



## CHERISH PITY

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Katie told me I was arrogant as we sheltered in the library cafe, her with a tiny carton of apple juice, me with a cup of instant coffee and a sausage roll. Her eyes were lowered when she made this startling comment and I might have made some protest if she hadn't raised them the next, blue eyes under a jet black fringe. All I said was, 'I think a certain arrogance is necessary if you want to achieve.' She had her forefingers pressed together and she brought them to her lips.

I regret to say that I'm not instinctively a giving person. I am perhaps, not particularly lovable in some respects. These were the thoughts going through my head a few hours later as I stepped around puddles from the afternoon's rain.

I had a bottle of Bordeaux in a respectable local dealer's bag and I was walking the familiar route to her house. Familiar though it was, this was the first time I'd been invited to dinner so I wanted to make a good impression. Not that I was going to be any less myself. I was certain of this much, striding along the pavement with my measured gait. Katie's part of town wasn't so salubrious as my own, and I'd asked her more than once why she didn't move out of it. There were too many shady off-licenses and social clubs for my liking, and the really dubious areas of town were only a short distance away. Of course it was cheap and popular with

students, and there were cheap clothes shops and second hand bookshops. I wouldn't deny that it had some redeeming qualities. However, it was more a place to visit than anywhere you'd want to live.

I didn't worry so much about the students, who were clean-cut, most of them. I worried about some of the other characters you saw lurching around with their plastic bottles full of cheap booze. To me they were pathetic but to a sweet girl like Katie they might be threatening. Whenever I mentioned this possibility to her she smiled and said I wanted to be her 'knight on a white horse'. I liked her saying this kind of thing. On the other hand, I continued to urge her to move to somewhere more appropriate. And she continued to ignore me.

It so happened that on that particular evening I was a little short on cash and long on time. There was nothing I especially needed to buy, but it was possible Katie would suggest going out, and I might have forgotten about my cashless state and then we might be out somewhere and she'd have to end up paying for me. I have a way of thinking ahead to these contingencies. So to avoid any such situation I stopped at a cashpoint for one of the major high street banks and proceeded to withdraw some money. Next to the cashpoint a man in a battered coat and torn trousers was sitting on the ground. He took one look at my bag with the bottle of wine ensconced within and asked:

'Going to a party?'

I was mid-transaction but there was no possibility of him seeing my PIN number in his grounded state. 'I am, as a matter of fact.'

'Well, have a nice time.' I didn't look at him, waiting for the inevitable question as the ATM told me to stand by. 'You couldn't spare any change, could you?'

Then, for some reason which remains dark to me now, I reached into my wallet and, finding only the pound coin and a few pence which had been there earlier, I took the same pound coin and passed it to the man sitting next to the cash machine. I felt the roughness of his fingers for an instant in the handing over of the money. I looked at his face which was less ravaged than I might have imagined. There were lines in his cheeks and forehead, and a certain thinness of feature, and a few days

growth of tufty grey hair where he'd neglected to shave. And yet he was in better shape than many of the characters I mentioned previously. Which is not to say that he was in the peak of fitness and I shouldn't have given him anything. It was just that he appeared morally sounder than I'd expect someone in his position to be. As I was walking away he gave me a further surprise:

'God bless you sir.'

It was a dignified blessing by someone who seemed to mean it, rather than a babbled incoherence. Though I've always found the idea of God rather hard to take, I was touched by his words and carried them with me to Katie's house.

Katie shared with two other girls, one of whom studied French with her, while the other studied Philosophy. The girl who studied French was out at the cinema; the philosopher and her boyfriend were meant to be joining us for dinner. However, as I discovered, shortly after stepping through the door and taking my tributary kiss from Katie, the philosopher's boyfriend was sick and would not, in fact, be joining us for dinner. My feeble joke, that she should be philosophical about it, raised only a polite smile from Katie and an impatient look from her housemate. This philosopher was a pale, blonde girl with something slightly elfish about her ears which were not pointed of course, but tapered upwards rather more than was common. She loomed a little over Katie, my 'hobbit' — a name I never dared utter but occasionally thought in the presence of her taller housemates.

Katie and Jane (the philosopher) conferred and it was decided that Jane would oversee the cooking for the moment, and Katie and I would sit together on the sofa. I was not averse to the suggestion; it suited me very pleasantly. She settled into my arm and together we looked at the blank television screen, World Cinema DVDs stacked on one side, singer-songwriter CDs on the other. 'You look very pretty,' I said by way of conventional politeness (though the fact it was true ensured my words had the conviction such a cliché required if it was to be uttered). Which is a roundabout way of saying I meant what I said, as she was wearing a red dress that contrasted very nicely with her hair. She'd had something of what they call a Gothic look when we first met but I liked to see her in these bright colours.

‘You’re very dapper yourself,’ Katie said and she stroked my neck where the collar of my shirt opened. ‘I was hoping you’d wear a tie though.’

‘Smart-casual is all the rage, darling. Didn’t you know?’

‘Robin would have worn a tie.’ Robin was Jane’s boyfriend.

‘Yes, but Robin isn’t here. At least I’m here.’

‘I suppose.’ Katie rested into my arm again.

We reconvened in the dining room, or rather the dining room section of the kitchen/dining room. Katie and Jane set about lighting off-white candles in two ungainly candelabra that they’d brought out for the occasion. A pot simmered on the stove.

‘I pity Robin what he’s missing,’ I said. I pulled the cork out of the Bordeaux and half-filled three glasses. ‘Why didn’t you postpone the meal to another time?’

‘He fell sick very suddenly,’ Jane said. ‘We didn’t have time.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ I ploughed on.

‘I don’t know,’ Jane said. ‘I think it’s a cold but he thinks it’s the flu.’ Katie gave me a look and I stopped my questioning.

The first course, served by Katie, was mushroom soup which tasted a little watery to my admittedly uneducated palate. Everyone pronounced it excellent. With the main course it was Jane’s turn to cross the room to the kitchen and I took the opportunity for some discreet footsie under the table with Katie. She reciprocated at first, taking her foot out of her shoe and moving it slowly up my leg but it was over almost before it had begun. I sank my chin into my hands and looked at her across the table. I tried my luck again but she’d tucked her legs in under her chair.

‘It’s ready,’ Jane called out and Katie left me alone to play footsie with myself. The two girls rattled things together in the kitchen for a minute or two, so I looked at a poster of a singer-songwriter who may or may not have killed himself at an early age. Katie came over with two plates and Jane followed her with one.

‘Lasagne,’ I said. ‘I like lasagne.’

Katie put one plate in front of me and one in front of herself. Jane sat down and

pulled her chair in. The food on her plate was noticeably redder than the food on Katie's and my own.

'What are you having, Jane?' I asked.

'Vegetarian lasagne. It's got aubergine and peppers instead of meat. Well, there are some peppers in the meat one too, I think, but I don't eat meat.'

'I didn't know that you were a vegetarian. Is that for medical reasons?'

'No, it's not for medical reasons.'

'Why are you a vegetarian then?' I asked. Katie kicked me under the table as a kind of sequel to our earlier footsie.

'The usual reason, I suppose. I think it's cruel the way they treat farm animals. But I eat fish so I can't say too much.'

'What annoys me about vegetarians,' I began light-heartedly, 'is that they have to make such a song and dance about it. One song and dance isn't enough. It has to be a whole tofu medley and a series of 'anguish of the animals' Busby Berkeley dance numbers. I respect a quiet reduction in the sadness of the world, don't get me wrong. There's a real dignity in giving something when no one can see you doing it. Someone said once that the greatest thing in the world is performing a kind act that's undiscovered.'

'Can I just mention?' Jane asked. 'Like I said, I'm not really a vegetarian. I just don't eat meat.'

'I don't like the way the vegetarians and the environmentalists have joined forces. They'll say things like it takes ten fields of vegetables to feed one field of cows. It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. You eat your ten fields of vegetables and I'll eat my one field of cows. I'll even let you have the grass from my field. That's more than generous, isn't it? Oh, you should see the looks on your faces. I'm only joking.'

'I've thought about it myself,' Katie said.

'Don't do it. It's such a 'studenty' thing to do, becoming vegetarian. When you're a natural carnivore like you are.' I could feel Jane's eye on me. 'I don't mean for natural herbivores. Or ichthyvores.'

‘I know Katie’s a student,’ Jane said. ‘Aren’t you a student too?’

‘I don’t like to think about it,’ I said. ‘One more year and I’m out of here.’

We moved to less controversial subjects after that. I didn’t want to put Katie in a bad mood.

The next time I went to Katie’s neighbourhood I saw the man I’d seen previously, again sitting next to the cashpoint. There was a real contrast with another group of men I’d passed walking in. Three or four of them had been sitting on a bench in one of the few areas of green space in this part of town. You couldn’t call it a park it was so tiny, though there was a forlorn-looking slide and climbing frame, rarely used by the children it was intended for. The men’s clothes were dirty, I could see from behind, and there were cans of cheap lager on either side of them. One of the men stood up, clearly under the influence of much alcohol, and turned around to the street. He shouted an obscenity, though whether to me or his comrades was unclear. I averted my eyes and continued my journey.

This man next to the ATM was entirely different to those others, despite having suffered the same hardships. His clothes were the same as previously but he’d managed to shave since the last time I’d seen him, indicative of an unbowed sense of self-worth. This time I didn’t need to withdraw money so there was no need to linger. Nonetheless I didn’t fight against my better nature when it led me to slip my hand between the newly-washed denim of jeans and the cloth of pocket to grasp my soft, leather wallet. We don’t tend to think about coins very much. I felt a seven-sided fifty-pence piece in my hand, its hard alloy, the rounded edges. I bent down and dropped the metal into the man’s hand, accepting his blessing once more as I quickly moved away.

On subsequent occasions I would frequently pass on such trifles to this unbroken figure. We didn’t communicate much. I didn’t really know what to say to him. Each occasion would follow this similar pattern, of me finding money, passing it on, and him giving his Christian prayer. However, there were times when I wouldn’t give him money. When Katie was on my arm, I would pass him by without looking at him, not wishing to seem generous only for appearance’s sake. And when I was

with Katie he would never ask me for money, though many others did.

In January, when all the girls were away with their families, there was a break-in at their house. Katie was the first to get back to town and I was with her when the police came to call. Of course, the landlord was there too. Anonymous up until then, he showed his nasty side in a long discussion about whether someone had left open the small window in the bathroom.

‘Katie’s lost a lot in this burglary,’ I said. ‘Will you please stop harassing her?’

‘I’ve lost things too,’ the landlord snarled. ‘Everything that was in the kitchen, the shared TV.’

Despite my spirited defence it turned out that not very much of value belonging to Katie had actually been stolen, and what had been stolen was easily recovered on the insurance. However, some personal items had been damaged, little ornaments and so on she’d bought in the first year, and the burglar had even apparently made off with one book of her diary. These were the kind of things that would upset a girl like her, and with the landlord problem as well, she decided to move. It seemed early to move in together, and Katie agreed with me. She moved to a street a little way away from where I lived, the bloke who’d been staying there before having broken his ankle badly in a student football match and returned to his native Italy.

‘Disaster to disaster,’ her new landlady commented, shaking her head and tutting. This was after Katie had signed the contract, and we were sitting together in the kitchen, drinking overly milky cups of tea the landlady had made for us. ‘You never know with ankles. It might be wrong his whole life, the poor boy. He won’t be playing much football for the moment, that’s the main thing.’ She turned her well-fed face to where we were sitting, enduring this ritual of politeness. ‘Would you like more tea?’

Disaster to disaster! History, of which I am a student though I hadn’t seen fit to mention it so far, suggests that disasters lead to reform. It is only when the mine-shaft collapses, leaving dozens to die, that the safety rules are tightened. It is true that many disasters must sometimes accumulate before any action is taken, but in general the bigger the disaster, the greater the possibility of reform. I’d been

content to stay with Katie, despite our subsequently proven unsuitability, for many months while things were good, shoring up incompatibilities with sandbags.

Put simply, I am a rationalist with an eye on my career and Katie is an idealist with a loathing for any sort of ambition that doesn't involve the raising up of humanity. Proximity brought out these differences and rather than cleave together, our opposing outlooks on life only grew further apart like magnets that repel each other. My exposition is murky perhaps. Put simply, we split up.

I don't wish to describe the arguments or the silences that were worse than the arguments, the gradually increasing distance. I was more bitter than Katie and I said the more hurtful things, though I felt like I was the more hurt. Her eyes were reproachful and damaged me more than anything that came out of her mouth, so that finally the disaster happened and Katie and I fell apart. It was Katie who ended it. Blind as I was, I give her the credit for it. It was a very peaceful ending, at a quiet table in a local wine bar where a soft female voice which Katie was oblivious to was singing 'The sky is blue, the night is cold'. However, after the disaster, reform will come, and I expect to find someone who matches my personality more closely before the year is over. I'm certain of it.

And now it is spring and recently, for the first time in many weeks, I went to the part of town where Katie used to live. I told myself that I couldn't shut down a whole area just because of a failed relationship. No doubt some will suspect me of sentimentality in the return, but it was more of a case of exorcising a ghost. Once or twice I'd half jokingly suggested returning to the pub where we'd often met, with its crusty, irritable owner and handful of locals who refused to be displaced by students. Katie had turned me down the first time and reminded me the second time how much I'd always hated going there.

I browsed in a second-hand bookshop. Some of the books were discoloured and there were notes in the margins of the classics. At the front of the novels there were often inscriptions: '*From Paul to Laura 1999, much love*' or '*Hope you like it as much as I did, Alice xx*'. In the background the owner was talking on the phone about an upcoming book fair, gossiping about the participating sellers. A framed

sampler above his head held a line from William Blake: ‘Cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.’ I trod up the creaking stairs to the history section on the first floor. There was no one else there, which was fortunate as the room could barely have held two people. Shelves on three sides went up to the ceiling with a step for reaching the higher books, if necessary, while the stairs continued upwards to even more obscurities.

History covered one wall but I quickly discovered there was nothing of interest. The useful books I had already, and in any case they were far outnumbered by the useless books, out of date with tattered covers and superseded conclusions. Thus it was that I found myself looking at the biographies on the next shelf over. Former celebrities pouted or grinned on the covers of the gaudier books. Intermingled tomes with unfamiliar names on the side promised reading as dull as their covers. Then I recalled from an earlier visit that the more saleable biographies were kept on the ground floor where the owner could keep an eye on them.

One of the books caught my eye though, a hardback that was so big it had been pushed in to rest on top of the others. The actress who looked coquettishly out at potential readers was somehow familiar. I picked the book up, read the blurb and remembered a trashy American sitcom that had been repeated when I was still at school, and that I’d watched on and off for a couple of years. It wasn’t worth remembering. When I pulled the hardback out I’d dislodged another book and it had fallen at my feet. Now I picked it up. One of the featureless books that publishers used to produce long ago, long before they published them again and called them retro. A biography of an explorer who’d charted many of the smaller islands of the Pacific. Though little known today, he’d been one of the most extraordinary figures of the 18th century and was a headline maker of his day. He lived through glory and disgrace, achieved much and suffered much. This is what it said on the blurb. I put it back on the shelf.

It was getting late and I needed to start reading about ‘Empires and their Legacies’ for the next morning’s seminar. I went home a different way to the way I’d arrived. This meant that in about five minutes I came near the cashpoint where

the man had always been sitting. The pound coin I'd already prepared was loose in my pocket but from a distance it was clear that the man wasn't there. I kept walking. A woman, drunk, shouted abuse at the door of a newsagent's; a voice answering her threatened to call the police. The woman staggered over to me. I smelled alcohol on her breath, and saw the unhealthy nicotine yellow of her face, the straggling dark hair flecked with grey.

'Could you give me some money? They won't give me cigarettes.' It was a wheedling voice. I handed her the pound coin and fled.

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