

## Decisions

OLIVIA and James Dupont were sweethearts at college, and if the word sounds twee and old-fashioned, it does describe their relationship well. They met days after the start of term and found in the other a good friend as well as a lover. They were inseparable and neither took a second look at any other boy or girl. They moved in together in their second year, and after graduating and setting out to build a career, it was obvious each considered the other's plans when making their own. When Olivia found a job with the probation service, James looked for one in his field in the same city. It was also obvious that rather than rent they should buy a house, and it followed from that they should marry sooner than later. That, too, seemed the natural step, and neither gave it much, if any, thought.

When Olivia turned 28, James began to talk of starting a family. And, to her surprise, Olivia realized she was not keen. Why not? her mother asked her. What was she waiting for? But Olivia could not tell her because Olivia was still not sure.

'Do you want children, Olivia?'

'Yes, of course.'

'But? Something's stopping you?'

Olivia said nothing, but when over the months James again raised the matter, she began to have an inkling of what was stopping her. And because it was becoming a little clearer to her, she did not want to speak of it. Until spoken of, until she acknowledged her thoughts and feelings, she could persuade herself they did not yet exist.

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If decent folk saw Olivia and James Dupont as a nice, middle-class couple, they saw Sherrelle Williams as the lowest-class trash, a woman who had squandered every chance life had handed her. And don't give them that nonsense about having a poor start in life. Decent folk would not at all have been surprised that Sherrells was in jail for assaulting her partner. He and she were not married, but she had borne him two children and had two older ones with a previous partner. The assault was serious. Sherrelle and her partner were arguing, both were drunk and high. He had hit her

several times, she picked up a bottle and smashed him in the face, taking out an eye. That was serious.

At trial the public defender insisted that Sherrelle Williams had not intended harm and, he tried on for size, Sherrelle Williams had acted in self-defence. The jury took the view that even in self-defence and whether harm was intended or not, severe harm had been caused and found her guilty. Sherrelle Williams had convictions for larceny and credit card fraud, and the judge agreed with the public prosecutor that for such a serious assault a term in jail was the only possible sentence.

That's where Olivia met Sherrelle Williams.

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Sherrelle was up for parole and Olivia was asked to assess her for the board. They sat opposite each other in a bare room with just a guard standing behind Sherrelle by the door. The room had been redecorated and smelled of fresh paint. Sherrelle did not, would not, look at Olivia. Olivia knew it was not hostility, but shame.

'I've been asked to report on you for the parole board to see whether you might be eligible for early release.'

Sherrelle said nothing.

'Your files show you have behaved well and have an excellent disciplinary record, and I can't think the board is likely to refuse.'

Sherrelle now looked up at her, but said nothing.

'As you know your children are in care, but if you are released and can show you have a steady lifestyle, they'll soon be able to live with you again.'

Olivia paused.

'How do you feel about that?'

'Where's Wayne?'

'Wayne's in jail, too, I'm afraid.'

'What did he do? Dealing again?'

'Yes.'

‘He’s a piece of shit. When’s he get out?’

‘Not for a long time.’

‘Good. I don’t ever want to see that piece of shit again.’

‘Your mother has told us that you can live with her if you get early release.’

‘I don’t want early release.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want to leave here. I’ve got friends here, I get food here.’

‘Don’t you want to see your children again?’

‘Do they want to see me?’

‘I don’t know. When did you last see them?’

‘Not since it happened. Not since I’ve been in here. They don’t want see me, they’ve never visited. If they wanted to see me, they would have visited.’

‘Do you want to see them?’

Sherrelle said nothing.

‘Don’t you want to be together with our children as a family?’

Sherrelle burst out laughing, but it was not a happy laugh. And she said nothing.

‘Tell me why you don’t want early release, Sherrelle.’

‘I told you, I like it here, I’ve got friends here, it’s warm, I get fed.’

‘But you can’t stay here for ever.’

Sherrelle said nothing.

Olivia informed the board that Sherrelle Williams did not yet want to be considered for parole.

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‘James rang me.’

‘Oh, did he? Does he call you a lot?’

‘No, Olivia, in fact, I think this was the very first time he’s actually called me.’

‘Why did he call?’

‘Olivia, you two have to talk.’

‘What about?’

‘You know what about.’

Yes, Olivia did know.

‘I don’t think I’m comfortable with James discussing our private life.’

‘Oh, don’t be silly. Who else is he going to talk to?’

‘Me.’

‘But you won’t discuss it. Well, that what he says.’

‘Can we talk about something else?’

‘Of course, we can. But just let me say that if you have a problem, it won’t go away and you must face up to it . . .’

‘Mum!’

‘No, don’t Mum me.’

‘We don’t have a problem!’

‘If you say so, Olivia, But James seems to think you do. Even as a little girl . . .’

‘Please, Mum!’

. . .

Six months later Sherrelle Williams was against listed for possible early release, and Olivia was again asked to report for the board. Sherrelle seemed happier now and looked healthier. She had a new hairstyle which suited her, had lost weight and did not look as dowdy as she had done.

‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine, ma’am.’

But then:

‘I still don’t want to get out of here.’

‘Why not? Don’t you want to start your life again?’

‘I’ve got a life here and I like it.’

‘But you can’t stay here for ever.’

‘Why not?’

And to this question Olivia had no answer.

She reported to the board that Sherrelle Williams was still refusing an early release, but the board agreed to go ahead anyway. Keeping folk in prison cost the state money. Williams had behaved well in jail, and there was no reason to suspect she would not continue to behave well once released. A week later, Olivia was told that Sherrelle Williams had attacked a fellow prisoner. Parole was no longer an option, and she would was likely to have her sentenced increased.

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‘James.’

‘What?’

‘This is difficult, but . . .’

‘What?’

‘James, I know you want to start a family, and so do I but . . .’

‘But what?’

‘But . . .’

‘But what, Olivia? What? What are you saying?’

‘I -.’ She stopped.

‘What Olivia, please!’

‘I -.’

‘Come on, this can’t go on for ever and day. You say you want children and you sure as hell know I do, and I realise as the mother you will be shouldered with almost all the work, but I’ll do as much as I can, you know that and . . .’

‘I don’t think I want to start a family with you, James.’

‘What?’

‘Sorry, it’s just . . . I don’t think I want to start a family with you.’

'What? Why not?'

'I don't know. I just know I don't.'

'So what are we going to do?'

'How do you mean?'

'What the hell do you think I mean! What's going to happen? You want children, but not with me. So who do you want children with? Have you met someone else?'

'Of course I haven't!'

'So what is it, then? What's going on?'

'Nothing's going on,'

Then Olivia began to cry

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Olivia and James's marriage lasted just a few more months. They didn't discuss anything. They just followed their old routines as before, but both knew their marriage was reaching its end. One day James told Olivia he had found a small flat and was moving out a week the following Saturday. They both cried when he told her, but Olivia felt a relief. She didn't know why, but she knew that was what she felt. Wayne was stabbed to death in a brawl. When Sherrelle heard, she, too, felt a relief, but she did know why she felt it. When she was again considered for early release, she agreed. She went to live with her mother and soon she was joined there by her two youngest. But Olivia knew none of this, because she was not the probation officer assigned to compile a report on Sherrelle that third time.