

# **CHRIST, MY EX, AND I**

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I'M DEEPLY FLAWED. Half of me craves harmony, the other half thrives on chaos. It's a cruel paradox: one side cannot bear the storm of conflict, while the other wilts in the stillness of solitude. Relationships, as I've learned, are the perfect petri dish for drama – much like the individual clashing with society, or the mortal soul squaring off with the universe; there are no clear paths to peace.

I finally thought I'd cracked it this time. By thirty-seven, one begins to lose hope. My ex-partner and I spent two and a half years of domesticity, side by side, sharing toothpaste and tragedies, dreaming of a life less complicated. But then, one day, it hit me like divine thunder – Peter Slingsby, why hast thou forsaken me? It wasn't a question for God. It was for me, and thus for God. I couldn't keep doing it – the bickering, the laughing, the wrestling with hope like it was some unruly pet.

The idea of being alone, with others who also want to be alone, appealed to me. No grand ideals of marriage; no shared vision of a better future. Alone, just men in cells, surviving, praying. Poor, but free. And yet, like a moth to a flame, part of me still yearns to hold someone else's happiness cupped in my hands. Why don't these opposing forces cancel each other out? Why must they rival for control of my soul?

This is not the sort of short tale one writes to dazzle readers with meaning or thrill them with adventure. No,

this is merely a half-hearted lament, a sort of confession, of how love can unravel one, even with a good-will. It's about the aching heart of a sinner, a saint, and all the rest of it.

I met her – my ex-partner, my would-be family – outside a Chinese restaurant in York. Red Chilli, it's called. She stood there, drumming her fingers on the closed doors, glaring at a sign that announced opening hours as if her sheer will could make the place unlock early. Impatient, determined, a little intimidating. I liked her instantly.

'They're usually open by now,' she said to no one in particular – or perhaps she meant me. Either way, she didn't bother turning to check, though I'd just arrived and stood a respectful few feet away. Plenty of room for her to whirl around and throw up her arms in indignation, which she did not.

'Do you come here often?' I asked, testing the waters.

'A lot,' she replied, still gazing at the locked door. 'Most days. It's the only good Chinese food here. Not much else worth eating.'

'So it's authentic, then?' I ventured, though I had my doubts.

She turned to face me properly, and a faint smile flickered beneath her mask. 'No,' she said firmly. 'Nowhere is authentic.'

She was tall and slim, with long black hair that framed her face like a curtain. Her eyes held a tiredness that betrayed her youth, placing her somewhere in her forties – or perhaps younger, if life had been unkind. She stood with a slight hunch, the posture of an artist who had spent long hours leant over a canvas.

‘I like the decorations here,’ I said, and gestured towards the painted walls and the clusters of golden lantern balloons bobbing on the ceiling.

‘They have one of my paintings,’ she said casually. ‘Not my best work, but my mum insisted I sell one to the owner.’

‘That’s amazing,’ I said, genuinely impressed. ‘I’d love to see it. Maybe you could point it out once we’re inside.’

She glanced through the glass door and spotted a waitress bustling about. Without hesitation, she rapped her knuckles against the glass.

‘I’m hungry,’ she said. ‘Starving.’

The waitress, a petite figure in a white dress, rushed over to unlock the door and ushered her to a table near the window – a table, I suspected, that was hers by long-standing claim. I considered calling after her, asking her name, but something in her demeanour stopped me. She wasn’t rude, but hunger had rendered her curt, on the edge of a temper. A woman of routine, I decided. Like me.

I chose a table not far from hers, a distance that struck the right balance between discreet observation and casual proximity. I ordered aubergines swimming in a sticky, oily sauce that was both delicious and unsettling, and a plate of vividly coloured rice flecked with egg. It wasn't a proper meal; I wasn't here to dine. I was killing time before checking into my hotel – a few days in York to scout out potential flats.

Occasionally, she'd glance out the window, lost in thought. I didn't want to stare, but I couldn't help stealing a glance now and then, fascinated by the quiet intensity of her presence. I noticed that she ate at an almost glacial pace. It was fascinating, but impractical; I couldn't exactly linger indefinitely in the restaurant pretending to enjoy my sticky aubergines. Reluctantly, I paid my bill and left, but my curiosity – or let's call it research – led me to a café across the street. From there, I had a perfect vantage point of Red Chilli's entrance.

Settling in with a laptop, I opened a document titled Principles of Content Design for HSBC and began editing. A dreadfully corporate contract, yes, and the kind of work that made me feel faintly unclean, but it paid well enough to keep my dream of moving to York alive. Guilt over selling out could be postponed until after I'd secured a flat with a view of the Minster.

An hour later, she emerged from the restaurant. She walked at the same leisurely pace she'd displayed earlier, seemingly unbothered by the icy February air. Was she a local enjoying a day off, or a wealthy tourist indulging in Yorkshire's peculiar charm? It seemed unlikely she was sightseeing – February wasn't exactly prime tourist season, and York's appeal, while undeniable, didn't quite warrant a five-hour round trip from London when the British Museum was right there.

I toyed with the idea of following her but quickly dismissed it as ludicrous. Stalking is unbecoming, even in the name of romance. If she was a true creature of habit, I reasoned, she'd likely return to Red Chilli within the next couple of days. If not, well, then my grand fantasy of her as a remarkable woman and potential soulmate would have to remain just that. This wasn't an existential crisis; such fleeting infatuations are an inevitable part of human nature. Even those of us who dream of spiritual ascension and angelic choirs must reckon with the more earthly distractions of desire.

I returned to my hotel, where I spent the evening laughing at *The Pickwick Papers* on my Kindle. Dickens has a way of putting everything into perspective.

The following day, buoyed by a promising flat viewing, I strolled back to the street with the Chinese restaurant. Peering through the window, I found no sign of her.

Undeterred, I bought a sandwich, took it to the riverside, and soaked in the tranquillity of the Ouse.

And then I saw her. She was crossing the road on the opposite bank, dressed sharply, her earlier languor replaced by purpose. She was clearly on her way back from work, which meant she wasn't some idle tourist after all. The revelation jolted me upright like a marionette with its strings suddenly yanked. A moment of panic followed, but I quickly composed myself and watched as she disappeared into the distance, heading for a park where a bus stop waited at the far end.

Then doubt crept in. Was it even her? Plenty of Asian women had long black hair and carried themselves with a certain elegance. Perhaps my imagination had latched onto the nearest approximation of her form, weaving a narrative out of coincidence. I stayed seated, resolving to let fate – or whatever cosmic force governs these things – take its course.

I must confess to a touch of misdirection in my tale: we didn't meet again for another 5 years. By then, I was well settled in York, and it happened at a most unlikely place – a church gathering at Christmas, where volunteers were feeding the poor. There she was, ladling soup into a bowl with a wide smile, handing it to a woman wrapped in a threadbare coat.

‘I recognise you,’ I said, stepping forward, perhaps too eagerly. ‘From Red Chili.’

I didn’t expect her to recognise me, but by God she did. Her eyes lit up with recognition, then amusement. ‘Oh, yes. I used to go there a lot,’ she said. ‘That was during a rather... Difficult time.’

‘Difficult?’ I was surprised. ‘You seemed so upbeat back then. Perhaps I misjudged.’

She laughed lightly. ‘Appearances, you know. I was depressed, and there was nowhere good for Chinese food in York.’

‘Still true?’

‘Still true,’ she affirmed with a grin.

She was remarkably open with me, as if those 5 years had not passed between us, and how now I wish they hadn’t. Then I asked her name. Surely, I wouldn’t forget to this time.

‘It’s Flora,’ she said. ‘I chose it because I love plants.’

‘After the Roman goddess, I presume?’

‘Really?’ She blinked.

‘Yes.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ she said, then resumed serving soup.

I was meant to be pouring drinks, but I couldn’t resist lingering for just a moment longer. ‘Do you help out here often?’

‘No, only at Christmas,’ she said. ‘I’d like to do more, but work keeps me busy.’

‘Any time is worthwhile,’ I said.

I sensed my window of opportunity narrowing, and foolishly sealed it shut by wishing her a Merry Christmas.

‘Merry Christmas,’ she replied. But there was a glint in her eye – a subtle, promising notion that suggested she wasn’t entirely indifferent.

Later, when the volunteering shift ended, we caught up again. I was meant to head to my father’s parents for dinner, but that felt less urgent; I waited for her to part our ways.

‘I have to go,’ she said, not without a hint of reluctance. ‘It was nice meeting you.’

‘How can I contact you again?’ I asked, leaving nothing to chance this time.

She hesitated for a moment, then pulled out her phone. ‘Give me your number,’ she said. ‘I’ll text you.’

And so, the power dynamic shifted to her court. It was an act of faith on my part to believe she would actually reach out – but reach out she did, weeks later, well into the new year.

We began meeting weekly, and over the next six months, our relationship grew, though Flora took things slowly. She had been through a painful breakup years earlier, one that left her feeling abandoned at what she believed was her last

chance to have children. This, she admitted, had been a heavy burden to reconcile. But with time, she realised she never truly desired motherhood, and this revelation suited me just fine.

At forty, I already felt like I was at sixty, so inclined towards the quiet comforts of routine and reflection. The idea of entertaining children for hours on end had never fit my vision of a fulfilled life. Flora and I shared a similar sensibility, and though we occasionally bickered – usually over date plans – it was never acrimonious. If anything, it showed her independence and firm opinions, qualities I admired.

To my surprise, I didn't mind deferring to her lead. This, I realised, was personal growth: the quiet, understated kind that comes not from grand gestures, but from simply being in a devoted relationship.

We lived together in her modest terraced house for a time, but it quickly became clear she had aspirations for more space, and truthfully, so did I. After some deliberation, we decided to take the plunge and purchase a detached house on the outskirts. A joint endeavour, a shared mortgage, and the sale of my flat – a monumental commitment for two individuals who both harboured a gnawing fear of permanence. We told ourselves it was a logical progression. Surely, we weren't so different. Not

adversaries, certainly not. This new house would be a sanctuary, not a minefield of differing preferences.

On paper, we were aligned: politically moderate, morally agreeable on the big issues – euthanasia, abortion, and so on. We fancied ourselves parliamentary soulmates, voting in harmonious heaven. Life was smooth, at least at first. Two years passed. The house grew to feel like home. But like any couple sharing a roof, we bickered more, tested each other's patience. Dependence on each other brought friction, and soon we were playing the well-rehearsed roles of husband and wife, complete with all the minor grievances that simmered beneath our otherwise stable façade.

Yet, still, something within me began to shift – a restlessness that refused to be reasoned with. It wasn't so much dissatisfaction with her as it was an internal unease, a mounting pressure I couldn't quite define until one day, I could.

It was a cold spring morning, crisp but carrying the promise of new beginnings. I woke with a weight on my chest, the remnants of a dream I could not shake. In the dream, I had left Flora. And as the morning light streamed through the curtains, the dream hardened into conviction. For months, our minor disagreements – what belonged where, how clean things ought to be – had begun to feel symptomatic of something larger. We were speaking

different dialects of home, and though the differences were trivial, they began to feel insurmountable.

I made her breakfast tea and brought it to her bedside. She stirred, thanked me groggily, and launched into a rambling account of her dream – some fantastical nonsense about flying or winning the lottery. It was her usual morning whimsy, but she paused, tilting her head as she noticed my silence.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ I lied.

Her eyebrows raised, unconvinced. ‘You’ve lied to me,’ she said, sitting up.

I sighed. ‘I’ve been doubting again.’

She leaned back, the air between us loaded with her exhale. ‘Doubting what, exactly?’

‘Us.’

The word hung there, sounded sharper than I’d have liked or intended it to.

Her voice hardened. ‘You’ve always had doubts. I knew that from the start—it’s why I didn’t want to be with you at first.’

‘But we committed,’ I said.

‘And now you’re uncommitting?’ she snapped. ‘Is this about the house? Or me? What is it you’re doubting so badly?’

I didn't know how to say it, not in a way that wouldn't sound absurd. It wasn't the house. It wasn't her. It was me – or rather, it was my relationship with something else: God.

'I want to be closer to God,' I said finally. 'To spend more time in prayer, in thought, with Jesus – not in distraction.'

She stared at me, her lips pursed in disbelief, her hands pressing down into the duvet. 'We're good together. You know that.'

'I think you're right,' I said softly. 'But I'm not right for me.'

She laughed bitterly, but sadly. 'I told you,' she said.

'Told me what?'

'That you're too conflicted. You're not right for anybody.'

'Maybe you're right,' I said.

She welled up in anger. 'But I thought you'd have it figured out by now!' She shook off her temper, as if stretching it out. 'You need some time to think before you make this decision properly.'

And with that, she got herself out of bed and left the room.

For the next week, I lingered in a fog of conviction, an odd certainty that relationships were not my path. There was no grand catalyst. Just a quiet decision, resolute and unadorned: so, I left her, non-climactically.

What had kept me in the relationship was love – an earnest, uncomplicated desire to care for someone, to share a life. But in the end, I realised love alone wasn't enough. I needed to share my life not with a partner, but with God. It had taken me forty years to arrive at this epiphany, and I had no logical roadmap for how I got there. No visions, no celestial choir, no wounds of Christ to touch. Just a pull, deep and undeniable, like a mystical tide that refuses to stay out, or in.

Now I live within a Benedictine monastery, sharing cloistered days with nine other monks. It's a quiet life, defined by simplicity, prayer, and a profound sense of purpose. My ex-partner occasionally visits: Flora, that is. She says she likes the serenity of the grounds, the stillness of the church where we sometimes pray together. She hasn't found another partner, as it turns out, and not for her lack of trying, but because, as she says, 'Most people are just too difficult to live with. Perhaps I too prefer God.'

We laugh at that, though there's a truth in it neither of us denies.

Of course, my restless nature hasn't entirely gone away. The part of me that craves conflict still stirs. There are days when doubt creeps in, stubborn and insistent, even as I remain wed – vows of poverty and chastity – to Christ Himself. But doubt is part of the human condition, isn't it? We live in a world spinning with chaos, and it is through

that chaos we find opportunities for redemption. The horrors of the world, while overwhelming, are also the seeds of transformation – chances to confront our sins, to step out of their shadow, and into the light of Jesus Christ.

And so, I lean into the imperfections, the questions, the disquiet. By grace, these struggles are no longer burdens but lessons.