

## Avarice

By Lorraine Voss

'Oh Avril, 'this' is unforgivable!' Robert muttered to himself.

He tossed the manuscript onto the kitchen table, weighted it down with a tepid teapot and wandered out into the garden to contemplate an acceptable strategy for the delivery of his verdict.

He briefly considered deliberate destruction: An 'accidental' soaking in the bathtub or a 'reckless toss' too close to the Aga but clearer thinking convinced him of the futility of either action. Avril was not the type to leave things to chance. There would be several copies; she would have backed it backed up in triplicate at the very least. He sighed, there was no alternative; he was just going to have to tell her straight. Explain to her that the story, although beautifully written, was completely unsuitable for publication. The fact that she'd changed a few names; set the whole thing in some remote, fictional village and backdated it by thirty years wasn't going to fool anyone. No, the way he saw it 'this story' had the potential power to ruin the very public life of its ill disguised protagonist and seriously complicate the slightly more ordinary, but equally important lives of his closest associates.

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It was just gone half past nine when Avril arrived home from her writer's group meeting. Robert, well rehearsed, and ready to deliver his bomb-shell sat in the carvers chair at the business end of the heavy pine dining table. Stock still, shoulders hunched, head nestling in his hands, he looked tired.

'Hello Dearie, you look shattered. Busy day?' Avril enquired in her usual chirpy tone..

'Something like that' Robert replied. 'I've been reading your manuscript.'

'That's brilliant! Thanks Rob, I didn't think you'd have time, well at least not until after the weekend. What do you think of it? Does it seem a little far-fetched? The trouble with writing the truth is it often comes across like overly exaggerated fiction. Do you think the reader will find it believable? 'Should I tone it down perhaps?

'If you pause for a second, take some time to breathe and allow me to speak I'll tell you. I'm pretty sure you're not going to like it though so you'd better pour us a couple of large whiskies and pull up a

chair.'

'Oh dear, it sounds like I'm in for some fairly harsh critique.'

Not critique exactly. In fact the writing, judged purely as an exercise in contemporary literature, is very good. The punctuation is text-book; the story is compelling and the characters have a convincing degree of versatility and depth. The only real problem you've got is that you can't go public with it. Not toned down; not under a nom de plume; not in the guise of a fictional account; not today and not at any point during my lifetime. In fact if you make any attempt to get this perfect bound, I'll sue.

Avril swallowed the single malt down in one gulp and let out a dismissive laugh.

Rob, in a gesture that endorsed the importance of the statement that was to follow, peered over the top of his steel framed specs, paused for effect and said:

'Avril, I am deadly serious.' If you persist with your attempts to publish this you will be leaving me with no option. I will seek legal advice.

'Bloody hell Rob, that's a bit extreme isn't it?'

'Not as extreme as placing the quest for fame and fortune above the virtues of love, friendship and respect' Robert replied, and on that final note he stood up, shook his head and left the room. The kitchen door clicked slowly and deliberately shut behind him, a solid indication that all verbal communication on the subject had come to an absolute end.

Avril listened as Rob climbed the uncarpeted wooden staircase, even his footsteps sounded tired. She poured another Islay Malt. If she'd needed an excuse it would have been that the otherwise negligible chance of getting a moment's sleep warranted the extra measure. She sat quietly for twenty minutes, sipped the whiskey, mulled over the conversation and contemplated the 'what now.'

At 10.35pm Avril liberated her manuscript from beneath the pot of stone cold oolong and retired to 'joint imposed banishment' and the uninviting, starch pressed sheets of the single bedded box room.

After a night of surprisingly sound sleep Avril got up; followed her usual ablution routine; dressed; squared the bed and finally padded barefoot down the polished cedar staircase. As expected the kitchen was empty, Rob's recently rinsed coffee cup was balanced precariously on a potential avalanche that occupied the draining board and, held captive by the this morning's lukewarm tea pot, dead centre of the pine table was his daily note.

Instead of the usual: A rough agenda of the day's dealings; an ETA for dinner and three decidedly afterthought kisses, this note simply said:

Sorry Av, couldn't face further discussion. Packed a small bag and gone to stay with Jon and Sarah for a couple of days. Cowardly I know but I need the thinking space.

Will email later, Love Rob

xxx

'Chicken!' Avril said out loud. She bloody knew this would happen. 'This' always happened whenever there was the slightest flicker of dissension on the home-front. Rob didn't do 'disagreement.' He either did: 'Lalala – not listening' or else he went to ground, sulked and stayed there until Avril bent to his way of thinking. 'Well not this time!' she proclaimed in a believably defiant tone. 'This time he can bloody well stew!' Besides, it was too late to consider his ridiculous demands even if she'd had a mind to. The manuscript had been couriered to the agent seven weeks ago.

Later when Rob emailed, Avril ignored him.

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Lloyd Christian (Literary Agent and occasional Eisteddfod Adjudicator) had just finished reading Avril's novel and could hardly contain his excitement. He picked up the phone, carefully dialed the author's mobile number and waited...

'Hello, Avril Bliss speaking, who's calling please?' Avril inquired in her very best telephone voice. The mobile's screen announced the name of the caller but Avril always asked anyway. It's all about maintaining standards and exercising good old fashion manners she would assert when quizzed. In reality it had far more to do with the fact that she could never read the name on the display because she could hardly ever remember where she'd last put her spectacles.

The voice on the phone announced its identity as: 'Literary agent and old friend Lloyd' then swiftly declared its intent to arrange a business lunch at The Carlton Riverside for the following day. Avril put Lloyd on imaginary hold while she checked her imaginary diary, then, waited for what she imagined to be a 'believable amount of time' before returning to the call and declaring her availability. Lloyd thanked Avril, said he was very much looking forward to speaking with her at lunch, wished her a 'nice day' and rang off.

Avril placed her mobile on the worktop, bit her bottom lip, pinched her earlobes and shouted 'WooSa!' A strange stress busting technique she'd adopted up from some American blockbuster cop film. She followed the outburst with a few moments of deep breathing, a cup of Lady Grey and a celebratory

hobnob before booting up the laptop and composing a 'status update' email to Rob:

Rob,

My apologies for not replying to your email this morning; I had my reasons. Firstly: I thought it would probably be a good idea to allow you some time to reflect upon your ridiculous demands and secondly: The situation has altered since yesterday and I hadn't decided whether or not I wanted to tell you yet.

After some serious thought however, I've decided it's only fair to inform you that Lloyd Christian rang this morning to arrange a meeting with regard to 'the manuscript.' I am due to discuss it with him tomorrow lunchtime and feel sure he is about to offer a lucrative publishing deal.

I hope you appreciate how very torn I am between loyalty and success. I cannot help but wonder how the cards would be played were our roles in this dilemma reversed.

I'll update you as soon as I know more.

L ...

Avril xxx

Avril signed out; initiated shutdown and snapped the laptop shut.

'OK! What to wear?' she said out loud gathering an armful of garments from the fresh laundry pile near the kitchen door and heading for the stairs. After unintentionally depositing a random trail of odd stockings and assorted smalls on the way she entered the master bedroom, threw the remaining bundle onto the bed then opened the wardrobe door and selected six or seven additional items to add to the pile.

'Bloody nightmare!' she muttered, wriggling out of her Wranglers and into the first of the shortlisted outfits. In Avril's version of an ideal world the interior of her wardrobe would resemble Jeff Goldblum's in the Fly. Seven identical, practical sets of clothing, suitable for all occasions would make life so much easier. She sighed; clambered into the first ensemble; checked her image in the full length mirror and thought: 'Sod it! That'll do.' The snap decision made her feel good. It made her feel like she was in control. It made her think that maybe she should apply the same tactics to the Rob problem. Stop pandering to his ridiculous demands

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'Hello Avril, you look fantastic!' Lloyd exclaimed, rising from his seat to greet her as she entered the

dining room of the Carlton.

'Thanks Lloyd, you're such a darling.' Avril replied, taking the seat opposite and reaching for the menu. 'I take it that this meeting indicates your approval of my latest literary offering.'

'It certainly does!' It'll need some minor editing. There are a few brand name issues and couple of places where it sails a little too close to lawsuit land but it's all easily fixable. Once those issues have been addressed, I think it's got 'best seller' written all over it. I've composed a written summary of our offer with regard to the publishing and worldwide distribution. It's very a good deal Avril, I'm confident that you'll not find a better one elsewhere.

Lloyd passed the comb bound document across the table and smiled.

Avril's next email said:

Rob, you need come home, right now. You're not going to believe this!

A xxx

At 4.55 pm that afternoon Avril sat in the carvers chair at the business end of the heavy pine kitchen table. Sat leaning forward with her elbows on the table and her hands clasped, she looked confident and well prepared for battle. Rob arrived at 4.58

'I you'd better pour us a couple of large whiskies and pull up a chair.' Avril announced before Rob had even fully entered the room.

For God's sake Avril, you know I don't do dramas. I've already made my position clear and I can't think of anything you might say that'd change the situation. I don't even know why I came.

Avril said nothing. She slid Lloyd's proposal across the table toward Rob and with a nod of her head and a gestured look, indicated that he should definitely read the offer.

Rob snatched up the document and began reading. Avril watched the expression on his face change from anger, to surprise, to disbelief and shock!

After several minutes and a re-read to be sure Rob looked up and said:

'OK, I'm convinced, you'd be crazy not to! And if this means I lose my job and the 'gutter press' take me to pieces at least you'll be in a position to keep me in the style to which I would like to become accustomed.' Shame about Jon and Sara though, if this does all get out I mean.

'I know, I feel terrible but I think we have to put 'us' first.' Avril stressed!

'Avril, this amounts to sheer greed!' We should probably be ashamed.

Yes Rob, I know ...

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