika waves, the movement caught in my peripheral vision while I'm staring straight ahead. How did she talk me into this? I'm scared of heights for goodness' sake. I cautiously slide the rope again and drop another inch. No going back now...

~~~

Anika intimidated me at first. Everybody spoke so highly of her and she had that air of authority I'd never mastered. Her classroom was organised, her pupils engaged, and her results inspiring. She made teaching look easy. I wished it was. My first week at St. Joseph's was utterly chaotic. Inner-city teenagers, I quickly learned, were louder and sassier than the well-to-do suburban children at my previous school. These children required a different approach and while I struggled to find my feet, they ran riot.

It was Friday afternoon when Anika intervened to quieten my class. Her classroom was three doors down from mine so if she'd been disturbed, half the school had. They'd probably heard the ruckus all week. Mortified, I tried not to take it to heart. St Joseph's was a sprawling, notoriously tough school so I knew it would take time to establish discipline. Working there was always going to test me but I'd taken the job because a dozen applications and four interviews had led to only one offer.

Admittedly, it was a rash move. Reputation aside, the school was in an area I was unfamiliar with - new home, new friends, new everything. But Shanice had broken my heart and running from the life we'd shared was the only way I could cope.

~~~

I take steady breaths to control my trembling. There's only another foot or so of limestone blocks before an eighty-foot drop between the central arches of the Victorian railway viaduct. My legs feel rubbery, my palms are damp. I take a moment to look around while I steady myself. It's certainly beautiful here. The viaduct spans a steep river valley, the path of the disused railway cutting through

a spectacularly rugged, wooded landscape – a National Park. Level with my eye line, the topmost branches are laden with newly unfurling leaves bejewelled with last night's rain. Today, storm passed, the beauty is enhanced by clear blue skies and a fresh spring breeze. I inhale deeply, loving the tangy aroma of the damp wood.

I glance nervously at the ground: a patchwork of lush greens and browns dotted with clumps of delicate bluebells nodding in the sun. The river glistens as it tumbles and foams beneath the viaduct and my flimsy rope. Its roar competes with a veritable chorus of springtime bird song and the constant whispering of the breeze. Anika's picked an idyllic spot.

~~~

I was three weeks into my new teaching post when Anika found me alone in my classroom, sobbing my heart out. I'd had a bad day, though no worse than any other, and I can't pinpoint the exact moment that tipped me over the edge. But I knew I hated this school, this city, and the pokey flat I'd rented in a hurry. It was all too much and no longer bearable. I desperately missed my well-behaved class, my comfortable home – and Shanice. How I longed to turn back the clock and curl up on my sofa with her in my arms. I wanted that comfort – the comfort I thought was mine forever. So, when the last of my charges left for the day, I cracked.

Anika found me slumped at my desk: skin all blotchy, eyes red, and mascara running in inky rivers down my cheeks. Not pretty and most unbecoming of a teacher. I flinched when she discovered me in my moment of weakness but Anika didn't say a word. Instead, she rummaged in her bag and produced a packet of tissues, offering them with the warmest smile. Then she stroked my arm and said I was going to the pub for a drink, no arguments.

I didn't want to. I was in a ridiculous state and my embarrassment at Anika's intrusion to calm my unruly class was still fresh in my mind. We'd barely exchanged a word since, and she must have been annoyed, so her kindness surprised me. Besides, what would we talk about? My inability to teach? Shaking my head, I politely declined, but Annika wouldn't take no for an answer.

I'm glad about that. A drink with her turned out to be exactly what I needed. She bought the first round, making mine a double, then sat quietly beside me, her calm demeanour putting me at ease. And once I opened up, I talked endlessly – about Shanice, the plans I'd made, my desolation when she left. I talked and cried, working through all of Anika's tissues and a wad of my own, while she patiently listened.

~~~

Anika is looking up, hand shielding her eyes. "You can do it," she calls.

I hope so. Anika had abseiled before me and, even with her disabilities, made it look easy. Bless her, she's quite the daredevil. I'm not. I'm so scared right now, I feel physically sick. I let the rope out another inch, catching my breath when my feet no longer reach the walls. Dangling free, I'm terrified, yet thrilled. Me, abseil? I never thought I'd do this, never dreamed I'd find the courage.

~~~

After that night in the pub, Anika and I became friends. We met regularly after work, getting better acquainted over wine and nibbles in her favourite pubs. Then, friendship established, she invited me on a weekend away to a castle on the Welsh coast. Subsequent trips took in stately homes with landscaped gardens, art galleries, museums, and battlegrounds. As a history teacher, Anika loved British heritage and, as a thrill seeker, she sought out adrenaline rushes as part of the deal. She introduced me to white water rafting, canoeing, and horse riding, all in the most picturesque places in Britain.

And I had my uses. Her chosen destinations and activities were advertised as wheelchair friendly but we still encountered the occasional step with no ramp or a door without automatic opening. Even the path to this viaduct was too soggy in places for Anika to wheel herself unaided. She never asked for help, being staunchly independent, but I learned when to step in without causing offence. She enjoyed my company too, and I, hers.

The trips were empowering for me: I pushed my limits, learned to live again. One year on from my break-up, I started questioning my entire relationship with Shanice. I mulled it over and hindsight painted a very different picture of life with the woman I'd considered 'the one'. How had I been so deluded? I couldn't have been happy. Not really. We didn't talk like Anika and me; communication dried up long before our split. And how had I been content to stay at home every weekend slouched on the sofa watching TV? What sort of life was that? Thinking back, Shanice and I rarely went anywhere together, never explored the wonders of the countryside, or challenged ourselves. How could that have been enough?

Of course, that's what stings the most: it evidently wasn't enough for Shanice, though she didn't say a word 'till the day she walked out. I wished she had. Ours wasn't a casual relationship; we were as good as married. She should have talked to me.

~~~

"Keep going!" Anika's laughing voice is full of life. Pushing forty and wheelchair-bound, she has

boundless energy. Nothing stops her. She's a force to be reckoned with and she, bizarrely, says the same of me. I'm not so sure about that; I'm a forty-three-year-old slightly overweight woman still working out who I am. How is that the same?

Concentrating, I ease the rope through the cleat like I was shown and drop smoothly. I'm still at least sixty feet up but my confidence is growing. The trembling has eased and I bravely dare to look down again. Anika waves both arms, a beaming smile lighting her face. Releasing one hand, I wave back with a joyous whoop. Good old Anika, she's so lovely. I'd be lost without her.

My stomach suddenly tightens and it's got nothing to do with the gust of wind that sways the rope, or the light-headed floating sensation as I dangle above the racing river. I gaze at Anika, floored by the sudden realisation that she means the world to me. I exhale, gasping, unaware I'd been holding my breath. Anika. She's single and likes women. She's open about that, so why have I never thought of her as a partner?

The trembling's back. I look straight ahead again as both ground and water swirl beneath me. How did I not see it before? A relationship... Is that even possible? Anika's never discussed her love life, past or present. She's rather cagey about it. I know she's got a crush on several Hollywood actresses but other than that, I'm clueless. I've no idea if she's open to the idea of romance and I'm completely in the dark about her feelings for me. I grip the rope, crushing it beneath my fingertips, and force my gaze downward. I stare at her, brow furrowing. How would I feel if she started dating someone else? Devastated?

Devastated. Yes. The strange ache in my chest confirms that. So what should I do? Tell her?

One of the crew shouts encouragement and, rousing, I get moving, dropping steadily. A cheer goes up as my speed increases and, to my amazement, I find my descent is smooth. I've got the hang of this now and concentrating on the task in hand keeps my thoughts away from Anika. I hear sporadic applause as I approach the ground and when my feet touch down, I receive hearty congratulations from fellow adventurers.

Anika wheels my way and I feel my blood rushing when our eyes meet. She's lovely, beautiful, she's... I know what I have to do. I need to take a leap of faith. I love her.

Inhaling deeply, I remind myself that I'm no longer a timid, nervous woman running away from a life turned sour. I've started over. I'm a survivor. In Anika's own words, I'm a force to be reckoned with. And she's not Shanice; if Anika doesn't have feelings for me, she'll be honest about it. She'll let me down gently and we'll still be friends. No embarrassment or awkwardness. She's that kind of person.

Now . Tell her now . Heart thumping, I shed my harness and rush to greet her with open arms. “I did it,” I cry, hugging her close.

“You certainly did. Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say. “But actually—” I straighten but hold her gaze. “There’s something I need to…”

“I know.” Anika raises my hand to her lips. “Me too.”

~~~

My thanks to JWren for the editing