

Sole Charge

by

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It began with a dreadful cold. An occupation that stole all my senses and left me shipwrecked on a muffled island. For the first time in the seven years since mothers death I had to take sick leave. In this grid-locked fog I found myself staring at my reflection not in vanity but in wonder. Tracing the roots, the untold ties, the emerging inheritance of mother and father.

“How could two such handsome creatures have made anything so plain?” I asked my slackening jaw. Adam stepped up behind me.

“Justine, you have great skin, you’re the perfect sister, you’ve never done anything bad or mad and please can I borrow the car again next week?”

Even his lies were beautiful. At that moment air whistled a free passage and I breathed in clearly.

“Oh!” I gasped, delighted, “You smell of the sea.”

I spent the day dizzy with scent and a tingling palate.

Later his words came back to me. He was wrong. There had been one mistake. Daniel. I had never wanted a swashbuckler but a stealer. Someone to paddle upstream in the bowels of the night and invade without my noticing. He came from a long line of men who told their women nothing and as subtly as he arrived, he went. When the decree nisi was official, I was overwhelmed by the realisation that I had run out of time. There was only now and the impatient gale bullying my back insisted that I chose more discerningly what to notch into my belt.

I began by reducing this gravy of mine to an essential jus and emptied my home of all imperfect clutter and belief systems. I was left with expensive essentials, a dictionary and the best literary classics which I promised to care for, like privates in my army.

Life rolled before me like an infinite Lincolnshire landscape which is probably why I called the agency 'Futures.'

I understood the need to be useful. There is nothing quite like the dispossession of redundancy. Threadbare and leaking, people flocked to my small team like tired homing pigeons and eventually we found the clients to recruit them. Agencies have a poor reputation - seen as fickle usurers with the vulnerable as currency. I have always resented this. They are both factory and family, business and womb. The seven female staff became a connected daisy chain of understanding. A pulsing charged hive. As a confessor I have been entrusted with so much information, counselling them in failure and coaching them to succeed in selling themselves. A motley cast of thousands have imprinted their faces and foibles upon me. I have been their mirror, their witness. How could my commitment not be absolute?

My mother Delia would have had a field day.

She was able to seize on peculiarity or accent with surgical precision. At dinner parties, I'd hear her impersonations floating like wisps of smoke up the stairs.

"With the right training, I could have been a professional". Delia could have been many things. Acting was just another lost career.

"Oh do me, do me" I used to beg when the day had lost its appeal.

"I can't. You've nothing wrong yet!"

To her, injury made one interesting. Her taste was Greek and wide-gestured but sadly the world could not take her as seriously as she took herself. As I

grew, I sensed unexpressed rage thundering like stampeding bison across her plains. There was damage in the air.

Adam noticed nothing. So things got broken or burnt; the walls changed colour or her hair turned brutal new shades. He was protected – I was his armour. She missed so much herself –ignoring the cracks where the dirt of real life slipped through, where Dad and I lived. When she contracted Crohn's disease I took on more of the household chores while Adam read to her and made her laugh. He was her joy. I, her prop. I didn't mind - our misunderstanding started in the womb and Dad and I were so close. She found fault with everything we did. I followed his example, staying calm and blowing gently into the eye of her storm, keeping our distance as if proximity to her hysteria and failure was contagious. We used to slip out with the dog, go fishing or sailing and he'd tell me family was like a ship, a cause to dignify our existence. I have never got over losing him.

When he died, it gave Delia the excuse she needed to unveil her tears, hurl them out of the shuttered windows like a French mattress and beat them savagely in public. I lasted another two years before moving to West London. To his credit, Adam stayed until he married and returned after his divorce – so she wasn't totally abandoned.

I was relieved to return to work. Strangely, I noticed with my heightened sense of smell that each person had a unique scent, as individual as their face. It seemed random, but quite by accident I made a connection. Brian Halliday popped in as he did when his schedule allowed. I had finally placed him as a travelling sales engineer after months of interviews and rejections and since

then he had blossomed. These days he dressed impeccably and that old hesitation was replaced by quiet assurance.

“Sorry I haven’t been in recently. Taken on a lot of overtime. My news is I’ve been offered co-ownership of a pub, just off the Ryeclyffe road...”

I was unsurprised as a strong scent of hops emanated from him.

It was the right move and I encouraged him.

Interviewing new candidates over the next few days, I made notes on their most pervasive scent and approached clients accordingly. Our placement levels soared.

“What’s the secret then?” My colleague Wendy asked.

I grinned. “Since my cold cleared, everyone has a different smell that suggests... where they ought to be...and as I’m talking I realise how ridiculous I sound.”

Wendy laughed dubiously.

We were interrupted by an office favourite, Preeti. She glowed with no trace of the strained girl who came to us from the refuge, having fled an abusive husband. She had rediscovered herself and now worked as a contract PA, highly sought after and financially secure.

“You look wonderful” I told her. Her face broke open with that beautiful smile.

“Someone new?” Wendy twinkled and cast me a look. It was often hard to lose that protective feeling with those you had helped. Afterwards, she challenged me.

“So what was Preeti’s smell?”

I shrugged. “Leather...very strong!”

She raised an eyebrow "While I believe you, I don't think you should start putting it on people's C.V.s yet!"

Gradually, I was swallowed up by the regular pressures. I saw, heard and smelled...it was just another layer of information.

When a small scrap of a man approached and sat down at my desk one morning, I did not notice the ripple of curiosity he left in his wake.

"Detective Inspector Piper. Is there somewhere more private we could talk?"

It was not unusual to see the police, but I was still unprepared.

"The body of Preetibala Bhayani was discovered in West Horbury last night. I understand she worked for your agency."

"Yes" I replied automatically.

"Could you tell me about her background? Where she worked, associates, that sort of thing?"

I called in Wendy and as we painted as broad a picture as we could, the shocked part of me detached itself and floated away, remembering.

"Any men friends?"

Wendy hesitated. "Her divorce was very muddy but recently I think she might have met someone new."

"Where and how did she die?" I interrupted needing to know.

"She was found strangled on the border of Grangely Common and the graveyard." He replied smoothly but I could see he was watching us carefully.

"We both drive past there every day." Wendy exhaled slowly shaking her head.

That night I dreamed that Preeti and I stood at the bottom of a long dark flight of stairs. "It will be alright" I told her "just follow me" and taking her hand, we stepped cautiously up. "It's getting lighter, see." I said. But when we reached the top, her hand slipped out of mine and she wasn't there anymore. I woke with a terrible feeling of guilt, like I had let her down.

It was only a footnote in the local evening news but by the end of the week, the Nationals had it and there was a television appeal. The police now thought her death was part of a series of six murders with distinctive similarities that had occurred in the last seven years. All the victims were strangled with an item of their own clothing, in this case a leather belt - and more luridly, a small cross had been cut into their left breasts.

I grew sickened of the staff poring ghoulishly over every cutting and of people phoning, rabid for information, like a wild pack after a kill.

I was even short with Brian Halliday when he phoned to ask me out for a drink.

"You're not just wanting to gossip, Brian?"

"No", he replied taken aback. "I thought you might like to see the pub."

"Oh...sorry. I'd love to."

When he picked me up, Wendy was reading from the paper.

"...more reports of whistling in the graveyard "

"Everyone does," said Brian dismissively. "To ward off the ghosts."

Yes it was familiar. A touch of bravado in the dark.

I was grateful for any distraction because when alone there was a new inexplicable smell of disinfectant searing through my sinuses, nagging my

temples. I couldn't bear to think of her callously abandoned in death - despite all her efforts to live, to break free. Her mother's long nine months. Pointless. Unforgivable.

We settled into small corner, watching the flow.

"It feels so right, Justine. I don't want to be stuck in a car for the rest of my life. Time to grow some roots. You'll have to come in though. Otherwise I'll never get to see you."

I nodded, realising that I would miss him.

I had a phone call from Sally Greenwood, my ex –sister in law. She had recently moved, found some of Adam's things and wanted me to pass them on. It was only a few miles away and remembering that she hated driving in London, I offered to go to her. As we talked, I opened my mail to discover a speeding fine.

"Hell!"

"Pardon?" asked Sally startled.

"Oh nothing. I'll see you soon."

I stomped off to work and ranted at Wendy.

"Same damn road I always drive down. It wasn't even rush hour – 9.30. That's three points. I hate being caught!"

"Bad luck. Can you do the honours with Monica Cable?"

'Doing the honours' was a euphemism for telling Monica she had failed yet another interview because of 'personal hygiene'. I sat her down in the bad news cubicle with a roll of anti-perspirant.

“Monica. You have some great skills which clients are missing because of a body odour problem. I suggest using this.” It was blunt but we had been too polite and I was almost overcome with the stench of fish. It gave me an idea. A new food hall and market had recently been established, so I gave them a call and arranged an interview for her. Sometimes you need a bit of imagination to make things happen.

It was while I was on the phone that Adam came in. I motioned him to sit but he went on to the first floor.

“What can I do for you sunshine?” I asked when he returned, aware that everyone was growing a little more fluttery in his presence

“I’m just collecting my money. First opportunity I’ve had.”

I was surprised. “Have you worked for us recently?”

“When you were off. It was a favour...all their usual drivers were busy. Listen, I’ve been thinking. D’ you fancy a trip to Southend...visit the old stomping ground. We never do anything together anymore.”

I was touched. We fixed a date and immediately I started to look forward to it.

Adam always lifted my spirits like a sunny day.

I had never really understood what he saw in Sally. He seemed drawn to the demurely admiring almost as if he didn’t want the competition and I wasn’t blind to his faults. He was so vain he even had a favourite tooth. After they split up he used to say it wasn’t a marriage but a haunting. Sally was inscrutably discreet but I did wonder who got bored first.

I found the green door set low in the wall. If you hadn’t known where to look you would have missed it. In the midst of the push and shove, it was typical of

her to live somewhere ...hidden. She welcomed me warmly through a soft aroma of lavender. A tabby cat wound its way between us.

“Wasn’t he black?”

“Oh that one died when I was still married.”

A first awkwardness.

“How long have you been here now?”

“Since October. My new job starts in Grasse next month so it will be let. I would have sent these to you but there’s your mum’s old clock and some framed photos. He may want them.”

A name-less, no-fly zone.

I remembered the weather clock with its smiling wooden woman who stood permanently out.

“There’s no man. I forget why.” Sally murmured.

“Oh, Adam broke it off when Dad died.”

“Yes. How is he?”

“Still drifting and picking up work where he can. You know Adam.”

“And the agency?”

“Good although we had some sad news recently.” I told her about Preeti.

“That’s terrible. I saw something on television.”

“What’s worse is the police believe it was the latest in a series. The killer always engraves a cross in the left breast.” I shuddered.

“Cross your heart and hope to die.” She chanted suddenly. “It must mean something to someone.”

“She was a lovely girl.”

“Victims often are.”

We changed the subject. She was to re-marry once she had settled in France. It explained her new poise. I was delighted.

“Details please.”

“He’s a gentleman. He’s a lettings agent for properties in the Cote D’ Azur. No forbidden rooms and he makes me laugh.”

We parted like old friends.

“Take care Justine. God Bless.”

There was something I had forgotten to ask but it was gone.

At home I returned a message from Bryan arranging to meet for a drink that evening and the other from D.I. Piper who wanted to see me first thing in the morning.

“Would you mind coming to my flat?” I asked him. “I’m going on a daytrip with my brother.”

This time Bryan showed me around the cellars, the small office and the kitchens, asking my advice on menus and staff – I loved his enthusiasm. He lightly touched my elbow – a place less intimate than the hand, less comradely than the shoulder.

“It’s great to have someone to share it with. My Mum would have loved it you know. She ran a bar on the South coast. If it hadn’t been for Dad she’d have been perfectly happy.” He saw my questioning glance. “He was a depressive sort – very frustrated with his lot. He took it out on her and us kids –even the animals. Apparently, as a kid he killed a pet dog. You can tell how someone will turn out by the way they treat animals. Keith and I almost can’t bear to spend time together just in case either of us raises the past. Some parents

don't love...they brand you with their fears, like indelible tattoos you spend a lifetime trying to erase."

It was the most complex speech I had ever heard from him. I could only agree.

"Oh I didn't tell you. D.I. Piper interviewed Jack, Billy and I today."

"Why?" I was surprised.

"We were at this brilliant Indian called 'The Sunrise'? Round the corner from the park. They're talking to everyone who was in the area. Madness! It's always buzzing at night."

Although I rarely eat curries, I knew 'The Sunrise'. It was Preeti's favourite restaurant and we had taken her there as a celebration of independence. She wore jeans and heads turned.

A wave of exhaustion came over me and I wanted to go home.

"It's so early" he protested, "quiet drive somewhere?" but my reluctance showed.

"You've got to start living, Justine". He was disappointed to leave me at the door so hesitantly, I committed to another time.

Inside I called Adam's flat, having to work my way through the unaccountably frosty Mrs Dodd to speak to him. Adam meekly thanked her and waited until she had departed before saying,

"God. Her and my manageress are carbon copies – both suffocating gorgonzolas. I could eat them up! Still okay for tomorrow? Shall we stay over somewhere?"

"Let's play it by ear – I'll bring night things and pick you up about ten."

Chuckling at the thought of Adam feasting on his landlady, I gathered a couple of thermos flasks and an overnight bag and went to bed. The curse of insomnia had recently returned so I took my usual dose to help me get off.

The air was thick and earthy. Tables cascaded with olives and aubergines and as I unwillingly sat, a huge tentacled squid oozing black ink, wrapped itself around my flailing limbs and I was overcome with the old blood scent of the abattoir.

Gasping, I heaved myself back into a parched consciousness, my heart pounding angry at its arousal and stumbled out of the bedroom. I sipped water slowly and lay out on the sofa, gazing at that rare family snapshot that had been in Adam's belongings. Mother and Adam sat while Dad and I stood like bookends with our fishing rods. It was Dad who taught me to keep a steady hand to bait the hook and never to panic when reeling in and then how to cudgel the fish quickly. "You do what you have to do, Justine but do it properly." Ironically, Adam had never been interested so we used to leave them waving on the quayside...no...not waving... they used to...I forget.

By the time Piper came at eight, I had showered away most of the troubled night.

He seemed strangely reluctant to start.

"Well, Inspector, how can I help?"

As if I had jolted him back from some private reflection, he blurted out

"How well do you know Bryan Halliday?"

I was startled but I answered truthfully, amazed that my pleading inner voice could not be heard...*not Bryan. Don't ruin it.*

He wanted a complete career history and consulting his notes asked,
“Were you aware that according to your thankfully detailed records, Preeti and Bryan worked at SK transport at the same time?”

“No.”

“Of course we are running a check on everyone she worked with but Preetbala’s mother claims she was seeing someone new whose name she believes to be Bryan.”

“There’s something else” I said miserably and told him Preeti often ate at the Sunrise. Then I excused myself and had a long overdue weep before shaping up and returning. *April Fool Justine.*

Piper was discreetly examining my notice board.

“See you haven’t paid up yet ?” he said lightly, pulling at the corner of my speeding fine.

“It still rankles” I tutted. “I’m usually so careful. I must have been late for work.”

“Bit late for work, eh?” He tilted back his head and his large brown eyes peered curiously.

“I’d like to keep this between ourselves – unless you think there’s someone who would benefit from cautionary advice. Let me know if anything else comes to light.”

“Of course.” Was this a warning?

After he had left, I had a little time to finish some paperwork. I wrote a couple of outstanding letters and paid my speeding ticket. Then I made fresh coffee for the flasks and left for Adams, listening to the news on the way.

“After the recent appeals, police have announced substantial new developments in the latest of the ‘Whistler killings. Preetibala...”

Was there nothing else to talk about? I switched off as Adam climbed in.

“Hello gorgeous girl.”

“Hello yourself.”

We crawled round the North Circular, chattering. I told him about my nose.

“So, you have olfactory enhancement. Do ze scientists know?”

Zis is a phenomena. You may be ze third way –ze new generation. It could be a family thing...I might be able to hear in different languages.”

I flicked his wrist, knocking his ringing mobile phone out of his grasp. He turned it off.

“It’s our day.”

When we finally neared the end of the Southend Arterial Road, I said.

“Oh lets stop off and look at the old place.”

“Why not.”

Twenty-three Queens road was on the main dual carriageway. We pulled up onto the kerb and gazed at the flaking paint, the rusting iron numbers.

The sign, “No stopping between 9am – 9pm”.

“D ‘you remember how long it used to take us to get out in the morning?”

”Even in the evening it didn’t settle down ‘til after 9.” I agreed. ”Yet Dad loved it.”

“Mum didn’t. She said friends kept away because the parking was so bad.

After Dad died she couldn’t wait to move.”

“I thought it was the memories she couldn’t stand, not the driveway.” I joked.

“She hated people leaving. Dad went. You left. I had nowhere to go so I

stayed.” His face clouded. “The performances were epic when I first

mentioned moving in with Sally. She was impossible towards her.”

“I saw Sally recently. She’s emigrating and wanted to pass on some things.

Mum’s weather clock, for instance, man missing.”

“Huh” he snorted dismissively, “She should have binned it!”

“I thought you were quite attached, even though you broke it.”

“Mum told me to...said it ‘wasn’t needed anymore.”

He gurned like an ‘Eastender’

“C’mon Darlin’, let’s go down’ pier.”

I cackled obligingly. “Awight son – you ‘um it, Oil steal it! Actually, will you drive? I just want to enjoy the view.”

“Sure. You know I love this car.” He slipped in, adjusted the seat and we filtered into the seaside traffic.

Nothing had changed.

“D ‘you think they will have mended the sign yet?”

We laughed helplessly as the letters ‘OWLI’ came into view. It was always a matter of civic indifference that B, N and G stood dark like redundant lighthouses.

“N and G have obviously left the country in disgust and live in welcome anonymity in the South of France”. He joked as we parked close to the end of the pier where the bowling alley had dominated our youth.

There is nothing so dear as revisiting a childhood moment. I slid my fingers into those black balls, and felt a perfect footloose happiness. He beat me 10-6. We rolled pennies into countless slots and played every machine with the abandonment of a limitless purse.

“The ice-creams are smaller.” Adam pouted as we boarded the green and tan train which rattled its hard wooden passage to the end.

“You can’t do this on any other pier in the country, you know.” He lectured to unimpressed day-trippers. We stood, arms linked and stared into the muddy blue, watching the seagulls hovering overhead. I had spent so long dealing with the task in hand that I had stopped noticing the beauty and potential in a single swoop. I looked at Adams’ blonde locks tousled by the rising breeze.

“You could have modelled.”

“Too much expected, though it certainly would have satisfied Mum’s vanities.” He said dryly.

The sound of each lapping wave made me long to be out there.

“What d’ you say to fish and chips, down the Kursal and then finish off with” I glanced sideways “a spot of fishing at Paggleton”. I expected a groan but he was enthusiastic.

So we walked the golden mile, resisting the arcades and reached the pavilion where we ate our battered lunch from polystyrene plates and nodded in frenetic time to a stumbling string quartet. I could see Adam twitching at the siren call of the funfair, but first we found the distorting mirrors and leered at our buckled selves while a clutch of impatient school - children looked on disdainfully.

“Ghost Ride, Madam?” Adam ushered me into the darkness. I screamed obligingly as he tugged at my earlobes.

“Dodgems?”

“Just don’t give me whiplash.”

He left me to gently circuit while he terrorised the irrepressible local youth until finally, he drove towards me, banking us both, as he always had.

The hot sun emerged from the moving beards of clouds in a lilac sky and suddenly I just wanted to sit. He slapped his hands together.

“Coconut Shy and Shooting Range, I think.”

“Sunbathe. You go play.”

He kissed my head and bounced off into the crowd. I settled into my chair but the phone rang. It was Wendy. The poor line only gave me the odd word.

“...Just thought...Piper...talk...” I lost the connection and sighed.

Leave me alone

It rang again.

“D.I. Piper here.”

“Yes Inspector” I said tightly.

“...I need ...urgently...”

“I’m in Southend, Inspector. I’ll be back this evening but not before.”

“...Driving?”

“Yes...I can barely hear you. I’ll ring you later.”

Wilfully I rang off, and felt rebellion shivering up my legs. I could just see Adam’s head bobbing as he aimed for the coconuts and relaxing I drifted off.

Some time later, I woke to see him in front of me holding a plastic bag filled with water and two plump hopeful goldfish.

“Nick and Phil” he pointed to them.

“I hope you won those fairly.”

“Cross my heart, Guv’. Now, Waltzer and Big Dipper. What d ‘ you want when I come back?”

“Candyfloss, please.” I exhaled contentedly

Free, I almost felt free.

But then an image sprang into my head.

A child. Its mouth and cheeks covered with orange flecks, scraps, remains of what had just been eaten. Unmentionable.

And numbers... Two’s, three’s and nine’s. Numbers, raining down and dancing in front of me. If only I could rearrange them properly.

... I realised what Piper had seen and why he wanted me.

The phone rang and instinctively I answered.

“Sally. How funny.”

“Justine. Look...Piperquestions...”

Closing in.

“Sally ...what forbidden rooms?”

She explained everything before I lost her.

Adam carried outsized mounds of candyfloss.

“Lovely. Will my teeth survive?”

Sticky and sated, we made our way to the car.

“They used to hire boats out until five. We should make it.”

He drove us to Paggleton, stopping in the Bell’s car park. Gleefully, I ran down to the old jetty and spying several vessels, knew the owner would be near. I sat cross-legged, baiting hooks, while Adam watched with distaste.

“D ‘you remember ‘Gone Fishin’?” I sang lustily.

“She’s gone fishin’,

A fisher girl,

Some four big nets,

To unfurl.

Off he swim,

Towards her,

Who says fresh fish don’ t smell?”

Adam roared out the second verse.

“If she comes knockin’

I’ll slip out quick,

Pin her arms,

Against her ribs,

Tell her she’s not wanted,

Whatever she thinks,

Who says fresh fish don’t stink? “

“If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?” I asked him.

He thought.

“I’d have come with you and Dad. I’d have let go of her hand. She used to grip it so hard, you know Jus’. ‘No Waving’ because it was bad luck, so we had to just ...” He tailed off and I nodded, understanding.

“I’m so desperately sorry. I wish I’d known. We’re done here.”

I fetched my bag and together we stepped onto the little blue boat. He rowed easily, whistling, until we reached the middle of the estuary where we set

down anchor and I unwound our lines. As we waited, we uncovered our favourite places, films, foods...people.

“Have you never met anyone since Daniel?” He asked gently.

“No. There was someone recently but I don’t think it’ll work out. You?”

“...I love the taste of the first flush –I can’t help it – the thrill spills so quickly and they all...want to hold on so tight.”

Suddenly, his line jerked.

“Oh, Jus, what do I do?”

“Slowly reel out and...” I guided his hand, letting him finally draw in. He stared down as it flapped on the deck.

“My first catch. What is it?”

“Plaice. Want to keep it?”

“No. Have you got a camera?”

I still have the photo. He sits, beaming proudly, awkwardly holding his quarry.

“Coffee?”

I handed him a cup and nestling against the side, he dangled his bare feet over the edge.

“So peaceful here, Jus’.”

As the amber sun swung lower in its hammock, I felt the chill of inner heat departing at the end of a long sun-kissed day. I reminded myself that a woman’s pain threshold is nine times stronger and watched him sink slowly into sleep.

I have spent my best years giving people their futures and now, as I hear a door slam firmly shut and sit where countless women have sat before, I practise living with myself. I have planted an unmarked cross and hidden it in a rarely visited cul-de-sac. Sometimes I take a wrong turning and arrive there – it is always a shock. Such is my talent for burials.

It was my responsibility, my blindness, my car he drove on the night of the twenty-third, my fish he ate as a child, my mother he fled, my sister-in-law who bears the scar. I had, as ever, to protect him and in sole charge of the lives of women he may yet have ensnared, I know I have acted justly.

Smelling nothing but the stench of disinfectant, I stare up at my small window, which allows a vestige of light to blink a tomorrow and wait for endings.