

FORGIVENESS

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.28

For eleven years, Richard and I always got together for a cigarette and a coffee just after lunchtime and then, about seven months ago, Lee began to join us. Richard didn't seem to mind – he said Lee was a right laugh – but I thought it was a liberty. Richard's my friend, not Lee's.

Lee liked to talk about politicians, saying they were nothing more than a bunch of crooks and line-your-own-pocketers. He complained about the health service, the schools, the prison system, the usual things. He never had any solutions, of course, but it made him feel good to complain. Richard hung off his every utterance on account of the fact that Lee spoke well and used words that he had to explain afterwards.

Then one day he went too far and I had to do something about him.

This morning was the first time that Richard and I have spoken for more than six months as he's been ignoring me ever since. He said that what I did was wrong but I've tried to explain that it was a mistake, a one-off. I didn't mean it, he just pushed me too far. I asked him could we put it behind us and get back to the way things used to be and he looked away from me and shook his head, even though I knew that by sitting with me in the first place, we were already friends again.

'He were a lovely lad,' said Richard sadly, speaking in that low Newcastle trudge of his. 'He meant no harm to man nor beast.'

'If I could take it back, Richard, I would,' I explained. 'Believe me, I'm not proud of myself.'

'You've never even said sorry for it.'

'Well I can't apologise to Lee, can I?' I reasoned.

'A lovely lad, he were,' he repeated.

What happened was that I waited for him by the lunch queue, took a tray and smashed it down on his head. He dropped immediately and I fell on top of him and started beating him. I admit it, I was out of control. But things get so frustrating in here and it's not like I killed him or anything. Although he's been moved permanently to a local hospital and it doesn't look like he'll get out again.

'He were harmless,' repeated Richard and I'm sure he'd like to hurt me in response to my actions but I'm younger and stronger and have no problem with violence.

'I'm sorry,' I told him. 'I just wanted things back the way they used to be. You were my friend, not Lee's.'

He looked over at me and opened his mouth and I thought he was going to say something more, but instead he just lit another cigarette and turned away from me. I'll work on him tomorrow, I'll win him back. I didn't have any more time today. The screws came and took us back to our cells before I could say another word.