

Kate London

We Do Not Deal in Guilt or Blame

I was apologising. He was tall, very tall in fact, about six foot four, and older than me. We'd had plans but last minute I'd said yes to my friends who were going to a gay bar and then on to a club. It was much the better option and I was saying sorry, which I was but also wasn't.

5 He put a hand up like someone stopping traffic and I stopped talking and he said, "No. We do not deal in guilt or blame."

That was that then. I had to be a grown-up: make my choices and own them. If I wanted to go out with my friends, well then, fine. But he wouldn't tolerate this guilt and blame fucked-up thing. He'd done a lot of work on himself and he wasn't going to be busy with my shit.

10 I didn't like to mention it, I said, but my family had actually represented Britain in the Guilt and Blame World Championships. A couple of times we'd won gold. He laughed and told me to let go of all that shit. That might be my family but it wasn't me. Perhaps I had been slipped into the cot by faeries.

15 My parents were small and when we visited they moved around him like sparrows. They didn't like him. You might think it was because he was so much older than me but really I think it was because he was so tall. His clothes were wrong too. Big blue cotton trousers that weren't jeans. Black shoes that my mother would think were odd but that she would also feel obliged to approve of because they were made from leather and hand-stitched. A huge grey felt hat shaped like an over-sized bowler. He ate strange food as well. Into my mother's fridge – packed full of normal food – he placed interlopers: TetraPaks¹ of carob-flavoured soya milk desserts and steamy plastic bags in which mung beans sprouted moistly.

My mother seethed and moved the food around and asked him if he still wanted it.

20 He taught in a central-London drama school and he liked me to go with him to see the student shows. He wanted to support them, he said. It was very positive, he felt, to be around such optimistic, talented young people. He introduced me. This is my girlfriend. Hello. Hello. I was their age but there wasn't really much to talk about. They weren't interested in me. Who can blame them? I was only their teacher's girlfriend.

25 But I was interested in myself! I had a powerful wish to be somebody. Sometimes I was down about it and irritable.

"I live with you in this flat. I've just got a tiny shelf for my things. My career is going nowhere!"

"Do not compare," he said. "Save the need to judge till later."

30 We did great things together, things I hadn't done before. In September he took me on holiday to Tuscany. On a wet November London day, we went to a cinema in the afternoon and watched *La Strada*². In early December, we went to hear Ali Farka Touré³ play live.

35 He knew a lot of stuff. He'd read loads of books. We stood on London Bridge and he quoted Dante⁴ in Italian. "So long a file of people," he translated. "I had not thought that death had undone so many." He didn't have a television in his house but he did have a turntable and lots of records. He liked all kinds of sex and it was very important to him that I came too.

40 We decided not to spend Christmas with my family. It was hard to tell my parents but I agreed it was worth it to be free of the dead turkey and the over-cooked sprouts. It would have been uncomfortable with him there. I could picture how it would be: him sitting motionless, his face expressing nothing at all, while my family squealed with fake delight at my sisters' children opening way too many presents in front of a tree that had been dug up and screwed into a plastic stand.

¹ a type of cardboard container

² *La Strada*: an Italian film from 1954

³ *Ali Farka Touré*: a musician from Mali

⁴ an Italian poet (1265-1321)

That snowy December in the Lake District⁵, I stepped naked into a racing stream. The water was as bright as sunlight and so cold it scorched me.

He'd taught lots of people who'd gone on to be famous and he took pride in their achievements. He was happy for them. We bumped into one of them on a London street. She had glowing skin and shiny hair. He said, "Aren't you too famous to be out?" and she said, "Ha. I just put a bobble hat on and no one recognises me." Her same beautiful face was blown-up and plastered on the side of a red bus that drove past as we were standing there.

"Amazing," he said, and she smiled and looked at the bus and said, "Yeah. It is, isn't it?"

I got a feeling then that I didn't understand. Something like a ravenous hunger.

On Sunday mornings, I worked for cash at a market stall in Camden⁶. He came by and annoyed the stall owner by hanging around with his black mountain bike and getting in the way of customers. OK, he said when I told him he shouldn't do it again, but why did I have to be there on the weekends when he wasn't working? It was a horrible waste of that most precious thing: time. Why was I doing it? Some misplaced sense of duty?

He encouraged me to let go of a lot of stuff, and I did.

When the daffodils came out on Hampstead Heath⁷ I did a good imitation of Doris Day in *Calamity Jane*⁸, swinging my arms wide open on the high note of "Secret Love"⁹. He surprised me by liking Doris. She was, he said, a kind of innocent. People were always waiting for Doris' mask to slip, but there was no mask. She was as she seemed: tough and optimistic. She didn't believe in original sin. None of the sadness in her life had affected her essential nature. Like me, she was a changeling. She leaned on infinite wisdom and her days were bright with blessings.

At last I was in a band. There were four of us. I was the singer and the only girl. When we took a break from rehearsals I stood outside with the bass guitarist and stole drags from his cigarette. I wore a tatty emerald green fur coat and cut my hair with kitchen scissors. In the middle of the set I stood alone on the stage. In my charity-shop coat I strummed my guitar and sang Doris' "Que Será, Será"¹⁰. It was a great contrast to all the thumping bass and I loved it. Everyone loved it.

He always came to the clubs when we had gigs. I had started to wear make-up – dark kohl lines around my eyes.

"You don't need any of that," he said.

The band had a gig in Liverpool. The others were in a bed and breakfast that smelt of wet dog but he paid for the two of us to stay in the Grand Hotel. When I got back from rehearsal he asked me if I'd been smoking and I said no. The hotel suite had a big bath with claw feet. It was so big I could swish about in it. The light was pale green and he took photos of me. "You're a wild animal," he said.

He had a friend who was a photographer. This friend had a beautiful black partner and two children. When he wasn't with me he went to their house and hung out at their big oak table or took their children to Holland Park and bought them ice creams. Later I found out he'd had copies of the photos that he'd taken in Liverpool printed and given them to his friend.

I told him to get them back. He was offended; all those nasty thoughts were mine alone. The guy was a photographer, for fuck's sake. He could see beautiful naked women any time he wanted. It had all been about the beauty of the photographs and the beautiful moment.

"Nothing real can be threatened," he said, "Nothing unreal exists."

"Get them back anyway," I said.

⁵ *the Lake District*: a mountainous area in north-west England

⁶ an area in London

⁷ *Hampstead Heath*: a park in London

⁸ *Calamity Jane*: an American film from 1953 starring Doris Day

⁹ *Secret Love*: a song from the film

¹⁰ *Que Será, Será*: (Spanish) Whatever will be, will be

85 That night I was woken by a presence. A bird was standing outside on the window ledge, looking in on us sleeping. It was bright green with red stripes under its wings. I watched it for a while and it looked back at me like an equal.

I woke him up.

"Look," I said.

"It must be a sign," he said.

"I think it's a parrot. Shall we open the window?"

90 He shook his head. "Let's not ruin it."

It was hard to fall back asleep with the bird watching me. It seemed so determined. I think it wanted me to let it in. It was sad to think of that; it had escaped or been set free but all it wanted was to be imprisoned again.

95 Someone from a TV company telephoned me to come in for an audition. They were doing a pilot for a travel show. They'd seen me singing "Que Será, Será" at Dingwalls¹¹; I was just the thing they were looking for. They thought I'd make a great presenter. The bass guitarist drove me home from rehearsal in the clapped out Volvo the band used to move all the instruments around. We sat outside the flat for a while before I went in. We smoked a cigarette with the car windows rolled down.

100 "I hope you don't have to leave the band," he said. "But I bet they'll say yes and then you'll be moving on. It's a shame."

I was late home. I ran up the stone steps. The mountain bike was in the hallway and he was in the kitchen cooking.

"You've been smoking again," he said. "I can smell it from here."

"I was just sitting in the car."

105 He shook his head. "Lying is worse than anything. Why would you lie?"

I didn't say anything. I sat down at the table and he put a plate of risotto in front me.

"Smoking's so dirty," he said. "Why would you do that to yourself?"

"Never mind that. Have you got my photos back yet?"

110 My audition was in the morning and I said I wanted to go to bed early. I lit a candle and had a hot bath. I shut the door so he wouldn't come in. I put a t-shirt and pants on before I left the bathroom.

I was getting into bed. He stood in the doorway to the bedroom.

"I can't believe you gave those photos of me to your friend," I said. "I want them back."

115 I lay on the bed and pulled the duvet up. I can remember it perfectly: the organic cotton and the smell of lavender oil. I closed my eyes and that's when he hit me. I don't know what he did exactly because my eyes were closed but it was a hard, sharp blow: strangely solid but also sudden, like someone throwing water.

I was furious.

I got up and pulled my jeans on. I started throwing my things in a bag.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. Obviously."

120 I was already less angry than I had been a second before.

"Don't be ridiculous. I hardly touched you. Wait till the morning at least."

"No," I said. "Now it's happened I'll always worry it will happen again. I'll never feel safe with you."

It wasn't exactly true; I wasn't frightened of him. But it was over: that was true. This was the moment.

He was standing watching me. His face was full of pain.

125 "You can't do that. You can't treat me like a violent abuser just because I hit you once."

I thought he was going to cry and it reminded me of something Doris Day wrote she had said to her first husband when she left him. "The feelings I once had for you are dead and gone. I don't love you anymore and without love it just wouldn't work."

He said, "It will never happen again."

¹¹ a live music venue in Camden

130 He was crying now and I couldn't bear it. I felt sorry too that he was trying to make me change my mind but I wasn't as strong as Doris; I didn't have the courage or the presence of mind to tell him that I wasn't leaving because he'd hit me but because I didn't love him anymore.

I gathered up my things and went into the street. I called the bass player for him to come and pick me up and he said he wouldn't be long.

135 I stood in the orange London night and thought of that parrot. I wondered whether someone had taken it in, or if it had died of cold, or whether it was making a go of it – that being free thing.

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