

CHIMPANZEE

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There's a friend of mine makes short, beautiful films about difficult subjects for publicly funded arts organisations. A short while ago he signed up for a minor cosmetic procedure. Twin furrows punctuate the middle of his brow, just above the nose, but once the doctors inject a bead of collagen gel under the skin there, his worry-lines will magically disappear.

My friend is a vegetarian. He juices. He abstains from caffeine. His bathroom boasts perfumeless aftershave, non-abrasive facial scrub; soapless soap. He never smiles. His lover is a professional cello player. She is elegant, eerie: a mannequin ballerina in a Powell and Pressburger movie. It is barely possible to imagine the two of them having sex, and then only in a geometrical way.

They live on the ground floor of a terrace house off Holland Park – one of those wedding-cake houses with woody front gardens, generous bay windows, and a big flight of steps to the door. Inside: white walls, mahogany-stained floorboards, shielded from the road behind blinds of unbleached linen. They read many books, but own only twelve, which they have wrapped in brown paper and claim to recognise by shape alone. Theirs is the kind of life encapsulated on certain Finnish postage stamps. A Don't Try This At Home sort of life.

My life is different; which is to say, more ordinary. I read voraciously. I crease. I drop. I dog-ear. I have been known to break a spine in two. I do not wrap. Sometimes I lend; I never sell. I buy more than I read. Books in precarious piles stuff the deep, free-standing bookshelves in my small, snug flat in Peckham Rye: evidences of past enthusiasms, some of them quite mysterious now, the whys and wherefores all forgotten.

Paul Ekman's *Telling Lies*; *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* by Rudolf Arnheim; an incomplete run of publications from the International African Library. I don't remember buying any of these: the fragments and abortions of a literary life.

I eat beef and drink whisky and smoke American Spirit cigarettes. I exercise rarely, and when I do, I overcompensate wildly: the GR20 across Corsica; ice-climbing in

Sweden. I am hypomanic: I work long into the night seven days a week until, every three weeks or so, a fleeting, powerful depression nails me to the bed. I'm saying this only to establish that my face is a lived-in face, the face I deserve.

Also, I smile. I smile at my friends. I smile at perfect strangers. I smile when I am happy, grateful, rueful; even when I am annoyed. I smile at waitresses, at barmen, at bus conductors. In the street, I am always on the look-out for someone whose eye I can catch; someone I can smile at.

If I had the collagen injection my friend described to me, it would take my worry away and leave my smile intact, which – at forty-three going on forty-four – would make me look like an idiot.

About eighteen months ago, a woman I didn't know threw a glass of prosecco in my face. This happened at the launch of *A Victim of His Own Success*, my sardonic little biography of Gabriele D'Annunzio, in his day, Europe's most notorious popular novelist. The launch was held in a small gallery in Soho. The place was packed; guests were spilling out onto the pavement.

As I followed them through the door, a girl wearing uniform black, carrying a tray stacked with empty glasses, stepped in front of me. I stopped short to let her past and somebody bumped into me from behind. This was the woman who, a few seconds later, called me a bastard, and, a split-second after that, threw her wine in my face.

Afterwards, I set to work on another book.

I woke at eight, read for an hour in bed, then dressed, gathered notebook and pens, and set off for the Blue Mountain Café in East Dulwich, a twenty-minute walk away across Peckham Rye. I enjoyed the walk across the Rye. During football season I used to sit and watch local five-a-sides slipping and sliding on the damp grass, while defeated-looking fathers wheeled their toddlers back and forth between the formal garden and the supervised play area.

During this time, and contrary to my usual habit, I wrote entirely in long-hand, in green spiral notebooks. The café staff were always cheerful, always happy to see me, even if I did take up a table for hours, sipping on a single cappuccino. For my part, I was always careful not to take up too much space; to choose a small table; to move my belongings out of the way at the busiest times, so that people could sit opposite me if they wanted.

Last winter I kept catching colds, one after another. One time, a woman sitting opposite me stood up suddenly. ‘You can have my coffee if you want,’ she said. I looked up and found her sneering at me. I was taken aback. She was in her late twenties, and she was wearing a denim pinafore dress – never a good sign.

Of course I had a wincing dread of running into *that* woman again – the one who, having collided with me, had seen fit to throw a glass of prosecco in my face. Her, or another like her. I was thinking about her a lot back then. I had begun to understand how the wine she had thrown was only the latest and most serious of a long line of affronts. Though I still did not know who she was, I had come to understand what she was, and that there were others like her out there.

‘All your sniffing and snotting – I feel *sick*.’

She was out from behind the table now. ‘Why can’t you use a handkerchief?’

It was my first London winter in three years. I’d been spending Januaries in Venice, researching D’Annunzio’s liaisons with a string of difficult women: Luisa, the Marchesa Casati; Eleonora Duse. But on my last visit, my carefully worked-out schedule of visits and appointments had found itself edged aside for Millie.

Millie wrote. She performed her own poetry on Radio Four’s *Woman’s Hour*, rubbing up against some horrendous scoop about clitorrectomy, perhaps, or an interview with a neglected singer-songwriter; witty pieces about vests, or soup.

When high water comes to Venice, it rises through the pavements everywhere at once. This is the moment you discover that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who still enjoy playing in puddles, and those who never did. The water is gone by

lunchtime. From the restaurant upstairs at Quadri, I watched as a clear foot of it drained away through tiny sink-holes between the flagstones. The damage done.

Millie was playing her 'Come here, go away' game with the staff. She wanted the waiter to dry her shoes. She wanted the waiter to bring her shoes back. She wanted the waiter to bring her some dry shoes.

In the centre of the piazza, a man and a woman in smart casual clothes trotted in circles round and round. Every so often they would point at random into the air, as though firing imaginary weapons.

Millie wanted a drink. Millie wanted the waiter to know, me to know, the world to know, that she couldn't be expected to sit down to five courses with wet feet and no drink.

The couple's gestures were ungainly and unpractised. When I leaned back in my chair to study them, I realised I had been watching them through a flaw in the glass; that they were smaller and nearer than I had assumed; that they were children.

All morning Millie and I had teetered along duckboards down flooded alleys, pausing distracted at this church or that, this paper shop, that stand-up patisserie, and slipped up, the pair of us, like a couple of drunks, on stone footbridges, their steps edged in marble slick as soap. The canals in Venice have this quality: that they are always the same colour, regardless of season, weather, or time of day. The blue-green of certain plastic garden furniture.

All morning, again and again, I had crashed against the rocks of her resentment.

'Do you have to keep bumping into me like that?'

'Do you have to keep pawing me?'

'Do you have to keep following me around?'

'You know,' I said to her, 'I don't think you actually *like* men.'

She said: 'You have no idea what it *is* to be a man.'

What could I do but laugh?

Venice is the spoiled girl's Mecca. Grumbling, she boards a water taxi which carries her up the Grand Canal to the Palazzo Leoni – home, at one time, to the Marchesa Casati, mascot of Decadence, and Gabriele D'Annunzio's monstrous muse.

The spoiled girl gets out of the taxi, scowling, her *fidenzata* trailing after. She comes to a low gate. It is bolted shut. She fights with the bolt. It is a simple mechanism, but still she contrives to fight with it. Were you to offer to help her with the bolt – well, God help you. (Cecil Beaton once spent an entire day in Venice trailing after the Marchesa while she shopped for 'something orange'.)

The Palazzo Leoni has the widest frontage of any building on the Grand Canal; it is also, oddly, *La Serenissima's* only bungalow. (By the time the original owners contrived to lose their vast fortune, only the ground floor had been built.) Here, following in Casati's footsteps, a more humane, more talented Peggy Guggenheim would start her own collection of art, and artists.

Our spoiled girl could as easily have visited Peggy's collection on foot, from her hotel, across the Accademia Bridge or the Rialto. She could, at a pinch, have caught a vaporetto. But arriving at the Palazzo Leoni by water taxi has this advantage – that she jumps the queue of art lovers waiting outside the main entrance and thereby evades the small entrance charge.

It may be that she is pregnant. It is a small bump, a sixteen-week bump, but she walks as though she is carrying a bag of cement. Her shoe-lace has come undone, but she cannot be expected to do it up on her own; instead she hobbles painfully over to the Guggenheim Foundation café and waits for her young husband to sit beside her. Then she plumps her foot – THUMP – into his groin.

'I really have had enough,' I told Millie. This was the morning we were caught out by the High Water – the morning I discovered that Millie did not, never had, and never would enjoy playing in puddles.

She had sucked her teeth at me for a third (and as far as I was concerned, final) time. As though I am supposed to carry an *acqua alta* timetable around in my head! (We had

lost our sense of direction in the tiny square outside the Malibran theatre. The water was rising.)

I said to her: ‘You are not going to be able to make me feel bad about myself. I know who I am by now, for Christ’s sake. I know what I am. I know I am a man.’

It really was rather splendid, this speech of mine. For full effect, it deserved a splendid exit. And there were alleys, flooded now, that I could take, and she would not follow me. So I stepped off the duckboard into the water. It went over my shoes, into them, flooded them; it felt wonderful. ‘I even like myself!’

‘Oh, *do* you?’

As emotional experiences go, falling out of love is one of the great unsung pleasures. Was I ever so happy in my life as that moment when I wandered away from her, splashing and skipping – another dumb tourist playing at Gene Kelly? The rain ricocheted off the brick walls of the narrow alleys. Tourists in complicated yellow galoshes huddled under the awnings of the ink-and-paper shops, the Murano glass outlets, the porticos of churches. The rain drove into my face. I took off my glasses so I could feel the rain against my eyelids. It poured against me like a lover. I opened my mouth, let it in to my mouth, laughed softly to myself: ‘Do you have to keep, you know, *bumping into me?*’

Gabriele D’Annunzio – once upon a time, and for a short while, the ‘lyric dictator’ of the seaport of Fiume (eventually the Italian government asked for it back) – was regarded by ordinary Italians as a national hero. Consequently, the moment he came to power, Mussolini smothered the suspect poet in titles and spurious honours and kept him under virtual house arrest at his palazzo by Lake Garda. D’Annunzio was by this time so susceptible to flattery, he never actually realised that he was under arrest.

I was in my late thirties when I met Millie. When we fall in love with someone, what we actually fall in love with is their world. I fell in love with Millie’s kitchen. I fell in love with Millie’s underwear. I loved her pillows, and her shoes. I loved her scarves and her seven different kinds of toothpaste, a flavour for each day of the week. I loved those little blue bottles of essential oils from Neal’s Yard.

I was a sucker for Millie's world. Those little antique shops in Rye. Her cutlery drawer, every knife and fork a 'piece': distinct, unmatched, genuine silver plate. Wine glasses from an arcade off Portobello Road. Cushions from a woman in Islington. In a world where everything has an aesthetic value, the humblest objects acquire a small but perceptible erotic charge.

Millie had a house in Kent. She took me there on weekends. We visited boot fairs. It was charming at first. Every time we rode over a steep bridge, or round a sharp bend, she'd toot her horn, 'to warn oncoming traffic'. It never occurred to her to just drive more carefully.

First, We fall in love with a world. Perhaps love for the person will follow – perhaps not. Perhaps there was not, and never will be, anything between you but your lust, and as that loses its first, predatory edge, perhaps you will find that while you are still very much in love with your lover's world, your lover leaves you cold.

Millie had an apartment in Soho, which she'd inherited from her father, a famous TV comedy writer.

Millie let out this apartment to a friend called Bunty. Sometimes, after a night on the town, we would call over. Bunty received regular beatings – blood on her lips; once, a fractured finger – from her long-term boyfriend Jerom.

Jerom.

This was his name.

Jerom had a double First from Oxford. Bunty used to harp on about this endlessly, straining Aberlour whisky through chipped teeth. 'He has a double first! From Oxford!' He was forty-seven years old, and he worked for a bank. He travelled extensively throughout Europe ('Extensively! Throughout Europe!') and he claimed he was a spy. Given today's parlous international situation, I don't doubt this was true.

Millie wanted Bunty out of her Soho apartment. She wanted me to move in. What is more endearing than the capriciousness of a rich woman? O, it is lovely. I loved the idea of moving to Soho. I had nothing against moving to Soho.

But: 'You can't stay here,' Millie said, the first and only night she stayed over at my flat in Peckham Rye.

I was bugged if I was going to let Millie think she had ‘rescued’ me. ‘Why can’t I stay where I am?’

‘Well,’ she said. She had a passion for being in the right.

‘What’s wrong with this place?’

She wrinkled her nose.

‘What?’

She turned, taking in my living room, my galley kitchen, the door to my bedroom: ‘Is this all there is?’

She came after me, of course, that day of high water in Venice. Through the rain. Through the flood. I was half-way to San Marco and our lunch booking – no point in both of us going hungry – when I heard her calling me back. I was so happy to be on my own again, I had half a mind to ignore her – only I heard her voice catch, and I am a sucker for sentiment.

She embraced me. She gave me what I wanted. A public demonstration for the fake-bag sellers, the designer-shop queers, the parka-huddled *gondolieri* and bewigged concert touts. She kissed me. There were tears. We seemed, in that clinch, to have cleared some hurdle, to be entering a new territory.

All Rubbish, of course. But by the time dessert arrived, she had rewritten the day’s events to suit herself. ‘I was going to let you go,’ she said, confidentially, ‘but then I saw you were crying.’

‘I was crying?’

She laid her hand on mine: sharing her insights. ‘When you walked off, I saw you take your glasses off,’ she said. ‘You were wiping your eyes.’

She leaned across the café table and kissed my eyelids. An extraordinary gesture. ‘I couldn’t bear to see you so upset.’

I was speechless.

I wanted to punch her in the stomach.

I remember once, returning alone from a visit to the Palazzo Leoni, I came up against a woman wrestling her umbrella up an alley so narrow, there was no room for me to pass her. With growing impatience I waited at the mouth of the alley while, inch by difficult inch, she jammed her ruined umbrella between the rough and ancient walls. The cloth of the umbrella was all shredded, and bare spokes glinted like needles. I thought to myself, ‘This alley is too constricted for her,’ and I smiled. It is the world that is in the wrong; it is you who have failed to measure up. This is the line spoiled women would have you swallow: that they are angels.

That night, while Millie slept, I worked up the day’s notes about the Marchesa.

(‘Toot-toot,’ we’d go. Under bridges, over bridges, to our Kentish destination. ‘Toot-toot.’ Driving with Millie from antiques fair to antiques fair was like riding shot-gun with Toad in *Wind in the Willows*.)

— and of course as soon as *that* image leapt into my head, I nearly choked for laughing. Millie woke and wanted to know what I was laughing at. Obviously, I couldn’t tell her. Not in so many words. That was the trigger for our final, ridiculous argument. ‘That’s what the horn is *for*,’ she insisted. She was so frantic to be in the right, she would make things up to be right about.

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In the Blue Mountain Café, the woman sharing my table leapt up suddenly. ‘Why can’t you use a handkerchief?’ she said.

She left without paying for her coffee, and I applied a swift antidote to her poison by calling the waitress over and making a joke of it.

The waitress said of her: ‘Thank God the bitch is gone, the cow.’

The waitress is very pretty and I see her every day, but try as I might I can’t seem to get her into conversation.

The night Jerom broke Bunty’s finger, I remember, Millie stayed at the flat to straighten things up and I drove Bunty to casualty. ‘What the fuck does it matter what kind of degree he’s got?’ I shouted, losing my temper. ‘He’s *forty-seven*, for Christ’s sake.’ How had I come to be writing for people like this?

Sobbing now: ‘You’re so nice.’ Bunty laid her swaddled hand on mine. ‘You’re such a gentleman.’

This is the sort of thing you say to a child.

The trouble with me is that I smile too much. I used to think I was just being friendly, but now I’m not so sure. Not everybody likes being smiled at; spoiled women least of all.

Millie: ‘Look, I’m not your mother, okay?’

Millie: ‘Oh stop being so bloody *grateful* all the time; it’s embarrassing.’

Millie: ‘You have no idea what it *is* to be a man.’

I can’t help it. I’m not even aware that I’m doing it half the time. So I’ve started keeping a record. And now I know. I smile at shop assistants. I smile at postmen. I smile at drivers who stop for me at pedestrian crossings. I smile at children. I smile at people I hold doors open for, and at people who hold doors open for me. I smile at people who pass me on the street, and at people who sit opposite me on trains.

Am I so friendly?

Or am I, after all, like those chimpanzees, grinning in order to placate? To show fear?

Returning home from the Blue Mountain café, I found that my snug little flat had finally lost patience with itself. A floorboard had given way – they were old, all cracked and loose and creaking – and had sent a bookcase slam across my dining table. There were books everywhere. They were so old, and most of them unread, that I didn’t even recognise them.

Books are supposed to make a mirror for the mind. My books weren’t like that. My books were the slime-trail I had left across my life. I was like a snail, carrying its home on its back, only this wasn’t its home at all, it was somebody else’s, some bourgeois nobody I didn’t even like very much.

‘The author has researched his subject with depth and thoroughness, without which A Victim of His Own Success could easily have been considered fiction. He has brought to life a true feeling of the extraordinary, vain, self-deluding character of D’Annunzio.’

I didn't need these books. The rugs were three-deep on the floor and I didn't need them either. I made to stand up and I caught my head on the edge of the table.

What did I need two tables for?

Why did I need one?

I remember, at the launch of my book about D'Annunzio, a woman I had never seen before called me a bastard and threw her wine in my face.

I stepped forward and grabbed her by her nasty orange scarf. I wanted to know who she was, and why she had done this thing. I shook her. *'Who are you?'* I twisted the scarf. Everyone was watching.

But she struggled in silence, and would not say her name.
