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# Lunch

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## Lunch

### **Abstract**

Robert Pegnim lurks — his word, he always puts into words what he is doing — he lurks by the table piled high with copies of his latest book, and several of the earlier ones. Robert Pegrum well-known novelist en route from the Adelaide Festival in this store today from 11.30-lpm. Get your signed copy today.

## Lunch

Robert Pegrum lurks — his word, he always puts into words what he is doing — he lurks by the table piled high with copies of his latest book, and several of the earlier ones. *Robert Pegrum well-known novelist en route from the Adelaide Festival in this store today from 11.30-1pm. Get your signed copy today.*

He thinks it's a stupid thing to be doing. But publishers like it, and since he knows which side his bread is buttered (is grateful that it is buttered at all) he goes along with it. So far, in an hour, he has signed eleven books, and one of those wasn't new. He smiles, an elegant ironic smile curling his lips, sees himself doing it (in his wordmonger's eye) and smiles more broadly. He is nearly 50, his novels achieve quite a pleasant *succès d'estime*, he is glad that he has never sold out to commercialism (at the same time is wondering whether he could have, had he wanted to) and only regrets that his writing is good but not great. But he has the comfort as well as the despair of constantly trying; he might surprise himself one day.

So he stands by his table of books and charms those who come to buy them. He smiles at them, head on one side, and immediately they feel immensely significant. Fascinating people, of real interest to this famous novelist. His wife is very scathing about this, compares him to a bitch on heat; it's like a smell you exude, she says, and people come lapping it up, take it as a personal compliment. But just that same charm has blunted Barbara's sharp tongue over the years; neither is any longer much upset by the other's defects. They rub along well enough; Rob sometimes thinks it's odd that so much passion — of jealousy, despair, betrayal, as well as love — should come to this. The critics rave about his perception: 'the chilling clarity of his truth-dealing' is mentioned on the latest blurb. Perhaps that's all it means, the recognition that rubbing along well enough is very much the best that life will offer, a good gift, a nice piece of luck.

He stares out of the window at Garema Place, at the great plane trees already yellowing, already unleaving, at the lunch-eating people sitting

on benches in and out of the hot autumn sun. There's a woman standing on the pavement staring at the bookshop window with a small intense frown; doesn't he know her? He would claim that he doesn't know anybody in Canberra, but he did live in Australia for more than thirty-five years, and perhaps old friends, acquaintances, could have moved here by now. The woman has shoulder length dark hair and at that moment a flutter of autumn breeze catches it and streams it away from her face, and Rob is back on a windy gazannia-ed paddock by the sea and Frances, his 19 year old love, is frowning just like that as she tries to get one of his kites to ride the sea airs, and the old pangs of passionate longing catch his chest. The sickening desire, which he had to pretend in front of Barbara and their friends was simply friendly interest in a protégée, a clever story-writing girl who would benefit from his interest, raises his gorge again.

The pangs are momentary. The desire is a flash of *déjà vu*. But he is very pleased indeed to see her, as she walks through the shop to his table of books.

— You've cut your hair, he says.

— Mm. Well, I decided I was a bit past the long and flowings.

— You haven't changed a bit, he says. You're still as beautiful as ever. Head on one side, smile specially, privately, just for her.

She smiles uneasily. You always did flatter, she says.

— Ah, but never you, never you. I just tried to find the words for you.

— I wasn't sure whether to come, whether it was a good idea. I was going to have lunch with my husband but then he rang and said a whole lot of work had come up and he couldn't make it, so I thought I would, well, at least look through the window. And then, well, it seems silly not to say hello.

— So, you're having lunch with me.

She has forgotten the ease of his masterfulness. The comfort of it.

Now it's lunchtime there are a few people coming into the bookshop and Rob is kept busy with signing. At 5 past 1 he seizes a gap and hustles her out of the shop.

— Where to? Any outdoor restaurants? It's a glorious day, much too nice to be cooped up inside.

— Well, there's University House. Food's not amazing, but the garden's lovely. Stephen and I were going there.

— University House it is.

— Do you still fly kites? she asks in the car.

— Oh yes. When I can. I wrote a book about them, you know.

— Yes. You gave me a copy, remember? A valedictory one.

Of course. How could he have forgotten. My heart is breaking, he wrote. I cannot leave Barbara now. But I will always love you. Always, always. My dearest love in all the world. Well, it was 15 years ago.

They get trays and take cold meat and salads and a litre of red wine. (When I drink the wine, says Rob, I wonder why I ever left old Oz.) They walk up the steps into the Fellows' Garden, an Oxbridgean enclosed space of lawn and flowers and immense calm trees. Frances stops suddenly and Rob almost bumps into her, then she walks across to a table where a couple sit, heads together in earnest important conversation.

— This is amazing. What a small world we live in. (All in sharp bright brittle social comedy tones.) Rob, I don't think you've met my husband, Stephen, and this is his mistress Sharon. Rob Pegrum, an old friend of mine.

— Bitch, says Sharon.

— Slightly vulgar, as you see, Frances apologises to Rob. Well, we won't join you. I'm sure you'd rather be ... tête à tête. A bientôt.

She and Rob holding precarious trays walk through the meandering garden; she takes them to a part out of sight of Stephen and Sharon.

— Does that happen often, says Rob.

She laughs, though her eyes are thick-lensed with tears and her hands quiver. No, it never has before. You must have given me courage. Or gall. Oh, I know she exists, he keeps swearing he's given her up, that she means nothing to him, and then I come across her ... spoor, and realise that all his swearings mean nothing. But this is the first time publicly.

— Do you think of leaving him?

— Oh yes, all the time. But I don't want to. And he doesn't want me to. Funny, isn't it?

They look at one another, each the object of the other's dreaming when spouses failed. He the brilliant verbal lover, love in words, passion rarely realized, she the fresh slender girl, virginal in idea as well as in flesh. Both realise that he is the one who has kept the old role; he's aged, a bit, is slightly sourer, slightly sharper, but she is no longer the girl whose hair fell like silk in the wind, is a married woman, matron, mother, and life has worked his wicked will upon her. She's no different from his wife, the 10 years more youthful are a drop in the bucket of the scheme of things.

— Well, beautiful-as-ever Frances, tell me about yourself.

So she does, picking at her food with its tasty industrial dressings, but drinking the wine in hundreds of tiny sips, so that he offers to get some more. Tells him, one sentence per item, of finishing her degree, and teaching, and getting married, and having children (three, now 11, 9 and

8) and declaring that she will never teach again, of her small pleasant business, cooking: pâtés, terrines, tarts, puddings, casseroles, transportable food for people without time or inclination to make their own, and delivering her goodies all over Canberra for people to serve up (just a quick turn in the microwave) as their own.

— And your writing?

Her eyes slide sideways, stare down at the grass, the dug-over autumn flowerbed. Well, I still write a bit, short stories still, but just for me. I mean I don't do anything with them. All tooked oop in me little bottom drawer — forgetting he won't know this comic spinster's song of her youth.

— Cowardice, he says.

— Yes, of course. But comfortable.

— You write well. You used to, and you're probably better now. You should be making something of it, you know. It'll be foul for a while, with rejections and so on, but it'll come good — it has to when you're good.

— I suppose so, she says. I keep thinking I will, but not yet.

— Promise me, he says. Now. Today.

— Well, soon, she says, smiling and deprecating like the girl she used to be. But you, how are you? I read your novels, I buy them even, when they come.

— Aye, there's the rub. I stopped being a full-time novelist when I started having a family. He doesn't tell her he believes he has her to thank for this; remembers sitting secretly in the ugly harsh-lit cafe drinking feeble coffee and saying I want to have children with you, I want to have six children, I want you for my wife and the mother of my children. He doesn't tell her that he thinks it was Barbara's awareness of Frances — perhaps not the person but certainly the fact — that made her stop taking the pill (without telling him) and present him with the fait accompli of her pregnancy, after 10 years of marriage and 10 years of refusing to buggery up her life with children. But perhaps Frances knows. Curious, he thinks, this girl whom I loved, who has children of her own, and my children, who are not hers, but I couldn't have loved them more if they were, though I might have loved their mother more but that's not really important, not now, my life has its patterns and I do not really want to change them.

— So you have children, she says, nodding gravely.

— Yes. Two daughters.

— Called...?

— Miranda, and Imogen.

— Shakespearean, I think.

— Indeed. They're rather highly wrought little English girls, I'm afraid, even if we do fly kites on the downs.

— How old are they?

— Miranda's 15, Imogen 12. Quite aged, you see.

— And Barbara? Is she as beautiful as ever? (This is a disingenuous question; Frances never thought Barbara beautiful, but she knows Rob did.)

— Yes, I suppose so. She keeps busy with her music. And village affairs. We live in Brighton now, you know, or at least, a village nearby. A 17th century farmhouse, but not too inconvenient, and easy enough to get to the university. You can't keep a family on the odd novel. Though the thing is it is the odd novel when you work for a living, even though Sussex gave me the job with the idea of my going on writing, still without it there might have been more than the odd novel. Still, it's footling to quarrel with the past. What's done is done, etcetera.

— No, but you can use it to change the future. You can learn, and change yourself, even.

She leans forward and speaks passionately. Rob draws back. He is positively non-committal.

— Yes, he says. Maybe.

— And you are happy, she says.

— Oh yes, I think so. As the pessimist and the optimist said, all for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

— Oh, I hope not, she says, deliberately dimpling. Then softens. I used to think I was happy, she goes on, eyes down and sideways, fixed on the clods of earth. I used to think what a gift it was not just to be happy but to know you were, so many people only find out when it's passed that they were. And it's ironic, isn't it, because that happiness was wrong, it was based on a false premise, what I thought I had I didn't.

— No, no. Rob shakes his head vigorously. Happiness is never wrong. That happiness was real, because you perceived it; nothing can change that.

— I'm afraid that's not true. I'm afraid of the tainting of the past. Oh, not *our* past, that's safe, but Stephen's and mine.

— You mustn't let it happen. You can control it, you know. The mind is its own place, and all that.

— And makes a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven... Mm. I don't know that it's supposed to be voluntary, though. She raises her eyes to him. They are still as glittering brown and green as ever — he once wrote a poem about them being magic stones that changed and had power, were laved in the streams of her tears and sparkled in the sunlight; a cryptic

and conceitful poem like all the ones he made for her — and her face is still pretty and hardly lined, what it has lost is that mysterious bloom that youth does not know it has until it is lost. Youth and bloom, and both gone; beauty (for the lucky possessor of it) remains, but harder, colder, more disdainful, without the vulnerable glow that catches the heart.

She hesitates, holding her words, but then speaks. She has drunk a lot of wine.

— In this last year, with this horrible business with Sharon (she's young too, you know, she's 20) I've thought about you a lot. You've been a kind of dream, a fantasy I had, I could run through it when I felt unhappy. You came back, like this, and we were still in love, just as we used to be, only even more passionately because of the long parting, and Barbara had left you, or died or something (I mean, not horribly) and you were alone and we could live together as we'd always planned. Happily ever after. A fairy story, you see. Escapism.

She stares at him, speculative, defiant, but not hopeful. He smiles his old charming smile, misty, loving, sad. It accepts her conclusions. He has no magic wand to wave, he cannot make her story come true. Or he could, but he won't. His life has its patterns. He does not wish to change them.

He takes her hand, lying clenched on the table.

— Oh Frances. It's a beautiful dream. I wish it could happen. I've never stopped wanting it. But my life, Barbara and the girls, I couldn't hurt them like that, you do see, don't you?

She sees, as she did those years ago, when he said, I can't leave her but any day now she will leave me and then we can be together always.

— I've got to go to a reception tonight at 6 o'clock (some hooaha at the High Commission) and I leave on the plane at 8.30 tomorrow ... but this afternoon ... are you busy? We could go back to my hotel, we could have a few hours...

All his sweetness is in his eyes, his smile, his pleading voice, in the delicate nursing of her hand.

— No, she says, let's leave the past where it is ... and safe ... that bit of it. Besides, I've got to get home. I've got to make three quince tarts by 6 o'clock. Can I drop you somewhere?

He follows her out through the garden. Stephen and Sharon are gone. And he knows he has killed the sad little dream that helped her to bear them.