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THE SALAD OF THE BAD CAFE

Have you noticed there isn't much kissing these days on film? Or in books for that matter. No tentative hand-holding. No delicate touch of a shy finger-tip to another's elbow. Eyes bore into eyes like sexual drills at parties that sound like grog-sodden political seminars waiting for the gut-response . . . and there's plenty of that! . . . and then they're straight into it, a kind of problem in Euclidean anatomy so that there's this fearful assault by rumps thighs breasts . . . and other parts. Now we study it. Very laid-back liberal.

I had this tutor who used to say, 'When Mellors . . . we're all adults here, aren't we students?' . . . pause for light intellectually challenging laugh . . . 'fucked Lady Chatterley, it was not so much a sexual penetration but a symbol for the class struggle on one level and on another the vitalism of nature in *its* continuing resurgent struggle with urbanisation. It was a cosmic act of sex.'

Then this voice said 'cock!' from the back of the class. It wasn't my voice. I wish it had been. But

'Now there,' this tutor type said, 'you make a very –salient – point.'

And Monsieur Paronomasia sniggered like crazy at his own dirt.

At that point I left the web, I left the loom, I took three paces straight out into the corridor/carpark and slammed my motorcycle into outraged life.

I'm a reasonable young man. It puzzles me how I suspect there is some other form of behaviour, nourished as I have been at the nipples of commercial television. For all my twenty years the notion that the world is peopled by thugs and copulators and copulator thugs has seemed a natural and gentle thing. I live with it. And when the old man roars at my slumped figure in the living-room, 'Christ, son, do you have to watch that garbage?', I protest with innocence, 'But Dad, it's coloured garbage!'

When you drop out in the southern hemisphere, there's only one place to go . . . and that's north. In the other half they head south. As my tutor would point out, 'a heliotropic act of submission.' So I'm here with Dinny and Lam, too far north to feel the cosmic waves created by Velveteens and Lady C. If their earth moves . . . and what a disgusting phrase *that* was . . . it can rock academe for all it's worth. I simply don't care. Too far out and not drowning but waving. Cheeky!

I had picked up Dinny and Lam almost in passing, somewhere half-way up the coast, in a run-down caravan park with no other stayers, and I'm still not sure why we joined destiny and pushed north together. Dinny wears tank tops, agonising jeans and a neck dangle. He's into vegetables and zen and is very boring. I don't really understand what we're doing up here. There's money chinking somewhere in his background and he only hitches because it's part of the cliché. Lam is a big girl with cocky hips, masses of orangey hair and keener than Lady C. Actually she's a bit wearing, too, with her slam-bam style, thank you ram, but Dinny's not one for nuances and he is more engaged with the early gambits of a relationship intended to stun the sensibilities of those South Yarra money chinkers than he is with her. Cheques keep arriving *poste-restante* making him look like a latter-day remittance man and all the time, o my God, all the time, he talks endlessly about moving across to Malaysia, Singapore, doing the Indian thing. I think he's looking for himself. 'But will you *be* there in Kuala Lumpur, Bali, Isfahan?' I ask.

'Stuff!' he says rudely.

Lam is looking for herself, too, and they try to convince me their search is mine. I agree, but grudgingly, to go with them up the last stretch of coast, flog my bike at a loss and force them to do the final leg by plane.

Slap into midday heat, punchy and sticky.

There we were trailing across the tarmac to the apron where there's a cyclone wire enclosure outside the main room. The terminal was jammed with folk coming, folk going, a potch of shoulderbags and Gucci tourists and alternative society drab. It all comes together here . . . rich Yanks and hippies and Karma

bums and real estate men like Mellors.

Just as we came through the gate into the enclosure, in the middle of the crowd I saw this old couple saying goodbye. He was a tall scraggy fellow but you could sense how his energies flailed away in their bone-trap. His false teeth shifted up and down as he talked and his hair was sparse and grey as a winter lawn. He must have been nearly seventy. But his face was blazing with a smiling concern and he didn't notice a single person except the dumpy old girl he was farewelling. When he kissed her, her pudding hat got knocked askew but neither of them noticed because she wasn't seeing anyone else either and he gave her a long kiss, long for a couple that age, and then talked urgently to her, his hand rubbing anxiously all the time with worried fingers up and down up and down her arm as he bent his smile into hers.

It was such naked affection, so bared, so oblivious, I had to look away. Embarrassing it was. Not a bit like Lady C and Mellors.

'See that couple?' I ask Dinny as we wait for the airport bus.

'Disgusting,' he says, dismissing them.

Later that afternoon we catch this rail-motor into the hills. Dinny tells me there's a kind of Nirvana on the range and a hostel that won't break the bank. The scenery is stunning but half way he gets bored and leaves Lam and me sitting together and goes to join the driver in his little cabin. We're only two rows back but I can still hear him going on with all that old stuff . . . 'a couple of days here, then off to En Gee for a bit. Over to Malaysia then up to India.'

'Look,' I say brightly to Lam. 'Even the gorge is yawning.'

Lam giggles and says, 'I'm glad you've come, Toby,' and gives my hand a squeeze. She hates being ignored for a minute and I suffer her hand to the top of the line where we pile out into a fern-stuffed station. You'd swear Dinny had been there before, he's so geographically confident, loping smartly up the stairs, leading us up the hill, across the road and turning left by the river.

The hostel is a torpid bleached building dog-paddling in mango trees. Even from the road outside in the dusk we can hear the sound of endless piano playing a kind of vegetarian music. Dinny handles everything, finds a housekeeper, books us in and heads for the dining-room. This is so dark I can't see a thing at first, but then the candles on the tables ease my eyes into focus and I can see about twenty kids cramming themselves with pumpkin fritters and bean casserole. Dinny sums up the room with one tactical glance and heads straight for a table where a couple of people are already sitting ('Never pick an empty, Tobe! That way you never meet a soul!) and within minutes we've swapped first names ('Never give a sur-name, Tobe!') and he's taking these two poor guys on safari to EnGee Bali Singapore Calcutta while Lam, who has forgotten my mauled hand, assesses the strangers. Did I say Strangers? That was seconds ago. The piano still putters on and on and now we're close to it, it has the timbre of a loosely strung banjo. But that doesn't faze the character bent over it. Like he won't stop. I think he's making it up as he goes along and I can't really concentrate on my lettuce and cress.

Lam makes a score with one of the two chaps at our table, a prematurely bald gent with lots of tan and chains, so I pretend monstrous interest in the food and the piano and after a while I make out, through the jangling of loose keys and the unintended silences of stuck keys, fragments of Summertime. 'And the livin is easy', Lam is humming beside me, all sexual nudges but leers at bald boy opposite. She hums out of tune and I'm so irritated I get up and go over to the piano where the guy is just taking a break. Jesus! A break. Now at least you can hear the cracking of celery stalks and carrots.

The pianist gazes up at me as if I'm some kind of tone-deaf intruder. He's a cheeky bit of work with a black pony-tail smacking his waist-band, bright alert eyes and lots of gall.

'Know any Ellington?' I ask.

Silence. He smiles at me. The silence extends and his smile crawls all round the room like treacle. Maybe he can't speak. His silence says 'squaresville'. I feel a total goob. And then he says,

'You *like* that sort of music?'

Well, that's a spot of challenge in a meatless world. He's telling me my taste stinks and when I open my mouth, nothing comes.

He smiles a bit more, a bright smile of candid pity, and then he says, 'I don't know that sort of thing, man.' He gets up from the piano stool and he only comes to my shoulder. He smiles again and leaves me standing.

Lam isn't helpful.

'Stirrer,' she says, almost affectionately. 'Wait till you hear that Eastern type music all the way from Malaysia to India. Dinny will tell you all about the twelve note scale.'

Dinny is about to tell me . . . he never needs much clueing . . . when someone begins banging a guitar a shade more tunelessly even than the piano, and moaning some fake folk words over the top of it. Under cover of the noise Baldskull leans across the table towards Lam and says without a blink, 'I think you and I could make it.'

Lam flings her mane back, leans on Dinny's shoulder and laughs.

'I think we could too.'

'I hear that,' Dinny says. 'Tum-tum!' His fingers are grooving on the table surface and he hunches ecstatically to the guitar rhythm so that his head almost vanishes into his shoulders, swinging jazzily left right left *chu-chu-cha-chu-chu-cha*. 'We saw,' he says to Baldhead, '*the* most disgusting thing today.'

'Disgust me,' Baldhead orders indifferently. He's mauling away at Lam's upper arm and his elbow has come to rest amongst some shredded cabbage.

Dinny rolls his eyes in a suffering fashion. He looks as if he's going into a bardic trance. 'This old couple, and like I mean old, man, all crepe, beige and bone, like I say these two olds were practically having it off on the tarmac. Never seen anything like it.'

'Love, man,' Baldhead said. 'We've got to love each other.'

'Not when you're gummed up with Fasteeth and sclerosis. It was like an assault, baby, an aesthetic assault.'

I wish I'd said 'crap' then, but I didn't. I'm still not sure why I'm here. I am less sure, growing more sureless and not waving but . . . well, you know the rest.

It goes on. The guitar keeps thumping, the voice keeps lamenting above it, Dinny nags about aesthetics and Baldhead keeps working away at whatever bits of Lam he can reach. The place is full of carnivores. You don't want to hear all the subordinate clauses of Dinny's terrible grand tour that he examined at least twice more before we picked up our gear and found our dormitories.

'Segregation,' Lam cries, 'Too much.'

'We can fix that,' Dinny says insinuatingly. 'I'm going for a little walk around the spacious estate. The Paradise Gardens.'

'Spot on,' Lam says. 'You come too, Toby. Come into the garden, Tobe. Get with the action.' Oh she's full of quotes, the crazy woman—they're both so full of nods, becks, wreathed quotes, you'd swear you were back in the old groves of—and she elbows me gently but generously in the ribs, singing 'I got plenty of action!'

Poor Lam. I look at her hungry eyes, mouth, body. She's strung like a fiddle.

'Sorry,' I say. 'I'm whacked. Why don't you try that hairless geezer before he's bespoke.'

She wasn't hurt. She thought it a great idea. She went off tangled so close in Dinny they tottered as they went down the hall and I stood there, watching till they came out of the dining-room again and I saw Baldie linked in on her other arm as they headed for the garden.

I shut myself in the washroom and brushed my teeth so hard the gums bled. But I couldn't sleep. Other kids came in and the beds filled up, except for two and I lay there wondering what I was doing there awash with insomnia and raw food. I'm not making judgements, mind you, but everything seemed wrong. Later, maybe two or even three, I heard Dinny crash into bed beside me, heard the sag of another wire mattress farther down the room, and felt my sleepless lids grating against a huge sandy 'why?' Dinny was snoring in a flash and I watched

his inane bland face picked out in starlight, sated with Lam. Or was he simply sated with himself. I don't think he knows what he's doing here either. His lips move only to follow the curves of his heavy breathing and sleepless, I watch him a long time, hearing and not hearing him say 'disgusting'.

Round about six, I slip out of bed, dress, grab my bag and head out of the place down the hill to the railway station. And I know what I'm doing there, holding my cracking skull and watching the station hand sweeping the dust and butts that have gathered under the potted ferns. The ticket office doesn't open till seven so I sit a bit and walk a bit, wondering about a lot of things, having a private vision of a failed next world, too, with all the angeli archangeli wearing black suits/white shoes black shirts/white ties, dark glasses, and fondling harps that turn swift as a blink into sub-machine guns. There's a lot of mafiosi around . . . and I lump Lam and Dinny in with them, thinking, thinking, thinking of Dinny saying 'disgusting' and Lam grabbing the world and that old geezer with his anxious fingers worrying concernedly at the old lady's arm and Dinny and Lam's mouth and the old girl's smile and Lam and the old geezer's fingers and the fingers . . . I can't stop remembering those fingers . . . and that worried concern and her looking up at him, smile into smile, and those anxious fingers rubbing. Rubbing.

I have to admit it. My earth has moved.