

Coffee and Conversation

by

Josephine Allen

I tried to make eye contact. But, as usual, his eyes slid away from mine to gaze at his fingers drumming on the table.

“The trouble is, you always expect the worst of people,” I said. “If you approached them in a positive manner, they’d be more likely to respond in kind.”

He thrust his bottom lip out in that irritating manner. “Any more pearls of wisdom? Life isn’t like those trashy novels you read, you know.”

I’d had enough.

“Of course not. But a bit of escapism is good for the soul, and I sometimes pick up excellent bits of advice. One goes like this: ‘Remove negative people from your life. They drag you down, and kill your own joy’.”

He frowned. “What do you mean? You’re the least negative person I’ve ever met.”

I gave him what I hoped was a scimitar smile, as they say in the trashy novels, and said, “I’m advising myself, not you. Goodbye, James.”

“You’re going back already?”

He might be a smart accountant, but he was *so* dense when it came to conversational nuances. “If necessary, but I was hoping *you’d* leave. You’ve finished your coffee. I haven’t.”

“You’re ... dumping me?”

“Let’s just say we’re so incompatible that there’s no point in trying any further for a meeting of minds. Off you go. I’ll pay the bill, if that’s bothering you.”

He reddened. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

I shrugged, took my current paperback out of my handbag, and opened it at the bookmark.

He stood up and snarled, “You’re too dumb to recognise a good offer when you get it! Any woman your age would...”

I tuned his rant out. He half-reached for my book, perhaps to tear it out of my hand, then cursed, spun around and stomped off between the footpath tables to his Beemer — black, of course — which he’d parked in the loading zone.

He jumped in and blasted off. A red light at the intersection of Boundary and Vulture Streets spoiled his exit. Not that I noticed, particularly.

I remembered that character in the old “Li’l Abner” comic strip, the one who walked around with a constant dripping black cloud over his head. Joe somebody. I felt as if that black cloud had suddenly moved away from over my head, letting in the sunshine. Not that Brisbane didn’t need the rain.

“What an idiot.”

It was said in an undertone, but I have good hearing. Outraged, I jerked my head around, to meet the gaze of a guy seated at the next table.

I’d noticed him several times at this coffee bar. He was the intellectual-looking sort that a

bookish type like me noticed. Yesterday, he'd smiled at me.

Now he held my gaze. Dark brown eyes, warm, yet serious. Nice eyes. But he'd insulted me.

"I don't think so," I snapped. "Some things aren't worth the price."

He looked bewildered, then his face cleared. "Oh! Sorry! I didn't mean *you*, I meant him."

Although mollified, I wasn't about to let him off the hook so easily. "I'm glad to hear it. But don't you know it's rude to eavesdrop?"

"Yes, I do. Again, I'm sorry."

"You don't look at all sorry. What's your excuse?"

"None." He paused, then added, "But I have a reason."

"Which is?"

Now, rather late for it, he looked embarrassed. He dropped his gaze and said, "I'm a writer. In my spare time, that is. Observing people, and eavesdropping, gives me ideas."

"A writer!" My animosity vanished. "What's your genre?"

"Murder mysteries. I'm a solicitor in my day job, so that gives me other angles." He leaned over to reach his hand across the space between the tables. "Geoff Baxter."

I clasped it. A nice, dry, warm and firm hand. "Jenepher Gallagher. With the old Irish spelling."

"Pleased to meet you, Jenepher."

Without being invited, he moved to the seat what's-his-name had vacated. I didn't object. "Are you a writer too?" he asked.

"What makes you think I am?"

"Your use of the word 'genre'."

"Well, I've ... tried to start, just recently."

He smiled. A charming smile, sort of twinkly-crinkly. "So what's *your* genre?"

I adjusted my glasses. "Young adult."

He nodded, taking this information seriously. "Great field, if you can break into it. There's a lot of competition, though."

I stared. "Most writers roll their eyes if you mention young adult."

"Only if they're literary wankers. I think they're just jealous of the sales figures for the *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* series."

What a nice man, I thought. "Are you published?"

"Only an e-publisher so far. But I'm hoping to break into print." His voice warmed with enthusiasm. "I've just managed to interest a good agent."

"Congratulations!"

We paused and smiled at each other, then he asked, "What's *your* day job?"

"Librarian." I glanced at my watch, then nodded up the slope of Boundary Street towards the quaint old building that housed the West End Library. "And I'd better be getting back, much as I've enjoyed our conversation."

He rose when I did: a proper gentleman. Just the right height, too; I'd even be able to wear high heels if—

Stop right there, girl. You're getting ahead of yourself.

"I'd like to continue it," he said. "My office is just around the corner. I come here every

day at ten-thirty; my research break, I call it. Might I see you here again?"

Wow, a date — of sorts!

"Mmm ... perhaps."

Back at the library, I caught my pony-tailed, thin-as-a-rail colleague lurking behind the stacks engrossed in an SF novel.

"Heavy filing job, Justin?"

He answered with a sheepish look.

"Let's make a deal. I won't object to your reading on the job if you don't mind when I take long coffee breaks. We can salve our consciences by working back to make up."

He grinned, and shook my hand. "Deal."

I wished I'd met Geoff Baxter earlier. Next week the woman I was filling in for would be back from maternity leave, and I'd be returning to my usual post at City Library. I served a customer, then idly typed Geoff's name into the computer for an author search.

Bingo! His e-publisher must also be print-on-demand. One copy of *Blood in Brisbane*, at the City Library.

I was too impatient to put on a hold and wait for it to turn up. At lunchtime, I hopped on my little Vespa and scooted over to City Library.

He was already seated when I arrived, next day, at ten-thirty sharp. He smiled and stood up when I appeared, and insisted on buying my coffee. When we'd settled again, I pulled *Blood in Brisbane* out of my handbag.

"I've read your book."

"Wow! That was quick. Um ... what did you think?"

"Couldn't put it down! It kept me up till two a.m."

"That's the most flattering review I've ever had."

He smiled. He really had the most attractive smile. "In fact, it's the *only* review I've ever had."

"I really like your detective. He's a well-rounded character, unlike those in a lot of crime novels. In fact, all your characters are well-rounded."

He actually blushed with pleasure. It confirmed my feeling that he'd put a lot of himself into his protagonist. I thought we'd continue discussing the book, but instead, he took an unexpected tack.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"You can, but I won't guarantee I'll answer."

"That guy you saw off yesterday. What does he mean to you?"

"Him? Absolutely nothing."

The answer hung there. I decided to explain.

"My sister set me up with him as a blind date. I only agreed to meet him again to avoid

disappointing her. But I could see it would be a disaster from the start.” I sighed. “She’s married to this rich stockbroker, you see, and keeps trying to pair me off with his equally rich friends.”

“Huh.”

Amazing, the amount of expression that a single fricative can show. I could see there was a story there. I raised my eyebrows, and waited.

“Your sister should meet my ex. She left me for a hot-shot property developer. According to her, I didn’t have enough *ambition*. Meaning, I wasn’t earning enough to keep her in the manner to which she’d have liked to be accustomed.”

Good. An acceptable explanation for why such an attractive man was unattached.

“It sounds like you’re well rid of her.”

He sighed. “Maybe.”

Hmm. Undecided. Not so good. A pause, then he said diffidently, “I’ve got another manuscript finished. Like to read it? I’d appreciate your feedback.”

“Yeah! Love to!”

“I’ll email it to you. Have you got something you could show me?”

“Ah, um ... I’ve got ... three chapters. I haven’t shown it to...” I trailed off.

“I know how you feel. It’s impossible to tell, with your own writing, whether it’s the greatest story unpublished, or absolute crap.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll email it.” We exchanged email addresses, then another thought struck me. “Did you get any character insights from, um, *observing* us yesterday?”

He grinned. “Oh, yeah. I think I’ll make that James guy my next murder victim. You know, always expecting the worst, until it happens to him.”

I laughed, but felt a tiny bit disappointed that *I* hadn’t rated as a possible character. But then he surprised me.

“And then... My detective’s a real loner. But I thought, when he’s doing research in the library, the librarian could get intrigued by the books he’s checking out, and strike up a conversation with him. Then she could make suggestions, start helping him, and, gradually, a relationship could develop. I’m thinking of a series, you see.”

I almost blurted out a comment, then settled for a smile I hoped wasn’t too starry-eyed. At thirty-something, it wouldn’t do for me to appear too desperate or over-eager. *He’s talking about a fictional relationship*, I reminded myself. *Not real life.*

He liked my chapters! His major recommendation was to reduce the passive voice. I guess my overuse of it was due to the pernicious influence of working for local government. *His MS* was brilliant; I could hardly suggest any improvement.

By the end of the week, my morning coffee with Geoff had become the focus of my life. It was unthinkable to end it. By this time, I’d moved back to City Library.

I came to an agreement with my supervisor that I could have an extra long morning coffee break, in exchange for a short lunch hour and no afternoon break. I’d jump on my scooter and putter across Victoria Bridge, go around the block to avoid passing the coffee bar, park behind

the library and stroll down to meet Geoff.

Eventually, of course, he sprang me.

“I got off early today and went to the library to walk down with you. They told me you’d gone back to the city.”

Haltingly, I confessed. He reached across the table and took my hand, and his eyes grew tender. His touch felt like a jolt of electricity.

“Do our meetings mean that much to you?” he asked.

I nodded, unable to speak, and waited for his reaction. It came out of left field.

“Have you ever been to the Mount Coot-tha Restaurant?”

When I shook my head, he said, “It’s lovely at this time of year, watching the twilight stealing over the city, and all the lights coming on. Why don’t you ride over to my office after work, and we’ll drive up there for dinner.”

I accepted, of course. He took me around the corner and showed me where his office was.

I scarcely had time to greet Geoff that evening, when the office door burst open and a highly polished and distraught blonde erupted in.

“*Geoff!* You’ve got to help me!” she yelped.

His jaw tightened. “This isn’t a good time, Sally.”

“Carl’s been *arrested!*”

He took a deep breath. “Would you excuse us please, Jenepher,” he said, took the blonde’s elbow, and hustled her into his office.

The door failed to shut properly. Shamelessly, I eavesdropped. Only for research, of course. She could make a good character. Heroine, or villainess?

“What for? Fraud?”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“Just an informed guess. How do you expect me to help?”

“You’ve got to represent him!”

“*God*, Sally. Don’t you know *anything*? That would be an impossible conflict of interest, me defending the husband of my ex-wife. Even if I won, there’d be an appeal.”

“But you’re the only one who could get him off!”

Silence. Then, “So he’s guilty, is he? And you want me to lie through my teeth for him.” More silence, then:

“Look, the best I can do for you is to give you the name of a good man—”

“You *bastard!*”

The door banged open and she stormed unseeingly past me, to slam out the main door and clatter down the stairs.

A long pause. Then Geoff came out, biting his lips. He stared at me without speaking, then said, “You heard?”

I nodded.

“I know what you’re thinking. *What did he ever see in her?*”

“More along the lines of you’re too good for her, actually.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “We married too young, that was the main problem. I guess I confused lust with love. You know, I didn’t think I was over her. Not until now. Before, I couldn’t believe she was so self-centred, so oblivious.”

“There’s a tag for helpless heroines in bad romances,” I offered. “TSL. Too stupid to live.”

He laughed. “You called that right.”

Suddenly his taut pose relaxed. The bleakness faded from his eyes, and he danced across, took both my hands in his and spun me around.

“Jenepher Gallagher, you’ve just witnessed a rebirth. And it couldn’t have happened without my meeting you.”

He kissed me.

For the first time! Bliss! It started as jocular, and went on a long, long way from there.

He tasted wonderful. Isn’t that what scientists say kissing is all about, to taste-test compatibility?

“We’re both reborn,” I said, when we finally broke.

“Then let’s go and eat ... then we’ll discover, together, what real life is all about.”