Out of Hours

Saul Miller

Lifestyle advice

Geoff lumbers in like a goods train.

He is grinding through the gears wheezily by the time he shunts into position, taking the chair like it is buffers. Still, the recoil holds him.

He looks me straight in the eye. 'The gout's better, at any rate. Since I gave up on your cheap pills.'

I expected something like this. 'I make mistakes, yes,' I mumble, quoting Nixon in my embarrassment. 'But for personal gain, never!'

'It is, indeed, hard for the strong to be just to the weak!' counters Geoff with a dose of de Valera. 'You still never should have given me that stuff.'

'I warned you that you will have pain,' I point out, weakly misquoting Kinnock. 'It was in the formulary, keeping costs down, helping meet targets.'

He clearly enjoys my discomfort yet bears no malice. 'Ah, at least this diabetes stopped me from feeling so much of the pain. Anyway, suffering breeds character ...'

'I know,' I interrupt, frowning, surprised to hear him introduce Jesse Jackson. 'Character breeds faith. I didn't think you were a believer.'

He strokes back his dreadlocks. 'Not that sort,' he admits with a wry grin.

This is my moment to seize the high moral ground. It must be at least a year since I last Gave Lifestyle Advice.

'We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier,' I start off, trying to be optimistic. 'Ask not what your country can do for you.'

He sighs. He saw this coming. 'Whatever the country,' Geoff answers, 'freedom of thought and expression are universal human rights. I don't know if Pamuk thought eating cake was part of this, but I do.'

I grimace and resort to Rudd: 'As of today, the time for denial, the time for delay, has at last come to an end.' I venture. 'Eat less, do more!'

He shrugs. 'But I'm not in denial. Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice ... I like wallowing with cake!'

'The basic problem confronting the world today,' I tell him, wilfully implying the opposite of what Eleanor Roosevelt intended, 'is the preservation of human

freedom. We need cake licensing. Or, at least, minimum pricing for all tiffin.'

He nods, acknowledging these ideas but knowing they will never happen. 'Our policies only succeed when the realism is as clear as the idealism.'

A chill silence falls, as though Blair himself is near. I glance at the computer, fingering the keyboard, wondering whether I have yet done enough.

He sees me and coughs.

I blush: caught breaking eye contact to sneak a look at the screen! He leans forward, tattooed arm on the desk. I feel like a mere guards' van.

'I'm only fat and multi-morbid' he asserts sternly, 'because you never Gave Lifestyle Advice when I was a kite-surfing, snowboarding, rugby-playing tyro. You should have stopped me doing all those extreme sports. I wouldn't have broken my back then.'

I look for a quiet siding but there is none. Desperate, I offer a bit of cheesy Gorbachev: 'Freedom of choice is a universal principle to which there should be no exceptions.'

His face softens, kindly. 'Well then, that means you can prescribe me those more expensive pills after all. You know: the ones that won't trigger gout.'

My guards' van splinters. Forlornly, I write the prescription.

'This is your victory!' I concede, quoting Obama to his slowly retreating form.

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