

Coffee with Mr Klein

A short story

Paul Morgan

JULIA'S GAZE CARESSED THE OBJECT OF HER DESIRE. There wasn't a straight line to be seen, only a sensual, rolling curvature of glass and chrome and polished, waxed metal the colour of carmine lipstick. She recognised this feeling: the tightening in her stomach, the pangs of hopeless yearning. It was the feeling she got when falling in love with a stranger on a train she knew she'd never see again, someone she felt would instinctively and instantly understand her through his beautiful, sensitive eyes. It was the feeling she got when window-shopping beyond her means in the City on Sunday afternoons. This was both. The showroom window reflected a translucent version of herself and the patient dog sat on the pavement beside her. Beyond this ghostly pair the car glowed like a magical survivor from another world: a world where Frank Sinatra forever held open a door while Grace Kelly stepped out, smiling as a constellation of flashbulbs went off; a world where you wouldn't dream of going out without makeup and everyone wore a hat; where smoking was elegant and cars never crashed.

She knew every detail of the car from the dealer's website. An original left-hand drive Karmann Ghia, 1964 model, the most beautiful car ever designed. Shipped from

Germany to Sydney that same year, where an ad agency executive had guarded and buffed and cherished it as jealously as any caliph the prize of his harem. After many happy years together he had been made a Partner in his firm, and reluctantly felt obliged to acquire a Porsche, for appearance's sake. He gave the Karmann to his daughter, and with a double-dose of grief watched her drive off to motor down the Hume to Melbourne, where she married and had three children and sold the car in the Trading Post to a chef who moved to Perth . . . and so on, until it was discovered, looking rather sorry for itself, in a North Shore caryard. Now fully restored to mint, factory condition it had a price-tag which was as much as Julia earned in half a year.

She sighed, pulled up the collar of her coat, said, 'Come on, Toto', and walked on towards the beach. Even in winter, there was always the beach. The little Schnauzer pulled ahead, drawn by the offshore breeze carrying scents of sea-weed and a hundred different delicious rotting things. They made their way down to the water-line where the sand was firmer and she threw sticks for Toto who crashed bravely in and out of the surf to fetch them, shaking himself each time, sending droplets in every direction before looking expectantly at her again. Throwing another stick as far as she

could, Julia walked on towards the ruined seabaths and fell into a regular daydream, where Mike Munro introduces her on *This is Your Life*, while she stands beside him looking bashful but sexy. Mike's left hand grips her arm while he reads from the big red velvet book in the other: 'unsung hero . . . dedicated teacher . . . gifted . . . kooky . . . an inspiration . . .' Then, as always, comes the other, unlooked-for description she keeps of herself: 'mousy, on-the-shelf thirtysomething, can't afford a new car, not had a boyfriend for over a year . . .'

Making a desultory plan for the afternoon (return video, ironing, phone mum), Julia reached the sea-bath wall, shaggy with seaweed, turned and began to walk back along the beach. Toto had done the stick-thing and was running ahead, where he suddenly seemed to become two dogs. Toto 1 stood in the surf barking at a seagull while Toto 2 chewed at piece of old ship's rope he had found. It was another Miniature Schnauzer with almost exactly the same markings, as far as she could see at this distance. Its owner

was walking towards her, a tall, elderly man neatly dressed in an overcoat she instinctively knew was European. As the two dogs engaged and raced off, both holding onto the thick piece of rope, he came towards her and introduced himself with an easy, confident smile.

'They could be from the same litter', he said, 'you didn't get yours from Leura too? From Mrs Feinstein . . . ?'

'Manly RSPCA' she said, smiling back, 'I was lucky. And how old is yours? Toto is five this year.'

It was a familiar conversation, one she had had dozens of times. Still it was pleasant to be walking at the surf's edge talking to somebody new, somebody who asked interested questions about her. She was right about the coat: his clothes, his accent, his manners, everything about him said 'Viennese' for some reason (even though she'd never been to Vienna).

'It's a wonderful gift to be a teacher. You must be very talented. Think of all the hundreds of young people who must look back with affection and gratitude at how you awakened their interest in art, in literature . . . '

Julia wasn't sure this was how she would describe reading-lessons with Blinky Bill to the Rescue, but was pleased at the compliment, and they parted company with a handshake.

The following Sunday they met again by chance at the same spot. She hadn't thought of him since the previous week, but found herself happy to pick up their conversation where it had let off. It was easy talking to him and the time passed quickly. On their way back big drops of rain began to plop down and, from nowhere it seemed, he produced a stubby umbrella which unfolded at the touch of a button to a giant mushroom cap which protected them both.

Julia almost put her arm through his, but didn't. It was hard to make out his age. In his sixties easily, bald, with liver spots on his skin and wispy pale eyebrows: no Sean Connery. She shivered as the wet wind slid over her.

'You must be cold, dear' he said. 'Does hot coffee and some cake sound appealing?'

'Mmmmm, sounds good' she nodded.

'My house is just a short walk from here', he said, 'you're very welcome to come back for some refreshment.'

Julia had assumed he meant to go to a café, but felt safe going with him and anyway, she had her mobile in her coat pocket and Toto to guard her. The street looked like a row of Victorian worker's cottages but she could see at least half a dozen Mercedes parked along it, and instantly visualised the kinds of conversion that gets written up in Vogue Living. Once inside the door the house opened up like a magician's palace: corridors to left and right, cantilevered steel steps rose to a mezzanine where familiar-looking paintings hung, while she followed her host down a series of shallow travertine steps to a wide, welcoming lounge looking out through French windows onto a well-kept garden. A pair of low modern sofas sat either side of a crackling log fire. On the floor were beautiful Afghan rugs which glowed red in the afternoon firelight, and the walls were hung with yet more paintings: a Fred Williams landscape, a Boyd of the Expulsion from Eden (like one she'd seen in the State Gallery), and more. Julia gasped. He smiled at her reaction, letting the dogs into the garden, closing the door then slipping the coat from her shoulders.

'Please do take a closer look at the paintings' he said, disappearing with her coat through another doorway.

He returned with a tray bearing a silver coffeepot and fine, white porcelain cups. They sat on either side of the wide steel and glass coffee table, and he finally talked a little about his own life instead of asking about hers. How he had emigrated from Austria in the 1960s, seen a growing hunger for European antiques and gone into the business himself, travelling back every June to spend the Northern Summer buying from auctions in little towns from Belgium to Italy and shipping back a container-full to sell in his Balmain shop.

'Can you think of a more agreeable occupation, my dear, than buying beautiful objects that give you pleasure, then selling them at a profit when you tire of them?'

She heard about his wife who had died ten years before – 'smoked like a chimney', he said, shaking his head – and his own health problems that led him to sell the shop a few years previously.

'But you're alright now?' she asked.

'As alright as I'll ever be,' he said with a smile, 'it's just a little angina, my heart you know. But no more moving wormy old dressers from one side of the world to the other for me, and a good job too. I've kept all my favourite pieces. Have another biscuit and I'll show you some of the collection. Would you like that?'

'Very much' said Julia.

The following Sunday she was invited again, and the one after, and these visits became a part of her weekly routine. Each time he showed her some new piece of furniture or china with a marvellous story behind it . . . a seventeenth century French cupboard, a teacup once owned by Lady Hamilton in Naples, an elegant Biedermeier hall-table. Always there was something new, and another room she hadn't seen before – the house seemed to go on and on. Once he pulled a dust-sheet with a flourish from a walnut display cabinet, to reveal a complete set of Venetian wine goblets from the 1500s, twinkling shyly, as though he had pulled aside a changing-room curtain.

'This was a set I pursued for years,' he said. 'It was made for Giovanna Semprini, a famous courtesan of the time. I finally heard a whisper the owner had died and called a friend in New York who bid for me at the auction. It was thirty years since I had first seen it, at Christie's in London, and now it was mine. I would have paid anything for this collection. There's nothing like it outside Italy and a little museum in Zurich. Tell me, isn't there anything you desire that much?'

'You'll laugh' she said, and told him about the beautiful red car she saw every Sunday on the way to the beach.

He laughed, but not unkindly.

'You have good taste, Julia' he said, replacing the dustsheet carefully, 'but is there anything a little less, perhaps, extravagant?'

Julia confessed to a current yearning that was almost emotional for an iPod MP3 player. She began explaining its features to him and how you could use it as a PDA as well and . . .

He waved her words away with his hands, laughing again.

'No, no, stop . . .' he said. 'I don't understand a word you're saying. It's all a strange new language that I'm much too old to learn.'

'Well, I'll never afford one anyway. I should just forget about it.'

'Never say never, dear, haven't you heard? Anyway, perhaps some kindly gentleman will buy one for you.'

'Some chance,' she said, 'and anyway, I don't know any . . .'

'Now, now . . .' he broke in, 'and there's always give and take, you know, isn't there? A little give and take . . .'

He raised his eyebrow with a knowing, wicked look.

'But isn't there, really?' he persisted.

'If you're saying what I think you're saying,' she replied, 'you're an outrageous old man.'

They both laughed, and he led her back to the garden, still chuckling, to collect Toto.

The following Sunday there was no sign of him or the little Schnauzer on the beach. It was the first time this had happened. Julia felt she knew him well enough to go to the

house and ring on the bell, wondering if he was alright. After some time he answered the door, still in his pajamas and dressing gown, little leather slippers on his feet. He looked pale and very tired.

'I'm so pleased to see you, dear,' he said, leading her down to the familiar lounge and flopping into a winged armchair. 'I was hoping you would call by . . . a little turn this morning, nothing to worry about. I'm sorry I haven't been able to make a fire for you.'

The room was dark and almost as cool as the winter's day outside. She guessed he had been lying in bed to stay warm, waiting for her to come.

'Don't be silly. Look, I'll make a fire. It'll cheer you up . . .'

Julia slipped off her coat, took newspaper and twigs from the basket beside the hearth and got down on her knees to make the fire. She had done this hundreds of times as a child, on holiday with her parents in the mountains, and was soon placing logs confidently onto a blazing pile. She turned around on her knees proudly.

He was still slumped back in the armchair. His dressing gown had fallen open, and the pajama bottoms gaped, revealing a sprightly erection which he held delicately at its base as he gazed at her.

'Julia . . .' he said in a whisper, not going on.

She felt half a dozen things at once. Shock. Also, not really surprised. . . . pity . . . curiosity . . . a quick calculation . . . and amusement too. When Julia thought about it afterwards, she realised she hadn't actually decided what to do . . . she'd just done it.

Julia shook her head disapprovingly, then leant forward and took the penis in her hand. It felt warm and hard, no different to those of boyfriends she'd had, less than half his age. With a business-like air, she began to rub it firmly up and down while he lay back, eyes closed, moaning softly now and then. It was such an ordinary little thing to do really, she thought. What's all the fuss about, when you come down to it. Once his hand

moved towards her, as though to touch her breast, but she primly moved it back. And at last it was as if a series of electric shocks, ever stronger, passed through his body. He jerked almost upright, gave a loud moan that was almost a shout, then relaxed back into the chair as she felt a thick dribble run over her fingers. She gently removed her hand, wiping it on the pajamas, gave him a quick smile, and went to the bathroom to wash.

When she returned his dressing gown was wrapped tightly around him as he lay back in the big armchair before the fire.

'Julia, my dear,' he said with conspiratorial look, 'I'm so very, very sleepy. Would you think it rude of me if I didn't see you out?'

Strangely, she didn't think that much about her Sunday afternoon when she returned to work the following week. It was just something that had happened. It was the last thing on her mind, then, when a courier appeared at the Staff Room door Wednesday lunchtime with a small square parcel. She signed for the little box and unwrapped it with genuine curiosity, watched by an equally curious group of other teachers, sandwiches and mugs suspended between coffee-table and mouth. It was the latest, top-of-the-range iPod. She felt an icy finger of excitement run up and down her spine.

'Ah yes,' she said in what she hoped was a calm voice, 'I've been expecting this.'

Julia's visits continued through the Winter and into the Spring. After a while, at his whispered suggestion, she would dress up a little. It amused her and, of course, made him grin with pleasure when she came towards him on the beach. His favourite was a big, flowery fifties dress and lots of lipstick, like Kim Novak in *Vertigo*. One Sunday in November, Toto had to be dropped at the vet's for a check-up, and she arranged to go straight to the house instead of meeting on the beach. She reversed the curvaceous red car sinuously into a parking spot right outside, went up to the door and found it ajar. There was laughter and men's voices coming from deep inside the house.

'Come on down,' he called, 'the door's open.' She guessed he had heard the familiar throb of her car's engine and walked down the corridor. The French windows were wide

open and an ornate ironwork table and chairs set up on the terrace beyond. He was stood with another elderly man: shorter, plumper and wearing a double-breasted blazer despite the warm sun.

'Julia,' he called again, beckoning. 'Come and meet Mr Klein, an old friend of mine. He's in the jewellery trade . . .'

'Very pleased to make your acquaintance,' he said shyly, holding out a chubby hand. 'I've heard so much about you. Won't you have some coffee?' He waved his other hand towards the table, set with the familiar china. There was a big red ring on his middle finger.

Julia held out her hand and gave him an especially warm smile.

'I'd love some coffee' she said.

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