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A Gentle Consummation

Zeny Giles

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Abstract
Kathleen stands on the verandah and looks out. It is after four and the cars come one after another, turning from Maitland Road and moving past her house in an endless stream. She can feel their vibration as she leans against the doorway. Now they have stopped. The gates will be down at Clyde Street. She can see the impatience on the faces, the irritation as the cars bank up. All those men going home, tired after work, needing to be cosseted and fed. She wishes she could put her arms around them all to give them comfort. The cars begin to move. She can see their relief - their anxiousness to be home.
Kathleen stands on the verandah and looks out. It is after four and the cars come one after another, turning from Maitland Road and moving past her house in an endless stream. She can feel their vibration as she leans against the doorway. Now they have stopped. The gates will be down at Clyde Street. She can see the impatience on the faces, the irritation as the cars bank up. All those men going home, tired after work, needing to be cosseted and fed. She wishes she could put her arms around them all to give them comfort. The cars begin to move. She can see their relief — their anxiousness to be home.

She swings herself round and walks her slow way, up over the step and along the hall, through the dark lounge room into the kitchen. The nights are closing in, May already, and the shortest day only a month away.

Even here as she sits and drinks her tea, she can feel the cars going by. She remembers the bicycles — masses of them from The B.H.P. A few of them still about, but who would ride a bicycle if they could drive a car? She would have had a car if somebody had encouraged her. A special car of course. She would have driven in all the traffic. She had no fear. No fear at least if she was in control. She had been frightened with Brigid near the end. And with Jozef who could not hold a paintbrush without dripping paint or wash the dishes without wetting his shoes. Dear Jozef, so ready to help and so helpless. Yet strong. She remembers his anger with Brigid when she had given his socks to St. Vincent de Paul. 'I will organize my own works of charity,' he had said to her, so lordly and dignified. It still cuts like a knife in her heart that she has lost him.

If only Father Brendan were here to listen to her doubts, to hear why she cannot accept any more without question. As a young woman, she had said to him what she could not say to her mother, her brother or sisters. Not at confession. She needed to see his eyes as she told him. 'Why has He given me so much to bear?' And though she had refused to go to church, that dear man had continued to come. They had talked and they had argued. 'If you had been a man Kathleen,' he said to her, 'we would have made a priest of you.' Oh, she would kiss his feet if he were here now.
She makes her way to the back doorway. The grass is untidy, the chrysanthemums finished, the frangipani losing its leaves. In a little while its limbs will be grey and bare – unlike a living tree. The place depresses her with the traffic, the grit from The Works, and the houses so flat and dingy.

When Brigid came home after her retirement, Kathleen tried to persuade her ‘A nice brick house in Mayfield on the hill near the Monastery so we can hear the Angelus.’ But Brigid who had always been the faithful one, had no time now for prayer bells. In her room next to the lounge with its cedar sideboard, she began drinking herself to death. Once again Kathleen had to take charge humouring her sister, trying to bring help and finally having to make all the arrangements. Again she was left alone and who would offer comfort when she was dying?

Her lot has been to watch the world go by. She stood on the edge of life when she had the spirit to be a priest or a doctor or a foreign missionary. Father Brendan had seen it but he was long dead. And Jozef whom she loved was lost to her – twice lost to her. That made the world even harder to bear.

She closes the door, locks it and walks back to the front. She hates this barring of gates – this imprisonment. And just to put two eggs in the saucepan and set the table, makes her whole body ache. When she thinks how easily she used to cook the roast each Sunday – beef one week and lamb the next, with potatoes, pumpkin, two greens and her special sauce made with orange juice and fresh mint. Then baked apples and a bread and butter custard to use up the oven’s heat. ‘Could I take another helping?’ Jozef would say in his shy way, and he would spoon up the spicy toffee from the apples and almost purr with delight.

Now as she sits looking into her cup, seeing the pattern of tea leaves, she knows that like belief, and the frangipani in winter, Jozef might easily have been put aside. For she can still remember she did not want him.

Oh, he wasn’t like the Greeks who lived next door to her brother Danny in Camperdown and took advantage. No, he was fair. And neat – almost too neat in his old fashioned suit and small thick spectacles. She found herself impatient, wanting to hurry him along as he stiffly formed his English words in a timid high voice. He had come eight years ago from Poland. And though he did not go on to say it, she knew then he was Jewish. Her judgement told her to say no. She wasn’t well enough and there were other places. But as he looked around, furtively taking in the kitchen, the bathroom, the compact yard, she caught his eyes behind his spectacles and saw that he had suffered. How then could she refuse him?
She was firm enough to say she could not give him lunch or dinner that day or on any day when the cafeteria was open. On Saturdays and Sundays she gave full board, though she was prepared to adjust the charge if he preferred to go to family or friends. ‘In the weekend I will be here,’ he said, ‘but if I am to visit, I will give you early information.’ Then he carried his small port into the bedroom and closed the door.

She could not explain her uneasiness with him. Danny was no talker, but when he stayed with her, he blundered round, knocking furniture and would even sing in a loud voice after he’d taken a little ale. And her last boarder Bill, would work in his room with the wireless blaring. But this one made no noise. After two hours of his silence, she had knocked at his door to ask if he would take some tea or coffee. ‘Thank you, thank you,’ he had said in his soft way. ‘That is very kind. I would like a coffee.’ And something in the gratefulness of his tone and his tentative smile made her do something she had done for no other boarder. She prepared the coffee as she did for special family occasions, boiling the milk, letting it rise and bubble, then adding it to the strong coffee till the brown and the white twined into a creamy caramel. The Polish man was overcome. ‘You have made a most delicious coffee.’ And later, when they had become very close to one another, he continued to hark back to her kindness and her coffee.

She was grateful for that impulse, because for a long time, he continued to puzzle her. He did not have the smell of a man on his body or his clothes. Even after a long day at the University, he would return unchanged - no sweat on his face or the underarms of his shirt - no grimy marks in the creases of his collar. He was fastidious about his work and would fill every portion of his paper with tiny, neat handwriting and fine geometric diagrams. In his room, the bed was made, his clothes were folded, his books were stacked and tidy. After he finished his washing, for she was responsible only for sheets and towels, he would take hours to hang out his clothes. She saw him one day, surveying the line and going back to change the pegs, making sure the distance was uniform between shirts and singlets and blousing underpants.

There was something other than manly in the way he held a cup, ate a biscuit or took out his small purse to pay his board. For she had learned to love the dark growth of beard called the five o’clock shadow, to admire the beads of sweat that gathered on the top of men’s lips and to smell their difference.

On one unforgettable occasion, she had gone to visit a married friend and as they had sat together drinking tea, the three sons of the family came to visit. They were tall, broad shouldered young men with dark
beards and when their mother played the piano, they stood around her and joined in the song with deep bass voices. Kathleen had trembled at the weight of so much manhood.

What was this country across the sea that had made a man so unlike Australian men? She questioned why she had opened her house to such a foreigner. Then came the surprises – one after another and before she knew it, her life was bound up with his in a way she had never imagined.

He was in the habit of going out for a little time on Sunday. She thought it must be a meeting at the Synagogue – she’d been told there was one in Newcastle. One day when he returned, he said ‘Father Patrick asks about your health Miss O’Malley.’

Even then she did not understand.

‘At the Mass, the priest asks if you needed him to come to the house.’

‘Then you are a Catholic,’ she said to him. ‘If I had known, I would have gone with you.’

That was enough. Next Sunday he had organized the taxi to come at a quarter to nine. Every week they would go and return together.

One day he brought her a small bottle of wine. ‘For our Sunday dinner, Miss O’Malley. A wine from Portugal. It is light and dry. I’m sure you will enjoy it.’

She was amazed by the gift and his long speech. The meal next day was a banquet. Her head spun with the wine and the steaming dishes.

Then suddenly her widowed sister took ill and was rushed to the Mater. ‘I must go to Agnes straight away,’ Kathleen explained to him. ‘Her daughter has a young family in Brisbane and her two sons are overseas.’

He insisted on going with her to the hospital and when they had found out the seriousness of the illness, he said. ‘You must contact your brother and your sister Miss O’Malley. This is too big a responsibility for you alone.’

She could not make him understand that Danny was not able to face illness. He had not even come to visit their mother as she lay dying in the house so many months. And though Brigid was a nursing sister in Victoria, she worked now only with babies and could not bear to look on death. ‘I am the small and broken one,’ Kathleen explained. ‘But I nursed our mother. I have a special gift for comforting the dying.’

She loved his presence with her at the hospital. And after Agnes’ death, his support at the church and the funeral parlour. And she was warmed by his anger with the family because they had left all the arrangements to her. But it was no comfort after the funeral when Brigid decided she would take her vacation and stay a month. Brigid
was so bossy, wanting to re-organize the house and everyone in it, beginning with the painting of the kitchen. The paint had been delivered and they were about to make a start when Brigid decided suddenly she would have to go to Sydney. Jozef tried to help out but he didn’t even know how to hold a brush so Kathleen decided to call in a tradesman. And in the midst of emptied dressers and piled up kitchen chairs, Brigid returned and began her winter collection for St. Vincent de Paul. No wonder Jozef had been so angry. Later, when Brigid had gone out, he said, ‘Miss O’Malley, it worries me to see your sister make so much work for you.’ But Kathleen wanted nothing more than the weeks to pass quickly, Brigid to leave and their lives to resume their old pattern.

For all the sumptuousness of their baked dinners together, it was the Sunday evening meal she treasured most. On one of these nights as she brought him the last of the pancakes and watched his precise and fussy movements as he sprinkled sugar and squeezed the lemon juice, she realized that for the first time in her life she was satisfied.

But there was more – almost too much for her to take. Somehow he had discovered her birthday. ‘We will have a special outing,’ he said to her. ‘It is a play – no, a small opera at the Roxy Theatre.’

Not since her childhood was she so taken out of herself. The bright stage, the lavish costumes, the singing and especially the dancing. She felt herself swept away, moving with a freedom she had only known in dreams. Afterwards she thanked him but it was not enough. She wanted to go out to the frangipani tree where the flowers were lying heavy-scented on the grass and there, tall and regal in a flowing gown, she would take his hands, cast off his shyness and his faltering step and draw him into the grand twirling, one two three, one two three, of the waltz.

Then began another pattern. He would go to Sydney each Saturday on the morning Flyer and return at night by eight. He brought her a different gift each week – chocolates, flowers, a book, a small bottle of cologne. She enjoyed making the day pass quickly by baking little treats for the week that followed.

Suddenly, without warning, he said to her. ‘Miss O’Malley. I must give you early information. I am leaving. You see, in three months I will be married.’

It was a blow to her head but she could not cry out; a knife in her heart but she could not bleed. And after pain more intense than any she had known, came numbness – her limbs cold and heavy, tingling at times with the sensation of pins and needles. She smiled and talked as he continued to bring her Saturday gifts but her face was a mask.
She cooked his Sunday meals and made his evening coffee, but her sap had ceased to flow.

Curiosity saved her – stretching out her mind, making her wonder what sort of woman he had found. For try as she could, it was impossible for her to imagine this timid smooth man in the steamy grip of passion. So when he asked if he might bring his fiancee to stay a night, she said yes, feeling the pain, but intrigued at the same time to see what this woman would be like.

Jozef has driven her from the station to the house. She also was a foreigner as might have been expected. Nor was she very young. But Kathleen could not deny she was tall and handsome, though she would probably go to fat like other foreign women. Kathleen could have accepted all this, along with the kiss she'd been given at the door, while Jozef stood by like a boy wanting her approval. But how could she approve? How could she swallow the insult that followed?

For when Jozef had gone to buy wine, the woman had given her a large parcel. Upright, tied with bright paper and caught like a cracker at the top. Kathleen felt flattered that she should have taken so much trouble. But when she had peeled off the cellophane and the tissue underneath, she saw a basket with high sides. And in the basket were groceries, plain ordinary groceries – a pack of tea, a jar of marmalade, butter, flour, sugar and several small tins of spaghetti and baked beans.

‘But what are these?’ She said to the woman, her voice already cold.

‘Something for your pantry.’

‘But why should you bring me groceries?’

‘I thought to help.’

‘I have made my preparations.’

‘I wanted to save you extra trouble.’

‘You have come as a guest to my house and you have brought me groceries. Perhaps they do this in your country. They do not do this in mine.’

‘But Jozef tells me you do not go out often to shop because of your hip.’

This woman had insulted her household. Now she was being impertinent. ‘Though you see me walk with a crutch, I have no need of what you have brought me, and I would be grateful if you would take the basket and the provisions with you when you return to Sydney tomorrow.’

So that was settled. No more cosy visits and though they asked her to come and see them when they had moved to Sydney, she refused. Jozef continued to ring. They would talk together, and she would enquire politely about his wife but it was clear that Kathleen wanted no closer contact.
But for Jozef she held no blame, no resentment. This woman had connived to have him and had thought by her insult to break the ties that had grown between them in their two years together.

Sometimes when she spoke to him on the phone she heard the noise from the children who were allowed to stay up late and were not kept in order by their mother. ‘Perhaps I am too old for small children,’ he would say wearily. Then she longed to have him with her – to let him sit quietly, concentrating on his fine writing and the detailed drawings that filled his pages. A thinking man, a Professor of Mathematics, needed to be left at peace with his books. She would never have interrupted. But an hour or two after the children were in bed and she had cleared away their playthings, she would measure out the milk into the saucepan and watching so that it did not boil over, would carefully begin to prepare the coffee.