

POPPENDOKTOR



Bel Mooney



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When they finally emerged from the hotel, the sun was high and shattered the surface of the canal. Lucy blinked. 'Two days is all we have, and we get up so late', she murmured.

Michael put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed tightly. 'Better things to do than make an early start,' he whispered, brushing his mouth over the top of her head. She could smell his after shave in the air, sharp citrus, not her choice.

They turned right along Singel and strolled towards the flower market. After a short distance Michael stopped, striking his own forehead with theatrical exasperation. 'I

forgot the guide book', he exclaimed, 'I'll just run back and get it'.

'Do we need it?', Lucy pleaded, 'I just want to wander.'

'No, we need the map. You walk on and look at the flowers. I won't be long.'

Lucy knew not to argue, or offer to accompany him. But she turned to watch the tall, thin figure striding back to the small hotel, light mackintosh flapping open like wings. When he had disappeared she still stood watching the spot where he'd paused to open the hotel's glass door, without glancing back to see if she had walked on. Michael always got his own way. The thought of that made her tremble deep inside, with desire and grief in equal measure. She bent to him, always, unable to help her pliancy, or the helplessness when she imagined the scent of his skin and hair. Five years into the relationship, nothing had changed. Is this being in love, Lucy wondered, when the multi-coloured spring flowers in silvery buckets themselves seem poised for his return?

It seemed a long time before he was back, apologising for the delay: he could not find the book, he was waylaid by the obsequious manager, and so on.

'But it was on the chest of drawers - I saw it', she said.

'Then Jesus - I need glasses!' he joked, easily, 'I told you I'm getting old'.

He pulled her arm through his, and quickly pointed

out the price of the flowers, translating quickly into sterling for her benefit. 'Dutch women think it's their right to have a house full of flowers', he explained, 'so they wouldn't stand for the prices we have to pay. Oh darling, do you remember the narcissi?'

'How could I forget? That was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me!' Lucy smiled.

They had met at a party. Amongst the colleagues and acquaintances, the stranger dazzled her with his attention. Michael knew so much, he had done and seen so much. Next day, when flowers arrived at her office, she was finished. Armfuls of white narcissi, taking two delivery men two journeys. Her colleagues ran around trying to find vases, jamjars, coffee mugs, anything to hold the extravagance of blooms which filled the air such heady sweetness Lucy thought she might faint. The card simply read, 'For the Romantic in you', with no signature. But he had written the name of a bar, that day's date, and a time - 6.30 pm. When she kept the rendezvous all was predestined, she thought. After that, the smell of narcissi would always make her weak with longing.

'If I'd only known', she said thoughtfully.

'What?'

'Everything'.

'Do you think you wouldn't have turned up?'

‘Oh, I expect so. I couldn’t help it really. By the time you know the danger you’re in, it’s too late.’

They turned from the flowers and walked on in silence, turning left towards the Amstel area. Still she didn’t respond to his question, which weighed as heavily as his arm on her shoulders. The streets suddenly seemed full of young people, in groups and in pairs, talking and laughing in cafes, perching on walls, whizzing past on bicycles. Lucy realised they had not passed anyone old for quite a while. She pointed this out to Michael.

‘Young and beautiful - like you’, he said, with a small, self-conscious sigh. Lucy knew this was her cue to cosset, to kiss, to tell him how handsome he was and sexy too, the only one for her, despite the fifteen years between them. But a small flame of rebellion spurted within, and she said nothing.

Suddenly there was a sound of music from one of the tall buildings, somebody playing blues guitar with skill. The chords sang out in the air above their heads, reminding her of a boy she’d been infatuated with when still in her teens. Lucy stopped and looked up at the rust-coloured gable, trying to identify the window, imagining the fingers moving over the strings in a melancholy riff. Why was it, she wondered, that even at thirty you found yourself having to fight nostalgia?

‘You’re miles away’, Michael complained.

‘I was thinking....wouldn’t it be wonderful to come and live here? We’d have a flat, high up there, and there’d be geraniums on the balcony - like that. You’d buy me flowers every day, and I’d take guitar lessons, and we’d have a lovely time.’

Michael’s laugh rang out. ‘We certainly would! And apart from flowers, music and lovemaking, what would we do with ourselves all day?’

‘Oh, we’d start a business, or something. I know - travel! We’d do tours of ‘Lovers’ Amsterdam’, with all the best places to go, and the most romantic restaurants, and stuff like that. It’d be perfect, Michael - wouldn’t it?’

He pulled her to him and murmured ‘Of course it would, my angel’, into her hair - placating, as if he heard the panic behind her light-hearted fantasy, and knew he could dispel it (as always) by soft words and touch.

Rembrandtsplein was noisy and crowded. Pigeon droppings caked the great artist’s statue, running down like tears. A skinny young man, his hair in blonde dreadlocks, puffed into a didgeredoo with little skill, whilst his tattered girlfriend skipped, glassy-eyed, amongst the passing tourists,

proffering a red velvet jester's hat with barely concealed aggression. Nearby a group of tough-looking men in motorcycle leathers and filthy denims lounged outside a bar, drinking beer. There was a smell of frying.

They paced on, in a hurry now, although neither of them knew why. The guidebook and map stayed in Michael's pocket as the streets changed, in character becoming narrower and meaner, and they were lost without need of direction. Then Michael said gleefully 'Oh look where we've got to!', and stared.

The girls were in every window, on sale like fruit in a street market. Lucy stared at a blonde in transparent turquoise nylon underwear, then dropped her eyes. The girl smoked, not seeing her. They were everywhere, in stages of undress, in leather, in rubber - unavoidable. It seemed to Lucy that she could breathe them even through fast food and the sweetish scent of dope, and she was repelled.

She quickened her pace, and Michael laughed. The sound was harsh.

'Not your cup of tea, is it, little Lulu? Hey, but we could learn a thing or two'.

He stopped briefly at a bookstall with a display that reminded Lucy horribly of a butcher's window. Flesh, pink and red, raw, trussed or laid out on a platter -ready. Fish eyes dead. Ripe fruit split.

‘Tell you what - we could put this on the tour for lovers, on the grounds that they might end up having more fun!’ He jabbed a finger at a magazine cover of particular grossness, and grinned at her. Lucy looked into teeth sharp and white, for eating....

‘It’s disgusting!’, she said, ‘Why did we come this way? Why didn’t you look at the map? You were so bloody keen to go back and get it!’ She stood facing him, put her hands on her hips and laughed. ‘But shall I tell you what’s even more disgusting than your cheap thrills? It’s the fact that you think I’m stupid and naive enough to be taken in by that performance! You run back to the hotel to make your precious phone call, and think I don’t know!’

She strode off, not looking to right or left at the pimps and customers who loitered all around. Catching her up, Michael walked beside her in silence. Once his silent rage would have cowed her; always she was the first to speak. But that was before....

His tone was exasperated. ‘I can’t help it, Lucy. I have to check. You know that.’

‘I’ve known it for five years, but you keep telling me you’ll do something. You go on making promises, Michael!’.

‘It’s very difficult, love, you’ve got no idea’.

‘I’ve bloody well had to have an idea, haven’t I? I’ve put up with it for all this time, and you tell me I don’t understand!’

'You *can't* understand, Lucy', he retorted, catching hold of her arm to stop her flight, 'Look, Jakey's got his GCSEs in a month's time, and it's Emma's school musical in June. You can't expect me to spoil things for them! Let's face it, you've only got yourself to think of.'

'Oh yes', she said bitterly, 'Only myself. That's all. And I'm sorry I was so selfish as to want more'.

'God, Lucy, you can be so sodding difficult. I thought you'd got used...'

'Oh, I know you did', she said harshly.

Turning sharply left again they returned to the first of the concentric canals, and stopped briefly to watch a tourist boat slide beneath a bridge. Faces peered up at the buildings and the bridge; it seemed to Lucy they were all staring at her.

'Would you like to go on one, darling - us as lover-tourists?' Michael asked gently, as if talking to a child. She shrugged.

'Tomorrow,' she said.

'What shall we do now? Do you want lunch?' She shook her head. 'Well, shopping then!' He was pleading with her now.

'I want to buy you something - for the anniversary. Five years has to be marked.'

'Wood', she said dully.

'What?'

'It's the wooden one. You're supposed to give something

made of wood.'

'Oh, I think we can do better than that', he said brightly, steering her onwards.

She said, 'It'll be *your* silver wedding in another five.'

He stopped abruptly and kissed her, almost angrily. When he pulled back at last, leaving her mouth bruised and wet, she saw his eyes were moist.

'Poor Michael', she whispered, moved despite herself.

'Listen, Lucy, I will do something about it! We *will* be together. I'm not going to make the silver with her, I know it, I really do.'

Lucy felt that familiar lift within her, the old chemistry of touch and of words, making the air purer and clearer about her head, and the sounds of the city all around fading into sweetness once more.

The street they turned into was called 'Hartenstraat'. Michael squeezed her tightly so she could hardly walk. 'It means the street of the heart', he whispered, 'Isn't that symbolic? Well find something here. Let's look for a jewellers, or some lovely clothes....'

Lucy glanced about, enchanted by the curious old shops. Suddenly she extricated herself from his arm and darted off, as if she'd suddenly recalled something forgotten. Michael followed. They stood side by side in front of a window which looked as if it had not been cleaned in

years, the display whispering through a veil of dust .

There were rows of little heads, bald, like the grave companions of a Chinese emperor. Some of them had empty eye sockets; others stared through the glass with a blank and pitiless gaze. Heavily- fringed eyes were piled in bowls, like marbles. There were tiny little hands on sticks. Larger limbs of white porcelain lay in rows, in a macabre parody of a chorus line. There were also furry arms and legs, and ears of every size, and sad brown animal eyeballs, and pads for the torn paws of old teddy bears. At the rear of the window, arranged in miniature basket chair, a pierrot doll lounged, staring out of them, all stick limbs and white silk, with a tear of shiny plastic at the corner of one eye. In front of it, in a small Moses basket lined with blue gingham, lay something swaddled in white.

Michael stepped back and looked up at the sign. 'That's brilliant', he smiled 'Look, love - *Poppendocktor*. It's a sort of doll's hospital. I bet this guy makes lots of little girls happy again'.

Lucy's face remained pressed to the window.

He heard the sound first, a high keening, as if all the dismembered toys in the window had come to life. Michael pulled her around, and they stood, entwined like a statue of lovers saying farewell, until the front of his macintosh was damp, and Lucy's small face puffy and red. For a second, as

he stepped back and looked down at her with pity, Michael thought how young and plain she could look at times. He wanted to be somewhere else. In that fraction of a second, his mind flickered to the whores and wondered why people bothered with love, when this is what it did to you.

‘I wanted...I wanted....’ she was sobbing.

‘You minded terribly, didn’t you?’, he asked softly. Nodding, she ducked her head.

‘But my love, I couldn’t have handled it. It would have made everything so much worse, you can see that can’t you?’ Her head did not move. ‘You’d have had to give up work, and - oh God, Lu, I’d have felt so guilty. It would have spoilt everything.’

Lucy jerked herself away. ‘Don’t you see? I’m the one who’s guilty - now. And it’s already spoilt.’ She leaned her head against the window, watched by those rows of terrible eyes, as if in supplication to the little heads and limbs, and to what could not be made whole.

‘Oh please, make me... *help meget better*, ‘ she croaked. Her hand flapped in the direction of the Moses basket. Her eyes and nose streamed.

Horried, Michael encircled her from behind, and poured a torrent into her ear. He murmured how much he loved her, that they would always be together, that she was the love of his life, that he would leave home as soon as the

children....

On and one. And everything would be wonderful when they had their own place at last.

‘My darling - we’ll make it all right. We’ll have another baby’, he whispered.

Her crying had stopped now. She turned to him, a vestige of joy at the corners of her mouth. ‘Oh, Michael, can we? Do you promise?’

He moved his mouth softly, but greedily, over her hair, her forehead, her eyes, licking away the salt. The voice, the beloved soft voice seemed to come from a great height and echo around Lucy’s brain as his mouth found hers.

‘I promise you, my sweetheart, my darling, my little doll.’



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