

The Cause of the Tides

A P Charman

Emma's had plenty of time to study loneliness, so she knows it has many aspects. When she gets woken at night by the boiler sounding like a burglar, it comes disguised as fear. And when the bed's too big and she wishes she had someone to hold, loneliness is a set of doubting questions she never gets answered. Is she ugly? Is she pretty? Is she vain? What's *wrong* with her?

Emma knows them as her demons; those devilish voices that drown out her hopes with voluminous fears; the echoes of her mother; the scars of the loves she has lost.

Right now they are laughing, calling her a once-bitten fool. She's standing in the rain, waiting for Kieran but she has met him before. She sat next to him at the dinner party that was arranged by a mutual friend for the sole purpose of introducing them, but after three hours of humiliation while he talked to everyone

except her, she left feeling like she'd been stood up. Her little red monsters rejoiced in her invisibility.

He phoned the next day, pleading for a chance to apologise over lunch and she was appalled to hear herself agreeing. She told herself she was acting out of desperation and she had no answer.

As she stands beneath her umbrella, waiting for his face to emerge from the crowd they are nagging confidently. He won't show. And even if he does, there's a good reason he's still single. Emma just shifts from foot to foot, telling herself she'll accept a few flaws.

Rain drips from her umbrella, distracting her, and then she spots his face in the crowd and watches him walking, oblivious to the weather, open faced and innocent. In the moments that follow she can hear her practised greetings; 'Hi, how are you?' and 'You're early.'

When he gets closer, her doubts speak up. 'You have nothing in common,' she tells herself, 'except your seats on the shelf.'

He doesn't notice her. He is about to walk into the restaurant. He even compresses his umbrella back into a spring-loaded stump before finally realising someone's staring at him.

When he turns, she widens her eyes. She has been working on this moment; the raincoat, the heels, the University education and the decades of relationships that proved to be just the one hand clapping. It is always like this; the past, and everything it means, hinging on this very instant.

"Wow! You look fantastic," he says, grinning.

Devilish voices tell her this means she's overdressed but Kieran, holding his umbrella at a certain angle, squeezes its button. The black column springs out, thuds to a stop and then blooms into a shiny canopy. He pauses before raising it over Emma for just long enough to cause her to smirk.

"Shall we?"

He gestures towards the restaurant and suddenly she's embarrassed and acutely aware that she doesn't know this man at all.

Over lunch he repeats the apology he offered over the phone.

"I couldn't talk to you, I really couldn't. The only two single people there; we were such an obvious set up. It felt like I was fifteen and all the other boys were nudging

me, 'go-on, go-on, talk to her, go-on'. All the worse because you looked... well, you looked fantastic. I'd have been fingers and thumbs anyway."

Emma jokes with him about the expectations of their married audience, he looks genuinely remorseful, apologising for his cowardice, and something in her heart shifts.

"Since you're buying me lunch, I guess I'll have to forgive you."

"Oh, I'm paying am I? You like the man to pay?"

"Only in penance."

He laughs and starts telling her an anecdote about his sister. Emma lets him talk; she is entranced by his hands. Everything is symmetrical. Good things are big and broad and spread out between them, or else they are nothing to do with him—hands up with his palms out, like a surrender. Anything powerful is concentrated in a small, potent bundle; problems are mixed up in a revolution that risks spilling the salt. Every type of emphasis comes with raised eyebrows. If he looks away from her, he looks far away... out of the restaurant window, across the water. When a tale is done or a point has been made, Kieran puts his hands away neatly, his fingers interlinked. He listens with his head to one side, a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

He talks easily and listens easily too. Emma tells him of her work digitizing film, her home town with its quiet market square, the church where she always thought she would marry and her flat in Chiswick. She doesn't tell him about the tribal masks she brought back from Brazil and never put on the wall, nor the pinewood bookshelves that were a temporary measure eleven years ago.

"Did you ever think your life would be like this?" she hears herself asking.

Kieran looks out over the river again, his eyes sparkling.

"...D'you know what it is? We live our lives in time, but we don't understand it. We don't know our lives any more than a dolphin knows the cause of the tides."

Emma can't help but smile. Kieran looks embarrassed at his sudden profundity. He glances around, then looks at his watch.

"Would you like coffee?"

They meet for lunch again a week later, and again a week after that. They get familiar enough to describe their lost lovers and she is relieved he seems in the same

boat as her; no great saga, just a few long-term relationships that broke down like tragedies, each for its own heart-breaking reason.

So the day arrives when Emma finds herself at home alone drinking late-night chocolate, remembering things Kieran has said and the expressions Kieran has used. She can picture Kieran's dark, delectable eyes and Kieran's symmetrical hands. She even recalls Kieran's description of Lawrence.

'The literary equivalent of sniffing someone's seat...'

She wriggles her toes to think of the way he sometimes loses himself and then gets embarrassed by his own words. She never had such conversations with former lovers and it makes her wonder what she was ever doing with any of them. Kieran has told her about his house; the things he collected on his travels and the paintings; he loves his paintings and has a special original—valuable—by an artist whose identity he refuses to reveal. Emma has never been there, but already it feels like home.

They meet again in the evening, and the connection just grows. She finds herself touching him constantly, taking his arm as they leave the restaurant, kissing instinctively as they say good night.

They agree to meet the next Friday and she accepts his offer to cook for her. It means she will go to his house and the possibilities are obvious.

The demons come calling while she's still in the bath. They've turned into smooth talking devils, claiming they want to protect her, reminding her of the times she's been hurt. 'Remember how it always ends,' they whisper, 'You're born alone, you die alone.'

Her exorcist is a CD; upbeat music, loud enough to overhaul the hair-dryer. She makes ready for everything, but with prudence. Her handbag kit includes condoms, pants, toothbrush and a taxi's phone number.

She tells herself that Plan A is a taxi home and, as she pins her ear-rings in place, she even practices her excuses in the mirror.

"I actually *have* to get home...I...I have to be up at six, no, at *five* in the morning..."

And when the cab drops her at his house she repeats the instruction to herself.

"Take a cab home."

She smirks, going up the steps, thrilled to be hoping for Plan B.

There's just a gap in events; after she has rung the doorbell and before he appears. Her demons flood through; She'll be crying into her coffee within a week...

Kieran's house is extravagantly decorated and smells of wine-soaked cooking. He looks more relaxed here; confident; even a little taller. As he shows her around she asks about the artefacts she finds.

"That's a Somalian communal bowl given to my grandfather... that's from er... Marakesh... it's lovely isn't it? The rug? I bought that from an Afghani guy in... Amsterdam or Rotterdam. Rotterdam, I think."

Then she comes upon a painting of a town square. It looks like somewhere in Germany. Unlike everything else it is not particularly pleasant and was produced without skill. She's about to move on.

"Ah that's it, you've found it. That's the one valuable piece I own. It's rare too. There are many fakes. Bet you can't guess who painted it."

Emma shakes her head but Kieran won't tell.

"Maybe this'll help; same guy."

She studies an architectural drawing of a neo-classical, thirties building, all drama and powerful columns. She is suddenly fearful she knows the artist.

"Any more?"

"Sure. A couple."

He shows her a picture of a colonnade, with columns of light powering into the sky from a bank of searchlights. It is a dramatic effect, but it gives her the creeps. She checks the original, then she turns to Kieran.

"You have pictures by Adolf Hitler on the wall."

He grins.

"You see; you're shocked. Everyone's always shocked. He was a painter. There are two sides to everyone; every single individual."

He steps back and looks admiringly at the Hitler.

"I keep this here to remind me, that no matter what someone does; there's another side to them."

Emma joins him in looking at the picture. She is nodding her head in apparent agreement.

"Now, it's important you don't misunderstand this; there's no sympathy; not a hint of the fascist about me; in fact, something quite the opposite. This is a know-your-enemy sort of thing. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Did you see this other one? This is a copy of his original drawing for the Volkswagen. The Beetle; the people's car. He actually designed it. He was a complex mass-murderer, our Adolf. Art, cars, architecture."

"Yes... yes, so I see. Oh, by the way, Kieran, I can't be too late home. I have to be up very early in the morning."

He looks at her with silent surprise and blinks away his disappointment.

"Early? Sure, of course. You want to use the phone?"

They are sitting in the taxi—Emma and her demons—glum-faced, staring at the black pearl raindrops on the window. The taxi grumbles and bumps over potholes, but no-one has anything to say.