

From **The Men's Room**

Chapter 16. In the Year 2000

'The social structure has not been much modified by the changes in woman's condition; this world, always belonging to men, still retains the form they have given it'. (Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, pp. 372-3).

She moved her hand over the polished surface of the clock on the mantelpiece, feeling how its walnut curves were able to cherish the passing of time. Time revolving inside it, the sustained interpolations of time passed, present and future in the universe outside it. From the time when she was a little girl, when the clock stood in her father's study and her mother dusted it for him, to now, the year of the millennium, when she took care of it herself. All the time she had lived, in different places and moods, with real people, ghosts, strangers, enemies, kittens, babies, clowns and criminals. Every minute was hers.

Either side of the clock were mementoes and reminders: an old birthday card of bright painted balloons, an invitation to a summer solstice party, a grey photograph of a little girl, a silver pierrot balanced on an unlikely glass base. She fingered each of these objects with distraction, at the same time turning to look out of window: the London rooftops were glazed with morning sun, and displayed a surprising medley of colours. The sky was an urban blue, and generously calm. One of the new bright green refuse lorries swaggered its way down the street; the refuse lorries, with their brash colouring and enhanced metallic clatter, were one of the legacies of Margaret Thatcher's England, which had lapped its insidious tidal wave well over the shore of the 1990s, leaving all sorts of scum behind it on the beach.

At ten o'clock it's time to go. Charity Walton is about to take a flight to Amsterdam, where she is going to meet someone she hasn't seen for ten years. A man whose existence once supported hers in a passion that passed understanding.

She checks the windows of the flat carefully. Everything is closed. She feeds Daisy, the arrogant black cat, and the three streamlined goldfish, Hook, Line and Sinker. Funny how habits one complains about, like the keeping of goldfish, stay with one, even when the necessity for them has passed into history. As she drops fishy crumbs on to the surface of the water, the three goldfish rush up and open their fetal mouths - for it is babies they remind Charity of, babies unborn, fighting for food in the dark, enclosed and not necessarily safe world of the amnion.

In the train to the airport Charity takes out of her bag the two books she's brought along: a volume of short stories and a new book by a feminist writer called *Being and Doing: Feminist Existentialism and the State in the Twenty First Century*. Charity's mood is not, however, up to the onslaughts of feminist theory. She puts it away, and instead dips into the less challenging but skilled Roald Dahl, an ominous story called

'Royal Jelly' in which a well-meaning beekeeper with a failing-to-thrive baby feeds it royal jelly and watches it turn into a bee...

'Any seat preference for you today, Professor Walton?'

'I'd like an aisle seat, please.' They've stopped asking about smoking on aeroplanes now, because no one smokes any more. In 1996 it became a notifiable disease.

The young man behind the desk smiles, showing off his toothpaste and his synthetic olive shirt, part of a new look recently introduced by the British Airports Authority (now jointly managed by Trusthouse Forte and a government aviation organisation in a format resembling a traditional marriage where both partners lead secret and financially disjointed lives). The shoulders of his shirt are at right angles to his arms. A padded masculinity is in fashion again. 'The flight will be boarding at 11.45, gate 45. Have a nice day.'

He smiles his toothpaste smile again. Charity loathes that phrase, and the whole cultural merging that has made it part of the public language of the British. She buys herself a double whisky at the bar. Men stand round her, a black-suited afforestation rooted with briefcases to the sleek, carpeted lounge. They talk and move from one leg to the other like ninepins in a bowling alley. In the midst of this wood Charity glimpses one tree, the upstanding, blue-eyed, far from honourable Mark Carleton. A few dozen cameos of Mark-and-Charity speed rapidly through her mind as the whisky goes down her throat, and the real Mark Carleton prepares to embark on a similar journey to hers from some other airport in the world.

At the age of fifty-two Charity has become a sensible woman. She knows her own strengths and limitations, she values herself at least as much as anyone else does, and she has at last come to regard the world as a rational place that isn't out to get her. She holds a senior university position in social science research, a personal chair: not the one she had had her eyes on in the beginning, but another one, which will do just as well. She has published six or seven books, she heads the editorial board of a left-wing academic journal and has acquired a solid reputation as a theorist in the health and illness field. People listen to her carefully and students come and sit at her feet. No one doubts her reasons for doing most of the things she does - having a mortgage, going to work, visiting the British Museum, buying the latest Avocado word processor to help her research monographs on their way, sending presents to her grandchildren. Tom has by now fathered three daughters, Dan a son; Rachel has repeated her mother's history and given birth to twin boys. Now AIDS can be cured, Harry lives happily with his friend Martin in a small stone house in a field in Yorkshire.

But Charity's credentials for going on a mission such as the present one are another story...

As the plane lands, her memory re-enters an old cosmic phase. She is on a beach with Mark somewhere, with the shifting silver sand under their feet, the sand merging with

a fertile ocean and the ocean with an untroubled sky. It is warm; even the wind coming from the ocean breathes warmly on them, and on a donkey next to them, taking ice down to the fishing boats. 'I wouldn't mind,' he had said, 'running away here, and living here with you. No one would ever find us. We wouldn't need much money. We could write. I would go fishing, I would bring you bright fish and you would cook them on a wood fire, and we would make love, and we would be happy . . .'

The plan for this reunion had been born one weekend in Holland in the early 1980s. Margaret Thatcher was systematically eroding the quality of life in Britain, schools were shut much of the time, hospitals were closing, the universities had become bastions of relative poverty. Feminism - real feminism - was nearly underground. One evening, drinking a bottle of good wine in a pavement bar, Mark had been telling Charity episodes from his earlier life and had, in the midst of the flow of edited recollections, been inspired by a way of bringing the three sorts of time together: living now, sitting here, telling stories about time past, and at the same time wanting to know about the future, their future, if only to know that they had one.

He remembered what she had said. 'But don't you think we'll be living together in the year 2000? I want to live with you,' and she had reached out and taken his veined hand in hers, hungrily.

But he had asked her to promise him. 'Please, Charity. The first of June at six o'clock in the evening in the year 2000 in Amsterdam. I'll wait for you on that corner over there.' He had pointed. 'By the Kodak building, next to the hotel. We'll drink champagne and discuss the future of the world, and the impermanence of love, the only thing that really matters. Governments will have fallen, populations will have exploded and died, women will still be taking valium, men will still be boys - I don't know what the world will look like, but we'll still be here!'

When Charity reaches the square, Mark isn't there. The pavement by the corner of the Kodak building is empty. Where he should have been is nothing: only the air remains expectant. And Charity wants only to be a spectator. She stands on the opposite corner watching the space where they should meet.

Mark is late because he has fallen asleep in his hotel room. He awakes knowing he has something to do, but not knowing at first what it is. The yellow counterpane reminds him of a field of buttercups, and, because he has more than once been in a field of buttercups with Charity, he is able to remember what he has to do. When he goes to the square he can't see Charity. He watches the space carefully for a few minutes to make sure she really isn't there. Perhaps she will materialise, he reconstructed out of the music and the happy crowds pulsating in the square. He scratches his head, uncertain what to do. A few strands of grey hair come out in his fingernails. He spends a few moments cleaning his fingernails. Then, 'Charity,' he says, silently, as he has not said that name for years, 'Charity, where are you, Charity? I want you, Charity.'

Still nothing. He allows his eyes to leave the spot and survey the square, and then he sees her. It's real! She's here! It's happened! His knees weaken beneath him: he holds tightly on to the key ring in his trouser pocket, but the keys in his clenched hand are coated with sweat. This is Charity. Here she is. Shorter than he remembers, and looking more vulnerable. But smart, and intelligent, even at this distance. Oh how the intelligence of that woman had overpowered him! He had been swallowed up by it, been made to come up choking for air, looking for fissures of insensibility in the dense intellectualism she had created around her.

She wears a black dress, guarding a figure that had always seemed right to him, despite the fact that it had increased and decreased by several per cent in many directions during the time in which they had been lovers. At a certain point in the decrease he remembers her hip bone achieved a sharpness that hurt him as he lay on top of her, and then he used to say 'It's time to eat a little more'. Her shoes, her bag and her beads are red, a colour she had seldom worn ten years ago. Her hair, on the other hand, is grey. That's a bit of a shock, but it looks good on her. She isn't looking in his direction, though. Why is she standing there and not in the place they had arranged?

He moves across the square towards her. At the same time, she leaves her vantage point and crosses the street. As her foot touches the pavement, she sees Mark coming out of the crowd. He wears a look of anguish and a creased suit. His hands, stuck in his pockets, push his shoulders up in a familiar attitude of suppressed resignation. Soon he will stand in front of her, so she will become aware of the smell of him, now and long ago. Without touching it, she can feel the material of his jacket, can predict the temperature and condition of the skin beneath.

He looks at her. She is the same Charity. He can see himself placing a hand on her shoulders in a gesture intended to claim her. She goes on looking at him.