

Grotesque

Andrew Regan

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Pavement Christ

Seven o'clock came eventually, and no sooner had Ben's phone alarm finished its peals than the door buzzer sounded. Who couldn't fail to be alarmed by that kind of punctuality? The thought that his guests had been waiting by the buzzer for the precise moment to ring couldn't fail to prejudice Ben's mind as he reluctantly answered the call and triggered the door mechanism. It was almost cruel: a liberty. The hapless amateur cook, confident he had at least fifteen minutes to spend desperately trying to fix a tasteless tagine or a still-bloody chicken chasseur, would be exposed for all to see.

Ben tried to bury these feelings of resentment deep down, when his front door was rapped with a feminine knock, and he revealed the two visitors waiting without. 'Oh hullo, come in, make yourselves at home'. They both wore heavy black woollen coats that were each about twice the size and probably about twice as expensive as the worn rain mac that hung limply from the cupboard door handle that served as his coat rack.

'Pleased to meet you again, Laura, Stefan! Come through, Rosie's just laying the table. Oh, thanks, that'll go wonderfully with the main course!'

Once the main pleasantries had been exchanged, and the old friends reunited, Ben oozed back into the room to do his bit. He clocked Laura amid a cloud of frizzy blonde hair, her partner plumping for a 'hipster'-style side-parting and a beard that King George V would have recognised as one of his own.

'Rosie tells me you're a nutritionist, Laura?'

'That's right, Ben, I mostly spent my time designing diet plans for organisations, advising on meals, that kind of thing.'

'I hope you won't be too hard on my cooking tonight!' Ben put so

much top-spin on it that it couldn't fail to pass as a piece of gentle good humour, and sure enough a blend of tinkling laughter ensued. He cringed.

'Oh, I'm sure it'll be lovely! Something smells delightful!' Laura replied with utter seriousness. Ben thought he might have trouble with this one.

'Oh, thank you. Well, we've got a North African theme tonight. What have we got, Rosie?' he asked rhetorically. 'Well, there's an Egyptian aubergine dip for starters, a Moroccan chicken stew for mains, and these are spicy nuts', he said, pointing to the bowl on the coffee table.

'Sounds wonderful.'

'Tell me, Ben, am I right that you work in IT?' said Stefan.

'Oh, yes, that's right. It's not very interesting, really' was Ben's standard defensive answer. He stood over the burning question with a sandbag in one hand, and an iron dustbin lid in the other, lest it go off in his face. 'What do you do, Stefan?'

'I'm err, I'm actually an economist.'

'Wow', said Ben, 'I'm impressed.'

'I sometimes joke that I'm the Home economist and Stefan's the real thing!' interjected Laura, beaming.

Ben liked economists: if they were any good, and were brave enough to speak to the general public rather than themselves, they generally disagreed with most things that people held to be true. It was very important, he felt, for people to be shown that they were wrong. Not only for the simple reason that they *were* wrong, but because the main bulk of people's brain activity seemed to be devoted to puffing themselves up, and to wrapping the world around themselves so that they could most easily live out the carefully-constructed fantasies that were their lives. Their bubbles needed to be pricked.

With the pleasantries already out of the way, the Egyptian aubergine dip was forced to do the bulk of the conversational heavy-lifting. Had anyone eaten it before? Yes, one person thought they had. There was cumin in it, wasn't there? Yes. It was nice, wasn't it? Yes, it was.

Gradually the wine loosened tongues, and Ben was chuffed that both starter and main course went round the table to rave reviews. Even the home economist, who revelled in her role as stand-in food connoisseur, gave her five smiley faces.

The mood dipped slightly as the second bottle of red was finished, and an anxious few minutes passed. Surely this wasn't the end? Like an incompetent game of cards, nobody knew who had the third bottle - and why were they holding it back? Concern turned to mutual joy when it was found in the kitchen and pressed into service.

'Well, we had an eventful morning. Somebody drove their car into the dry-stone wall on the corner by our house late last night, and knocked half of it down. I heard it happen, but I'm sure they must have driven off again. It's the biggest thing to happen on our street for a long time', said Laura, sure that this would capture the imagination of the group.

'People were quite upset', added Stefan. 'I definitely heard someone walk by and say it was a shame. That was the word they used, wasn't it, Laura? A shame. A crying shame.'

'You could do something about it', suggested Ben, with a hint of mischief.

'Well we did phone the Police, they took all the details down, and they said they'd come round tomorrow to get more details', said Laura. 'But then they phoned back the next day to try to talk me out of the whole thing. So nothing happened. It was very frustrating.'

‘Did you ever hear about ‘Dog Poo Dave’ from somewhere up North? It was on the News website a few years ago,’ said Ben, his red wine forming a warm pool of relaxation somewhere inside him.

‘Oh god. No, Ben,’ said his wife.

‘No, it sounds interesting’, said Stefan. Laura’s wine glass jerked forward slightly.

‘Well, basically he was a normal guy with maybe a bit too much time on his hands, and every time he found dog-poo on the street round where he lived, he got angrier and angrier. So at first he put little posters on lamp-posts complaining about it. Another time he went out early and drew circles around each poo in pink chalk so people could see it on their way to work. Nothing really worked, though.’

‘Oh god’, said Rosie, her head in her hands.

‘Well he stopped doing it for a while, and the poo problem apparently got a lot better; but then one day people went out in the street and found someone had made a huge crucifixion scene that was the full width of the pavement and twice as long, all out of collected-up dogshit. With a Christ-like figure in the middle. It was amazing to see. Bit weird maybe. Someone had to climb onto a bollard to get a good photo of it.’

‘Crikey, what a fruitcake’, said Laura. ‘Was it him on the cross?’

‘Oh, no, no, it wasn’t that bad’, said Ben. Laying down on the pavement amidst a cross made of dog-poo would be pure insanity.

‘He loves that story, really’, said Rosie, cutting a glance over to her loved-one.

But Ben was on a roll: ‘That wasn’t the end of it, because he also had a bee in his bonnet about car-drivers not indicating when they turned into roads. He’d been hit by a car once, apparently. That’s when the Police got involved, and that’s how it got on the News. He’d painted all these house bricks bright orange and had them

in a rucksack, then whenever he got cut-up by a car that wasn't indicating, he'd grab a brick and throw it. Maybe he'd smash the lights or knock the wing-mirror off, but some people got their windscreens smashed. Seems he got away with a dozen or so before the Police caught him.'

'That can't be true!', said Laura.

'Why bright orange?', asked Stefan.

'Yeah it's true, you can read about it. I think he wanted them to look like indicator lights, so the driver would know why it had happened. What a brilliant story, though: it redresses the balance between motorist and pedestrian.'

'Some drivers are outrageous, I'll give you that', said Rosie. 'There's got to be a better way, though.'

It was time for dessert. With grand ceremony, Rosie brought in the pavlova reverently, walking with rhythmic steps, and holding the extra-large dinner plate ever so slightly aloft. Ben had discussed repeatedly flicking the living room lights on and off, but as Rosie reminded him, you can't always know for sure whether someone is an epileptic. Under the circumstances, that was a risk nobody was prepared to take.

The pavlova had been Ben's idea. Remembering the dinner parties of his childhood, this was the dessert that his parents always prepared. So what better way to make those moments of yesteryear live again in the new generation? The fact that the trials and tribulations involved in making said dessert generally caused his parents to have blazing rows, due to the inevitably of meringue-related breakages and desperate last-minute repairs and replacements, was something Ben glossed over.

'One of my colleagues has a girlfriend who follows a diet I've never heard of,' lied Ben. 'She doesn't eat anything that's ever been alive.'

'Ever been alive?' queried Laura.

‘Sounds like a vegetarian to me’ mused Rosie.

‘No, vegetables have been alive too. So no animals or vegetables, just things like milk, but it can’t be Pasteurised because that kills bacteria that didn’t need to be killed.’

‘What, so just milk, then? You’re making it up.’

‘Am not - apparently only things that have been *independently* alive are out. So you’ve still got leaves, seeds, skin, fur, spices, and so on. Things that can drop off a living thing without killing it. Eggs as well. Fruit peel.’

‘Good heavens!’ tinkled Laura.

‘You are making it up!’ said Rosie.

‘No, no, that’s what these people believe. Don’t shoot the messenger!’

The game was up, but Ben had had his fun. He felt like he’d successfully pranged Teacher and had buried his face in his book just in time for the old duffer to turn around.

‘You shouldn’t make fun of people’s beliefs, Ben,’ said Rosie. ‘Not at the dinner-table at least. You never know who might be offended.’

‘Oh come off it, I was only kidding. Show me one actual person who was offended.’

Laura and Stefan looked a little sheepish - this was perhaps a little hot for them to handle, Ben felt. The pavlova, still unserved, sat mocking the guests, its meringue still proudly unbroken. Like a Christian in the Colosseum of Rome, with a lion dead of a heart-attack at his feet, things were looking up.

‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘If people are that sensitive, they deserve to be ridiculed. People have a right to think whatever they like, but they don’t have a right to make people pussy-foot around them. The more careful they want others to be with them, the more precious they are, the more of a ribbing they should get.’

‘That’s just rude, though, Ben. People have feelings, whatever you think about them,’ said Rosie.

Ben was very disappointed that his wife, ordinarily so intelligent and quick, couldn’t grasp this: ‘That’s crazy, I wouldn’t ridicule someone directly, either at the dinner-table or any other table, because that’s plain bad manners. Doesn’t make them right though. I’d still be doing them a favour.’

‘Hold one a second, though,’ said Stefan, who had been quiet for a good while. ‘Suppose I wrote something ridiculing the people you like - you wouldn’t like it, would you?’

‘Probably not, but it’s the principle, it’s not about what I think...’

‘It’s only satire if it’s against the people you don’t like, and against the people you think others won’t like. What’s so difficult about that?’

Had Stefan crossed the line? Was it time for a woman to step in and smooth things over?

‘Well I’m only really after the famous and the powerful’, said Ben, ready to roll over.

‘So you want to bring the powerful crashing down to earth - then what? So you can feel like a Big Man, feel clever than everyone else, and maybe get a bit of power yourself? It’s just like the big-name atheists in the media: religion is stupid and irrational, people are stupid for believing it, governments are stupid for giving them political favours. The subtext being: listen to me and my buddies instead, and our stupid, crank political ideas; let me run a network of schools with a wodge of public money and be defended from any criticism; let me feel like the smartest person in the country, and let’s see me dancing on ice on primetime TV instead of soap stars and Premiership footballers!’, said Stefan, tapping his index finger on the table for even greater emphasis.

‘There’s pavlova!’, offered Rosie, aware she might have missed her cue.

‘Sorry about that’, said Stefan. ‘Got a bit carried-away. Nothing personal.’

‘Ah, no worries’, said Ben, wondering whether the last two minutes could be struck from the record.

‘It’s just that satire’s not authentic, as far as I’m concerned. Even if you could find someone who’s prepared to stick it to both sides rather than just promoting their own cause in a smart-arse way, you can’t just knock the rich and powerful, because people can’t live without status’

‘Show me a satirist who offends both left, right, and centre, and see if he gets a series on Channel 4’, grumbled Ben.

‘Status *symbols*, you mean?’, volunteered Rosie.

‘Pretty much,’ said Stefan. What’s the point of bankrupting the country and causing a revolution by trying to redistribute away all income differences? People will still hate the bastards who have the most or the best cars, or clothes, or the coolest haircut. Even if we go back to Medieval times we’re just going to have to recreate all the old divisions, because people have to know where they stand in life. We’ll all be dirt-poor, but some guys will have swords, and some will be in the Royal Family. So the divisions in society will be even worse, plus we’ll all be burning dung in our mud-huts again. Best to leave things as they are and just get over ourselves.’

Stefan put down the dessert spoon with which he had been tapping the table with the rhythm of his words.

‘Well, you are right’, said Ben. ‘That’s not to say we can’t make things a little better, though.’

‘Sure, sure’, said Stefan, civilly.

The following moments of silence suggested Ben had lost that round embarrassingly. Someone had already praised the pavlova, the wine label had already been analysed (‘Minervois - that’s good!’), and it hadn’t started raining. Who was going to break the silence?

‘Actually, what I’m really attacking is status, *per se*’, thought Ben presently. ‘I’m not using the naive socialist argument. I’m saying: whoever you are, in whatever society, if you’re one of the people who craves the money, or to be King, or despot, or tribal chief with the most wives, then you deserve to be ridiculed.’

‘You can’t fix human nature’, said Stefan.

‘Oh no, I don’t expect to have any effect. And I’m not saying that you should throw the media scumbags in jail or hang all the politicians from lamp-posts, because the people who come after will probably be as bad. At least though the powerless can get some succour, though. At least they can have a laugh.’

He took a big sip of wine and continued: ‘Did you ever watch *Andrei Rublev*?’, and without even pausing for a response to that question, ‘It’s Medieval times. All the villagers are sheltering from the rain in a barn, and the jester - who doesn’t give a fig about anyone or anything - criticises the authorities, makes the people laugh and forget their troubles. Next thing you know, the local knights have come, knocked him over the head and dragged him off, and you don’t see him again for ten years - so it’s all a bit tragic. At least he made them forget their back-breaking toil for about five minutes.’

‘How’s everyone getting on, then?’ interrupted Rosie. ‘Anyone need a top-up?’

‘Oh, not for me,’ said Laura, significantly. ‘I have to be careful now, because...’, she continued, before turning sharply to Stefan, with whom she shared a ten-second conversation of silent gestures and facial expressions. ‘Because we have a happy announcement to share with you. We’re pregnant. Or rather, I am! We’re going to have a baby!’

‘Though it’ll mostly be Laura, Stefan added, clearing up that question before it arose.

‘Oh, that’s wonderful news,’ said Rosie.

And so the conversation continued quite predictably for some time. For something entirely hidden from view, the baby-to-be attracted surprisingly keen speculation.

‘Of course we’ve been trying too,’ said a tipsy Rosie, cutting a look at her husband. ‘But you know what he’s like, he has his opinions about how things ought to be.’ Adopting a loud whisper, she continued to humiliate Ben: ‘I don’t think he’s that keen!’, which got a few good-natured laughs.

Ben didn’t mind being the butt of a joke, but he had to fight his way back into the conversation. ‘That’s not true at all, I’m up for children. Just not necessarily my own’, to which Laura drunkenly made a snorting laugh. ‘Seriously, though. Stefan should know all about the economics of having kids. I read that children were like pollution in reverse. Which I think means that they’re a side-effect of something else you like doing... You’re not too keen on them yourself, but you can’t help the benefit they give to other people. More people in the world, more chips in the big game, more chances of producing the next Albert Einstein.’

‘Well, those are good arguments,’ replied Stefan. ‘Of course...’

‘So in fact it’s selfish not to have kids, really. It’s the opposite of what you read in *The Observer*, I’m sure. All that shit about body clocks and carbon footprints and the Great Pacific Disposable Nappy Island.’

The dinner party had continued long after dessert had been finished, and a bag of premium chilli-infused pizza bites and a bowl of Ben’s roasted cashews had already been mentioned in dispatches while fighting off the relentless tide of Cabernet Sauvignon. Eventually Laura and Stefan were forced to call a halt, and left in high spirits, waiting outside in the cold November air in advance of their taxi home.

When the dinner party was over, there were torn crusty rolls, bits of Brie rind, and red wine glasses. No pungent smell of candle wax

and French soft cheese, mind you, because you only notice that if you've been upstairs watching 'Planet of the Apes' on a black-and-white TV all night.