

I'M A STRANGER HERE

Daniela Baggozzi.

Claire returned home one night to find a young man sitting on a suitcase outside the door of her flat. She tried to maintain a certain countenance and taking out her key gave him an inquisitive look which was meant to get the stranger up on his feet and out of the way. Instead, the young man stood up, held out his hand and smiling shyly said "Hi, I'm Michael, Johnny's friend." Claire shook his hand automatically while trying to make a mental connection. "You mean Johnny Goodman?" she asked, then regretted it because it seemed to give the stranger a certain lee-way. "I don't know his name. I met him in a bar one night and when I told him I was coming down here he said I should look you up. I meant to ring you first, but I lost the slip of paper Johnny gave me. It was just lucky I remembered the address." He smiled again and moved out of the way to let Claire open the door. "Well, you'd better come in, I suppose" she said, and walked into her dark flat.

When she had turned on the lights she found Michael sitting on the sofa and slipping off his jumper. "Sorry, I've been walking around the city all afternoon and I'm a bit tired." Claire stood in the middle of the room trying to assess the situation. She wished she had made plans for the evening or could think of some excuse to get rid of the stranger, but her mind was a blank. "Hey," Michael suddenly said as if he had read her mind. "Did you have something to do, I mean, am I bothering you? You see I've come here for personal reasons, pretty much on a wild impulse, I suppose, and the fact is I don't have the money to stay in a hotel. Johnny said you were a really nice person and you wouldn't mind putting me up for a couple of nights." Claire suddenly relaxed and sat down. "Look, the fact is I haven't seen Johnny in about two years and, well, it's just a little rude on his part to offer accommodation in my flat without my either knowing you or anything about the situation." She felt that to be a fair expression of her discomfort, but when she saw Michael's disappointment she thought she might have been a little more courteous.

"Look, I'll get out of your hair if that's what you feel about it, but can I just tell you the reason for my being here? It might be a good idea for me to get a woman's point of view before I make any other stupid moves." Claire wanted to apologise for her directness but she let it go and merely replied "Sure, if you think I might be helpful..."

"You see, I was going out with this girl in Sydney, where I live. Catherine, that's her name. We'd been seeing each other for about six months and we were really getting on, you know, spending all our spare time together, having fun. I mean, it was just perfect. Anyway, about a month ago I had to go away for a couple of weeks. It was part of my coursework for university, and there was no way I could get out of it. I asked her to come with me, but she said she couldn't take the time off work. Well, to cut a long

story short, when I got back she said she didn't want to see me anymore, she had met someone else and was moving here with him. She left about a week later and, well, I've been ringing her and trying to make some sense out of the whole situation, but she won't speak to me. So, I've come down here to see her in person. I don't know what else to do, you know, this thing is really getting me down. I thought that maybe when she sees me, she'll feel more comfortable and might actually agree to talk things out."

He stopped and looked hopefully at Claire. "Do you think it's a good idea?" Claire had been watching his expressions. He was about twenty-two, she guessed, had a smooth, tanned face and sad blue eyes. A typical, inexperienced youth, with a typical, youthful love problem on his hands, she thought, and felt something of his despair. "Well," she started, not really knowing what she was going to say. "The thing is, if she's happy with this other guy and doesn't want to speak to you, it might mean that it's really finished. It is a possibility you might have to face. And coming down here to confront her is probably not such a good idea either, might be better to write her a letter, or something..."

"No, no, no," Michael interrupted shaking his head. "I don't think you understand. You see, we were really in love, we did everything together, we told each other everything, we trusted each other. You don't fall out of love with someone just like that," he snapped his fingers, "there must be some other reason, something I did which she misinterpreted. You see, I've been a little preoccupied with my studies, lately - I'm doing a PhD in Science - and maybe she was feeling a little neglected. Also, well, she's a bank clerk, and it might just be that she feels intellectually inferior, or something. What do you think?"

Claire was really thinking about the cold chicken and potato salad in her fridge. "Maybe you're right," she said, "but I guess you won't really know until she speaks to you. In the meantime, let's have a bite to eat, I'm starving." "So am I!" Michael said enthusiastically, and followed her into the kitchen where he watched her prepare two plates of cold food and pour out some wine.

After dinner Michael stretched out on the sofa and began to stare into space. He seemed dejected again, and Claire did not have the heart to turn him out. "Look," she said, beginning to feel tired, "you can stay the night, if you like. But you'll have to sleep on the sofa, I haven't got a spare room." Michael stood up and in another wave of enthusiasm pounced on her and squeezed her in his arms. "Thanks, Claire. It's really good of you, and thanks for listening to my ramblings. Look, I'll try and get this whole mess sorted out and get out of here by tomorrow.

"Oh, don't worry" Claire said yawning and suddenly feeling like a nice aunt handing out advice "just try and go easy on her, don't help to scare her with your sudden appearance."

The next morning Michael was still asleep when Claire went to work. She left him the spare key and a note on the table saying she would be back at seven that evening. Throughout the day she thought about the young man several times and about his predicament. She concluded she quite liked him but that he seemed rather naive about how cruel certain people could really be, and foresaw a rather sad ending to his story with the girl he seemed to love.

When she returned home she found the house empty but Michael's suitcase in the same spot he had left it the previous night. She had a long bath which was

interrupted by a phone call. It was her boyfriend, Tim, calling from New York. She was happy to hear from him but noticed a false note in his voice. "There anything wrong Tim?"

"Well," Tim hesitated. "I called about an hour ago and a strange man answered. At first I thought I'd got the wrong number but I asked for you anyway and he said you would be home late. Then he asked me who I was" - he emphasised the "I" - "and asked if I wanted to leave a message. I mean, who the hell is he, anyway?" Claire resented Tim's insinuations and possessive tone but explained the situation. "Oh, I didn't want to make a fuss" Tim said, suddenly nonchalant. "It just sounded strange, that's all. Anyway, the reason I was calling is that I'm leaving tonight and should be back some time tomorrow night, probably late. I'll give you a call the next morning, all right?"

When Claire put the phone down Michael walked in the door. He looked at her still wet body half wrapped in a towel and smiled. "Caught you at a bad time?" He was holding a bottle of champagne in one hand and a small bag of groceries in the other. He followed the direction of Claire's gaze and explained "I cashed a cheque I hadn't been able to cash yesterday and thought I'd treat you to some nice things, you've been so good to me." Then he went into the kitchen. Claire suddenly felt as if she were a student again, living in the relaxed atmosphere of a group house where nobody had a fixed role to play, or expectations of how you should act. She looked at the phone again on her way to the bathroom and felt that same twinge of annoyance at Tim's suspicious allusions. She shrugged, and decided to get a little drunk and have a good time as a symbolic gesture of self-assertion against Tim's attempts to enclose her.

She put on an old pair of ripped jeans, a loose white shirt and pulled her hair up in a loose bun. When she walked into the kitchen she found Michael preparing a salad and laying cheese and paté on a plate. "I thought of taking you out to dinner, but it's probably nicer to stay in and talk, don't you think?" Claire said she thought so too. Then Michael stopped what he was doing and started looking at her. "Wow, you look really lovely, this evening. You look so young!" Claire took the compliment as part of the general mood of festivity she had fallen into and smiled agreeably.

They sat by the fire place in the living room and got stuck into the food and champagne. "You haven't told me yet, what happened with Catherine today?" She had refrained from asking the question earlier, sure that if there had been any good news he would have told her immediately. "Oh, nothing much. I went over to the bank where she works and just turned up in front of the counter. She freaked, but I knew that if I'd called her beforehand she would have refused to see me. Anyway, she says she needs to think things over and doesn't want to talk to me until she's figured out what she wants to do. I'm pretty sure she still loves me, she just doesn't understand that I love her, as well. I think I'll go back tomorrow, just to show her I mean all the things I've been saying to her for the past few weeks. In any case, I feel a lot better about everything, now. So, let's be merry and forget our troubles for tonight." Claire raised her glass at the suggestion and realised they had run out of champagne. She got up laughing and tipsy and went to the kitchen to open a bottle of white wine.

When she got back Michael was lighting a fire. "I thought you might be getting cold" he said kneeling on the floor and striking a match. "Besides, it's cosier with a

fire." Claire poured wine for both of them and sat on a big cushion on the floor. When he had got the fire started Michael turned off the lights and sprawled out on the floor next to Claire. They watched the fire in silence for a while, then Michael sat up, as if his attention had suddenly been drawn to something. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, this strange guy called up from New York before. I told him you weren't here and he practically hung up on me." Claire, who was in that semi-drunk mood where most unpleasant thoughts seem to belong to a different world shrugged her shoulders and recounted in a comical, though rather unflattering way the conversation she had had with Tim earlier in the evening. "You're joking! What, he thought I was your lover, or something?" Claire nodded, laughing. "But I mean, do you love this guy?" Claire flinched at the directness of the question, mainly because she had never had to answer it before. "Well, I guess we get on pretty well, when he's here. He travels a lot for his work and we both lead our own lives... I suppose I'm fond of him, but he's not the great love of my life, or anything."

Some loud music from the flat next door suddenly pierced the silence. Claire drained her second glass of wine and got up to dance in front of her own reflection in the window. "You dance really well" Michael said admiringly, following her movements with his eyes. "This was my favourite song when I was about sixteen" Claire said laughing and half out of breath. "Come on, get up and dance!" Michael struggled up off the floor and joined Claire in front of the window. When the next song started, an old rock and roll number, Michael grabbed Claire's hands and started pushing and pulling her in all directions, picking her up and sliding her under his legs. When the song finished the two were exhausted. They collapsed onto the cushion on the floor and suddenly kissed.

Claire pushed Michael away gently and started laughing again. "Come on, I've got to get some sleep, or I'll be late for work again tomorrow." She got up smiling but noticed Michael getting that disappointed look of his she had noticed the previous night. "Look, Michael, you're in love with a girl, I'm involved with a man... You and I are friends, right? Go on, try and get some sleep." Michael got up slowly and finally smiled "Yeah, you're right. It's just that I've had such a good time with you tonight." Claire said she had had a good time too and went to bed.

The next morning she woke up and found a yellow rose next to her pillow. She took it as a sign of the friendship that had developed between her and Michael and smiled thinking back to the pleasant evening they had spent together. Then she realized she was already an hour late for work and bolted out of bed. When she left the house Michael had already gone out.

Some time after lunch Michael telephoned her office. She told him she had no time to speak, but he sounded terribly distressed. "Look, just for a minute, something terrible has happened." Claire suddenly wondered how Michael had discovered her work number but she merely said "Ok, but make it quick, Michael, I've got to finish a report for Monday and I'll have to stay back as it is." Michael's voice suddenly broke down in a series of sobs. "All right, all right" he said, almost angrily. Claire was sorry for her brusque tone and listened patiently. "Well, I went to see Catherine again this morning and told her I would be back to meet her for lunch, you know, just so we could talk privately. She told me not to go near her again or I would regret it, but I went, anyway. So, I turn up around twelve thirty and wait. After

about ten minutes she comes out with this tall, rough looking guy. Then I see her pointing at me and telling him something. Anyway, this guy walks over and without even a word just punches me in the stomach. It was a really strong punch and so unexpected that I just collapsed on the ground. Then he kicked me in the side and said that if I ever bothered Catherine again he'd come and find me with his gang of friends." Claire felt a surge of indignation towards Catherine, whom she had never even met, and quickly turned on her comforting voice "Are you hurt? Are you alright?" "Yes, I'm fine now, just a couple of bruises from the fall, mainly. But you've really got to help me, Claire, I don't know what to do anymore." Claire noticed the people who shared her office turning to look at her with what seemed to be annoyance. "Well what do you want me to do?" she whispered. "If you could just call Catherine and explain my point of view..." Claire interrupted "Quite honestly, Michael, I don't think Catherine's interested in your point of view." "No, I just want to be friends, now. I mean, I can see that she's pretty wound up in that guy, that monster... Well, I just don't want any hard feelings between us, that's all. I want her to know I forgive her and that I'll always be her friend if she needs me. See, I think I have been putting a lot of pressure on her and, well, I want to apologise." Claire found Michael's reaction to the whole affair rather touching and, feeling sorry for him promised she would call Catherine as soon as she got a chance.

But Claire forgot all about her promise until she got home and saw Michael's empty suitcase by the sofa. She ran some hot water for a bath, took out a slip of paper from her bag and dialled Catherine's number. A surprisingly mild voice answered the phone.

"Hello, could I speak to Catherine, please?"

"Speaking."

Claire had prepared herself for some confrontation but the girl's soft and almost frightened tone made her change tactic.

"Sorry to disturb you, but, well, I've been a little worried about Michael." There was a long pause.

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Well, yes I guess I am, though I only met him two days ago."

"In that case I advise you to get rid of him before it's too late" the girl said in a suddenly determined tone.

"Look, Catherine, I don't want to know what your feelings are."

"My feelings?" the girl interrupted. "Listen, I don't know who you are or what Michael has told you, but if you want the truth, I don't even know the guy. I mean, I meet him in a bar one night while I'm waiting for a girlfriend and we have a chat, you know, just a harmless little chat about some television program, or something. And the next thing you know he's hanging around me all the time and following me home from work, calling up in the middle of the night... He made my life unbearable, and now he's followed me down here, as well."

Claire took little notice of what the girl said and went on:

"But you did have some sort of relationship, didn't you? I think it's the way it all ended that upset Michael."

"Relationship? Look, I've told you, I hardly know the guy. We talked twice and somehow he got the idea that he owned me, and when I told him I had a boyfriend

he found out who he was and threatened to kill him if he didn't leave me alone. Can you believe it? I mean, the guy's a nut. You show him some kindness and he takes over your life!" Claire glanced over at Michael's suitcase and some of his clothes draped over the sofa. She also noticed the plates, glasses and empty bottles from the previous night had been cleared up and the fireplace cleaned. There was something about this girl she did not like, something about her winging voice which reeked of self-justification and an inability to deal with her problems alone.

"Still," Claire said in a rather harsh voice, "there was no need to have him bashed up by your tough boyfriend." At this the girl started laughing raucously. "Is that what he told you? Boy, he's really got you wrapped around his little finger, hasn't he? Listen lady, I don't care if you believe me or not, but what actually happened is that I walked out of the bank with one of the security guards because I knew Michael would be hanging around waiting for me. And there he was, of course, smiling. Except he stopped smiling when he saw the security guard, and just walked over and started punching into him and swearing his head off. So, the security guard wacked him one in self-defence. I mean, what was he supposed to do?"

Claire was beginning to feel tired. There was something in the girl's story which was beginning to ring true; on the other hand, she could not believe she had been such a bad judge of character. She thought back to the previous evening and how she had enjoyed Michael's flattering attention as well as his company. She felt foolish, suddenly, and resolved to get a straight story once Michael got back.

As she lay in the bath and thought over the episode she concluded neither story - Catherine's or Michael's - had been totally true or false. She assumed the truth was a mixture of the two, possibly exaggerated versions. She was beginning to relax and feel optimistic about the prospect of a long weekend when she heard Michael come in. "Hello!" he shouted from the door. "I'm in the bathroom, Michael." Presently Michael walked in with a big smile on his face. "That looks comfy," he said looking at her breasts floating above the water. "Want me to rub your back?"

Claire suddenly felt as if the water were a hot trap and she wanted to get out. She looked at Michael's large hands, at his earnest face and, trying to keep an even voice said "No, thanks, I want to get out." Seeing that Michael had no intention of leaving the bathroom, she asked him to pass her a towel. She got up slowly, quickly wrapping the towel around her body and Michael began to rub her back dry. "By the way," Michael said, "that guy, Tim, rang again. He said he was at the airport and wanted you to go and pick him up. He caught an earlier plane, or something." Claire turned around and looked at him. "And what did you tell him?" she held her breath as Michael replied "just that you were probably working late and that I would give you his message." She let her breath out and suddenly felt at ease again. She had let that girl, Catherine, get to her with her psychotic stories; she should never listen to strangers, she thought to herself.

She went into her bedroom and dressed. When she came out Michael was pouring champagne into two glasses. "Thought we should celebrate the end of the week and the long weekend to come" he said in the same celebratory tones he had used the previous night. "Well, you seem to have picked up since this afternoon," Claire said, and again thought of Catherine's words. "Look, I'm sorry I disturbed you at work and all that. I felt so upset and, well, unwanted. I went for a long walk after

I spoke to you and I've thought about a lot of things. I guess I had to see it with my own eyes - that Catherine was in love with someone else, I mean - to come to terms with it. Did you call her, by the way?" "Huh, huh" Claire nodded and waited, but there was nothing unusual in Michael's response. "Oh yeah, and what did she say?" "She just doesn't want to see you again, that's all." Michael shrugged and smiled "Nothing new about that, is there? Hey, listen, I've bought some pasta and things which I could cook up in a jiffy or, if you prefer, we could go out, I've still got some money left over."

Claire took a sip of her champagne and reached for the telephone receiver. "Thanks, Michael, but I'll probably be having dinner with Tim, if he's not too jet-lagged."

She was half-way through dialling Tim's number when Michael grabbed the receiver from her hand. "He's not there, if you're trying to call him." Claire let go of the receiver and looked up at him from her armchair. "What do you mean, where is he?" Michael was standing above her, fixing her with his pale blue eyes. "I don't know," he shrugged, "he just said not to bother with the message because he wouldn't be at home waiting for you." Claire could hear Catherine's words running through her head like a catchy tune you can't stop singing. "What do you mean he's not waiting for me. Michael, what did you say to him?" Michael's face suddenly took on an extremely hurt and offended expression. "What do you mean say to him? Claire, don't you trust me or something?" Claire wanted desperately to trust him, but there was something about his eyes, something she had mistaken for sadness which was now striking her as a look of derangement. "So, tell me what you said to him, then." She had managed to stand up and walk over to the window but she thought her voice was sounding slightly hysterical. "Claire, what on earth is wrong with you? Look, why don't you relax for a while and have a drink. I don't know what's wrong with this guy. He was probably annoyed to find me here again. Who knows, I mean, you said yourself he was a bit possessive." Claire relaxed again, and started laughing. Of course, that would have been Tim's reaction, that of taking some hard position out of pride. He was probably sitting at home right now, waiting for her to call and apologise - but apologise for what? she decided to let him wait it out, if that was the game he wanted to play. "I'm sorry, Michael. I guess I'm just overworked, or something." She laughed again, as Michael, whose face was now beaming, started walking towards the kitchen. "You will eat with me, then? I've bought some really nice things, and I'm a good cook, you'll see. You just sit there and listen to some music, while I go and get dinner ready."

He walked over to the stereo and started flicking through the records. A few minutes later a slow saxophone tune rose out of the speakers. It was Claire's favourite jazz record and she reclined on the sofa and took a sip of champagne. She looked at her watch - it was just after nine - and smiled to herself, thinking she would have a relaxed dinner with Michael and call Tim sometime around eleven, if he did not call beforehand. Yes, it would be nice to spend another evening with Michael, and she wondered how she could have let that silly girl Catherine influence her - after all, she had spent enough time with Michael to know that she could trust him, and she had never liked diffidence as a guiding force in human relations. She imagined Tim sitting by the telephone at home, and savoured the speech she would make, once they saw each other, about her right to choose her own friends and lifestyle. She felt that she

had learned a lesson about herself and the feeling was accompanied by a sensation of absolute freedom...

When she woke up a fire was burning in the fireplace. The kitchen light was on and she heard Michael bustling around. The next thing she noticed was that it was a quarter to eleven. She wondered why Tim had not called yet, then she looked over at the telephone. It was not in its usual place but lying on the floor and its cord had been ripped to shreds. She was just beginning to take stock of the situation when Michael walked into the room, wiping his hands on a towel.

"Oh, you're awake" he said with his usual shy smile. "Everything's been ready for ages but I didn't want to wake you. I've just been washing up and putting things away." Claire stared at him, waiting, unable to speak. "Are you ready to eat now?" Michael asked in a sweet, almost maternal voice. He disappeared in the kitchen again and came back with a large, steaming bowl.

"Spaghetti alla carbonara," he announced. "Oh, no, don't try and get up. Sit back and get comfortable." He sat next to Claire's legs on the sofa and began to twirl the fork around some spaghetti. As Claire closed her lips around the fork he held out for her she saw that the front door had been bolted and the chain put on. "Good?" Michael asked. He pretended not to notice the direction of Claire's gaze, but presently he said "just an extra precaution against Tim, in case he gets some strange ideas." He smiled again and handed the bowl to Claire. "Go on eating, I'm just getting some more champagne." He troddled off to the kitchen and at the door turned around with a big smile. "I'm so happy, Claire. You'll see, we'll be great together, you and I. I'll look after you." Claire nodded, then looked around the room as if she might find a solution to her problems there. She caught sight of the slip of paper with Catherine's number on it. It was lying on the floor, next to the telephone.