

## The Power of Exclusion

Sitting in the bare classroom, made warm only through shared laughter, she overheard some of her classmates talking about a supper. They were making plans that were clearly not a secret. In a class of only eight, secrets are hard to keep.

"What are you guys on about?" She asked.

"Supper tomorrow night," several voices chorused. "Are you coming?"

"I haven't been invited," she replied.

"Of course you have," said Jenny. "Samantha sent the text."

Of course she had. Samantha had never been particularly friendly towards her, so she was not surprised to be left off the list. As the conversation continued, Samantha slipped silently away from her corner of the room, making no comment.

During the break Jenny tried again. "It must have been an accident. You know, sometimes text messages just don't arrive," she pleaded.

"It doesn't matter. I have a date anyway," she replied, quickly arranging one in her head. This was not her being excluded, this was "other plans."

All evening she waited for Samantha to add her to the guest list, but Samantha kept stum. She thought back to the end of last term. The group had gone to the pub. Usually Samantha left early to catch a train, but this time she wanted to stay, while the others left. Our girl stayed with her, partly from politeness, partly to see if she could crack Samantha's veneer and catch a glimpse of the person inside.

Samantha quickly delved into her psyche. "There's something I wanted to talk to you about," Samantha said and the girl wondered if she would be granted an explanation for the coldness she perceived. Samantha had attacked her work several times in a forum where everyone else was tentative and kind. "I noticed a few times you've said you aren't attractive," she continued. "I don't ever want you to think that. You are beautiful."

The girl found tears dribbling down her face. She blamed the wine, but it was really the shock of someone she barely knew, and didn't know if she liked, understanding a part of her inner self. She thought this might heal their hostilities. A ceasefire, if you like.

A few months later, back in class, Samantha critiqued her work severely, going on and on. She had written about redundancy being a catalyst for her first trip to America. Samantha derided her at length, saying redundancy was hardly a big deal. How would she know? Samantha has never been made redundant. The girl kept quiet, but she was mad inside.

Now she was not invited.

In the break in the lecture the following evening she blithely mentioned her lack of invite within Samantha's earshot. Samantha said nothing. She just picked up her phone and left.

The girl was alone. The only one of eight not a part of the group. She felt rejected and abandoned and had no voice to speak. She didn't understand this childish behaviour, but still she was hurt. Her mother said this was about Samantha, not about her, and she knew that mum was probably right, but it didn't make her feel better.

Most people have the power to make her cry through the simplest of things, whether it's a shared minute of hilarity or a moment of true compassion. This is the flip side - exclusion and emotional pain. She would twirl this in her head for weeks, wondering what she had done to be so maligned.

She messaged a classmate the day after supper to see if anything had been said. Nothing. She didn't know if it was worse that no-one mentioned her absence or that she had not been invited in the first place.

She thought long and hard.

She had no explanation for Samantha's actions, but she realised that while for her this was a big deal, for her classmates it was irrelevant. They couldn't see the hurt behind her eyes or the ache to play a part. They were just hungry.

