

## Waiting for Godfrey

The last time Bill had needed a taxi, his wife was using the car, and he had a message from the head of Major Motors where he worked as Maintenance Manager, to come to an urgent meeting to make a decision about a proposed new fleet deal. In the event, the taxi had arrived 25 minutes late. The previous passenger had fallen getting out of the taxi, which had necessitated waiting for the paramedics to attend, filling in accident and insurance forms, against possible litigation, and making sure neighbours would look after her. When he finally arrived at the meeting, El Supremo had made a unilateral decision in his absence. Bill was also roundly chastised for his tardiness, with no opportunity to explain that things had not exactly been under his control. Following the incident, Bill had always made sure he 'covered his back'.

He rang Reception and talked to Debbie.

"Good morning, Major Motors, Debbie speaking. How may I help?"

"Hi Debbs, it's Bill"

"Oh, Hi Bill. How are you?" She liked Bill. He was always kind and thoughtful and friendly, even when his wife had died so tragically.

"I'm fine thanks; and you?"

"I'm good. How can I help?"

"I shan't be in tomorrow, urgent personal business. Can you make sure everyone who needs to know, *does* know, including El Supremo. I don't want him breathing down my neck again. Can you do that for me please love?"

"Of course Bill, no problem. Leave it with me."

This time the taxi drew up on the dot. Bill was watching for it, and, 'battening down the hatches', buckled himself into the back seat and relaxed. It was only a short drive to the surgery, and he was in good time; 'better half an hour early than two minutes late', he told himself. He paid the fare and walked through the automatic doors, passed Reception, to the sign-in screen. 'Male / female, month of birth, date of month. 'Welcome Mr Enderby. Your appointment with Dr Godfrey is at 1150am.' Bill cleared the screen and pushed open the door to the waiting room. It was bright and colourful, arranged with rows of modern, wooden, upholstered chairs with arms. The walls were filled with posters and announcements which no-one liked to walk around reading, they felt anonymous and safe staying put. To his immense surprise, the room was empty save for one woman of approximately his own age, though 'always tricky judging women's ages'. She looked up from the magazine she was riffling through, and smiled. She was slim, well dressed in a dark blue trouser suit with a bright flowered silk scarf at her neck. Bill returned her smile,

"So where is everyone? I thought I'd have to wait," he opened.

"Well I think you *are* in for a wait. The doctors have all been called out to a major incident. They saw as any patients as they could, and offered alternative appointments to others. I'm waiting to see Dr Godfrey."

"Ah, it's Godfrey who wants to see *me*," added Bill. "Did they give you any idea of the waiting time?"

“‘Fraid not,” was the answer. “They’ve *no* idea.”

“What’s the problem, do you know?”

“A major pile-up on the motorway. Patchy fog I gather.” He liked the way she talked, unhurried, cultured but unaffected, smiling, musical and natural.

“Ah well, wait and see I guess. My names Bill by the way,” and he held out his hand. She took it; it was soft and firm in his dry, work-worn fingers. “I’m Amy. Pleased to meet you. Do you come here often?” She was mocking him delightfully, and he knew it.

“Only when I’ve nowhere else to go. Well its warm and its comfortable, and you meet a better class of people.” Bill was mocking Amy and *she* knew it. “I think I’ll just go and see if they have any more information. Shan’t be a minute.”

“Hello, Good morning, or is it afternoon now? I’m Bill Enderby to see Dr Godfrey at 1150. I gather we’ve all got problems. I just wondered if you have any up-to-date info.”

“I’m afraid not Mr Enderby. Would you like me to make you a new appointment?”

“Well actually, ‘No’, it’s very kind of you to offer, but you see, *I’ve* got a problem too. It’s Dr Godfrey who wants to see *me*. I’ve had to take a day off work because of the timing of the appointment. I’ve come by taxi because of the eye drops. And I’ve fasted because of the blood tests. So ...”

“I see. I’m sorry, but you can wait and hope. That’s all I can suggest.”

“OK, not to worry. Thank you.” As he went back to the waiting room, he thought, I can’t go through all this again. El Supremo will carpet me if I take another day off; he never listens, he never sympathises, he’s only interested in himself, how much the firm is making, and what’ll be the size of his annual bonus. Hate to think what he’s like at home.

“No news. Sorry,” he said to Amy. “But hey, why don’t we pop around the corner to Café Rouge and have a coffee, sod the nil-by-mouth?”

“Well that’s a bit of a problem,” Amy answered.

That morning had started like they all did. Her husband Bernard, got up and threw the curtains back, regardless of the time of the year, the intensity of the light, or lack of it, or the clemency of the weather. He then stomped into the en-suite coughing and spitting. Amy took this as the signal to get up and make his breakfast; he always insisted on a ‘full English’, making derogatory comments about the news he scanned in his morning paper. He then donned his overcoat and drove off scattering the gravel on the drive. Rarely did he acknowledge the care Amy had taken to have everything ready for him. She’d cleared away, showered, dressed, made-up, and was ready to greet the day. She was tidying the sitting room, and carrying a pile of old papers and magazines into the kitchen when she tripped over the corner of the rug and ‘went flying’.

“I didn’t like to ring my husband and ask for a lift to A&E,” she explained to Bill, “I knew what he’d say, ‘Can’t get away. See the doctor.’ So my neighbour came round and got me up. She called 111, and they told us about the pile-up and said unless it was a *real* emergency, ‘see your doctor’. They didn’t say there wouldn’t *be* a doctor available. Anyway, we decided there probably wasn’t anything broken, and she brought me in in her car, before going off to work.

“So you see. Can’t walk. Sorry about the coffee, I could really use one now.”

“Hang on a tick,” said Bill as he turned and disappeared again. When he came back he was pushing a wheelchair. “Found it in Reception. They said we can borrow it. I’ve left my mobile number. They’ll ring us if Godfrey turns up. What do you think?” Actually Amy thought she should keep her thoughts to herself. She liked this man. He was dressed smartly casual, in olive cords, matching polo-necked sweater, and a tweed jacket. He was easy to be with, easy to talk to, and now resourceful.

“Have you passed your test as a pusher? Wheelchairs I mean; I don’t want to know about the other.” They both laughed. Amy looked at Bill, leaning on the handles of the chair with a questioning expression. “Why not. Let’s just do it.” Without putting undue pressure on her right ankle, Bill managed to pull Amy up to a standing position, before lowering her into the chair, and gently lifting the offending foot onto the rest.

“There. Comfy madam?” he asked in mock servitude.

“Perfectly Jeeves. Carry on,” she responded playfully.

“Very good madam. Hold very tight please,” and off they went. As they reached the entrance, Amy commented, “I don’t understand why the outside door is automatic, but not the inside door. I suppose there’s a reason. Have you pushed one of these before Bill?”

“Er, no, but it’s quite straight forward,” he sounded a trifle unsure, and it wasn’t lost on Amy, who clasped the arms more tightly. “Watch out for the uneven paving slabs, I don’t want another accident.” Bill was getting into his stride.

“All under control madam. Just relax and enjoy the ride.” They stopped at the kerb of a side road and considered, “I think backwards would be best, don’t you?” offered Bill.

“You’re in charge Jeeves. Whatever you decide.” She was enjoying herself. She hadn’t felt like this in a very long time; like a child again, doing something she wasn’t quite sure she should be doing. Someone was taking notice of her for a change. At home she was taken for granted. Invisible. The only time Bernard noticed her, was when she got something wrong; like forgetting the mustard, over-cooking the bacon, leaving the outside light on all night, or putting his book back on the wrong shelf. He could be so petty; she could never relax with him.

How it had all happened, she couldn’t actually work out. He had insisted she shouldn’t work, but stay at home and look after things. He was a workaholic, motivated by money, what he could make and what he could spend it on. He used people he thought could further that aim, but he had very few friends. They rarely went out. If they did, it was with business acquaintances and their partners; Amy played the part of the dutiful wife.

‘Wait to be seated’, the sign said.

“Don’t tell them,” said Amy laughing, but I’m already seated. Bill rested his hands on her shoulders as they waited. Involuntarily he gave them a friendly gentle squeeze, and she responded with a slight shrug.

“Hello, I’m Maria. A table for two? This way.”

“Thank you,” said Bill.

“No problem. I’ll be back to take your order,” answered Maria with a smile.

“Now, do you want to stay in the wheelchair or transfer to one of theirs?” asked Bill solicitously.

“I think I’d better stay put, just to be on the safe side, don’t you?”

“Fine. Let me just rearrange the furniture a little. There OK?”

“Oh this is lovely. I’ve never been here before. I’m afraid there are very few places I have been to. My husband is always too busy or too tired. We rarely go out.” Amy looked around her. The restaurant was obviously very popular, but the diners were thinning now as they headed back to work. She looked across at Bill, “This is a real treat for me.” He smiled back,

“Do you really want coffee, or shall we have a glass of wine?” he asked her.

“Oh my, umm I’d love a glass of wine, how decadent, wine at lunchtime. It’ll make me squiffy if I don’t eat something,” she wavered. Bill warmed to the occasion,

“Look Amy, how’s the ankle?” he suddenly enquired.

“Er, oh much easier now I’ve rested it. Still painful when I put my weight on it though.”

“That’s good. I was just thinking. We don’t know how long we’ll be waiting for Godfrey; it’s lunchtime, and I’m enjoying your company. Why don’t we have a glass and bite to eat.”

“I’d love that, but what happens if the surgery rings for us?”

“Well we’ll say we’ll be there as quick as possible. What do you think?” There it was again, she’d love to be able to tell him what she thought; about him, about her boring life at home ever since Justin had left for New Zealand. He was there only child. Bernard said there wouldn’t be any more, something about interfering with his lifestyle. Justin had been all she had really; now ... nothing. Why shouldn’t she grasp a little innocent happiness while she could.

“I think it’s a great idea.” Maria was returning to the table, pad and pen in hand.

“Are you ready to order? What would you like to drink?”

“Red or white? Bill asked Amy.

“Er, red I think.”

“OK, two large glasses of the Argentinian Merlot please. Oh, and can we had glasses of tap water too. Maybe dish of olives to pass the time.”

“Of course sir,” and she made her way to the bar. Bill handed Amy a menu.

“I suggest something quick, in case we’re called back. Look at the Plats.”

“I’d like the poulet escalope et frites, s’il vous plait,” she said in an effortless French accent. Bill looked at her in admiration.

“Do you speak French?” asked Bill.

“Well yes, I lived in Paris for two years after university, working as a nanny,” answered Amy modestly.

“Did you study languages at University?”

“Actually no, but because I’d got French at ‘A’ level, I read English and French literature.”

“My you’re some clever lady,” Bill said genuinely impressed. Mary returned with a tray and placed the drinks on the table in front of them.

“Would you like to order now Sir?”

“Yes. Fine. Er, my partner will have the poulet and I’d like an omelette with ham and cheese please. Oh, and could I have a separate side salad.”

“Thank you Sir. Enjoy your wine.” Bill picked up his glass by its stem and held it to the light, swirling the deep red liquid round the glass. He brought it to his nose and moved his head from side to side. He took a draught, and washed it round his mouth sucking in air as he did so.

“Mm, that’s nice. Cheers Amy. You are a most charming companion to be sharing our waiting for Godfrey. Here’s to our brief encounter.” They chinked glasses as Amy too said,

“Cheers. I’m so glad we’ve met, and thank you for looking after me.” She paused wondering if she dare, “Tell me about yourself Bill. Are you married? Children?” She hoped she didn’t sound too pushy, but she found she wanted to get to know this man better. He was so different from the one she had married. But then *Bernard* had seemed charming and gregarious and amusing and entrepreneurial, when she first knew him.

“Well, Cynthia and I had been very happily married until three and a half years ago, when she was involved in a car crash; she died a few days later in hospital never having regained consciousness. Our daughter Peggy and family live not far away, so they’ve been a great help. Our son Neil is a jobbing actor, based in London, but travels all over wherever the work is. But I still see him regularly, well as regular as he could ever be in his profession.”

“What do you do?” she asked. Bill laughed and handed the olives to Amy.

“I labour under the grand title of Automotive Engineer,” he said, “a glorified title for a car mechanic. I have always loved mechanical things. Taking them apart and putting them together again. Even at school I was always doodling and designing things. I loved Tech Drawing. I left school at 15 and was apprenticed to a garage which taught me everything, and sent me to college to get the qualifications. I love it. Well I love the practical side of it, you know the hands on. Trouble is I’m now a manager, and that means paperwork and organising others, which is fine, it’s not a problem; I’d just rather be under a motor. Then there’s the boss; a bully. El Supremo we call him, always looking over your shoulder and finding fault. Not a nice man.” Bill took another large sip of his wine. “Anyway what about you?”

“Oh, well as I said, after university, Paris, met this man, married him, then ... it all seemed to fade away. He gives all his time to the business. Never had time for his son. Chased money and curried favour with those who could help him. Don’t get me wrong, we have a lovely house, and Justin, our son, and I never wanted for anything. Now Justin is on the other side of the world. So ... nothing really.” Amy looked wistfully at her glass. Mary came back with their orders.

“Enjoy,” she smiled.

“Where did this ‘enjoy’ come from?” asked Amy rhetorically. “Why can’t they say, ‘I hope you enjoy your meal’ or something, but ‘enjoy’, it’s crass. Sorry,” she said apologetically, “This looks divine. Bon appetit.” They fell quiet as they picked up their irons and began their meals. Both of them felt a calm, comfortable sense of togetherness. They were insulated, isolated, from the world around them. There was a connection between them even in the silence. Bill hadn’t thought about another woman since Cynthia had died. Amy had accepted that she was married to a bullying bore, and that was her lot in life. Did it have to be like that? Or could it be like this?

Bill’s phone rang.

“Hello. Bill Enderby speaking.”

“Hello Mr Enderby. Just to let you know Dr Godfrey is back. He’s just sorting himself out; so whenever you’re ready. OK?”

“Fine. Thank you. We’ll be with you in ten minutes or so.” Lost as they had been in each other’s company, the call came as something of a shock, bursting the bubble of make-believe, and bringing them back into the present. Bill stood up,

“Sorry love, our waiting for Godfrey is over. I’ll go and settle up.”

When they got back to the surgery, the receptionist welcomed them with, “When you’re ready. Who’s going in first.?” Bill and Amy looked at each other. “You go first.” Bill suggested, and started to push Amy towards the door.

“Well what’s the verdict?”

“Er, Oh a sprain. Bag of frozen peas on it and take paracetamol. Should be back to normal in a week.” Bill went in for his consultation.

“It’s only twenty past three. How about a cup of tea?” Suggested Bill, when his consultation was over, and who didn’t want the fantasy to end.

“I’d like that,” Amy answered, “Do you think they’ll let us keep the chair for another hours or so.”

The waitress brought the cups and saucers and pots of tea and little jugs of milk and complimentary ginger finger biscuits. Amy said,

“When you were in with Dr Godfrey, I was thinking”, she paused. “When I was at primary school, there was a boy in my class called William who was always drawing and making things. He and I were joint milk-monitors once, he was great fun.” Bills face lit up,

“That was me,” he laughed. “I remember now, you were Amy, er, Amy Wallis was it?”

“That’s right. Well, well, what happened?” She asked.

“Well you went to the grammar school. I failed the eleven plus and went to Brownleys Sec Mod.” Amy felt excitement building. She didn’t want the afternoon to end. She wanted to spend more time with this excitingly different man. “So what’s your name now?” asked Bill, revelling in the fact that they had known each other so long ago, and now they were rekindling the relationship. Dare he ask her if she’d like to meet again? They could picnic in the country, or find oldie-worldie pubs. They could row on the river or just go for a drive.

“Proctor. Amy Proctor.” Bills face froze. He just stared at her in disbelief. “What?” asked a bewildered Amy. He didn’t move. It was the shock. He didn’t know what to say. “Tell me. What’s the matter?” she pleaded with genuine concern. Slowly he put down his cup and looked into Amy’s eyes in sheer disbelief.

“I’ve just realised, Bernard Proctor, your husband, is El Supremo, my boss at Major Motors.”

Howard Brayton  
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