
Friends, Lovers, Chocolate

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The man in the brown Harris tweed overcoat – double-breasted with three small leather-covered buttons on the cuffs – made his way slowly along the street that led down the spine of Edinburgh. He was aware of the seagulls which had drifted in from the shore and which were swooping down onto the cobblestones, picking up fragments dropped by somebody who had been careless with a fish. Their mews were the loudest sound in the street at that moment, as there was little traffic and the city was unusually quiet. It was October, it was mid-morning, and there were few people about. A boy on the other side of the road, scruffy and tousle-haired, was leading a dog along with a makeshift leash – a length of string. The dog, a small Scottish terrier, seemed unwilling to follow the boy and glanced for a moment at the man as if imploring him to intervene to stop the tugging and the pulling. There must be a saint for such dogs, thought the man; a saint for such dogs in their small prisons.

The man reached the St Mary's Street crossroads. On the corner on his right was a pub, the World's End, a place of resort for fiddlers and singers; on his left, Jeffrey Street curved round and dipped under the great arch of the North Bridge. Through the gap in the buildings, he could see the flags on top of the Balmoral Hotel: the white-on-blue cross of the Saltire, the Scottish flag, the familiar diagonal stripes of the Union Jack. There was a stiff breeze from the north, from Fife, which made the flags stand out from their poles with pride, like the flags on the prow of a ship ploughing into the wind. And that, he thought, was what Scotland was like: a small vessel pointed out to sea, a small vessel buffeted by the wind.

He crossed the street and continued down the hill. He walked past a fishmonger, with its gilt fish sign suspended over the street, and the entrance to a close, one of those small stone passages that ran off the street underneath the tenements. And then he was where he wanted to be, outside the Canongate Kirk, the high-gabled church set just a few paces off the High Street. At the top of the gable, stark against the light blue of the sky, the arms of the kirk, a stag's antlers, gilded, against the background of a similarly golden cross.

He entered the gate and looked up. One might be in Holland, he thought, with that gable; but there were too many reminders of Scotland – the wind, the sky, the grey stone. And there was what he had come to see, the stone which he visited every year on this day, this day when the poet had died at the age of twenty-four. He walked across the grass towards the stone, its shape reflecting the gable of the kirk, its lettering still clear after two hundred years. Robert Burns himself had paid for this stone to be erected, in homage to his brother in the muse, and had written the lines of its inscription: This simple stone directs Pale Scotia's way/To pour her sorrows o'er her poet's dust.

He stood quite still. There were others who could be visited here. Adam Smith, whose days had been filled with thoughts of markets and economics and who had coined an entire science, had his stone here, more impressive than this, more ornate; but this was the one that made one weep.

He reached into a pocket of his overcoat and took out a small black notebook of the sort that used to advertise itself as waterproof. Opening it, he read the lines that he had written out himself, copied from a collection of Robert Garioch's poems. He read aloud, but in a low voice, although there was nobody present save for him and the dead:

Canongait kirkyaird in the failing year

Is auld and grey, the wee roseirs are bare,

Five gulls leem white agin the dirty air.

Why are they here? There's naething for them here

Why are we here oursels?

Yes, he thought. Why am I here myself? Because I admire this man, this Robert Fergusson, who wrote such beautiful words in the few years given him, and because at least somebody should remember and come here on this day each year. And this, he told himself, was the last time that he would be able to do this. This was his final visit. If their predictions were correct, and unless something turned up, which he thought was unlikely, this was the last of his pilgrimages.

He looked down at his notebook again. He began to read out loud. The chiselled Scots words were taken up by the wind and carried away:

Strang, present dool

Ruggs at my hairt. Lichtlie this gin ye daur:

Here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the mool.

Strong, present sorrow

Tugs at my heart. Treat this lightly if you dare:

Here Robert Burns knelt and kissed the soil.

He took a step back. There was nobody there to observe the tears which had come to his eyes, but he wiped them away in embarrassment. Strang, present dool. Yes. And then he nodded towards the stone and turned round, and that was when the woman came running up the path. He saw her almost trip as the heel of a shoe caught in a crack between two paving stones, and he cried out. But she recovered herself and came on towards him, waving her hands.

'Ian. Ian.' She was breathless. And he knew immediately what news she had brought him, and he looked at her gravely. She said, 'Yes.' And then she smiled, and leant forward to embrace him.

'When?' he asked, stuffing the notebook back into his pocket.

'Right away,' she said. 'Now. Right now. They'll take you down there straight away.'

They began to walk back along the path, away from the stone. He had been warned not to run, and could not, as he would rapidly become breathless. But he could walk quite fast on the flat, and they were soon back at the gate to the kirk, where the black taxi was waiting, ready to take them.

'Whatever happens,' he said as they climbed into the taxi, 'come back to this place for me. It's the one thing I do every year. On this day.'

'You'll be back next year,' she said, reaching out to take his hand.

On the other side of Edinburgh, in another season, Cat, an attractive young woman in her mid-twenties, stood at Isabel Dalhousie's front door, her finger poised by the bell. She gazed at the stonework. She noticed that in parts the discoloration was becoming more pronounced. Above the triangular gable of her aunt's bedroom window, the stone was flaking slightly, and a patch had fallen off here and there, like a ripened scab, exposing fresh skin below. This slow decline had its own charms; a house, like anything else, should not be denied the dignity of natural ageing – within reason, of course.

For the most part, the house was in good order; a discreet and sympathetic house, in spite of its size. And it was known, too, for its hospitality. Everyone who called there – irrespective of their mission – would be courteously received and offered, if the time was appropriate, a glass of dry white wine in spring and summer and red in autumn and winter. They would then be listened to, again with courtesy, for Isabel believed in giving moral attention to everyone. This made her profoundly egalitarian, though not in the non-discriminating sense of many contemporary egalitarians, who sometimes ignore the real moral differences between people (good and evil are not the same, Isabel would say). She felt uncomfortable with moral

relativists and their penchant for non-judgementalism. But of course we must be judgemental, she said, when there is something to be judged.

Isabel had studied philosophy and had a part-time job as general editor of the Review of Applied Ethics. It was not a demanding job in terms of the time it required, and it was badly paid; in fact, at Isabel's own suggestion, rising production costs had been partly offset by a cut in her own salary. Not that payment mattered; her share of the Louisiana and Gulf Land Company, left to her by her mother – her sainted American mother, as she called her – provided more than she could possibly need. Isabel was, in fact, wealthy, although that was a word that she did not like to use, especially of herself. She was indifferent to material wealth, although she was attentive to what she described, with characteristic modesty, as her minor projects of giving (which were actually very generous).

'And what are these projects?' Cat had once asked.

Isabel looked embarrassed. 'Charitable ones, I suppose. Or eleemosynary if you prefer long words. Nice word that – eleemosynary ... But I don't normally talk about it.'

Cat frowned. There were things about her aunt that puzzled her. If one gave to charity, then why not mention it?

'One must be discreet,' Isabel continued. She was not one for circumlocution, but she believed that one should never refer to one's own good works. A good work, once drawn attention to by its author, inevitably became an exercise in self-congratulation. That was what was wrong with the lists of names of donors in the opera programmes. Would they have given if their generosity was not going to be recorded in the programme? Isabel thought that in many cases they would not. Of course, if the only way one could raise money for the arts was through appealing to vanity, then it was probably worth doing. But her own name never appeared in such lists, a fact which had not gone unnoticed in Edinburgh.

'She's mean,' whispered some. 'She gives nothing away.'

They were wrong, of course, as the uncharitable so often are. In one year, Isabel, unrecorded by name in any programme and amongst numerous other donations, had given eight thousand pounds to Scottish Opera: three thousand towards a production of Hansel and Gretel, and five thousand to help secure a fine Italian tenor for a Cavalleria Rusticana performed in the ill-fitting costumes of nineteen thirties Italy, complete with brown-shirted Fascisti in the chorus.

'Such fine singing from your Fascisti,' Isabel had remarked at the party which followed the production.

'They love to dress up as fascists,' the chorus master had responded. 'Something to do with only being in the chorus, I suspect.'

This remark had been greeted with silence. Some of the Fascisti had overheard it.

‘Only in the most attenuated way,’ the chorus master had added, looking into his glass of wine. ‘But then again, perhaps not. Perhaps not.’

‘Money,’ said Cat. ‘That’s the problem. Money.’

Isabel handed Cat a glass of wine. ‘It invariably is,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ Cat went on. ‘I suppose that if I were prepared to offer enough I would be able to get somebody suitable to stand in for me. But I can’t. I have to run it as a business, and I can’t make a loss.’

Isabel nodded. Cat owned a delicatessen just a few streets away, in Bruntsfield, and although it was successful, she knew that the line between profitability and failure was a narrow one. As it was, she had one full-time employee to pay, Eddie, a young man who seemed to be on the verge of tears much of the time, haunted, thought Isabel, by something which Cat could not, or would not, speak about. Eddie could be left in control for short periods, but not for a week it seemed.

‘He panics,’ said Cat. ‘It gets too much for him and he panics.’

Cat explained to Isabel that she had been invited to a wedding in Italy and wanted to go with a party of friends. They would attend the wedding in Messina and then move north to a house which they had rented for a week in Umbria. The time of year was ideal; the weather would be perfect.

‘I have to go,’ said Cat. ‘I just have to.’

Isabel smiled. Cat would never ask outright for a favour, but her intention was transparent. ‘I suppose ...’ she began. ‘I suppose I could do it again. I rather enjoyed it last time. And if you remember, I made more than you usually do. The takings went up.’

This amused Cat. ‘You probably overcharged,’ she said. And then a pause, before she continued: ‘I didn’t raise the issue to get you to ... I wouldn’t want to force you.’

‘Of course not,’ said Isabel.

‘But it would make all the difference,’ Cat went on quickly. ‘You know how everything works. And Eddie likes you.’

Isabel was surprised. Did Eddie have a view on her? He hardly ever spoke to her, and certainly never smiled. But the thought that he liked her made her warm towards him. Perhaps he might confide in her, as he had confided in Cat, and she would be able to help him in some way. Or she could put him in touch with somebody: there were people who could help in such circumstances; she could pay for it if necessary.

They discussed the details. Cat would be leaving in ten days' time. If Isabel came for a hand-over day before then, she could be shown the current stock and the order book. Consignments of wine and salamis were expected while Cat was away and these would have to be attended to. And then there was the whole issue of making sure that the surfaces were cleaned – a fussy procedure subject to an entire litany of regulations. Eddie knew all about that, but you had to watch him; he was funny about olives and often put them in containers marked down for coleslaw.

'It will be far more difficult than editing the Review of Applied Ethics,' said Cat, smiling. 'Far more difficult.'

Which might have been true, thought Isabel, although she did not say it. Editing a journal was largely repetitive work: sending letters to reviewers and assessors; discussing deadlines with copy editors and printers. All that was mundane work; reading the papers and dealing with authors was a different matter. That required insight and a large measure of tact. In her experience, the authors of papers which were turned down almost invariably proved resentful. And the more incompetent or eccentric the paper – and there were many of those – the more truculent the disappointed author became. One such author – or his paper – lay on her desk before her at the time. 'The Rightness of Vice': a title which reminded her of a recent book she had reviewed, *In Praise of Sin*. But while *In Praise of Sin* had been a serious investigation of the limits of moralism – and ultimately claimed to be in favour of virtue – 'The Rightness of Vice' had no truck with virtue. It was about the alleged benefits for character of vice, provided that the vice in question was what a person really wanted to do. That was defensible – just – thought Isabel, provided that the vice was a tolerable one (drinking, gluttony, and so on), but how could one possibly argue in favour of the sorts of vices which the author of the paper had in mind? It was impossible, thought Isabel. Who could defend ... She went over in her mind some of the vices explored by the author, but stopped. Even by their Latin names, these vices barely bore thinking about. Did people really do that? The answer, she supposed, was that they did, but she very much doubted that they would expect a philosopher to spring to their defence. And yet here was an Australian professor of philosophy doing just that. Well, she had a responsibility to her readers. She could not defend the indefensible. She would send the article back with a short note, something like: Dear Professor, I'm so sorry, but we just can't. People feel very strongly about these things, you know. And they would blame me for what you say. They really would. Yours sincerely, Isabel Dalhousie.

Isabel put the thought of vice behind her and turned her attention back to Cat. 'It may be difficult,' she said. 'But I think I'll manage.'

'You can say no,' said Cat.

'Can, but shall not,' said Isabel. 'You go to the wedding.'

Cat smiled. 'I'll reciprocate some day,' she said. 'I'll be you for a few weeks and you can go away.'

'You could never be me,' said Isabel. 'And I could never be you. We never know enough about another person to be him or her. We think we do, but we can never be sure.'

'You know what I mean,' said Cat. 'I'll come and live here and reply to your letters and so on while you get away.'

Isabel nodded. 'I'll bear that in mind. But there's no need to think of reciprocation. I suspect that I shall enjoy myself.'

'You will,' said Cat. 'You'll enjoy the customers – or some of them.'

Cat stayed, and they ate a light supper in the garden room, enjoying the last of the evening sun. It was June – close to the solstice – and it never became truly dark in Edinburgh, even at midnight. The summer had been slow to come, but had now arrived and the days were long and warm.

'I've been feeling lazy in this weather,' Isabel remarked to Cat. 'Working in your shop is exactly what I need to wake me up.'

'And Italy is exactly what I need to wind me down,' said Cat. 'Not that the wedding itself should be quiet – anything but.'

Isabel enquired who was getting married. She knew few of Cat's friends, and tended to get them mixed up. There were too many Kirstys and Craigs, Isabel thought; they had become interchangeable in her mind.

'Kirsty,' said Cat. 'You've met her with me once or twice, I think.'

'Oh,' said Isabel. 'Kirsty.'

'She met an Italian last year when she was teaching English in Catania. Salvatore. They fell for one another and that was it.'

For a moment Isabel was silent. She had fallen for John Liamor in Cambridge all those years ago, and that had been it too. She had gone so far as to marry him and had tolerated his unfaithfulness until it had been too much to bear. But all these Kirstys were so sensible; they would not make a bad choice.

'What does he do?' Isabel asked. She half expected Cat not to know; it always surprised her that her niece seemed uninterested in, or unaware of, what people did. For Isabel, it was fundamentally important information if one were even to begin to understand somebody.

Cat smiled. 'Kirsty doesn't really know,' she said. 'I know that'll surprise you, but she says that whenever she's asked Salvatore he's become evasive. He says that he's

some sort of businessman who works for his father. But she can't find out exactly what this business is.'

Isabel stared at Cat. It was clear to her – immediately clear – what Salvatore's father did.

'And she doesn't care?' Isabel ventured. 'She's still prepared to marry him?'

'Why not?' said Cat. 'Just because you don't know what happens in somebody's office doesn't mean that you shouldn't marry them.'

'But what if this ... this office is headquarters of a protection racket? What then?'

Cat laughed. 'A protection racket? Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing to suggest that it's a protection racket.'

Isabel thought that any accusations of ridiculousness were being made in exactly the wrong direction.

'Cat,' she said quietly. 'It's Italy. In the south of Italy if you won't disclose what you do, then it means one thing. Organised crime. That's just the way it is. And the most common form of organised crime is the protection racket.'

Cat stared at her aunt. 'Nonsense,' she said. 'You have an overheated imagination.'

'And Kirsty's is distinctly underheated,' retorted Isabel. 'I simply can't imagine marrying somebody who would hide that sort of thing from me. I couldn't marry a gangster.'

'Salvatore's not a gangster,' said Cat. 'He's nice. I met him several times and I liked him.'

Isabel looked at the floor. The fact that Cat could say this merely emphasised her inability to tell good men from bad. This Kirsty was in for a rude awakening, with her handsome young mafioso husband. He would want a compliant, unquestioning wife, who would look the other way when it came to his dealings with his cronies. A Scotswoman was unlikely to understand this; she would expect equality and consideration, which this Salvatore would not give her once they were married. It was a disaster in the making and Isabel thought that Cat simply could not see it, as she had been unable to see through Toby, her previous boyfriend; he of the Lladró porcelain looks and the tendency to wear crushed-strawberry corduroy trousers. Perhaps Cat would come back from Italy with an Italian of her own. Now that would be interesting.