

Begetting - Loss - Recovery

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PART ONE

BEGGETTING

BEGINNING

She possessed a weird sense of humour, a weird sense of reality. I should have known. I mean I should have known she was responsible. Responsible for what? Good question. Well, in the first instance, responsible for stealing the cards from my treasured card index of names and telephone numbers - the essential collection of contacts every journalist relies on.

I knew about her humour even before she came to live in my rooms. I did not approve but how could I disassociate it from the other qualities I adored. And, besides, it added an edge to living, I was so blunt, any edge helped.

In a restaurant she might order a main dish of fried fish and french fries, relishing the alliteration. Then, when it arrived, complain to the waiter and swear on her mother's life that she had ordered some fancy pork dish. The waiter would look at me in disbelief. With as neutral an expression as possible, I would turn my eyes away, usually away as far as possible from her. Embarrassment would seep through my conscious self until it chanced on a chord of morality - and at that point I would turn back towards her, ready to laugh it away, ready to say: 'Susan, really, you must remember you did order fish'. But first I would touch base with her hypnotic eyes, and there I would see all the mischief, the confidence, the astonishing radiance, and above all the carelessness that dared me to challenge her. Invariably I would look away again and the waiter would remonstrate but a few seconds longer before retiring hurt, so to speak.

And how often had she stopped a perfect stranger in the street with words of surprised greeting, and employed a full two minutes in trying to convince the stranger - man, woman, young or old - that she knew them well from somewhere, but where? Gently I would unhitch my arm from hers and sidle a few yards away, not wanting to be involved. From a safe distance I would watch her slim form, arms gesticulating wildly, her long creamy hair being flicked from side to side, and try to beckon her away. It relieved me to do something like that, something decent, straightforward, honest and down-to-earth. When I first knew her, she had given me a role to play in these mini-dramas. She would call me over and suggest that if the stranger could not remember her then perhaps they could remember her father, brother, uncle; she even tried me as her son once. I learnt though, before too long, that if I walked away rather than responding it spoilt her fun.

Going to the cinema was an adventure. This game was so simple, so effective. She would rub her hand up and down a neighbour's thigh until he (or she) responded in one way or another, then she

would cry out with heartfelt apologies before grabbing my thigh with both her hands, as if to prove that's where she had meant them to be. On one early occasion and one occasion only, at least with me, this particular impish trick brought a dividend - new friends: Marjorie and Trevor Haynes. Margie, as we came to know her, had responded to the thigh stroke by putting her arm around Susan and tickling my neck. The three of us burst out laughing, a pleasure the French film was not encouraging (and to be fair Susan rarely played this trick during a film either she or I was enjoying). On this occasion we all left before the end, the two women kicking the shins of the serious shoosh shooshers along the row. In a crowded smoky West End pub Susan and Marjorie lit each other's touch papers while Trevor and I, both clearly damp rags compared to our partners, delved into a profound and satisfying criticism of modern times.

At one point I got so tired of Susan's trickery that I stopped accompanying her to films. Then, one rainy night in late winter, she urged me to go with her to see a much-talked about drama. The antics, she promised, would stop. They did, for a while, until I stopped worrying, then, a few weeks later, she started again. All the way home she recalled every detail of an old woman's outrage, and giggled contagiously. Eventually I cracked and laughed too, unable to resist her infectious charm.

But how could I not know it was her? How could I have been such a sucker to think, to think for a moment, that she would not play with me in the same way? I can remember the first time an index card went missing. I was working on an article about mad cow disease, not my favourite topic but a regular one, and I had talked to a contact on a Monday. On the Tuesday I needed to talk to him again, but I could not find his number in my card index. Certain that I must have misplaced it, I searched through the whole index, card by card, then through the rest of the desk, and then throughout my office. When Susan came in from the bookshop where she worked, she glided into the office, bringing a welcome cup of coffee and a kiss on the cheek. I picked up a card and asked if she'd seen a similar one lying around the house. She gleamed at me, and said no.

The problem was not serious but it was annoying. The following morning, I called another contact from whom I had acquired the details in the first place, but I felt a fool. By the third time it happened, I had seriously begun to suspect Susan. When she came in that day, she had her arms full of flowers, flowers for me. I accused her directly but with a light-hearted games-up laugh. I thought a direct confrontation with confidence would disarm her into an easy submission. I didn't notice at the time, but the bunch of orange and yellow lilies with their long stems and brilliant colours rose suddenly screening both her face and her quick yet quiet denial. I was left to face and respond to the delightful present.

She returned to the subject at the weekend. We lay on our sides back to back, naked after love-making, the late afternoon sun streaming in through the dusty windows projecting streaks across our

skin. She twisted her head round a fraction towards me; and, with a smile that I could hear but not see, remarked that I should trust her not to interfere with my work papers. I did, I did.

“Does it matter much, I mean can’t you ring directory enquiries?” She asked innocently. I had no desire to break the trance-like moments with a dull explanation so replied laconically.

“Yes, yes of course.”

I hardly dare recall how many cards went missing - perhaps 5 or 6 that I had needed, but probably 15 in total. I took pains to explain to Susan that the damage was never serious. And it wasn’t, at least I didn’t believe so. I wasted a lot of time. Several colleagues and contacts found it odd that I had become so careless, but I never missed a deadline. It wasn’t that kind of a problem. Had I admitted being more disturbed then, maybe, perhaps . . . what a pair of unuseful words.

I examined my own behaviour with the cunning of a psychoanalyst and contemplated the most bizarre explanations. Did I sleep walk at night, pre-occupied with work or the money I was earning from it? Susan sniggered at the suggestion, replying that my body was always there when she wanted it. Perhaps I had mini-memory losses and threw the cards out of the window or flushed them down the toilet. Perhaps I hated my work. It was a question of elimination, there were so few possible explanations.

Trevor, when I consulted him, said he had no doubts that Susan must be the culprit. Ask her then, please, I pleaded. He did. She said it was as much a mystery to her as to me.

I asked Damien’s opinion, late one afternoon when I was nearby and chanced a visit to his expensive, lavishly furnished, Belsize Park flat. There was much about Damien, an ex-schoolteacher in his sixties, and a close friend, that irritated me. There was his ego for a start, his dormant emotions, and the size of his nose. Yet I loved him dearly. More importantly, his advanced age coupled with a sensitive intelligence gave him more wisdom than anyone else I knew.

“She’s criminally insane. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Come down off your misanthropic pedestal for a moment, Damien. Be sensible. Why would she lie? We are living together.”

“Leave her at once.” Brilliant advice. “Have you any more Marjorie Proops questions for me, or can I get on with this review - it’s for the New York Times.”

This was near the end, and a sickness had already begun to weary my body and soul. That evening

Susan came home, radiant and joyful, just to see her at times made me happy. I forced a smile, but in an instant she had pushed me down on the sofa and was on top of me demanding to know what was wrong. I told her Damien was of the opinion that only she could have stolen those cards. At the time, she still disliked Damien, possibly because she felt threatened by the combination of his homosexuality and my friendship with him. She flew into a rage, a rare rage.

Susan's pride was strange, not as strange as her humour: she hardly ever became truly angry, but when she did, it was always unexpected in that the circumstances never seemed to warrant the emotion. It might have been the right moment for Susan to confess, in consideration of my health, but Damien's accusation hardened her resolve. Damn Damien, he should have been wiser.

During the next two weeks no more cards disappeared. Susan had been living in my Maida Vale flat for over a year, and I had been living within her sphere of influence for 18 months. Not the easiest of times, but without doubt the most exciting of my life. We lay curled up together in bed, attempting to press as many parts of our body together without compromising our sight of the small black and white television stacked on a pile of second-hand books in the corner of the room. Sherlock Cushing stalked cautiously around the same corner of the room. We had missed the middle of the film during the crescendo of our love-making but it didn't matter as we'd both seen it before and knew the plot. I thought how much lighter I felt since no new cards had gone missing. I kissed her softly, gratefully and went to the kitchen to fetch a cracker with peanut butter and gherkins, Susan's favourite, and a glass of juice. When she'd finished munching, I told her - I don't know why or with what intention - how glad I was that she had stopped the nonsense with the cards. Without moving a muscle or twitching her eyes away from the drama, she replied.

"Bill, I had to stop, you were taking it too seriously."

Everything went silent, dark, dead. Out of the silence, darkness, deadness came a tiny child's scream, it grew in the back of my head, I could feel it. It grew and grew and finally came out in an almighty wail. I started swearing at the top of my voice, and then pushing Susan off the bed with my feet. She hit the floor before she or I knew what had happened. I changed my expletives and screamed at her again. My hand found a book by the side of the bed and I threw it at her as she escaped, naked, through the bedroom door.

I got cross more often than Susan, but she had never seen me angry like this. Even I had only seen myself like it once before. I screamed out to her using language I hardly dare recall. Then I told her to get out. We were finished.

She rang once or twice, and there was a card - a kitsch card, a big red heart with red tear drops crying out of it and the word 'Sorry' on the inside. But how could I forgive her? A few days later she visited

the flat when I was out and took away a variety of essentials and non-essentials. She left a note: 'Bill dearest, I am sorry, I am so sorry. I did it for a giggle. It seems such a little thing to fight over. I don't mind about the fight. When you're ready, tell me how you are. Sorry, Susan.' But how, how could I ever trust her again.

Dreary week succeeded dreary week. A surfeit of assignments meant I was able to keep busy. I could work without tiring until late in the evening, but, at some point, I had to stop, and then the silence and emptiness of the flat took over. The weekends, too, were difficult for I did not look for ways to fill them. After several weeks, I noticed that my anger had begun to subside and a feeling not dissimilar to remorse lurked close by ready to open a gateway for my love of Susan to reenter; but, when this remorse leaked into my thoughts, I would fight it with the powerful memory of betrayal and the ease with which she had repeatedly lied to me. Occasionally, at night, my sexual need and desire for her intermingled and became so strong that I allowed my thoughts to caress her with affection.

One Thursday, less than a month after the fight, I came home from an interview to find she had visited the flat again and removed a few more of her possessions - mostly clothes, but some trinkets also. On my desk in the study she had left a small pile of cards, and a piece of paper with her address and telephone number, which I recognised. She had gone back to her father near Ipswich. That pleased me, for I knew she went there to recuperate when hurt, she had told me so. The pleasure did not last long: after a few seconds of staring at the paper I knew she had meant me to believe just that. I picked up the cards and shuffled them between my hands. This helped me recall all the time I had wasted looking for them, all the embarrassment of having to call colleagues over and over again, and all the blindly stupid explanations I had invented in an effort to explain their disappearance.

The same afternoon, Ruth, a good friend who lived nearby, rang to invite me to dinner. I accepted readily for she knew nothing of my troubles and would give me all the sympathy I needed. And then, as if to confirm my re-instatement in society, Trevor telephoned. He knew all about the situation (Susan must have talked to Margie) and invited me to Deal, where the Haynes owned a holiday flat, for the weekend. I promised I would go, though not with him and his family on the Friday afternoon, for I had a piece of reporting to finish and deliver before Monday, but on the Saturday. Ruth's call had already lifted the gloom caused by the trail of Susan's visit, Trevor's invite lifted my spirits further for I invariably enjoyed weekends at Deal, children and dog and all.

The rest of the afternoon was taken up with a final read through of an article on drugs for cancer. The bulk of the report, for a science magazine, already sat neatly written in the hard disk of my computer. The final part, or rather the first part for I was hoping the missing bit would make the lead, was waiting on an interview with a London consultant - Dennis Williamson - who had begun the very first clinical trials with a new drug for breast cancer. I had talked to his secretary so many times without result that I felt one further call could make no difference. All the information sat fresh in my mind. I

sat waiting while the telephone at the other end purred and purred. I looked at my watch, it was past 6pm. I was about to hang up when a man answered and admitted reluctantly that he was Dr Williamson. I gave him my name, Bill Lambert. He said he had seen my byline, which was a good start. He listened patiently until I ran out of breath, then, without frills, told me to be at his office at 8.30am the next morning.

I skipped, more lighthearted than I had felt for weeks, the mile or so from Maida Vale to Ruth's house in Kingsgate. The High Road supermarkets were still open so I could buy both a bottle of wine and a bunch of flowers. Since Susan, I had seen very little of Ruth yet she was one of my oldest friends. Damien had introduced us at one of his soirées. She was the grand-daughter of his oldest but deceased brother. Despite years of affection and a certain attraction, we had never become lovers. Perhaps the attraction was never sufficiently magnetic, perhaps circumstances had conspired against us, perhaps we were 'in respect' rather than 'in love', as one of my previous girlfriends had suggested, and scared of falling out of respect. But now we had an established friendship, it seemed improbable that we would break through into new realms; moreover, we knew each others' failings and weaknesses too well.

Although anxious to see Ruth's smile, I took time to walk across Kilburn Park. Such activity: tennis players chased bright green balls, mongrels chased poodles, old timers glued to the benches pulled long faces full of resignation or satisfaction (one of them smiled at me, as though he knew from the flowers I was on my way to a sweetheart), a few runners and one exerciser chased their own health, a pack of teenagers kicked a football to and fro, unaware that a park warden hobbled across towards them, barely restraining himself from beating his walking stick in the air. For a moment I lost myself in memories of my own early adolescent days, the innocent fun of schoolboy play, the friendships made, made and broken.

A voice calling my name brought me back sharply to the present. It was a neighbour of Ruth's I'd met once.

"You're Ruth's friend aren't you, you remember me, Shirley, we all went dancing together one night together." Following a dinner with Ruth and her then boyfriend some two years ago, we had danced together much of the night. Dancing had been preferable to talking for she talked nonsense, mostly about astrology, gods and gurus, yet she moved lithely on the dance floor exuding sensuality, and succeeded in drawing my reluctant body into the music. Out of politeness I chaperoned her home, and then found I needed to be almost rude to refuse her insistent invitation for coffee. Later I discovered that darling Ruth had been trying to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, Shirley, a neighbour of hers, had been deeply depressed and was needing diversion; and, on the other, Ruth thought that I - in pre-Susan days - might find her attractive. She had even primed Shirley as to my shyness.

So, on that mild evening in late Summer I stopped to talk to Shirley for a few minutes. I hardly listened as she rambled on - about Cornwall and some cult or other she had discovered - and we became another component of the tranquil park scene so typical of our time and the relative peace in which we all lived.

Ruth, who could well be described as tall, dark and handsome, welcomed me with a gorgeous hug, and then scolded me for not having telephoned or visited for over three months. Such was life with Susan, I remarked casually as we moved into her richly furnished lounge. I mentioned my chance meeting with Shirley. Ruth said she liked the girl, but that she had 'a screw loose'. She had not seen her for months and had no interest in discussing her. Instead she wanted to hear my sad tale. I followed her into the busy, appliance-filled kitchen, where I opened the wine, and she immersed two large pieces of haddock in a pot of milk. I was commissioned to finish the salad. We talked about Susan through the preparation and the meal itself. Ruth made no outright judgement though said something along the lines of 'It's not the end - there's more of you and Susan yet.' Her sincere dark eyes peered through a fringe of tidy auburn hair and looked at me seriously. I glimpsed a trace of sorrow, a trace of pity, perhaps even envy. Then it was gone and she had swung the conversation to one of her own problems, stalling any enquiry as to what she had meant, or felt.

Lovely Ruth had never settled down with a man. There had always been one, occasionally two, around but they had either lacked sufficient imagination or were hopelessly impractical - she seemed unable to strike a happy medium. On reflection the same held true for me - there had been women before Susan, but they were all as black and white to colour, as mono to stereo. Yet despite Susan's charm, beauty, and intelligence, she was clearly flawed too. Perhaps all people were either flawed or dull, or perhaps Ruth and I . . . Walking back from Ruth's a depression returned, I didn't want to think along those lines any further. Late night loiterers of a hundred different races still frequented the ghastly neon-lit burger bars that turned the Kilburn High Road into a fairground candy parade.

The next morning, I arrived at Dr Williamson's office with a few minutes to spare. Doctors invariably kept me, well most people, waiting, but I would never plan on being late myself. I made enquiries and took myself along the labyrinthine passages, peeking through doors whenever one swung open for a view of broken, ill and bed-ridden bodies, trying to guess what might be wrong with them. Strange places hospitals: a concentration of the physical failings of the human body and consequently terribly pathetic, yet marvellously hopeful too, because so much of the present illness will be cured or bettered and the bodies will return to renewed life, with no or at least less pain. I entered a door with Dr Williamson's name on. A young lady looked up from her computer screen; I told her my name and she pointed to a half open door and told me to go in.

Dr Williamson was stooping slightly over an open drawer at a filing cabinet when I entered, but when he turned to greet me I was faced with a lean man, well over six foot. His gaunt yet friendly face

looked younger than I expected, 30 perhaps, but his position belied that possibility. He must be nearer forty, I thought. Unusually I took an instant liking to him. I liked that he saw me immediately on arrival, I liked the warmth of his attention as though he knew me of old, and I liked the atmosphere - nothing special, tidiness, photos, plants - in his office.

“Bill, we have half an hour, at nine I will be dragged off to a project meeting, I hope it’s time enough. My secretary says you’ve been trying to get hold of me for some days. I’ve been away and I told her I didn’t want to talk to the press.

“Dr Williamson . . .”

“Call me Dennis. Bill, I’ve seen a few of your articles, and I trust you not to wrap any information I give you into a biased report.”

“I have already written most of my article, but would like a newsy peg, especially since the drug has now started first clinical trials.”

“Bill,” he kept using my name, “this drug will never cure cancer, no-one here intends ever to give that hope, but if we can slow down the rot, if we can relieve the pain, then we are doing something worthwhile. My patients are guinea pigs, I’ll tell you that straight. I tell them that straight too.”

I had been impressed before he began, after half an hour, I could understand why he had achieved a pre-eminent position so young. He explained to me how they thought the drug worked (no popular journal as far as I knew had got to grips with this yet), the problems they were likely to encounter, what they expected to gain through the trials, and the limitations. Furthermore, he gave me a few of the first patients’ comments. On my way out, as we walked along the corridors together, every passing nurse and doctor acknowledged him. It never occurred to me to suggest another meeting, a social one, it never did. But he must have liked me, or perhaps, I thought later, he might have calculated I could be a useful person to know. I left the hospital with an invite to dine at his Notting Hill house the following week.

Back home I set to work on my draft without delay, writing the first few paragraphs, amplifying the middle and drawing slightly different conclusions at the end of the 1,500 words. Dennis had pointed out, and I believed him entirely, that I could end on a higher and less critical note without losing accuracy. It was nearly 4pm by the time I printed out the final copy, and inserted it into an envelope which already contained photographs and diagrams. I had taken taxis during the morning, now I settled to go by tube. At the Holborn editorial offices I caught Alex, the features editor, putting on his corduroy jacket to leave for the weekend. An overweight but fit ex-rugby player, he lived for his job, and for sailing. But he was a star in my life, for it was he that had given me

enough work, four or five years previously, to make possible my switch from business to science journalism.

“I thought of you today,” he said in his squawky awkward voice, “and, heh, I concluded how unusual it would be if you disappointed me.” I did not tell him about the Williamson interview. He would enjoy his weekend reading all the more for the surprise. I thought with relish of the praise he would lavish on me next week. Alex was no fool, he knew he got value for money from me simply because I responded so well to praise. It wasn’t that I loved it, more that I needed it, mentally. Perhaps other journalists injected themselves with confidence from a shining enlarged byline, but for me an editor’s praise was what counted.

I struggled against the displeasure of the return rush hour journey by closing my eyes and transporting myself to Deal; trying to project to the joys of a carefree weekend. The train lurched to a stop, I but one of a line of skittles to knock and to be knocked sideways, no-one fell down for there was no room. I looked around at the faces, almost all of them dead after a week’s work and a lifetime of travelling in crowds. No living eyes could last long in that environment. I closed mine again and thought of the Danish pastry I would buy on my way home. Teatime, a tradition restored. Susan had done away with teatime, and why? because she preferred coffee. The train lurched forwards, and I pushed Susan back, back out of my thoughts. It was getting easier.

At first I did not check the answering machine, preferring to make a pot of tea and a few sandwiches to satisfy a nagging hunger: I had eaten neither breakfast nor a proper lunch. I sat down with a trayful of goodies: thinly sliced bread (bread with all the bits), wensleydale cheese, German salami, homemade mayonnaise (given me by Ruth), a whopping apple danish, a steaming pot of tea for two. I turned on the radio to catch the early evening news. Only when the telephone rang did I remember the machine; the click went after one ring. Instead of picking up the receiver, I thumbed the volume switch to hear my own recorded message. Friends often hung up before the tone, and I expected likewise this time; but, having already arranged my weekend, I had no anxiety about missing an invitation. Instead I heard a familiar voice. The few simple words were enough to shatter any peace I had carved out in recent weeks, and to change my life. I made no attempt to catch her before she rang off. The machine’s pips and clicks came and went. I stood silent and dumbfounded.