

Selfishness must always be forgiven you know because there is no hope of a cure

Last year, another little idiot became infatuated with him. When I say 'little' I refer to both her youth and size. He attracts small, delicate young women just as our birdbath attracts diminutive birds. My husband is like the birdbath in our garden, a lump of old millstone, something redundant that once had a purpose but is now merely ornamental. We were married in name only. Both of us had lost sight of our original attraction to one another, until Tomato Pushing Girl came along.

He invited her for lunch. She pushed a cherry tomato, which was supported by a small leaf of iceberg lettuce, around the plate. She dug the fork handle into the lettuce and perambulated the baby tomato round and round the china edges of the plate as if she were practising pushing a pram around the roads where we lived. It was then I knew it was serious. I watched her and wondered if she could flatter the old goat into late parenthood. He would be sixty-four by the time the child was in primary school. I wanted to ask her:

'Do you have any idea of what it's like to have an elderly father?'

A dry old stick of a man who doesn't have the energy to play ball games with you and thinks it doesn't matter because you are a girl. Thinks he can offer other things, such as intellect, that he can shove information into a child's head like fruit through a sieve, never understanding that an illiterate man who can play in the park is better than an old man with a house full of books. The elderly parent can never make the leap culturally either. He will bang on about the glory of The Beatles, making his daughter into an absurd creature. Even if he is well meaning

and attempts to listen to the child's choice of music and admits that the tune and lyrics are not half bad he will continually hanker for Abbey Road.

Six months ago I did not want Tomato Pushing Girl to have a chance with my husband, but then I met George.

I was in my final year of teaching at the University when George got a job in the department. He came from Greece with a PhD, few publications, but an international award for teaching. He was moved into a corner of my office, a huge room, from which I had fought off all incomers for fifteen years.

'What is with all these lists?' he said, referring to the blackboards, whiteboards and post-it notes on my walls.

'Me and my husband's lives are busy,' I said. 'In order for us to enjoy our downtime we need to be extremely organised.'

He snorted. Within three months it was evident that he was a thief. I asked him why my most promising male student wanted to jump ship, and was now on his supervisory list, a young man that I had spotted and nurtured since the first year of his undergraduate degree.

'Because you patronise and demean people,' he said, 'whereas I am a fair man who looks them in the eye.'

'This is not possible,' I said. 'You cannot change lists.'

'It seems that I can,' he said. 'I went down to admin, using the stairs, and asked Isabel' (he always knew the names of the admin staff) 'to make the necessary changes and she did.'

'Let's go for lunch,' I said, 'and work this out.'

He ordered himself a large glass of the house red. I admonished him, explaining that drinking at lunchtime is very much frowned upon at the University. 'Against the rules.'

'He will never come back to you,' he said, sipping his wine.

'Who?'

'The student.'

'Ah, I thought you meant my husband.' I explained briefly about Tomato Pushing Girl and he listened whilst showing little expression on his face.

'This does not surprise me,' he said. 'I watch you for several months and I see you are a witch.'

And so a friendship was born. During the next few weeks we frequently had lunch together, during which he challenged all that I held dear.

My work ethic: 'You waste your time crouching in the office. Making your ridiculous papers that nobody reads. It's only the teaching that matters. The welfare of the students.'

My choice of long-term partner, after having met him over dinner: 'Self-important and shallow.'

My pension: 'You are hanging around here, giving up your health and what's left of your good years to an institution that does not care for you, all for a few more euros at the end.'

He had a profound influence on me: not on my personality, as you will see in a moment, but on my methodology.

'Stop with your lists. You make me twitchy,' he said.

'What will happen?' I said.

I did what he suggested and the following happened: the dry cleaning was kept at the shop for the eight-week time period allowed and then given to charity with all the other unclaimed garments. I missed a dental appointment, my first non-attendance in twenty years. The dentist himself rang – ‘I thought you had been run over by a bus.’ But the most significant thing that happened was that when I ran into Tomato Girl I had changed a little.

I say ‘ran into’ but I knew she would be at the VC’s University Garden Party because George had put her on the list.

‘You can’t put an undergrad on the list,’ I said. ‘And especially not one from a nonsense subject.’

‘I can put Mickey Mouse on the list.’

As she approached me at the garden party on her delicate white calves, I saw that her dress combined a modern cut with an old-fashioned print. The dress so strongly resembled the flower-patterned curtains of my childhood that looking at the material made me feel sleepy. I let out an indiscreet yawn as she came close. I stopped her polite enquires about my health by telling her in detail about the uncanny resemblance between her frock and the window dressings of my youth. Standing by me she suddenly appeared shorter, as if she were descending into the grass. ‘Are you sinking?’ I asked whilst not holding out a hand.

She said that she was not and that the wedge was a reliable shoe in that it didn’t sink on grass but spread a person’s weight evenly.

‘How fortunate,’ I said, looking at the tightly stretched material of her dress over her stomach, like cling film on a rising loaf.

‘You would like me to sink without a trace, wouldn’t you?’ she said.

‘Where did that come from?’ I asked. ‘I thought we were having a perfectly pleasant conversation.’

‘I’m sorry, I was dreading seeing you but once I caught sight of you I thought I would just get it over with,’ she said. ‘I wasn’t going to come. I don’t know how I got invited.’

I widened my eyes and looked at the ground as if she had made a terrible social blunder.

‘How’s the course going?’ I smiled kindly. She was doing a degree in Drama.

‘Alright, I suppose. I sometimes wonder what I’m doing, opting for classical acting, whether it will lead to work or if it’s all just a waste of time.’

As if we don’t all feel like this on a daily basis when we question our life choices, I thought, but I said nothing and looked at her, again as if she were behaving inappropriately, perhaps suggesting that she give my husband a blowjob, when I was merely inches away.

‘Acting is absurdly competitive,’ I laughed. I knew nothing about acting. ‘I suppose it’s one of those courses where none of the participants will make a living but they still feel compelled to follow their dreams.’

‘I know you think that’s stupid,’ she said.

On the contrary, I thought she exhibited the kind of bravery and zest for life that I had lost long ago. Maybe I’d never possessed it. I certainly envied it in others.

And today, as she stood before me, I could see what my husband saw in her. The honesty coupled with vulnerability. What she didn’t realise of course is that

there is no place for either of those sentiments in a long-term relationship. Both are as unwelcome as cat shit in the garden.

I wasn't bothered about him going, financially. I had always supported myself and would continue to do so. Neither was I concerned about him going in terms of emotions. I had never asked for empathy from him. I had seen clearly from the beginning that he was not able to offer it. It did not come with the package. I wanted him because he was impossible to ruffle. We all know that life is intolerable but he pretended that it wasn't. He was solid and made out that nothing would ever change, that things were set in stone. Women came and went but none threatened our relationship.

'You can have him,' I said.

'He is not yours to give away,' she replied.

'Theoretically he is,' I said. 'And why do you object anyway? Men have given women away to other men throughout history. Think of the marriage service.'

'Is this a game?'

'No.' I told her about the profound effect George had had on me.

'Are you in love with him?'

I wondered why she would think that. He was my guru, certainly, but that was all.

She explained how it was a deep and profound love between her and the millstone. I put my finger to my mouth to shush her. Whenever we talk about love it always sounds absurd, I advised. Better to shut up and get on with it. Only time will tell.

I said he would be free to leave at the weekend. In the meantime he and I would need to edit some lists.

‘Why are you letting him go now?’

‘Nothing is fixed,’ I said. ‘Nothing that exists on paper is unchangeable. I have been on one list, married, and I am about to move to another.’

‘He said you were cold,’ she said.

‘Why is that used as an insult against women?’ I asked. ‘Coldness is neither a positive nor a negative. He loved a cold woman, which is why I worry about you. Still, you too can hop from list to list.’

She turned up at my door six months later. When I saw her burgeoning stomach I realised in my heart that George was right. Lists can be changed. I moved the millstone’s name from the mortgage, detached my name from ‘employment’ with the University and moved it to ‘retirement’. I signed forms to release my pension. Three jumps from paper to paper with no problems. Now I hold my granddaughter, as I call her, in my arms. We watch the TV. We are waiting for a specific advert – a biscuit commercial. ‘Look,’ I say, dangling the child in front of the screen, ‘It’s beautiful, clever Mummy.’ She will be home soon and then she can talk to me about her new job. She works on an artificial street, complete with bank and pub and houses. Although it feels very real when you watch it on television, the buildings are just wooden edifices.