

‘Your primitive boyfriend has arrived.’

Marco’s voice broke into Carole’s reading, his announcement coming to her on a gust of stale tobacco.

She looked up. ‘I wish you wouldn’t keep calling him that.’ She marked her place, put her book in her apron, and went to greet her customer.

He had come in quietly, as always, and taken his place in the corner by the spiral stairs. Tall and gaunt, he carried his years well. He moved briskly and gracefully. He wore his dark blue suit: a little less sombre than his other suit. He smiled as she approached.

‘Ah, Carole, I do hope I find you in good health?’

‘Fine.’ she said. ‘The usual?’

‘Yes, I think so. The usual, please. But I will also take one of your bilberry buns as a pudding, if I may.’

‘Such extravagance!’ said Carole. ‘You’ll be putting sugar in your tea next.’

She went back to the bar. Marco had heard the order and was already in the kitchen frying sausages. At this time of day, half past ten, the breakfast rush was long gone. On alternate Wednesdays, her primitive friend came in for the *Beggar’s Breakfast*. He had beans, bacon, two fried eggs, two sausages, black pudding, fried bread (no mushrooms) and a pot of strong tea. And a chat afterwards.

Carole had worked in the *Beggar’s Bistro* for almost five years. The Bistro, a cheap caff by day and a poncy restaurant in the evenings, took up the ground floor of an old chapel. A firm of architects used the top floor. Where once there had been a vestry, storage space and an office there was now a kitchen. The pulpit and organ had been replaced by a bar. The shelves that had once held bibles and hymn books now supported bread baskets and wines. The wooden frames that had once announced hymn numbers, now served as the specials board displaying *Beggar’s Best*.

Two rows of cast iron pillars, that had supported the gallery of the chapel, now held up a false ceiling and, above that, the floor of the architects’ studio. Around each pillar there was a substantial shelf and a group of grubby wooden bar stools. Around On the two long side walls, the pews had been converted into rows of booths for diners.

Near the main door there was a spiral staircase in ornate ironwork. It no longer went anywhere, just disappeared into the false ceiling. It could not be removed because, said one of the architects, ‘That’s structural, that is.’

Next to the spiral was an awkward corner with room for a table for one. Here the old man sat on Wednesday mornings and ate a hearty, heart-threatening breakfast.

Back at the bar Carole got back to her book for a while until Marco gave her a shout: ‘Primitive grub’s up.’

‘Don’t be rude. He’ll hear you.’

Taking the large teapot and mug on a tray, with the big breakfast platter, she carried them over to the customer.

‘I fear you have forgotten the bilberry bun,’ he said, as she set the food down.

‘You only get your blueberry muffin if you eat up all your first course.’ She winked. ‘What are you reading today?’

He held up his book.

It was wrapped in brown paper that had been used again and again. The creases he had made for previous books were in the wrong places for the current one. On the cover were several book titles – in beautiful copperplate. The titles were upside down or sideways depending on how the paper had been folded for the earlier books. He pointed to the one title that was not crossed out: *Commentary on Revelation. Isaac Newton.*

‘And what are *you* reading today?’ He asked.

She took the book from her apron pocket and showed him: *The Physics of Angels.* It was a deep blue paperback from the Oxfam shop, two doors along, and destined to return there.

She left him to his breakfast and went back to her post at the bar. Marco exuded a heady brew of odours for company: a strange mixture of Balkan Sobranie, sweat, cooking fat, and another, more herbal substance.

Marco nudged her: ‘Why are you so matey with the smelly old sod?’

‘I’m trying to read. And he’s not smelly. He wears old clothes, but he’s cleaner than you. And you’re supposed to be in the kitchen, so piss off and let me read.’

When she had first arrived at the Bistro, Marco had tried to chat her up. He had long ago given up on that project, but still treated her with familiarity. It was as if his rich fantasies of bedding her – which he sometimes related to her with gusto – made him feel entitled to intimacy. He wasn’t really a Marco. He was born in Batley and had been given the name Martin Oldroyd. In his teens he decided that Marco di Pietro would give him ‘a better chance with the women.’

Carole had come to the Bistro when she had just graduated. She was wondering what to do next and needed a temporary job to put food on the table. Her wondering went on for a couple of years. After the first two years she had found a friend, Sal, who managed the Oxfam shop, and they lived together in a flat above the old books.

What could she do with an indifferent degree in Human Sciences from a low rated polytechnic? The course booklet had promised lucrative work in management: ‘Students will graduate with a thorough grounding in operations research, psychology, sociology, politics and economics providing a launch pad for a dynamic career of leadership in a wide range of arenas.’

She chose the course because she liked the sound of *Human Science*, as oppose to science at school, which was dull, dull, dull. The course had not worked out well. She never felt grounded in anything. She copied screeds of stuff from big textbooks into her assignments and essays. She got poor grades and just scraped through the exams. She never knew where to concentrate her effort and her tutors had no advice, using tutorials and lectures to attack each other's courses.

After a year or two at the Bistro she realised it was all she really wanted. She liked the human company and, once she had frozen out the amorous Marco, she felt settled. She had been here six years now, the John Major years, working her way up from temporary waiter to catering manager.

Working at the Bistro offered busy hours, lots of friends, and some quiet times for reading. With its big carved sign above the front door – *Primitive Methodist Chapel 1879* – the Bistro had become home.

Carole looked over and saw her customer had finished eating. He had gone back to reading. She cleared his table and then picked out the biggest, freshest and juiciest of the blueberry muffins and took it over to him.

'Is it a good book?' They both said, simultaneously. They laughed at the collision and then paused.

'Oh, please Carole, ladies first. Tell me about your guardian angels? How are the angels?'

'Not too good really. I can't understand any of the physics and the angels are all sentimental slop.' She sat down.

'Then why did you choose the book?'

'Sal at the Oxfam shop said it was brilliant. I bought it to please her, really. Sal's the only angel I want.'

He smiled. Long ago she had revealed her preferences to him. He had been commiserating with her over Marco's coarseness and told her 'A pretty young girl like you will surely find a nice young gentleman soon. Someone who will treat you with the proper respect.' She had chuckled and said she preferred women.

After a shocked pause, and a grave shake of his grey head, he had simply said: 'Ah, I see. Well. So much has changed. So much has changed.'

She had shocked herself, too. She was usually evasive about her private life. She had surprised herself: declaring her preferences to a retired Primitive Methodist minister. Someone of whom she knew little, at that time, other than his taste in books. She didn't even know his name.

Her candour had caused a rift between them, but only for a short while. He did slowly get used to the idea that she was, as he would say, 'of another persuasion' but even after five years of their regular weekly chats he would occasionally point out 'smart young gentlemen', especially the architects when they came down for coffee. (He never seemed to notice there was a sexy young lady architect too.)

Their contrasting book habits soon brought them back together.

The Methodist's reading consisted of theology and commentaries on the Bible. He didn't need to read the Bible, he knew the King James version by heart: all the New Testament, the Psalms, the major Prophets, and something he called 'The Song'. The Song was his favourite and sometimes he would recite whole chapters of it for her.

'The Song is,' he said, 'about a young gentleman's love for a good young woman – such as yourself. But its real meaning is that it speaks of the love God has for us and which we should have for Him.'

She loved to hear him recite. He spoke quietly, gazing at mostly empty pews. His voice had a rhythm and gentleness which filled her head. It was the Good Book to him, but to her it was dreamy poetry about stars and kings, about lovers and country ways.

Carole's reading was, like her degree course, hopelessly scattered. She read books about nature, gory thrillers, romantic tales of love, murders, poetry and history, horrors, astrological guides, plus whatever Sal recommended, and some ideas of her own. (The Oxfam shop also supplied most of Carole's clothes. Books, clothes, ideas: all uncoordinated, all unrelated, all second hand.)

In their quiet chats she eventually learned a lot about the preacher's life. He had attended this very chapel as a child and as a youth. Then he had spent a few years at a Bible College in Pennsylvania, where he was found to have a gift for languages. He had learned to read Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin.

As a minister he came back to this same chapel. He had married, but they had not had children and his wife died after only ten years of marriage. 'She was a Harrison, you know. Yes, I married Abigail Harrison. We had ten wonderful years. Years full of song.' He smiled wistfully whenever he spoke of Abigail.

He had loved his chapel, but the congregation dwindled. The older ones had died, but not before they had driven the younger ones away. He had tried to run a lively, interesting Sunday School, but the older ones insisted on being Sunday school teachers. (He called them 'the Prims'. That was what everyone had called the Primitive Methodists, including the Prims themselves.)

He told her sadly of the friction between his people and the main Methodist Church. The two churches had united in the 1930's and he, as one of the youngest ministers, had greeted the merger with optimism. At first his congregation had tried to ignore the merger. Later they became bitter, blaming the merger for all their ills – even the leaky roof. This bitterness formed the main theme of their Sunday School lessons. It was not surprising the children left as soon as they became teens.

Carole, often without knowing it, told her minister much about herself. He always asked about her books: what she liked in them, what she didn't. And he asked about her childhood, her schooling, her plans and dreams. (She had lots of dreams, but no plans.)

She told him of her alcoholic father and the mother she had not seen or heard of for ten years. It turned out that she and the Methodist had both been only children. And it was likely that neither would have children of their own. For her, children were a nuisance she could do without. For him, children would have been ‘glorious but, sadly, it was not the Lord’s will.’ He and Carole were two orphans with little in common other than a lonely love of books.

He briefly shared her succession of brief interests. He worked hard to understand such themes as aromatherapy, rune stones, Wicca and pyramids. Occasionally he would comment that ‘such things would have been frowned upon by my Church’, but mostly he asked her quick, thoughtful questions. ‘Always seek the substance,’ he would say. He was puzzled that she looked on Tarot cards and the *I Ching* as authorities, and yet she said science was ‘a load of boring old rubbish.’

He liked the bistro best when it was quiet. He had always liked the quiet. When the chapel had still been a chapel, Wednesday mornings had been a short Bible study, with periods of prayer for the elderly in his flock. He came here now to remember them.

Always, after staying an hour and a half, he would leave ‘so as not take up one of your valuable tables.’ He never witnessed the mad bustle of lunch.

The chapel had closed when he retired in the early seventies. The building stood empty for a few years and then became a cheap carpet shop. The architects had taken it over in the early eighties, cleaning the blackened outside, which revealed the stone inscription above the door. By adding a new floor they made the upper gallery into a well-it studio. The now gloomy, lower rooms they leased out as a bar.

Sometimes the preacher would miss a Wednesday, and Carole would miss him. He always told her in advance. He would be ‘off to visit old friends around the country. Old camp friends. Prims. Old relics, much like myself.’

‘*Camp* friends?’ Carole asked.

‘Oh yes, we always had an annual camp. Until the war. The war changed a lot of things. The camps were wonderful events. Living and eating in common. Hymn singing, testimonies, Bible studies. The younger ones could meet up and play games. There were barn dances in the evenings. In the stricter families it was the only way for boys and girls to meet.’ His eyes twinkled with memories.

When he didn’t come for a couple of weeks Carole didn’t worry at first. This time he must have forgotten to tell her, but he would be visiting his camp friends. (How glad she was that Marco had never heard *that* phrase from his reminiscences!)

But then two weeks became two months, and she became concerned. She wondered where he had got to but, not knowing his name, she didn’t know where to start. And two months became four.

‘What are you moping about?’ asked Marco, one Wednesday morning.

‘I’m wondering where my book man has got to.’

‘Probably popped his clogs. He looked ready for it.’ Marco launched into Python territory: ‘He is no more, he has ceased to be, ‘e’s expired and gorn to meet ‘is maker, ‘e’s a stiff, bereft of life ...’

And there he stopped. Tears were streaming quietly down Carole’s cheeks. Even Marco could not be so crude as to parrot any more of the sketch. He edged towards her and put a tentative hand on her arm. She shrugged him off.

‘Sod off Marco. Leave me alone. He was *my* friend. You were always rotten about him.’ She dabbed at her face with a serviette. Marco slunk back to his murky kitchen.

A few weeks later the Bistro’s owner decided on a makeover. They asked her to take three weeks off while the new look was installed but they were emphatic that she would be welcomed back once things had settled. Unfortunately, they said the same thing to Marco.

The grubby barstools were replaced with chrome stools. The old wooden tables and pews were sold. (Apparently carved pews were valuable.) New, plastic tables arrived in garish colours. A new sign went up over the front door. It shouted ‘*Beggar’s Bistro*’ in vile-green lights. The lights were mounted on a navy blue board, completely covering the primitive inscription.

The customers didn’t change, so Carole still liked the place.

A few more months passed and, on a grey wintry day, a letter came to Carole’s flat, from a solicitor in Sheffield. She had to read it a couple of times – ‘seeking the substance’ – before she worked out what it meant. The key sentence said: ‘Following the death of the Rev. Jared Cawfield, it is our duty as executors, to send you the enclosed cheque.’

£2,000 was to be sent to Miss Carole Dobbie ‘as thanks for so many enjoyable conversations about the Good Book.’ The letter said it was his only personal bequest and the rest of his modest estate had gone to a Methodist charity. She hadn’t known his name, and yet he knew her name *and* the address of the flat above the Oxfam shop.

‘Well,’ she thought, ‘£2,000 will be enough for me to tempt Sal. We can go on a beach holiday together.’

*Jared*. A name she had never seen before. If only Jared was here now. He could tell her what language his name came from, and what it meant.

But that was behind her now. Sal would be the name for the future.

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