
Opening Extract from...

A Time of Love and Tartan

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A TIME OF LOVE AND TARTAN

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This is for Caroline Hahn and Richard Neville Towle

1

An Invitation to the Elephant House

When Pat Macgregor received an invitation from Bruce Anderson to meet him for coffee at the Elephant House on George IV Bridge, her first reaction was to delete it. That is one of the great advantages of electronic communications – one can simply delete them. And one can do the same to people – in their electronic incarnation, of course; at the press of a button, or the equivalent, one can send them off into some vast soup of disassembled digital data, reducing them to floating ones and zeroes, consigned to a Dantean world of echoes, a shadowy underworld of fading impulses.

And that, thought Pat, was the fate that Bruce so richly deserved. A few years earlier he had played with her affections, as he had toyed with those of so many other young women, believing that to pay attention to this rather shy young student of art history was to confer on her a benison for which, if she knew anything about the world, she should be profoundly grateful. The expression *God's gift to women* came into all this – somewhere. It was usually uttered sarcastically, as in *He thinks he's God's gift to women*, but in Bruce's case this was exactly what he did think of himself. In his view he was one of those people who existed to give pleasure to others – not through anything he actually did – although that, of course, entered into it – but simply by being.

Auden said that the blessed had no reason to care from what angle they were regarded, having nothing to hide. This was true of Bruce: whether you looked at him from the front, the back, or from either side, the inescapable conclusion was

that he was egregiously good-looking. As he pointed out to Catriona, a young woman with whom he once visited Florence, "There's a statue of my double in this city, you know."

She had looked puzzled. "Your double, Bruce? Here in Florence?"

Bruce smirked. "Yes, right here. Would you like to see it?"

She nodded. This was some sort of game, she suspected; but then Bruce was so playful. That was one of the things that attracted her to him – his playfulness. That and, of course, the way he made a girl feel special; now that was a very considerable talent. And then there was his hair gel, that strange, clove-scented potion that tickled her nose when she smelled it, and added, in such a curious way, an erotic charge to the most mundane of situations.

Bruce and Catriona had already visited the Uffizi and had stood for some minutes before Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* before Bruce said, "That's Venus, you know. That's her standing in the shell."

Catriona nodded. "She's very beautiful, isn't she?"

Bruce thought about this for a few moments before he replied. "Her neck's a bit long, but, yes, she's beautiful all right." Then, after a short pause, he had observed, "Beauty's an interesting thing, isn't it? You either have it, or you don't. And that's all there is to it."

Catriona looked at Bruce. He returned her gaze with all the confidence of one who knew that he stood on the right side of the divide he had just described.

That was in the Uffizi; now they found themselves in the Galleria dell'Accademia, looking up at Michelangelo's great masterpiece, the towering statue of David.

"There," said Bruce. "Feast your eyes on that."

The contemplation of Michelangelo's David is not easy for everybody, but Catriona looked.

"Lookalike?" whispered Bruce.

She stared at the line of David's nose and brow: it was undoubtedly Bruce. Her eye followed the sweep of his arms and the musculature of his torso. And she had to admit it: Bruce could have been Michelangelo's young model.

"I don't tell everybody about this," confided Bruce. "But I remember when I first saw a photograph of David, I thought: 'Jeez, that's me.' I was about sixteen at the time. In Crieff. I was at Morrison's, you know, and one of the girls in the class stuck a picture of David up in a corridor and wrote underneath it *Bruce Anderson*. It was so immature, but somehow …"

Pat, of course, had soon detected Bruce's narcissism. But in her state of infatuation – for that, she acknowledged, was what it was – she had persuaded herself that his self-obsession was a harmless quirk, a hangover from adolescence, a passing phase. After all, there were plenty of young females who were just as fascinated by their appearance, spending hours in front of the mirror. It was more unusual amongst males, perhaps, but what was sauce for the goose should surely be sauce for the gander. If women were to indulge themselves in the contemplation of their own beauty, then why should men not do the same?

For a few months, she had circled Bruce, caught in his gravitational field as a moon might be in that of a planet, until at last she managed to extricate herself. When that happened, her father's relief at her escape had been palpable. "Men like that are very dangerous," he said to her. "The only thing to do is to tear yourself away. Believe me – I've seen it in so many of my patients."

Pat's father, Dr Macgregor, a self-deprecating and scholarly man, was a psychiatrist, and was particularly close to his daughter. He and Pat's mother had divorced after she had gone off to restore a walled garden in Perthshire and had never returned. He had done nothing to deserve the desertion, but had been generous in his response. "Your mother has found

herself elsewhere," he explained to Pat. "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*, as Candide (I think) pointed out. The important thing is her self-fulfilment – that's all that counts."

But there was something else that counted for him, and that was Pat's own happiness. He doted on his daughter and when he realised that she had taken up with Bruce, he had been tipped into depression. At the end of Pat's affair with Bruce – an end that he, at least, had realised was inevitable – he had tried to explain to her that however low she might feel after the break-up, it was as nothing when compared with the risk she would take in staying with him.

And that was why, when she received this invitation to meet Bruce in the Elephant House, Pat said nothing about it to her father. And it was also why she almost deleted it from her e-mail in-box without a reply. Almost, but not quite: she moved the cursor to hover over the delete symbol, hesitated, and then moved it to *Reply*.

"See you there," she wrote. She added no emoticon – for what emoticon is there to express anticipation of the sort she was feeling?

2

On George IV Bridge

Pat arrived at the Elephant House before Bruce. She had not planned it that way: he had suggested ten-thirty in the morning, and she had lingered slightly in Forrest Road so as to be at the café at a quarter to eleven. This was a stratagem to show him that she was not at his beck and call, and that even if she had agreed to meet him, she was not that eager to do so. It failed, however, as Bruce did not get there until shortly after eleven.

When she found that he was yet to arrive, she briefly toyed with the idea of leaving. To do so would at least be to heed the advice – even if rather tardily – of her friend, Janice, with whom she had discussed Bruce's invitation.

Janice's views were very clear. "Don't," she counselled. "Just don't."

"I'm only going to meet him for coffee …"

Pat was not allowed to finish. "Coffee? You know what coffee leads to?" Her friend uttered the word *coffee* as one might utter *cocaine*, as if a whole hinterland of warning, of decline, of Hogarthian dissipation lay behind the word.

"You see," Janice continued, "you should never – *never* – take up with an ex. Everybody knows that. Everybody. *Everybody*." Janice had a way of repeating words, or verbally italicising them, that added a certain melodramatic force to what she said.

"Do they?"

"Of course they do. The reason why an ex tries to get in touch is always – *always* – to get something from you. Never

– never – to *give*. So the only thing to say to an ex is: you're *history!* You're the *distant past!*"

Pat had wondered whether there might not be cases where an ex merely wanted to meet as … dare she say it? … a friend.

No. Janice was adamant on that. "As a *friend?* Pat, get real. Men don't do *friendship*."

"Oh, come on. There are plenty of men who do friendship."

Janice shook her head. "But not exes. *Exes* do dependence. They do recrimination. They do insincere attempts to get you back temporarily because they need a partner for a ball or something like that. Or to ask for *money*. That's what exes do, Pat, and if you go to meet this guy, this *Bruce*, at the Elephant House then you're toast. You're on a plate. *Bruschetta*."

Pat had wavered, and had almost taken Janice's advice, but had eventually decided to meet Bruce in spite of it. The whole point of seeking advice, at least for some, is to get somebody to confirm what you have already decided to do, and Pat had decided that she would meet Bruce. It would just be for coffee, and it would be a single meeting. If he asked her out, she would come up with some reason for saying no. She could even use that time-honoured pretext of having to wash her hair. That was an excuse that was still occasionally used as a signal to a man that he had no chance, and was, in a way, the ultimate put-down. Even Bruce, she felt, would understand that. And yet … and yet … did she really want to wash her hair?

She found a table at the back of the café, near the window. From there, looking out over Candlemaker Row, she saw the roofs of the Grassmarket and, against the skyline, the Castle. The café itself was busy; it attracted a young crowd, a mixture of locals, students and others, with a chattering presence of foreign teenagers. Pat was at an age where she was unaccustomed to feeling older than those around her, but here she did. She was now twenty-five, the point at which eighteen-

and nineteen-year-olds suddenly start to look straight through one. Invisibility to the young, of course, is a quality that grows slowly: by thirty, one is beginning to get fainter; by forty, one is starting to disappear; and by fifty the metaphorical hill has been crossed and one is simply no longer there.

This manifested itself in the conversation that was taking place at a neighbouring table between a boy and a girl of eighteen or nineteen. They seemed oblivious to Pat's presence only a few feet away and well within earshot, and were discussing the slovenly habits of the boy's absent flat-mate.

"His room stinks," he said.

"He stinks," she agreed.

"I can't stand it when people stink. You know, we owe it to other people not to stink. It's a sort of …"

"Civic duty?"

"Yup. Don't stink. You'd think people would get it, wouldn't you? After all, which part of *don't stink* doesn't he understand?"

Pat stared out of the window, trying to insulate herself from this unwelcome exchange. Why had Bruce contacted her? Did he want to ignite old fires? She would not allow that. She simply would not. She knew that he was not good for her and anyway, she was no longer interested in the sort of short-term relationship that Bruce went in for. But what if he had changed? What if he had matured and was now prepared for longer-term commitment? What then? Could she see herself with him again, giving him a second chance? People did change; they grew up, they stopped being selfish, they thought more of other people's feelings. Sometimes in the case of males this change happened quite late – at twenty-eight, and even beyond; or so she had read. In fact, she had seen something in a magazine recently that suggested that some men did not mature – fully mature – until they were well into their thirties. Bruce could be one of those, perhaps. He was now

twenty-eight or thereabouts, or was he even thirty?

Her train of thought was again disturbed by the conversation at the neighbouring table.

"You know what? He hardly ever changes his socks. No, I'm not making this up, but I think he wears them for four or five days and then he leaves them lying on the floor. He has these ghastly trainers – you should see them, you'd want to throw up, I swear you would."

"He's disgusting. How can you bear to live with him? Why don't the rest of you throw him out?"

"He owns the flat."

"Oh. Well, I suppose that makes it different."

"Yes, it does."

Pat smiled. The world was a difficult place. One had to hold one's nose; metaphorically, of course, but sometimes otherwise too.

3

Bruce Irritates Pat, But Only to an Extent

"Patikins!"

She looked up to see Bruce standing at the end of the table, smiling at her. Her irritation at being addressed by the childish soubriquet was intense, but did not last for more than a few seconds. One had to forgive Bruce – it was impossible to be angry with somebody like him, with his clove-scented hair gel, his narcissism, his incorrigibility, his breezy self-confidence, his propensity to infantilise the names of others …

He bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. There was a strong scent of cloves.

"I know I'm late," he said, as he sat down opposite her at the table. "But I knew you'd wait."

Pat frowned. How did Bruce know that she would wait? Was she the sort of person who could be expected to wait because she had nothing better to do – or, because even if she would not normally wait, she would always wait for Bruce? To paraphrase Charles de Gaulle, who said – to those who urged him to take action against the inflammatory rhetoric of Jean-Paul Sartre – that one did not imprison Voltaire; one does not stand up Bruce, no matter how late he may be.

But she simply could not let him imagine that she had nothing better to do than sit in the Elephant House and wait for him.

"I was about to go," she said. She wanted to sound firm, but the words came out almost apologetically.

"Where?" he asked casually. "Are you working today?"

Pat helped Matthew in his gallery in Dundas Street, but

only on three days a week.

"No." Again it was not the answer she had intended, but Pat was truthful and whatever the stakes for her self-esteem, she could not tell a bare-faced lie.

"Then that's all right," said Bruce.

It is *not* all right, she thought. It is *not*. But she said instead, "It's good to see you."

Bruce inclined his head, as if to acknowledge an act of homage. Of course it was good to see him; he had been good to see for as long as he could remember. Even as a small boy, he had attracted admiration for his looks; the cherub had become an angel, had become a youth from a Giotto painting, had become a matinée idol …

"So," he said. "How's Patsy?"

This was a complex offence. Bruce had an irritating habit of referring to people – in their presence – in the third person. That was count one. Then there was the diminution of Pat's name. That was count two. And finally there was the question of a possible play on the word *patsy*, as used in the argot of fraud. The patsy was the victim; was that what Bruce was implying? She decided it was not; if Bruce employed word play, it was not that sophisticated.

"I'm all right," she said.

He reached across the table and patted her hand gently. "Good," he said. "And you were about to ask how I was, weren't you?"

"Was I?"

He winked. "I think you were. Well, there's nothing wrong with me. *Rien*. But I could do with a cup of coffee." He paused. "Are you going to go and get something for yourself?"

Pat seethed. "What do you want?" she asked. This was intended to be a question about the point of their meeting: Bruce clearly wanted something.

"Thanks," said Bruce. "I need to make a phone call. I'll do that while you're fetching. Hope you don't mind. I'll have a *latte* – semi-skimmed, if poss. I'll keep the table."

Pat caught her breath. She wanted to storm out; she wanted to tell this outrageous man that his charms would no longer work on her; that she saw through everything; through the hair gel, through the banter, through every arrogant assumption about female psychology; through the whole, outrageous act – she saw right through it. But instead she asked him whether he took sugar.

"*Nyet*," Bruce replied. "No sugar, thanks." Then he added. "I thought you'd remember that – you know, from the old days."

As she stood at the counter waiting to be served, Pat reflected on what Bruce had just said. It was typical of his solipsism that he should imagine that she would remember every little detail of his preferences. Who would possibly remember, after some years, whether or not somebody else took sugar? If the other person was immensely important, of course, one might remember a little detail like that – if one went to tea with the Pope, for example, one might say, years after the event, *He doesn't take sugar in his coffee, you know*. Or he might make some small remark about something very insignificant, and one would remember that, with all the clarity with which important events can be incised into memory. Such as, *The Pope said that his watch wasn't keeping very good time*. Something like that. To which, of course, the reply might be that the watch of such a personage is calibrated in centuries rather than minutes and hours …

She waited her turn. Two young Japanese women were ahead of her, talking to one another in hushed tones. One of them glanced at Pat and smiled; it was a tiny feeler of empathy, and she felt it touch her briefly, a flicker of warmth. They were strangers to her, far, she thought, from everything that was familiar to them, visiting this café for its literary associations.

They were pilgrims, in a sense, not all that different in their quest from those who went to a religious shrine, to a grotto where some manifestation was said to have occurred a long time ago, or to a river bank where the water was in some way holy and capable of washing away all the pains and cares and grubbiness of our ordinary lives.

She took the tray with two coffees back to the table. Bruce had finished his call, and was tucking his phone back into his pocket.

His tone, when he spoke, was business-like. "Right," he said. "You'll be wondering why I wanted to see you. Here's the inf. I'm going to be setting myself up in business." He smiled at her and told her what he had planned. Then came the proposition. "And I want you, Pat, to work with me. How about it?'

She stared at him. "Are you serious?" she asked. "I mean, as in *serious*?"

4

Those Things for which We're Grateful

While Pat and Bruce had their conversation in the Elephant House, Bertie Pollock (7) sat in his classroom at the Steiner School, looking out of its west-facing window. He knew it faced west, as he had recently acquired a compass from his friend, Ranald Braveheart Macpherson. In turn, Ranald had been given it as a present by his godfather, who had forgotten that he had given exactly the same present the year before, and even the year before that.

"You have this one, Bertie," said Ranald. "It's jolly important to have a compass. If you get lost, you'll always know which direction you should go."

Bertie thanked him effusively. "You're really kind, Ranald," he said. "I wish I could give you something in return, but I don't really have much stuff."

"I'd noticed that," said Ranald. "But don't worry, Bertie, when you get older you might have more stuff and then you can give me some of it. I'll keep a note of what I give you so that you'll know how much stuff you have to give me."

That struck Bertie as perfectly fair, and it made it easier for him to accept the compass that Ranald had passed on. There was a small instruction booklet that came with it, and this explained the points of direction, and gave a short note on magnetic deviation. For Bertie, though, the real point of having a compass was to know which way was west, as west was important to him in more ways than one. Directly west of the Steiner School, only one block away, was George Watson's College, where Ranald Braveheart Macpherson was a pupil

and where Bertie had spent a brief time – not quite a whole day – in a plum-coloured school blazer to which he was not entitled. That day had ended ignominiously when he had been pushed to the ground and roundly kicked on the rugby field – an experience that had prompted him to run back to the Steiner School, where rugby was blessedly unknown.

Beyond Watson's, over Craiglea ridge and a touch more to the south than to the west, lay the Pentland Hills, where Bertie had once gone fishing with his father and where, after they had been lost in a suddenly-descending haar, they had ended up seeking directions at a farmhouse. Had Bertie had his compass, he felt, they would not have been lost in the first place, but that would have meant that he would never have met the farmer's son, Andy, with whom he had established immediate and deep rapport. So a compass, he decided, like so many things in this life, brought both advantages and disadvantages.

Yet the west still called, and called strongly, because in that direction lay what to Bertie was the promised land – Glasgow. No matter how constrained he might feel in Edinburgh; no matter how trapped in the programme of yoga and psychotherapy planned for him by his mother, there was always Glasgow, an irresistible presence – rather like a great lighthouse in the darkness sending out its pulsating message. *This is Glasgow calling* … And surely readier than all others to answer the call of Glasgow was Bertie. Glasgow was freedom; Glasgow was excitement; Glasgow was a yoga- and psychotherapy-free zone.

But in Edinburgh that morning the members of Bertie's class had been given the task of writing a list.

"Lists are very important," said the teacher, Miss Campbell. "We use them for all sorts of purposes. Can anybody think of the sort of lists people make?"

She surveyed the class. There were a few thoughtful

expressions, but no hands went up.

Then Olive put up her hand. "Mummies make lists of things for daddies to do," she volunteered.

Miss Campbell hesitated. The staff tried as far as possible to avoid role stereotypes, but sometimes these seemed so accurately to reflect what happened in real life.

"Well, that's true," she said. "But daddies may also make lists of things for mummies to do, don't you think?"

Olive shook her head. "Not in my experience, Miss Campbell. Mummies don't need these lists because they're the ones who decide what needs to be done. So those things are already in their heads, you see."

Miss Campbell gritted her teeth. She was all for equality in relations between the sexes, but she found it very hard to agree with Olive on anything. She had no desire to encourage her, and agreement might simply urge her on.

A further thought had occurred to Olive. "Of course, I suppose you might not know about that sort of thing, Miss Campbell, since you don't have a husband, do you?"

Miss Campbell closed her eyes and mentally counted to ten – in Gaelic. She had heard about the reason for the dismissal of Elspeth Harmony, who had pinched Olive's ear in full view of the rest of the class. At the time she had been shocked by what seemed a completely unacceptable lapse in professional standards, but now she was not so sure. It must have been immensely satisfying to pinch Olive, and as she thought of this she felt the thumb and index finger of her right hand move slightly apart, as if in readiness for just such an attack. But she could never do that, of course, whatever the provocation, whatever the temptation. And so she finished counting up to ten in Gaelic and then opened her eyes again.

Pansy now joined in. "Of course, somebody might ask her to marry him, Olive." And then to Miss Campbell she said, "Has anybody ever asked you to marry him, Miss Campbell?

And if not, do you think anybody might?"

Bertie turned to Pansy. "You shouldn't ask that sort of thing, Pansy," he said. "And I bet nobody's ever going to ask you or Olive."

This brought a cheer from Tofu. "You bet they won't," he called out. "Unless they're mad, of course. They might get somebody from the loony bin."

Olive drew in her breath. "Did you hear that, Miss Campbell? Did you hear what Tofu just said? He called the Royal Edinburgh Hospital the loony bin."

"You shouldn't say that, Tofu," said Miss Campbell reproachfully.

"Make him stand in the corner," said Pansy. "For two hours, Miss Campbell."

"Shall I hit him for you?" asked Larch.

"I think we need to return to lists," said Miss Campbell. "Let me suggest a list we could all make – and shall do so right now. A list of all the things we're grateful for."

The members of the class exchanged glances, but jotters were taken from desks and pencils readied.

"Number one," wrote Bertie. "Mummy and Daddy." Then he paused. He so wanted to cross out mummy, but he could not; he just could not.