

I love Samuel Taylor

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One

‘Excuse me,’ a voice called from the field’s edge.

Glancing up from his notebook, he saw a young woman on a horse.

‘Are you going to say ‘can I help you?’’ he asked.

‘Why would I say that?’

‘Isn’t it what people like you do in these situations?’

‘Which people; what situations?’

‘Is this conversation going to consist entirely of questions?’ he sighed.

Before she could stop herself, she laughed, then sauntered the horse a little closer to where he was lying, on the bank of a small pond surrounded by trees in the middle of the field.

‘I didn’t begin with a question,’ she replied softly.

He pretended to be deep in thought, swivelling his head as if following a Wimbledon rally. ‘Hmmm,’ he considered, ‘I think perhaps it was an enquiry of sorts.’

‘I suppose it was,’ she conceded.

‘You were intending to establish,’ he continued, ‘how I came to be sitting in the middle of your field!’

‘What makes you think it’s *my* field?’

He held up his hands in surrender. ‘Ok. Ok. You win. Just go easy with the questions, already!’

She looked down, assessing him with a tolerant smile. He was about her age, early-twenties, and sensibly dressed for casual walking in a navy fleece, jeans and trainer-style boots. He had straight, longish black hair and dark blue eyes.

‘It is actually my Dad’s field,’ she admitted, ‘and there is actually no footpath to this part of it.’

‘Guilty as charged!’ he exclaimed, springing to his knees and unsettling the horse a little, ‘I am indeed trespassing on your

land but I couldn't help noticing this little oasis and thinking, 'I bet there's a lovely pond tucked away up there,' and, since there was no livestock to disturb I decided to investigate.'

She nodded towards the notebook, which his rapid movement had tipped on to the grass. 'And did you find inspiration here?'

For the first time he seemed less assured. 'A thought did strike me, yes,' was all he replied.

'Which was?' she persisted.

'Is. Gone, alas!' he lamented. 'Like the person from Porlock, you distracted me at the vital moment and the masterpiece is lost forever!'

'You flatter yourself, I think,' she laughed, 'and in any case you got some of it down, I saw you scribbling away as I rode towards you.'

'Just sketchy fragments; nothing of substance I assure you.'

'Is it a poem?'

'Not this,' he gestured dismissively, 'this is merely a poor, stillborn thing, never to grow to maturity.'

'Well read it anyway; read it and I will forgive you your trespasses.'

He inclined his head a little, 'thine is the kingdom,' he murmured, smiling to himself. 'Very well, you give me no choice. I will share these scraps with you if I must.' He looked up at her. She had brown eyes and long dark hair, which flowed from beneath her plain black helmet. He lifted the notebook with a flourish and moved to a sitting position.

'Swallows dive with spitfire wings, laugh at the lumbering airbus grinding warily overhead, curving at stalling speed the longest way down to Castle Donington.'

The horse tensed, shivered a little then farted softly and deposited a neat pile of steaming glossy turds onto the grass. They looked at each other and laughed. She patted its neck.

'I'm afraid Darcy isn't into poetry, but I liked it,' she hesitated for a second, 'well, I must be off,' then added theatrically, 'you are forgiven!' and turned the horse to trot away.

'I thought horses had names like 'Game for a laugh', he called after her.

'That's race horses!'

‘What’s your name?’ he called again, rising to his feet now.

‘Jess, what’s yours?’

‘Sam,’ he answered, ‘Samuel Taylor.’

Jess waved as she cantered to the track at the bottom of the field and disappeared from view.

Sam arrived back home by mid afternoon. It was Sunday and his housemate Matt was flat out on the sofa watching the football. He picked his way carefully through the detritus on the living room floor and flung open the curtains. Matt did not even blink. He turned and surveyed the squalor. ‘What a dump!’ they both said simultaneously. Sam glanced towards the TV.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Ok.’

Sam let out a strangled cry and turned to the screen, deliberately obstructing Matt’s view but provoking no reaction at all.

‘Nil-nil in the eighty-ninth minute and you’ve nothing better to do than watch this crap?’

‘Nope.’

The final whistle blew, the referee choosing to show some compassion and play no added time.

‘Satisfied?’ asked Sam aggressively.

‘It’s a result.’

‘Of course it’s a bloody result! What else is the end of a football match?’

Matt began to mimic the reader of the final scores on the BBC, leaving Sam to predict the away team’s score from his intonation.

‘Brighton and Hove Albion Nil, Leyton Orient...’ ‘Nil’ Sam guessed.

‘Notts County 2, Accrington Stanley...’ ‘Three,’ he suggested.

Matt sipped the remainder of his lager as their game continued, then gently lobbed the empty can onto a small pile in the middle of the floor. He punched the air as it came to rest neatly on the top.

‘I’m sorry Matthew, I’ve misjudged you. Here I am complaining about you turning our lounge into what appears to be an abandoned squat, when all the time you have been

carefully constructing a conceptual art installation. This should be in Tate Modern, you could win the Turner Prize for it mate!’ He ripped open an imaginary envelope. ‘And the winner is.... Matthew Mullins with ‘Living Room’, a shocking and uncompromising study of life on the margins of *suburban* society.’ He hung an air microphone in Matt’s direction, inviting him to spout in Post Modernese, but he refused to play. Sam had finally managed to provoke his nonchalant flat mate.

‘Ok Mr self-righteous prick! What have you been doing all morning that’s so fucking brilliant?’

Sam told him all about his walk and the meeting with Jess.

‘Nice one mate!’ exclaimed Matt. ‘She’s definitely up for it and probably loaded to boot. Get in there!’

‘I don’t know,’ hesitated Sam, ‘farmers are having a tough time at the moment’

‘Yeah right! Probably had to turn the heat down on the jacuzzi!’

The door abruptly swung open and a dishevelled girl entered, dressed only in a T shirt of Matt’s, which bore the slogan ‘Give germs a chance’ beneath a line drawing of a grinning hairy bug. She had clearly only just woken up.

‘Who are you?’ she asked Sam accusingly.

‘Sorry for intruding,’ Sam replied, ‘I just happen to live here.’

‘Sorry, sorry’ Matt intervened, ‘this is err...this is um....’

‘Jenny,’ she prompted him, ‘and I was just coming down to say I can’t get the shower to work.’

‘That would be because it doesn’t,’ explained Sam helpfully, ‘our landlord’s not being very co-operative at the moment on account of us being a bit behind with the rent, you see.’

‘Well why don’t you move then?’ Jenny asked angrily, ‘this place is an absolute -’

‘Dump!’ they all cried in unison. The lads both giggled and slapped palms.

‘I’m off,’ Jenny snapped and stomped back upstairs.

Sam looked enquiringly at Matt, who responded with an expansive, continental sort of shrug, and a hand swivelling ‘so, so’ gesture.

After a few moments Jenny came thumping back down, breezed through the room without a word and was just opening the front

door when Matt called, 'I didn't get your number!'

'Good!' she snarled as the door slammed.

'Was that my fault?' asked Sam, not troubling to disguise his indifference.

'No, no I think she generally wasn't too impressed. It's been a while since I changed the sheets and what with the shower being kaput, well....'

'That's more than enough info thanks mate. She's probably gone straight down the clap clinic!'

'Are they open Sundays then?' Matt enquired with genuine curiosity.

'How the hell would I know?'

'Oh course, sorry,' acknowledged Matt, whose frequent and apparently effortless success with women was a constant source of annoyance and bewilderment to Sam. 'Maybe your luck's turned,' he suggested, 'sounds like horse girl's there for the taking.'

'How could you possibly know that?'

'Well she didn't laugh at your poem did she?'

'Firstly, it wasn't a poem and secondly, most intelligent people don't as it happens. How come I've ended up sharing a house with a brainless, rugby playing, alcoholic philistine?'

'Same reason I've ended up with a pseudo intellectual loser who has only fleeting acquaintances with the world of work I suppose. Nobody else would have us mate.'

Sam's resentful silence indicated that his friend was probably about right.

Jess trotted back to the farm at a brisk pace. Sunday lunch was still a family ritual at home and she liked to help her mother with the cooking. Dismounting, she led Darcy into a small paddock beside his stable. She deftly unbuckled the saddle and bridle, draping them over the fence as she turned him out. He would be fine there until after lunch. She patted his neck and pressed her cheek against him then ran to put the tack away, kicked off her boots and stepped into a pair of old trainers.

As she jogged through the yard she saw Mark, her father, belting the coupling of the muck spreader with a lump hammer.

He was forever bashing or welding recalcitrant bits of metal.

‘That’ll fix it Dad!’ she called cheekily as she sped by.

‘Bloody things seized up again!’ he grimaced. ‘I was going to try and get Dumbles done before lunch but there’s no chance now. I’ll douse it in easing oil and leave it till this afternoon.’

‘OK. I’ll give you a shout when we’re dishing up.’

Jess smiled to herself as she slid off her trainers and jacket and dumped them in the porch. But for that rusty coupling, Sam would have had shit sprayed all over him as he lay there pontificating. She quickly washed her hands and dashed into the kitchen.

‘Hi Mum! What needs doing?’

Christine, her mother, was just lifting the foil off a roasting tin containing a large joint of pork. She cautiously lowered it back into the oven and slid a tray of potatoes and a dish of stuffing onto the shelf above.

‘You can do the veg if you like, love. How was your ride?’

‘Lovely thanks,’ she replied as she took a thick slice off a large swede and began peeling it, ‘but I really shouldn’t have left all this to you.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Christine, ‘it’s months since you’ve been out riding on a Sunday.’

As she briskly prepared the vegetables, Jess thought about Sam. There was something about him that appealed to her; he seemed intelligent and a bit quirky, rebellious even. She wished now she had found out more about him instead of hurrying away, perhaps exchanged numbers.

Jess was lonely. She had been half way through the first year of a degree course in English at Leeds University when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Christine responded well to the initial treatment and, apart from spending more weekends at home than originally planned, Jess completed her first year without interruption. Although Christine appeared to have beaten the breast cancer, secondaries were discovered on her liver during that summer. Since this was inoperable, chemotherapy was the only recourse so Jess decided to defer her second year and stay at home to support the family. Months of chemo debilitated Christine but succeeded only in arresting the

growth. Eventually, early in the new year, she had taken the decision to discontinue her treatment. Nothing more could be done now; she perhaps had only months to live but was resolved to carry on normally for as long as possible. Jess knew all this of course, but her younger brother Tom had not been made fully aware of the seriousness of the problem. He was about to do his 'A' Levels and the others agreed that it would be best to protect him until the exams were out of the way. Jess found this difficult at times because Tom was inclined to be lazy and thoughtless and she often had to bite her tongue when remonstrating with him.

Christine suddenly looked utterly exhausted.

'Mum, why don't you let me finish off here and have a rest before we dish up?' Jess suggested. Her Mother did not object, silently making her way into the sitting room. Jess had just got all the vegetables boiling when Tom, still in pyjamas, drifted into the kitchen.

'I'm starving, what time's dinner?'

Jess turned to look at him. He was short for his age with a pale complexion and curly brown hair.

'You look like you need feeding up, squirt,' she teased.

'Well that's better than being fat!'

Jess had put on some weight since coming back home but it didn't concern her. She decided to sidestep a slanging match, which, after all, she had initiated.

'It'll be about ten minutes. Just time for you to get a shower and put some clothes on.'

'Yes Mother. Where is Mum by the way?'

'She's just gone to get Dad in, so you'd better get a move on.'

When everything was ready and keeping warm in the oven, Jess slipped into the lounge. Her mother was lying on the sofa, a hand resting protectively across her stomach. Jess knelt beside her.

'Are you going to be able to eat any of this, Mum?'

'Just a bit.'

'Ok, I'll go and fetch Dad.'

She was just starting to get up when Christine suddenly clasped her hand.

‘Thanks love,’ she whispered, ‘I couldn’t do this without you, you know that don’t you?’

A wave of emotion flooded through Jess, but she knew she must not cry. Squeezing her Mother’s hand, she hurried from the room, not trusting herself to speak. Stamping her trainers back on, she ran out to find Mark. He was already on his way up to the house, having finally brokered a union between tractor and spreader.

‘You managed it?’ She enquired, careful to modulate her voice. ‘Eventually. How’s Mum doing?’

Jess could not hold out. ‘Oh Dad,’ she sobbed, ‘she’s totally worn out. I don’t know how much longer we can keep this up.’

Mark clasped her to him tightly.

‘I know it’s hard, love but it’s what she wants. Tommy will be through most of his exams in a week or two and we have to try to keep things on an even keel till then.’

‘But I don’t know if we can!’ Jess wailed.

The food was all a bit dried up and overdone by the time Jess had got everybody served but Tom was so hungry he didn’t notice this, or the fact that Christine hardly ate a thing. On the pretext of urgent revision he excused himself as soon as he had finished and nobody objected; it was just a relief to be over another hurdle on this final lap. Jess cleared away and washed up as her parents dozed on the sofa.

As soon as she could, she ran back down to the paddock. Since she was fifteen, Darcy had been her best mate. Several of her school friends with enough land or money had bought a horse at around the same time and he was the only survivor.

Jogging through the farmyard she noticed a few swallows skimming low over surface of its muddy puddles. She stopped abruptly and watched them carefully for a moment.

‘They do have Spitfire wings!’ she laughed.

Darcy was nibbling the longer grass at the bottom of the paddock when Jess arrived. She clambered onto the fence and sat for a moment enjoying the view over the Vale. It was a lovely late spring afternoon with real warmth in the sun and a gentle breeze. Eventually he noticed her and ambled over.

‘Ok buddy,’ she whispered, ‘it’s time to give you a good brush down.’

Jumping off the fence she led him over to the stable where she reached in and grabbed a pair of heavy brushes. With both hands she dragged one across his broad flanks, gently smoothing out the matted hair.

Jess saw the tractor heading over towards Dumbles, muck spreader trailing along behind, and decided it was time to go back to the house to see how her mum was doing. She quickly finished brushing Darcy down, forked some hay into the manger and turned towards the paddock gate where she noticed Tom sitting on the fence in her favourite spot.

‘How long have you been perched up there?’

‘A while,’ he replied glumly.

‘What’s up? It’s not like you to risk exposing yourself to fresh air and sunlight for long.’

Tom looked down at the ground for a moment as if weighing up how best to express what he wanted to say. ‘Something’s up with Mum isn’t it?’ he mumbled eventually.

Jess felt as though she had been thumped in the chest and struggled to find a reassuring reply, knowing that her hesitation had already given the game away.

‘Isn’t it?’ Tom reiterated.

‘Yes,’ Jess whispered, ‘she’s quite poorly.’ And despite her best efforts, she began to cry.

‘I know what you’re all thinking,’ Tom continued calmly, ‘that I need protecting from all this so it doesn’t affect my revision, but it’s not working. Something is obviously wrong and not knowing is just making things worse.’

Jess nodded. She had been half expecting this to happen eventually.

‘Is she going to -?’ He couldn’t finish the question before tears came. Jess walked over to him and held his arms. He pressed his face into her shoulder.

‘Don’t think about that,’ she said as firmly as she could. ‘It’s a step at a time at the moment and the next one is navigating your exams. Can you do that for her Tom?’

He nodded into her shoulder and she put her arms round him

now, holding him tightly. They were not especially close but had never hated each other like some siblings they knew.
'Thanks sis,' he croaked, 'thanks for telling me.'
'Our secret, yeah?' she murmured.
'Ok,' he agreed.