

Humble

‘You are a capricious capitalistic carrion-feeder.’ Miriam’s flaring eyes are mirroring the tone in her words, but Charles just smiles provocatively and sips from his over-sized wine glass. Donna’s finger-food evenings are often like this. She seems to thrive on bringing assertive opposites together.

Outside, the rain beats against the window panes. The river view is obscured in the cheerless wet evening; but inside it is warm, comfortable.

‘Charles, Miriam is merely asking you to consider an alternative way of structuring the finances of society – other than your current ... ah ... self-serving model.’ Donna can slip a stiletto between a victim’s ribs, with charm.

‘Joe,’ she says to me. ‘What do you think of Charles’s view of the world?’ But I tilt my head in teasing dismissal, savouring another salmon-crepe taster and keeping my powder dry for the moment.

‘We need to preserve and conserve wilderness.’ Miriam persists, staring into her glass.

‘What bloody wilderness? The space between a greenie’s ears? Give me a break. Wilderness?’

Donna is good. She has her hand on Miriam’s wineglass. ‘A top-up, Miriam,’ she asks sweetly. ‘Just ignore the arrogant accountant.’

But Charles’s eyes declare that he knows his host has just saved him from a bullet of red wine.

Candice, his guest for the evening, sits opposite – slim with fine blonde hair, cut square across the shoulders of a simple black dress. She has been the quiet foil for her outspoken acquaintance, politely revealing nothing of herself so far.

Donna usually orchestrates the conversation, which is how we have arrived at this contratemp. ‘Joe,’ she says. ‘Candice is in the business world.’ She catches the eye of Charles’s friend. ‘Isn’t that right?’

‘Marketing management,’ the blonde replies seriously. ‘On-line.’

I smile encouragingly towards her but she gazes with bewildered disdain at her evening’s companion.

As I sit pondering how this edition of Donna’s debates might go, Charles leaps back into the fray. ‘Why do we believe what we believe?’

Donna sniffs, still on her feet, completing topping up our bulbous glasses. ‘Oh, I *do* hope this is not going to degenerate into the dead-end creed debate.’

‘No. No. Forget religion,’ the accountant challenges. ‘A ruby? How do you know it’s the real thing?’ He points at the stone his hostess wears proudly on her right hand. He and Donna have a past together; but then so have I – with our hostess, that is.

‘Coffee anyone?’ Donna now holds the percolator. ‘Is my ruby real, Charles? It bloody well better be.’

I watch him chortle jollily at some thought. ‘The value is in the love, my dear,’ he expounds, ‘not some expert voicing his persuasive opinion. Aren’t you all going to complain about plundered resources next?’

Miriam rises to her feet. I have only known Miriam at a distance, as an acquaintance of Donna. She is a striking thirty-something with her anger flashing and a straggly red-hair pony-tail tossing in frustration. ‘We do share the planet. Why should humans have special rights to vandalise at the expense of every other life-form? Answer that.’ Her legs are planted firmly astride, blue skirt swirling, chin jutted, white bloused arms folded in front – but Charles doesn’t twitch.

I look at Candice again. We are the audience at this performance.

Charles is on his soap-box. ‘Haven’t we just enjoyed Donna’s hospitality? This is not some primitive shifting-agriculture. This is the order of things. We grow, we manufacture, we produce wealth so that the world can function.’

‘But sustainably, Charles,’ Miriam persists.

‘Dear Miriam, we are back to the greenie bullshit. We need earners for a tax base and a consumer market. Without economic growth, people don’t have jobs, don’t contribute, and become welfare dependants. The whole thing goes to shit.’

Donna grins.

Miriam shakes her head as she sits back down on the sofa, in apparent disbelief. ‘You are stuck in a whirlpool of nineteenth-century economic theorising. This is a finite planet. Population is well over seven billion. Your born-to-rule mindset is stuffing hope for the future. What do you think, Candice? Could you market his doomsday strategy?’ She looks at Charles’s companion for support.

‘It’s a new world.’ Candice’s disappointed expression doesn’t change. ‘Anything can be marketed, with access to moneyed web buyers.’

What does she see in Charles?

Miriam shrugs and sighs at Candice’s response.

‘See. It’s all about money. Buyers?’ Donna interjects.

‘Of course, it’s all about money.’ Charles shakes his head to clear away the heresy. ‘What other possible reason could there be for any business enterprise?’

‘Perhaps the good of society?’ I suggest.

‘Society? Joe, what a disappointment you are. I could staff all the businesses in the world on lust, lucre and the lure of lording it over others – not necessarily in that order.’

‘Refill?’ Donna asks generally, grinning anew. ‘Coffee or cabernet?’

Charles swallows a large mouthful of red in anticipation.

‘Miriam’s right, Charles,’ I say as I watch him continue towards the remnants of his very large glass. ‘We need to face the reality of exponential population growth with a parallel decline in resources and free space.’

He looks down his nose at me. ‘And your world-saving alternative is?’ He completes his quaffing while simultaneously gesturing to Donna for another.

‘A cultural change,’ I suggest. ‘We need a sustainable economic and social model which can succeed on our planet.’

Miriam gives me a grudgingly admiring look. ‘Right on, Joe.’ She has paid me scant attention until now. As she sits beside Donna, I sense a casualness between them. Interesting.

Charles splutters. ‘And what would this commie greenie model look like?’

Candice breaks her earlier restraint. ‘Society needs to provide services. You agree?’ She speaks quietly, choosing to look away from Charles and focus straight at me – pleasant enough, from my perspective. ‘Our expectation of governments? Right?’ She is challenging *me*, gently – willing me to answer, I sense – and her eyes are holding mine, without a blink.

Donna nods, while adding, ‘And that is without all the usual luxuries. For which we need mon...ey, Joe?’

I shrug. This is always like pushing water back uphill.

Donna glances at Miriam for endorsement.

I repeat patiently. ‘It needs cultural change. Inuit society, Aboriginal society ... managed their population expansion; they understood a balance with nature.’

‘Jeezus.’ Charles splutters, spilling his wine in a purpling stain down his chambray shirt-front. ‘You’ll have us back in the trees.’

‘Careful, Charles,’ Donna admonishes. ‘Argue as you will, but moderate your coarseness.’

He looks startled and nods obediently.

Mumbling, he speaks slowly. 'Breeding is a natural instinct. Do you expect millions to give up personal pleasure and aspiration for some angelic planetary good? It's a crack-pot idea. I rest my tired and weary case.' He yawns loudly.

Candice's voice is quietly dismissive. 'China has had a one-child policy – now a two-child. Their next generation is not growing at the old rates. That's cultural change, happening now ... for decades.'

'But how do you do that in the *free* world?' Charles slurs.

'Education can lead cultural change.' I can see the volcano building to erupt so I smile and continue, 'Free thinking might overcome the pig-headed attitudes which have brought us to this point. Education, Charles. There's your solution.'

'The academic writer's fix-all.' He snorts. 'Well, your school system has been a spectacular failure in recent years if world test data are valid ...'

'Not schooling, Charles,' I interrupt. 'Education. Critical thinking is what is needed. Some balance in examining policies.'

'Joe.' His face is florid. 'Never in history has education changed self-interest, greed, aspiration – the fundamental tenets of our free society.'

'Actually, Mr Accountant, it has,' Donna interjects. 'The nineteenth-century abolition of legalised slavery?'

'Precisely,' a triumphant Miriam chants. 'So start finding your economic answers which don't involve screwing half the planet.'

'There's a challenge for you, Charles,' I suggest. 'Start with that premise.'

'C'mon then. What will this new world look like?'

'Ah!' Miriam laughs. 'Belittle us with the last-bastion argument for protecting the status quo – any excuse not to think for yourself outside your complacent square.'

Charles wears a sneer which doesn't quite work due to his fast-glazing eyes.

'Dreamers. You are all just dreamers,' Charles mumbles. 'Now you will limit the children and live in some happy nirvana without competitiveness. What have you been smoking?'

'Bear with me.' I am still sipping my only glass of red whereas he must have consumed close to an entire bottle – and possibly not his first for the evening. 'People currently pay for society's service provision – Candice's point.' I look across at her in polite acknowledgment and she is holding my gaze again. Curious.

‘In a sustainable world, the fundamental difference would be in channelling the expenditure into recycled resources. Power generation would need to be from renewable sources.’

‘You *have* lost the plot now. The numbers don’t add up, Joe. You can’t generate enough energy through renewable resources. You know that.’

‘Ah! But, if that was the limitation, you would cut the power consumption, wouldn’t you? It would happen. You would find another way. This is not rocket science – it’s just that the world’s top brains have been working in expansionist economic models rather than looking for sustainable models for world survival.’

Candice appears to be grinning, behind her wine glass.

‘C’mon, Charles,’ says Donna. ‘He has a point.’

Miriam is back up on her feet. And if we didn’t need to transport everything around the planet, we wouldn’t need most of the vehicles and planes. People don’t have to live in cities, concrete drains of world resources.’

‘No cities!’ He splutters in incredulity. ‘You would wipe civilisation?’

‘It’s been done before and will be again – by nature, if we don’t act first.’

Miriam is whooping. ‘What do you think happened to the Mayas, Kushans, Angkor Wat, Old Zimbabwe? Waken up, Charles. A bright chap like you could be the saviour of the planet – instead of drinking all of Donna’s red.’

‘I need to sleep this fantasy off.’ His eyes flutter with the effort of staying in the conversation. ‘Candy, my dear, Donna will call a taxi to get you home.’

Candy indeed.

Within seconds, our fellow party-guest’s consciousness drifts away. Our four sets of eyes focus on his slowly-snoring drunken form.

I look at Donna, who shrugs with palms upturned in resignation. ‘Looks like he’ll be staying the night.’

Both she and Miriam are on a high – induced by the combined intoxication of euphoric debate, the demise of their antagonist and another toast of red.

‘Are you alright with that?’ I ask. ‘Or will I carry him to a taxi?’

Donna laughs. ‘He can snort away there. He’ll be a mess in the morning but I daresay the City will survive for a while without his input. He looks so serenely humble, snoozing away.’

‘Humble?’ snorts Miriam. ‘He’s an arrogant bastard, with a lot to be humble about. A blinkered relic. I bet his start in life came from inherited wealth; not his own hard work.’

‘As it happens,’ agrees Donna. ‘British ancestry. African traders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’ She laughs at our astonished reaction. ‘His father told me. I used to visit his family some years ago.’ She looks at me to acknowledge my awareness of both their and our pasts. ‘As Joe knows.’ Is that just a glance at the ruby on the right hand? ‘Charles was quite uninterested in his successful ancestry.’

‘Slavers!’ Miriam spits out. ‘Ripping off riches with trinkets. Bastards!’

Donna is unfazed. ‘Charles doesn’t care. Our poor humble snorer wouldn’t have a clue. He sees it as his right and responsibility to use his wealth wisely to lead the populace, all papered over in the family secrets and skeletons of history.’

She gives Miriam a hug. The angry tension seems to be slipping away from the red-head’s frame.

‘Well, he lost his argument,’ Miriam states proudly, adopting a puffed-up pose of a game-hunter with a trophy.

We make a strange sight – I and three women staring with such brazen irreverence at the somnolent City financier.

‘Then again.’ I grin to shake them out of their hubris. ‘He might just have lost a debate to *sober* advocates.’

Donna gives me a laughing cuddle while Miriam stares and starts to mouth words. Then she gives an embarrassed smile.

A realisation is dawning for me too.

‘Drunken bastard,’ Candy says softly. ‘I’m sorry. I hardly know him. This is our first real night out. Disappointing. You clearly know him well, Donna.’

‘Yes,’ with patient resignation in her voice. ‘He doesn’t change much. We go right back to uni days. Move on, Candice. He’ll only bring you grief.’

‘Thanks. I’ll take your advice. But it’s been a good evening for all that. I’ll be fine. I’ll get a cab home.’

‘Can I give you a lift, Candice?’ I suggest helpfully. ‘My vehicle is downstairs. Not a Ferrari but still pleasantly comfortable.’

‘I’m quite far out on the southside.’ The tone is an offer not a rejection.

‘I don’t have to keep fixed hours in the morning.’

‘And I work on-line from home.’ She smiles the first really warm glow I have seen from her during the whole evening. ‘What about Miriam?’

‘I’m northside,’ Miriam replies over her shoulder. ‘I have my own car.’ She and Donna have already started into the clearing tasks towards the kitchen.

Candice smiles again to me.

I think I am understanding her eyes now. With the opinionator asleep, a destiny seems to be shaping the end of an interesting party.

The thanking pleasantries are made.

Donna squeezes my arm wittingly as I usher Candy through the external apartment door to my car, parked in the wet-sheened street. The rain has stopped and bright stars twinkle through the shadowy gaps in the clouds – a metaphor, perhaps, for a world problem shared and on its way to being solved.

Donna leans to my new companion with a weary understanding, ‘It’s not your fault, Candice.’

‘I’m fine with it, Donna. Really. Thanks. Your *humble man with a lot to be humble about* seems fitting, if he actually understood. He’s not how I expected him to be. I hope he doesn’t cause you more hassles in the morning.’ She takes my arm confidently and, with a wave back to Miriam and Donna, she laughs. ‘Home, Joe, and don’t spare the horses.’

I wink discreetly at Donna as she stands, with a scheming grin, in the doorway. Miriam’s arm is entwined affectionately in hers, but I say to Candice. ‘That’s an expression from another era.’

‘My father used it,’ she says as I open the car door for her. ‘Got it from his father. Pity it wasn’t wealth like Charles seems to have received. So you write?’

I nod, as I gallantly seat her in the car.

‘And you manage marketers?’ as I take my place behind the wheel and wave to the contented couple in the doorway.

‘Not really. But Charles was happy to think that I did.’ She grins at my mildly-surprised expression. ‘He seemed like possible fun at the time; you know, urbane, witty, cavalier, rich – a business cocktail-party hook-up. But now he’s fast asleep and was never much fun at all. I just picked him wrong. It happens.’ She frowns wistfully and then looks intently. ‘Do you like fun?’

Does the sun come up in the morning? ‘C’mon horses. The lady has spoken.’

Her easy laugh is reward enough – for the moment – as she settles back in the leather passenger seat with the surge of the engine.

The car purrs over the moist city streets. I switch off the air-con pointedly – no reason to waste power – and wind the windows down a shade.

I glance at my passenger and she is smiling.

‘What do you really work at, on-line from home?’

‘I produce web-content.’ Her wide eyes tease. ‘Anything to get the younger rich people to part with their money – luxury travel, jewellery, yachts, investments – even making renewable energy appear fashionable. They’re usually so full of self-importance, they’ll buy most things to keep up the image. I do meet some interesting people. A bit hit or miss. Charles was a miss. Only one way to go now.’ Her gurgling laughter lights up her face with seductive promise.

I need the cooling breeze to collect my thoughts. I was sure Donna’s invitation had meant me for Miriam or even herself. How wrong had I been – and how skilfully manipulated.

I return the smile to my passenger ... with no humble intentions of copying Charles’s error of falling asleep quickly in Candy’s company.