

The Evil Genius

Stories

Alan Carmichael

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By the same author

The Reluctant Thief

The Gift

The Writers' Group

To Rick and Dee.

For the open road. And much, much more.

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Author's Note.

These stories were written in the early noughties when I was still learning (or failing to learn, some might say) the craft of writing. Readers may notice the absence of certain features of modern life such as satnav and Wikipedia.

Initially I planned to re-write the stories from scratch. Re-reading them more recently, however, it seemed to me that for all their weaknesses there were one or two strengths as well.

I have decided therefore to leave them unchanged.

“May I venture an explanation :
writing is the ultimate recourse for those
who have betrayed.”

Yūko Tsushima

Kathryn's Invitation

I had not been particularly keen to attend the awards ceremony, despite the encouragement of my agent, a lady whose considerable charms and a voice many mistook for a certain linchpin of Radio 4 were more usually deployed to soothe the febrile concerns of her romantic novelists.

I had not won a prize. My own publications, dealing as they did with price cycles of competing asset classes in the commodity markets, while well received on Wall Street and at the LSE, were less suited to the champagne and celebrity which, I imagined, might more accurately reflect the tone of the evening.

'Elliott, do come. It will be such fun,' she purred. 'Besides, you need to see how the rest of the publishing industry works.'

'Hmm. It sounds a bit X Factor to me,' I said.

'Elliott, my dear, don't be such a snob.'

To this I made no response. I suspected however that she did have an aim in mind, and that this involved steering me in the direction of those TV academics whose books with their punchy subtitles and the reduction of their disciplines to personalities and bullet-points had transformed the popular science listings - in the process either democratising the academic world or dumbing it down, according to one's view.

'Your money markets. Those hedge funds, those derivatives. It's all mainstream now,' she exclaimed. 'This recession's hit every one of us. God knows. Even I had to let staff go.'

I found myself imagining my next front cover - bloodied titles over graphs of plunging stock markets.

She sent me two tickets - '*But it's fine if you come on your own*' - and a promise that taxis to and from would be arranged. On the back of her card she had written the web address.

The event was to be held in the ballroom of a London hotel, and a graphic showed a dozen circular tables, booked at some expense, it seemed, by leading publishers and agencies, all arranged beneath a raised stage with an oblong bench for judges and hosts. It might have been the seating plan for a society wedding. Black tie was optional. The estimation was, no doubt, that dress codes for recalcitrant authors could never be enforced.

The website listed the award categories and I began to scan the shortlists. Some of the candidates were familiar by reputation, many were not. But halfway down I paused.

Kathryn Spence. *A Mother's Rebirth*.

Underneath, it said, 'One woman's struggle with cancer, a failed marriage, and a drop-out teenage daughter.' The category was Memoir and Autobiography, and I imagined equal measures of misery and triumph-over-adversity, the type of literary mélange which, these days, provided the perfect escape from the rigours of the morning tube from Hendon into the City. There was a photograph, a handsome woman in a white silk blouse with close cropped black hair, one arm around a young woman in a jean jacket, the daughter, now reconciled, one assumed. But I paused for other reasons. The name meant something to me, I had known another Kathryn Spence. For a moment I struggled to visualise this other Kathryn, my Kathryn, and felt, just momentarily, an irritation that it was now so difficult. Brown hair. Yes, she had had light brown hair, I was sure of that. And full, rounded features. Pretty, very pretty. Not angular, almost pinched, as were the features of the woman in the picture.

There was a short biography. She was fifty-five, the same age as me, and she had been to Durham University between 1977 and 1980, again, like me, although she had studied Law not

Economics. After that she had moved to London to pursue a career in fashion journalism and had risen to become managing editor of a number of leading women's magazines until illness cut her career short. Now she had written her book. There were commendations from a variety of figures in the public eye, including one from a tabloid owner famous for his expletive-filled tirades against all who crossed him - 'I met Kathy in her days as a cub reporter, and I always knew she had the balls to come through ...'

The balls?

Did my Kathryn have balls? The Kathryn of my university days?

Chutzpah. Perhaps that was the word. Perhaps that was the quality that described her and the circle in which she moved. For there was something taking place, that final year at university, the year we all graduated, the year we all began to study and to study hard for the first time since A levels. There was a kind of regrouping going on, a subtle realignment, one based not on academic prowess but on something more difficult to pin down and yet as easy to detect. It was the division of those who relished the ending of this three-year idyll of late mornings, ivory tower reverie and limitless horizons, from those who feared it. One could detect in the former a self-confidence, an assertiveness, in the latter a nervousness about what was to come, a desire to string out the present for as long as possible.

One got clues from their plans for the summer after finals. Some talked of internships with Goldman Sachs, or three months understudy at an opera festival in Tuscany, or interviews with Saatchi's and McCann's in Wardour Street. For these students, the world was theirs, and while they had relished the languor of their undergraduate years, they were now poised to move on, to take leading parts in the world of things, of money, of power and achievement.

Whereas for their peers, those less blessed with such clarity about the future, there were no plans, except teaching and postgraduate work or another year to retake finals.

One could detect a difference in dress and style. For those whose direction was clear and upwards, the cheesecloth and jeans were gone, to be replaced by pressed chinos and jackets. Some bought suits. For the others, the clothes remained indistinguishable from those of their first year protégés, as if by dressing down they might indefinitely postpone their re-introduction to the adult world.

And where did I fit into this?

I remember I had cut my hair - this was the first time I had visited a barber since arriving in Durham - but this was less to do with impressing prospective employers than because a certain spiky-haired Johnny Rotten had said *fuck* on television. I had also, more by luck than design, moved in with two fellow students who most definitely belonged to the chic pioneers poised to storm the kingdom of the grown-ups. And as a sign of the post-student world which they would soon be inhabiting, they had painted every room in the flat a brilliant white, so drawing a distinct line over the squalor of earlier, freshman bedsits. In that beautiful flat, on a fourth floor, with a balcony and wide windows, they staged parties where the guests drank cocktails, and where smoking a joint had lost its cool.

Would that be when I first met Kathryn? At one of those house parties? I have a memory of these young gods talking and laughing. No, not laughing. Braying. What was discussed? Career trajectories? Golden handshakes? Postings to Manhattan and Hong Kong? No, that is unfair, that is the gloss of an unreliable memory. But I do remember, in that knot of people, and especially in her, a confidence which I might describe as sexual and yet which I now know is something less easy to categorise. It was not only confidence in the act of sex, but also, much more, an assured awareness of what one might call its transactional power, its use, sometimes playful sometimes serious, as a tool one might deploy for barter or to advance

one's position or to engage someone's attention. A toss of the hair, a pursing of the lips, the lingering of a stare for a second longer than was necessary. The promise of our lithe and perfect bodies, so taut, so effortlessly active, not yet slowed down by the accumulation of the aches and irregularities which characterise middle age.

She stared at me, and I remember her steady gaze and her smile. What did she say to me, I who had still not emerged from the diffidence of my schooldays? What might I have said to her?

And yet two days later, as I walked in bright October sunlight to the lecture hall, I heard her voice over my shoulder. Loud, direct - 'Elliott, Elliott' - a shout more than a call. I stopped, we chatted. And then I noticed something which stays with me to this day, something so inconsequential which yet somehow characterises her perfection and unattainability. Do I sound eccentric to recall a detail so slight? Or even a bit weird?

She had expertly applied rouge to her cheeks, and I found myself staring at the left side of her face. That she had done so at all was unusual, for most of the girls did not wear much makeup. It was too expensive, too tiresome to apply, and anyway there was no need for artifice in that unblemished world they inhabited. That she had done so with such skill seemed to invest the moment with something else, some mystery, some deeper purpose. Was she going somewhere special, was she meeting someone important? But no, it was me she had buttonholed, just me, and it was the two of us talking.

She had high cheekbones and perfect skin, and the artfulness of her makeup, while noticeable in its artifice, at the same time revealed something else, something essential, the woman inside the girl, a woman who, in this tiny, tiny act of painted illusion, exuded a sensuousness which, in a flash, multiplied the attraction she radiated. We spoke, and I must have held her gaze, just so as to chat, and yet what I really wanted to do was to admire the perfection of that beauty.

'So will you come?' she said eventually.

‘Come?’

‘My party.’ And she handed me a card with an invitation for the weekend following.

I remember that I did indeed go to her party, though I cannot remember who else was there, or what music was playing, or what the guests wore. It was crowded, she was always active, always the centre of attention, making introductions or pouring drinks, absolutely at ease as a hostess. How desperately would I have wished to steer her into a corner and talk, just the two of us, as we had done for a few seconds on that pavement outside the lecture room. We did converse, just the once, though not by ourselves, but instead in a circle of half-a-dozen, each articulate and self-assured in the way that you can be only when you are twenty-one and have a summer internship at Goldman Sachs and the sheer uncertainty of the world is still its most alluring feature. Once she looked at me and smiled and said, ‘Elliott, tell me, what do you think?’ But I paused, and the chance was lost, and a half-dozen voices crowded out my own.

I left early. I was drunk. The next morning my flatmates found the invitation torn into four on the kitchen table, an act of juvenile pique for which they mocked me endlessly.

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