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The Whisky Didn't Help at All...
by Annie Forbes Cooper

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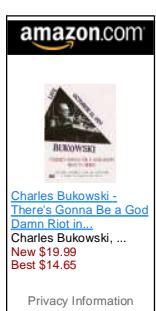
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**What Happened to Us
These Last Couple Years?**

Toujours gai!
archy & mehitabel, don marquis

I'd been anticipating our meeting all day. All year, actually. Planning my outfit. Rehearsing what I'd say. Imagining his reactions. Dizzily wishing my ten-minute stroll through Maida Vale's sun-dappled, leafy, elegant avenues would last forever, life having taught me that anticipation was often better than reality. I savored each blossom-laden tree with its sweet, optimistic smell of early summer, and tried not to feel so terminally *Brief Encounter-ish*, despite Rachmaninov's piano concerto raging inside my head. Maybe, if I told him what happened, he'd understood. Maybe, if I...

Aaaargh. There he was, strolling towards me. I sucked in my cheeks, along with everything else. *Toujours gai*.

"You look great," he said after getting the drinks in. "Your hair's different. Longer. I like it. New York obviously agrees with you."

I smiled, giving nothing away, glad he'd noticed. I'd gone to a lot of trouble to look the way I did, and busily clutched at my black skirt, in danger of disappearing up my backside as I sat down. He looked exactly the same—same tweed jacket, navy shirt and mustard tie. Why did men always look exactly the same?

"This place hasn't changed," I said, glancing round the ornate, Victorian-themed pub. One of our old haunts, it was packed with an early evening crowd of Bohemians and businessmen.

"Saw your *Sunday Times* story," he said. I made a face. "Thought it was good." He nodded encouragingly. Both journalists, we covered the same territory. It was how we'd met. Why I'd never contemplate returning to London. Our mutual pond was too small for both of us.

"No it wasn't. It was a bloody disaster. They completely rewrote it. Someone else added more information. Made me feel incompetent."

"Still, you got it in there." His hands played with his cigarette lighter, his face remained impassive. He sighed. "Why'd you have so many disasters? Always taking each blow on the chin. Other people go with the flow. You, well, you know."

I felt smitten by his observation. Was he right? I'd think about it later.

"Still smoking?" he asked, offering me a cigarette.

"Off and on. You?" I'd actually stopped in New York, but what the hell.

"Can't seem to give it up," he said, inhaling deeply. I'd always loved how he smoked a cigarette, the way it perched between his fingers. "How are you?" he said

"Fantastic."

"Really?"

I'd never tell him the truth: how much I'd missed him; how I wanted him to fling himself on the floor at my feet and tell me how he'd made a terrible mistake in not coming with me to America; how he wanted me back and couldn't live without me; how...

"You?" I said.

"Same as ever, same as ever. Nothing much new." The floor at my feet

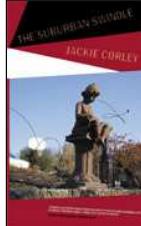
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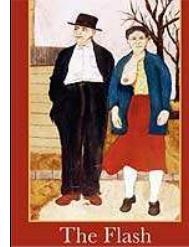
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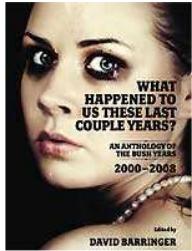
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remained conspicuously empty.

"God, life can't be that boring," I laughed, my heart splintering.

A smile engaged his lips. "That's my trouble, I was always boring. Too boring for you." I felt the full throttle of his eyes on me accompanied by a chill in the air. "Yes, you had the best of me." He grinned annoyingly. "There's nothing left. You drained me. I'm a dried up, wizened old shell of the man I used to be."

Fuck. This wasn't working the way it was supposed to. I hated him when he played with me like that. I smirked and puffed furiously, wanting to hit him. Maybe if I explained why I acted the way I did. Maybe...

"I know a lot of it was my fault," I said.

He leaned back and waited for me to go on. He hadn't heard that line before.

"That's why I had to see you, to explain. I saw things differently in America," I said. No need to tell him I'd gone into therapy, like all true New Yorkers. In the UK nobody in their right minds went into therapy. He remained silent. I had the floor. I wasn't sure I wanted it. Someone turned the volume up on jukebox and some torch singer's lyrics roamed recklessly around the bar: *"The whisky didn't help at all, I needed the support of the wall, the night you left me."* I had to raise my voice to be heard.

"I understand why you couldn't live with me," I shouted, just as the song ended. A couple at a neighboring table turned to stare. "I know I was impossible." I lowered my voice to a whisper.

He leaned forward so he could hear me better. "You changed so quickly," he said. "After all the trouble with your job, you were so unpredictable. I never knew what mood you'd be in. One minute you'd be loving and sweet, the next, screaming at me. I couldn't trust you—"

"I know, I know." I felt like weeping. I downed my drink in one. Fights were breaking out amongst the butterflies in my stomach, fueled by the scotch I'd glugged earlier at my friend's flat. Any Dutch or any other nationality of courage had long since deserted me. "They sacked me because they thought I was giving you stories, passing you privileged information."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Thought you knew."

"But it wasn't true."

"It didn't matter."

"I had no idea--"

"I didn't care. It was over between us. I wanted to leave the country, get as far away from you as possible. Same again?" Now it was my turn to instill a chill in the air.

"No, this evening's on me."

I nodded and watched him saunter up to the bar, wondering why I was torturing us both. I'd leave after this next drink. Never see him again. I saw him joke with the barmaid. He was so easy going. Everyone liked him. Dogs even followed him. When he returned, he lit us both cigarettes, the way he used to, making me feel like we were starring in some film noir classic and he was Humphrey Bogart and I, Lauren Bacall. Ingrid Bergman? Perhaps even Katherine Hepburn? The smoke coiled cinematically towards the ceiling.

"I feel terrible. I missed you so much," he said softly, as if unburdening himself of a deep secret.

"What?"

"You heard."

"Have you?"

"Of course." He looked away. His hand lay on the table. I wanted to reach forward and caress it. I restrained myself. "But you kept going under. I couldn't help you," he said.

"It was the circumstances," I pointed out. "You went back to HER." We never spoke about his wife. Her illness.

"I was weak. All my life I've done what other people have wanted. With you, I was going to, finally, break away,... Oh, what's the point? It's irrelevant. It's the past. Life goes on."

Would Humphrey Bogart have been weak? How did *Casablanca* end again? Oh,

right. He gave HER up for noble motives.

"I'll always feel guilty. I still think about you every day," he said.

"Doesn't that mean something?" I could feel my voice wobbling.

"We had our chance. We blew it."

"How can it be if you think about me all the time? How can you live with one woman and be in love with another? How? Tell me how?"

"You get used to it."

Damn cigarette, like the whisky, wasn't helping at all. I stubbed it out. "You happy?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Being happy isn't the point any more."

"D'you love, HER?" I couldn't bring myself to say her name.

Pause. His fingers traced a pattern on the polished table. He seemed to be wrestling with some great imponderable mystery of the universe.

"Not the way I love you. I can't help it." His face collapsed, his shoulders heaved with anguish. "Do you know how fucking beautiful you look? D'you know how much I want to take you home and fucking ravish you?"

"Drink?" I said, gaily. All was not lost, then. Toujours gai, cheri. Toujours gai.

About the author:

Annie Forbes Cooper is a Scottish-born, New York-based freelance journalist, essayist, editor, consultant and fiction-writer, whose byline has appeared in numerous UK and US newspapers and magazines. She has written short stories and two and a half novels, one of which is currently being turned down by some of the UK's best publishers. Her stories have been published in The Source, Peninsular, InkPot and Literary PotPourri. She's given readings at The Knitting Factory, The Ear Inn and several other New York venues. She has also had Honorable Mentions in the Writer's Digest Essay Competition, 2002, and in the ByLine Creative Nonfiction Contest, 2003.

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