

## Model of Solace

What a sight she is. Bruises everywhere, all over her hands and arms where the nurses have tried and failed to insert needles into battered, collapsing veins.

She has stopped wearing her wig and fragile wisps of dark hair are sprouting from her scalp. She has also given up going to the toilet and at the side of the bed a catheter bag dangles, two-thirds full of amber urine.

I always try to sound cheerful. It pleases me to make the effort: now I'm the one doing the deceiving. Often I toy with the idea of telling her that I know, but I think I get more pleasure out of the pretence, feigning sympathy while all the while hating her. I doubt it would add to her suffering if she knew that I know, so what's the point? It might even give her a twinge of pleasure to recall the satisfaction of finally taking something away from me.

Sometimes, once in a while, I do feel sorry for her. Really sorry. And then I tell myself not to be such a fool. Not after such an act of betrayal.

Her face brightens as I come in to her room.

They are allowed flowers here; not many hospitals do. I suppose these patients are in real need of solace. I place mine on the windowsill alongside the others, already in vases: my last lot of freesias, a little tired now, lilies and roses. In the distance a plane heads into the sunset, making for Heathrow.

'How's it going? You look a lot better than last time.'

'They've changed my bed for a special one. For the pressure sores. It's got air pockets and it shifts me around. But it's really noisy.'

I hand her the copy of *Harper's Bazaar* that I have brought.

'Thank you. I've been dipping into *Hello!* this afternoon.'

'A little light relief.'

There's a creaking, tearing sound and I watch her left knee drop a couple of inches. Her shoulder on the other side digs further into the pillows.

Silence falls. What would one normally say to a terminal patient in hospital? But of course this is not normal. Stick to the practicalities.

'I've brought you a couple of clean nighties. Does anything else need washing?'

One of the most enjoyable aspects of my role as supportive friend is to let myself in to her flat, look through the wardrobe and drawers in her bedroom. Her clothes are expensive nowadays. She has a wonderful collection of scarves by Hermès and Chanel. Once I took a shower in her bathroom, using generous squirts of her Penhaligon's shower gel and then her finest Egyptian cotton towels. She won't be needing them. Last week I opened a bottle of Sauvignon blanc that I found in the fridge and poured myself a glass. But I'm very honourable. I never go there unless she has asked me to, when she needs me to get something.

I glance at her hands and she is wearing a very beautiful gold ring set with an oval turquoise. Her nails are perfect – blood red and glossy. A manicurist must visit. These days hospitals are good at laying on such comforts.

How many years were we friends? More than twenty. The flat we shared in Shoreditch, in the days when ordinary people could live there: we rented it together

after only a week's acquaintance. The start of term at a new school and I had no accommodation lined up beyond a cheap hotel. She, teaching in the same department, was unhappy with her studio and so we joined forces. A harmonious partnership.

After a couple of years she met James, left to get married and move into a conjugal flat, and I found a better job, out of town. But we kept in touch, remained friends and later it turned out that James and David liked each other, too.

Female solidarity strengthened as children appeared. Long calls of baby commiseration led to exchanges of weekends, proper holidays together, finally to a shared cottage in the Dordogne.

Eventually we all ended up in London again. And I was always the one with greater success to show; we always had the smarter car, sometimes two, the roomier house, the more academic children.

Did I ever resent the fact that hers was the better body? Not really, although I remember her one summer, tanned, in a stripy pink and green bikini and, Yes, David was finding it hard to get his eyes to move away from her ripe and luxuriant breasts. We even laughed about it afterwards. Of course any man would have been fascinated, they were so perfect, ravishing in fact.

Today her nightdress fails to disguise the absence of the one that's missing.

'Professor Steiner came to see me this morning. He said they're discontinuing the injections into my spine. They aren't working. But they're carrying on with the more general chemo.'

'That's a bit of a bugger.'

'I can hardly feel my legs now. My right hand is starting to give up, too.'

'At least you can still read.'

'That's actually getting quite difficult. My left eye is wandering. I can't seem to control it properly.'

She raises an immaculate hand and smoothes it back over her scalp. Her expression is unreadable.

'Well, there are other things you can do. Would you like me to bring in some DVDs or music CDs for you to run on your laptop?'

'Oh, I'm quite busy, not bored at all. I can watch TV when I feel like it. And they keep bringing me food. Please don't worry about me. You really don't need to worry at all.'

'Has the food improved? You weren't very happy when you first came in. Would you like me to bring in some snacks? Some nice cakes or something?'

She shakes her head.

'It's really wonderful of you to visit me so often. Kate and Sara come sometimes but no one as regularly as you. I can't tell you how much it means to me.'

She looks up at me from her position of utter vulnerability on the bed and her eyes glaze over with tears. A wave of sympathy floods through me and I find myself wishing her a swift and merciful end. But almost immediately the memory of the email resurfaces and I long for the satisfaction of her protracted and painful death.

'I know we've said we mustn't use email but I've got to tell you,' I read from his Sent box. 'How can I express the unimaginable delight of our love? It just gets better and better. You are sooo inventive. So beautiful. I'm stiff just thinking about the next time. Can't wait for Friday.'

His password had not been hard to guess: the name of our old dog, Bilbo. I had known it for years. Normally his emails were routine and boring.

I decided not to react. To say nothing. His supper appeared on the table as normal every evening for the rest of the week, accompanied by the usual reviews of the day's activities, exchanges of thoughts about the children. I masked my searing bitterness and he sensed nothing.

But on the Friday afternoon I was waiting round the corner from his office, tucked into a doorway to shelter from the rain. Just to see for myself.

A little after half past three he came out, wearing the trenchcoat I got him for his birthday. I shadowed him effectively, I thought, following him to St. James's Park tube and slipping into the crowded carriage next to his. I saw him alight when the train got to Sloane Square and got out, too, only just managing to exit before the doors closed.

I was a dozen paces behind him on the escalator but he paid no attention to the rest of us, focusing I imagine on the indescribable invention of the sex he would be having.

He turned left into Lower Sloane Street and from the other side of the road I saw him stop outside her flat, step up into the porch and ring the bell. Very swiftly the door opened and he disappeared inside.

That was not long before her diagnosis. I have no idea how long they had been seeing each other. Fucking.

I kept the knowledge to myself. Knowledge is power. I had thought that one day I would confront him but actually I've enjoyed watching him grow more and more stressed as the disease progresses. I talk to him about the advance of her illness, making a point of updating him after visits to the hospital, relishing his attempts to seem nonchalant, dispassionately sympathetic while all the time in an agony of dread. I watch him when he doesn't think I'm looking and his unguarded face is bleak. So much now for unimaginable delight.

Funnily enough, the relationship between me and him has swerved into more congenial territory. We confide in each other - Ha Ha - our sex life has spiralled. Is this a coincidence?

'How are you both? How about the children?' she says, no curiosity in her voice.

'Oh, we're all fine. Phoebe has had another promotion at work: they've hinted that she'll be a partner soon. Will's doing really well with his start-up. He's had a lot of interest recently.'

'And David?'

'Oh, you know David. He's always so absorbed in work. Bringing home briefs to look at over the weekend. He's getting some high-profile cases nowadays. But he's really well, actually. It's a funny thing. He's seemed so happy recently, as if some pressure weighing on him had all of a sudden lifted. He's almost like a different person.'

She doesn't manage to clear the devastated look off her face quickly enough.

'That's great,' she says.

'And well . . . How should I put it? It's almost like a second honeymoon, after all these years. A cliché, I know. I don't know where it's all coming from. But well . . . Enough said. You really don't want to hear the salacious details, do you? Maybe you do. Sorry. I'll have to stop there.'

I'm pleased with my rich little chuckle, as if I'm trying to cheer her up with a joke.

A long silence while she leafs through the magazine, not lingering on any of the articles.

'I need you to do something really important,' she says finally.

'Just tell me and I'll do my best.'

'It's my credit card bill. It's tiny, just some flowers I sent for Kate's birthday, but I need to pay it. I can do that easily from my laptop. But I can't remember my password. I can't get into my account. I've tried twice and if I fail a third time it'll lock me out, won't it?'

'Where do you keep the password, then?'

'It's at the flat. I know it seems old-fashioned but I've never kept a list online. It's in an old notebook in the top left drawer of my desk.'

'I can drop in tomorrow. I've been planning to have another wander down the Kings Road.'

'Thank you. I really hate to burden you.'

I wonder how she can keep up the pretence. There she lies, counterfeiting pathetic appreciation of what I'm doing, while her skin still bears the imprint of David's lust. No doubt hating me, too, for the time I still have but she doesn't. For my renewed possession of him. I'm not the only one immersed in deception here.

When did it start? While she was still married to James or later, when she was single again? I try to stop myself rewinding the past in my head, looking for giveaway signs. But it keeps coming back.

She and David had a lot in common, similar Northern backgrounds, strongly Conservative views. We had some epic arguments in the holiday cottage. James even stormed off one night, not returning until daybreak.

By that stage she had moved out of teaching, was working as an editor at a legal publisher. Naturally they talked a lot about the law, she picking David's brains for story ideas.

Of course I was aware how fantastically attractive she was. Her body had a kind of lithe power that people found mesmeric. There was a tennis court in our village in France and she and David often played together, leaving the non-tennis players, James and me, to watch admiringly.

Surely I would have picked up some quiver of it if there'd been anything going on when we were together on holiday? It must have begun later, after her divorce. Like a good friend, I supported her when they split up. I invited her round for supper just as often as when they'd been a couple. But perhaps I should have taken heed: her not very well-concealed fling with someone at work was what turned out to be the final straw for James. Maybe adultery gets to be a habit.

If David hadn't sent that email, I might never have known. And I'd be visiting her in hospital as if things were the same as they always were, in ignorance. Anticipating real grief. Sincere support and sympathy, or fake? What's the difference? Does it somehow communicate itself, subconsciously, my hatred?

If he hadn't sent it, or I hadn't seen it, things would have taken their course, she'd have died, as she will anyway. We'd have helped organise a funeral, as we probably still will. He'd have been distraught but not able to express why.

Does he visit? Almost certainly not: too risky. He might bump into me. They must talk on the phone. I don't look at his emails any more.

‘I’ve got a chest infection. They’re giving me antibiotics for it.’

Pneumonia? Old people’s friend, they say. Terminal patients’ too?

Her voice does sound thick and bubbly. I pick up the wheezing as I approach the bed. I hope I don’t catch it.

I hand her the purple notebook with the passwords in it. She hasn’t even written it in code. Just the word: Carennac, the name of our village in France.

It did cross my mind that I could have sabotaged her finances. She’d handed me the weapon, all unwitting. I could have done it. But I prefer my subtle approach. I’m more in control. And it would have involved more effort, might even have rebounded.

‘Please could you pass my laptop. I don’t seem to have the strength.’

I watch while she taps the code in, arranges the payment, with the notebook open beside her on the bed. Only a few keystrokes. She closes the lid.

‘That’s a relief. It’s done. The stress was really getting me down. Thank you. Is everything all right at the flat?’

‘Oh yes. It’s absolutely fine. All in perfect order.’

A heavy creak from the bed and I watch her body shift position. We sit in silence for a while.

‘I often lie here thinking how lovely it would be to get home again eventually, to sleep in my own comfortable bed. Sometimes I even dream I’m there in bed and everything is normal.’

Yes, I think. Normal. With David at your side, fondling you. The picture is so sharp that I shudder.

‘And then I wake up and it’s the middle of the night and I’m still here.’

‘Of course you’ll get home eventually. This is a wonderful hospital. You can’t get better than this. They’ll sort you out eventually.’

The lie seems to calm her and once again we are quiet. Now is a good moment, I think.

A finely-judged degree of hesitation in my voice: ‘I do wonder . . . I do wonder if we ought to talk about practicalities, though. Of course you’re going to be all right. But I’ve been thinking for a while that you ought to allow for worst-case scenarios. I know it’s difficult . . . But . . . Have you made a will?’

The question drops into the space between us and she looks at me, a long look.

‘You know, don’t you?’ she says.