



# The Leather Bottle

**A Short  
Story  
By  
John  
Morey**



**Author of  
The Sign of the Rose  
Rose: The Missing Years  
Finding Rose**

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## **A short story by John Morey**

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“There's a good spot over there, not far from the entrance.” John was pointing to the empty parking bay close to where diners were filing into the restaurant.

It had just opened.

Clare made sure they left early enough to find one of the 'Disabled' bays still free. They were in luck. John, her husband, was still able to walk pretty well – on one of his 'good days' – but recently his Alzheimer's was becoming more unpredictable. Over the past five years, during which it seemed he was slowly retreating into a hibernation, she'd learnt to keep things as simple as possible. This included booking a quiet window table for the few occasions she *was* brave enough to treat them to lunch out and, of course, finding a convenient place to park.

Clare checked her hair and make-up in the rear view mirror before getting out of their red sports convertible, making sure she got to the passenger side before John started to struggle with the door handle.

*Although I won't see sixty again, there's no excuse to let standards drop,* she thought as she smoothed her skirt.

“Where are we going?” he asked, the usual puzzled look clouding his face.

“Where we said we would. The Leather Bottle. The restaurant. It's the first day of spring and your 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

John said nothing. At least he was rarely argumentative these days, given his condition. Just confused. Today *was* a good day and he took Clare's helping hand without complaint as he stepped out of the car. She ran her hand – lovingly – over

the front of his hair line, temporarily 'dislodged' by the gentle spring breeze as they'd driven the two miles from home in their open-top coupe. Kansas City could still deliver a morning frost at this time of year but today it was mild - warm enough to have the hood down to feel the fresh air caress rather than chill the face as they cruised through the 25 mile per hour zones, still arriving at the restaurant in good time.

They joined the queue assembled at the open main door to The Leather Bottle – thankfully just a handful of people (John didn't like crowds). Their brief wait (John didn't like hanging around) ended as the head waiter allocating diners to tables.

“Do you have a reservation, sir?”

“What?” answered John, too quick for Clare this time.

“Yes,” she replied, saving John's embarrassment,” a table for two. Name of Sercombe. By the window.”

“This way madam,” said the waiter, leading them both – John behind, then Clare. “Table for two, by the window. I'll fetch the menus.”

There were four chairs. Which one should he choose?

Clare made his mind up for him, seeing to it that John was comfortably seated in one facing the garden and away from the diners. She poured him a glass of water before taking her own seat.

The menus arrived.

Lunch was ordered, delivered, despatched and the plates cleared without incident. Had they finished too quickly?

Clare decided to relax and allow patience to take over and be satisfied that, so far, things had progressed without a hitch. *This IS a good day*, she said to herself, but she wasn't sure how John would react to her special surprise when it did arrive.

Even as they were leaving the house, pressing against the door to ensure it was securely locked, she was having second thoughts. *Had she done the right thing? He was used to routine, everything in order, all things in their place.* This meant people as well as things. *How would he react?* she wondered.

Also, his memory *had* become worse in the past few years. *Would he remember? And, even if he did, would he recall all that had happened all those years ago? Or just bits?* She would soon find out. Nervously she glanced at her watch – the fifth time since finishing their meal.

*It's nearly time, she thought. Have they changed their mind?*

“Am I too early? You did say half past.”

The voice came from behind, startling Clare. John had failed to react to the new presence. She turned towards the voice

“No, no. We've only just finished. So glad you could come, Emily.” They hugged. Clare invited Emily to sit next to her – between her and John. “Perfect timing,” she added.

“There you are, Emily.”

Surprisingly - to Clare, at least - it was John suddenly looking up and noticing what might have been a stranger.

But it wasn't.

He addressed her as if it were only yesterday that he'd last seen her.

But it wasn't.

Or perhaps more recently it would seem to him.

“I was going to send someone into the bathroom after you.”

Clare and Emily looked at each other as if to ask, *What does he mean?* Then they understood.

He hadn't forgotten.

Far from it, but what he *had* forgotten were the fifty years

since he *had* last seen her. All those years were lost to him.

To John, they were as short as a trip to the bathroom.

Emily was too shocked to speak. *He recognised me instantly*, she pondered. *But how?*

Clare stepped in to cover for her. "Yes. It *is* Emily," she said, "but you haven't seen her for a long, long time."

"But she's my girl-friend," he said, facing Clare with that puzzled look creeping back again. "Did she go somewhere?"

Then, directly to Emily, "Tell me. Did you go somewhere? I thought you'd just gone to the bathroom. We've had desert already, without you. Coffee should be here soon."

He was right about the last bit.

"Yes. I'm afraid I did go away, John my dear." Emily took hold of his hand as it rested on the table. Realising what she'd just done - acting so instinctively - she almost withdraw her hand, before deciding that would be worse. Obvious.

"That's right," he said. "We broke up."

It was all coming back to him now. To Emily, also.

"We did. I'm sorry."

"*You* broke up with *me*. Pah! Your dad never did like me anyway. Thought I was going to run off with you."

"Oh, he *did*," she insisted. "Mum too. They were just scared. Frightened we *would* run off. I was nineteen but, in their eyes, still their little girl." John replied to the first part.

"Scared? Of me?"

"Scared they'd lose me. That I'd leave them."

"So *I* lost *you*, and *you* left *me*? That was OK, I suppose. Yeh. I remember now."

He fell silent, motionless, looking into space, trying to remember more, but holding onto that last thought.

Finally he spoke. Quietly. "Broke my heart."

John leaned forward to look briefly at her face as he made that proclamation, peering close in, searching for the answer she didn't have, then looked away. He loosened her hand from his so he could stare out of the window undistracted.

Trying to remember more.

Clare looked on, powerless to help John this time.

*Had she made a mistake?* she asked herself for the tenth time. *Is it too much for him?* Her eyes lost focus as the first tears formed. She focussed on the napkin left behind by the waiter after he'd cleared the last course, picking it up to fold it carefully in quarters, as some act in an attempt to return order and normality to the occasion.

"I really am so sorry," Emily said, breaking the silence. "We were *both* so young."

John turned back to her now, composed. The grief that was so real fifty years ago had come back but, mercifully, just for a moment. He was back with her again, now, in a more buoyant mood as he reflected on lost years with optimism.

"They were good times," he said in a forgiving voice, taking hold of her hand in reassurance. "I loved you so much."

"I loved you, too, John. I hope you believe that. You must."

"Oh, yeh. 'Kids' love," he said. "The kind that never lasts." That was how he'd made it through the last time they'd been together. A pragmatic approach had worked then, it should do now. But this time perhaps he wasn't quite so sure.

As for Emily. She disagreed.

"I don't believe that – and neither should you," she whispered, conscious of where they were. "I've never stopped." Emily could hardly finish the words.

She held John's hand again - even tighter.

Clare knew what she meant. She would have been worried – under normal circumstances.

But these were not normal times.

As the main door opened, she looked up.

“I think someone else has arrived,” she said, relieved at the opportunity to break from the hold the two people had over her. “I’ll just go and fetch them. You two stay here. You have lots to talk about.”

They did stay, John and Emily, lost in each other's thoughts.

Finally John spoke. “It's my birthday, you know. They tell me I'm seventy five.”

He laughed at his own joke. She joined him.

“You look well, John,” said Emily.

“I am. Physically. It's just this... (he struggled for the words)... this memory thing. I can't even remember what it's called. It's so embarrassing.”

“I'm sorry, John. For everything. Mum and Dad were sorry, too. They admitted it. Afterwards. But too late.”

“Yes,” agreed John. “Fifty years you say? Since we last met?”

“That's right.”

“Just as well,” he said. “Otherwise you'd have been a long time in the bathroom.”

They both laughed again, reminded suddenly of one of the real connections they'd shared all those years ago.

A sense of humour.

“You remembered then – this was the last time we were together. Here, in The Leather Bottle. We had dinner that time. Just the two of us.”

“Amazing.”

“It is,” she agreed.

“No. It's amazing the restaurant has lasted as long as we



have, with fast-food taking over.”

He laughed at his own joke again, then became serious.

“I’m so glad it’s still here to preserve old memories.”

He paused.

“Remind me again. Why were we here?”

“It was your birthday,” she added. “Fifty years to the day.”

John couldn’t miss the opening for another joke.

“Still is. *Every year*. Same day – the first day of spring - or so they tell me.”

Then his laughter stopped. His face changed. “We broke up just a few days after. At least you didn’t spoil my birthday.”

“John. Someone else wants to meet you.” It was Clare, returning from the main door lobby, followed by a middle-aged man. “This is Joe,” she said.

The tall, sandy-haired visitor reached forward. “Pleased to meet you, John,” he said. “Happy birthday.”

They shook hands. Joe took a seat at Clare’s invitation.

“John?” said Emily, keen to get John’s attention back. “This is my eldest son. Joe.”

“Delighted to meet you,” said John. “If you turn out anything like your mother, you’ll be OK, apart from...” But his voice trailed off as if he had forgotten the rest of the sentence.

Or had he?

“John’s at the university here,” said Emily.

“He’s a bit old for a student,” John replied.

“Professor of English,” broke in Joe. “I’m Head of the Literature Department.”

“That’s how *we* met, *Clare and I*,” explained Emily, to John.

Clare was a part-time Admin. Assistant for the department and had been introduced to Emily, through Joe, at one of their

'Open Days'. As soon as Emily learnt of Clare's surname she asked the inevitable - did she know a John Sercombe?

It was there and then that the whole story came out.

Emily was totally transparent with full details – or at least most of them – which Clare took on board as being 'something in the past'. She decided it would remain there.

But, over the weeks – leading up to John's birthday – Clare and Emily became friends, close enough for them to agree on a plan - designed to help John tackle the dreaded Alzheimer's. John was to be reunited with Emily on his birthday.

At The Leather Bottle where they were last together.

So far it had gone well. As the lunchtime progressed more and more stories emerged, and were swapped. Clare took heart that John's memory seemed to be improving or, at least, was improved temporarily by the occasion.

Clare had grown to know Joe as a close working colleague. They were soon wrapped in a separate conversation, paying less attention to John and Emily, who reminisced at their precious times together leading up to their split exactly fifty years ago.

The years in between seemed to have melted away.

“Well, I'm afraid I have to love you and leave you,” said Joe, finally. “I have a class in half an hour. Some of us still have to work.”

Clare rose with him. “This really *has* been a good day, we *must* do this again.”

Although she hated to admit it, the experience had provided a welcome relief for her and had also clearly done John a power of good. She saw once again, for the first time in years, the John she'd met and had fallen in love with some

thirty years before.

“Can I make a suggestion?” asked Joe, turning to leave.

“You're the Professor,” said John.

He, too, was enjoying this 'new kind of day' in his calendar.

“I have a significant birthday myself coming up in a few months time. Not until late October actually, but you must come to celebrate it with me.”

“That sounds an excellent idea,” agreed Emily. “We *all* must go!”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world,” said Clare.

John seemed deep in thought, hesitating before he replied.

“How significant is 'significant'?” he asked.

Was he starting to put a few things together now? Events that had remained hidden for five decades? Would it lead to disclosures that were more than either Emily or Clare – or even Joe, for that matter – had anticipated?

“The big Five Zero,” Joe replied.

“Fifty years ago?” John continued to turn the new information over and over in his head for a while longer.

Until it dawned on him.

“Fifty years IS significant. It was certainly significant for us, wasn't it Emily?”

He caught Clare's eye, then looked at Emily before turning back to Joe. “And I guess it's quite significant for us, Joe. It's turned into a really 'good day', as Clare would say.

“Hasn't it – *son?*”

~ \*\*\* THE END \*\*\* ~

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