

PETER THE GREAT



A SHORT STORY BY

KJ HUTCHINGS

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‘Right, where were we?’ said the professor, having just finished telling the class about the time an old house mate vomited on their landlady’s cat during a dinner party.

Slowly the snuffling laughter began to die down and the students once again turned their attention to their notebooks. The professor removed his glasses for a moment. ‘Ah yes. *Empire*. The concept of empire is allusive, as we now know. The Roman Empire, for example, is viewed as an enduring empire, the embodiment of the human need for stability...’

Nicola bit on the tip of her pencil, in-between writing notes, surveying the neat teeth marks left behind.

‘In contrast, the British Empire existed for a comparatively short time span and its precarious power was constantly under threat...’

The professor’s voice smoothed over her like a languid warm hand. She bit down on her pencil again, harder this time.

A pile of books and notes were stacked on his desk, and several bulging and battered files had “Dr Peter Buchanan” thickly inked upon them. Nicola watched his animated hands, the light hairs curling over his wrists, his finger tipped with spade-like nails. She tenderly noted one of his fingernails was bruised black. His hair and moustache, which she imagined were once flame red, were now faded and greying. He wore a yellow shirt, a stylish ecru sweater made from silk and cotton, which protruded slightly over his stomach, and a pair of chinos. Nicola already knew he was wearing a pair of sneakers on his feet, the laces loosely tied. When he spoke, his eyes sometimes closed and fluttered behind his round glasses.

‘Have you been subjected to Gerry’s lecture on the Boer War yet?’ Peter Buchanan scanned the room with his precise blue eyes before blinking heavily. Everyone shook his or her heads.

He was referring to handsome Gerry Parnell, who delivered his lectures like an actor, expertly regulating his deep voice from the podium, his arrogant gaze piercing the length and breadth of the lecture theatre. Peter Buchanan had previously told them that he had known Gerry Parnell for decades, ever since they were contemporaries at Cambridge. 'I was a more *mature* student, shall we say,' said Peter Buchanan by way of explaining the discrepancy in their ages. 'Especially in those days.' Gerry Parnell was reputed to seduce female undergraduates, with varying success.

'Gerry Parnell,' said Peter Buchanan, sitting back in his chair, 'is the only person I know who smiles when he eats. It's most off putting, especially when it's scrambled eggs first thing in the morning in the canteen. He's been known to clear whole tables with one mouthful.'

His face remained deadpan while the whole room jogged and jolted with mirth. Delighted, Nicola joined in with the laughter and giggles, which Professor Buchanan eventually wafted down with his palms until it had subsided.

She shyly glanced at him as he rested his chin on his fist, his wristwatch glinting in the light. The extent of his full life showed on his face: one crease for his first wife, another for his third, the second wife wrinkling the skin between his bristly eyebrows.

To her annoyance, when she looked across the room, she saw Adam was smiling lopsidedly at her. He raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes and Nicola forced her mouth to tilt up in response to him. Everyone was overly nice to Adam, but none of the students could yet be classed as his friends. Cerebral palsy made his body rock ungainly along the corridors, his legs and arms bowing inwards, and although he didn't sound very slurred when he spoke, the noticeable asymmetry of his features and body made people initially discard what he was saying as they tried to not study him with embarrassment and pity.

On the first day of university, not knowing a soul, Nicola had seen him eating alone at the end of one of the long tables in the canteen, doggedly scooping up his food with a spoon, and had placed her tray opposite his. It was only when he began to happily chat to her that she realised the full extent of his disability, but by then it was too late, he had continued to single her out and she could not bring herself to avoid him as much as she would like. The way he moved often reminded her of her father, and those were memories she could do without.

Nicola returned her attention to Peter Buchanan. He caught her eye and suddenly it appeared, for those few seconds, that everything in the room had stopped, frozen. She allowed herself to look back at him, becoming flushed again under her clothes, and was torn when he looked away first, turning his attention to the other side of the room.

‘Well, I must say you have been one of the best classes I’ve had in a long time. Far better than the French students who tried to bribe me over exam papers,’ he said, smiling wryly. They had heard many of his anecdotes about his experiences as a teacher in Paris, living in the attic room of a boarding house owned by a ferocious landlord who refused, on Gallic principle, to clean the top floor toilet. ‘My second wife was so English about it,’ Peter Buchanan had told them, twitching his moustache. ‘Her bowels locked for a week.’

All his wives had been called Katherine and all had left him. ‘The first time was the biggest shock, naturally,’ Peter Buchanan had said. ‘When it happened the third time I barely batted an eyelid.’ His first wife left him on a Monday afternoon after taking all the furniture from the house. She left a note pinned to the doorframe that read: “Living with you is like watching two television sets at the same time.”

‘I would never have left,’ thought Nicola. To her, his life experience stood out in sharp relief in comparison to the brevity and barrenness of her own. He had been everywhere and done everything, travelled to places she did not know existed. No, she would never have left. She would have gone to Paris with him and never complained.

‘I think that’s it for today folks.’ Peter Buchanan began to wipe the blackboard clean. It had been crammed with chalked words slanting this way and that, an eclectic mixture of sizes and shapes that sometimes made her eyes dance when she looked at them for too long. On his first day he had apologised for what he referred to as his appalling handwriting, explaining that as a child in London he had learnt to read and write in a bomb shelter during the Blitz and the fear of a direct hit was not conducive to a steady hand. ‘Please read chapters four, five and six in preparation for my marvellous tutorial on Monday.’

Nicola decided she would read chapters seven and eight too, just to be extra prepared. She looked at his rapidly disappearing scribbles on the blackboard. Her mother had taught her the alphabet and how to write her name at the age of four. Nicola could still recall the effort afforded in forming the letters, one by one. Although conducted in an environment far less fraught than Peter Buchanan’s early education had been, her mother had been an impatient teacher, her mind often preoccupied with a list of chores. It was always her father she had turned to for storytelling.

She took her time packing away her books, hoping that Adam would leave before her. She wanted to tell Peter Buchanan how much she enjoyed his classes. She wished that Adam would go away and not hang around like an ungainly lump.

‘Would you like to join us in the bar this evening, Dr Buchanan?’ Adam suddenly asked. Nicola looked up sharply. It was the first time she had heard anyone suggest such a thing to a tutor. Adam continued to grin rather disarmingly. ‘We might even club together and buy you a drink, seeing as it’s Friday.’

She suddenly felt a shiver of embarrassment and contempt as she looked at him leaning against the desk, grinning like an idiot. Someone like Peter Buchanan would surely be far too busy to sit in the grubby student union bar. He would rather be in his study writing history books or reading Ernest Hemingway whilst listening to some fabulous piece of classical music or jazz and drinking cognac or wine. She quickly stuffed the rest of her notes into her bag.

Peter Buchanan briefly looked at her and Adam. 'Ah, the generosity of students. I would be delighted to join you – if I can. I have to go into town to meet a friend at around seven and perhaps I can persuade them to come along and meet my top students.' He turned and continued to wipe the board.

Beaming to herself, Nicola hurried across the campus. She heard someone call her name and turned round to see Adam lurching after her. She waited for him to catch up and flicked him a smile.

'You'll come tonight won't you, Nicola?' he asked, walking beside her in his ungainly manner.

'Yeah. Probably,' she replied nonchalantly, slowing her pace, all the time wishing he would go away.

'He's great isn't he?' Adam enthused. 'Professor Buchanan, I mean. Peter the Great, that's what we should call him. Peter the Great!'

Nicola felt her cheeks tighten as she tried to smile.

'I wonder if all his students have heard the same stories we have? Have you noticed that all his stories are about the past? He never tells us anything about the present.'

'Well, he's a history professor, isn't he,' said Nicola dryly.

Adam laughed. 'You know what I mean. We don't know much about his life *now* do we? Do you believe everything he's told us?'

'I don't know,' Nicola said, truthfully.

She had never thought to question his tales, choosing only to be amused and enthralled by them. Once she had grown accustomed to his irreverent style of teaching Nicola had found Peter Buchanan to be as distracting as he was entertaining and soon discovered that her thoughts of him infiltrated her time outside of class with surprising frequency.

She barely listened as Adam gabbled on. He is pretty immature, she thought, glimpsing at him as he chattered, but completely harmless. She softened a little, feeling mean for finding him so trying. In that respect he reminded her of an old boyfriend from the sixth form college. It amazed her now that she had endured those meaningless, short-lived entanglements.

‘How old do you think he is?’ Adam mused.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Nicola.

‘He must be well into his fifties,’ he pondered. ‘He’s quite old – older than my dad. How old is your dad?’

Nicola padded lightly down some steps, leaving him to trail after her. ‘I don’t have a dad anymore,’ she said over her shoulder, gratified by the way his mouth gaped open, for once lost for words.

*

After dinner in the canteen, Nicola returned to her room in the halls of residence to get ready for the bar. She found a message pushed under her door that her mother had rung earlier on the communal telephone at the end of the corridor and would Nicola please call as soon as possible. Sighing, Nicola placed the note on her desk and sat heavily on her bed.

The bareness of her small room still disheartened her, with its suspicious looking stains on the thin carpet and upholstery, the pin holes in the walls, the scuffed furniture and the hard narrow bed. Other students had televisions and stereos and even video recorders in their rooms, but as Nicola had to lug her belongings on the train rather than have the luxury of being given a lift, her room had the appearance of a sparse and unsettled occupancy.

Sometimes she still felt she was floundering at the university. Faces swirled and swam before her in the corridors and in the lecture theatres and the regimented life of tutorials and queuing for meals disturbed her personal sense of order and privacy. She had quickly discovered that the other students ate any food she left in the communal kitchen, even when she wrote her name on the packaging. It was best to leave her cartons of milk and yoghurt on the window ledge outside her room.

The first month or so had been the worst. Whenever she rang home she could hear her mother’s sniffles of barely restrained tears. Her mother always claimed things were fine, but Nicola knew what lingered under the usual undercurrent in her mother’s voice and felt the fear, neediness and guilt curl around her as she stood dejectedly in the phone booth, coins cupped in her hand. Inevitably her mother spoke about her father and Nicola would lean against the wall, listening in silence to what her mother told her.

‘When are you coming home?’ her mother always asked. ‘You haven’t visited for ages.’

‘Soon,’ said Nicola. ‘I promise. I’ve been busy with essays and stuff.’

After each call she would return to her room to lie on her single bed, listening to the comings and goings of the other students, and stare at the pitted ceiling in a glaze of misery. Leaving home had been something she had looked forward to for so long, planning it in her childhood bedroom and anticipating it as freedom and severance from the past, but instead she found that the binding cord of obligation had barely loosened since her departure.

She plucked her mug and coffee jar off the shelf above her desk and retrieved the carton of milk from the outside windowsill. The kitchen was empty, still bearing the sticky traces of someone’s cooking. Nicola made her coffee and returned to her room, wondering what she should wear. She laid several clothes out on her bed, trying to decide what was most suitable. Whilst deliberating, she freshened up her make-up.

What sort of woman did Peter Buchanan prefer? Nicola pondered this as she decided upon a red poplin shirt to wear with her jeans. Had his wives been dark or fair, slim or curvaceous? His stories about them had been plentiful, but he had never described what they looked like just as he had never mentioned a current woman in his life.

Intelligence and vivacity would have to be a necessary trait, Nicola was certain, and in this respect she felt lacking. No amount of A grades or exam success from school and college had been enough to wholly convince her that these results were a reassuring roll call of achievements, rather than a series of flukes. Studying had become a solace, a diversion, and a form of protection as she endeavoured at home to construct a barrier of paper walls with her books. She had quietly and methodically tried to block out home life with exams and tests, books and essays, as if attaining top grades could, in some way, replace what was irretrievable. As she dressed, Nicola was sure that if Peter Buchanan spoke to her tonight, she would clam up completely from shyness and longing or else blurt out something so ridiculously mundane and banal that facing him in class on Monday would be horrendous.

Her eyes kept skimming to the small alarm clock by her bed. She did not want to arrive too early as this implied eagerness and a lack of friends. Peter Buchanan had once commented that the first guests to arrive at a party were usually the duller. And he would know, reasoned Nicola as she buttoned her shirt. Peter Buchanan had hosted a great many parties. She pictured him holding court in his tastefully decorated dining room, all the boring guests hanging on his every word. There would be bookcases filled, floor to ceiling, with the kind of books a cultured, well-travelled, fiercely intelligent, mature man would have collected over the years. There would be souvenirs from his travels, paintings and sculptures, wooden carvings, ceramics, silk rugs, as well as wine racks stacked with expensive bottles from France, Spain and Italy. The furniture would be crafted from sleek, dark wood.

Her own selection of books resided largely in her old bedroom. Somewhere amongst the Penguin classics was a rather battered copy of *Cinderella* that she had once treasured as a little girl. She would clamber onto her father's lap with the book in her arms, pestering him to once again read to her before bedtime, before her mother ushered her upstairs. He had been like a giant to her, strong and protecting. Nicola had listened to his deep voice almost in a state of trance, her ear pressed to his chest as she nestled into his sweater, hearing the reassuring sound of his steady heartbeat. In the rhythmic sound of his voice, security and safety had resided.

She scowled at herself in the mirror above the hand basin. Thoughts of her father always made her frown or else look pensive and lost. She didn't want to think about how everything had changed when she was thirteen; safety and security snatched away one January morning.

Nicola slowly began to brush her long hair, gazing at her reflection until her expression softened.

Thinking about Peter Buchanan always helped.

*

The first person she saw in the bar was Adam. He stood up and waved her over to his table, which was in the corner, having saved her a seat by draping his jacket over it. His wide smile revealed his obvious pleasure.

'You look nice,' he enthused.

'Oh, it's just an old shirt I bought ages ago. It's second hand. Have you seen any of the others yet?' She scanned the smoky room.

'No,' said Adam. 'I'm not sure who's coming. I told as many people as I could.'

He insisted on buying the drinks and it was agonising to watch him slowly lurch back to the table with his hands full, bumping into tables and spilling some of the lager on the way. People tried to give him a wide berth but he sometimes still brushed clumsily against them nonetheless.

Trapped by Peter Buchanan's lateness, Nicola listened to Adam's chatter, throwing in a few words here and there to imply she was paying attention, all the time keeping the door in her line of vision. It was nearly nine o'clock when Peter Buchanan finally arrived. Her stomach leapt against her heart when she saw him in the doorway, holding the door open and smiling at the person behind him.

'He's here,' she said as casually as she could to Adam.

Adam looked over to the door. 'So *that's* his friend! Well done Professor Buchanan!' He strained to get a better look.

Nicola watched helplessly as Peter Buchanan's companion glided into the bar. The woman was attractive and elegant, possessing the lithe physique of a dancer, her lustrous dark hair captured in a neat chignon and long earrings dangling prettily against her slender neck. Hanging from her shoulder was a large leather bag. Peter Buchanan's hand was never far from the small of the woman's back as he guided her swiftly to the bar. It spoke of intimacies Nicola did not want to consider.

'She's pretty,' Adam said excitedly. 'And much younger than him! Everyone will be talking about this tomorrow, you know.'

'He hasn't noticed we're here,' murmured Nicola, her heart falling into flames.

'Well, he's obviously got other things on his mind!' Adam laughed.

Nicola and Adam both looked on as Peter Buchanan paid for two glasses of red wine and leaned towards the woman to say something. They quickly become engrossed in conversation and he often touched her hand or arm in a way that was tellingly personal and also somewhat rakish. Nicola felt her teeth clink against her beer glass. How many stories had the woman heard from Peter Buchanan and did she find them equally amusing, endearing, enlivening? Was that what made her curve her willowy back closer to him, to have him within easier reach?

‘She must be his girlfriend. Do you reckon she’s called Katherine too?’ Adam grinned at her unevenly.

‘I don’t know,’ she snapped, hating him.

‘Well, here’s to Peter the Great.’ He raised his glass ceremoniously. He took a swig of his beer and said with a smile, ‘Well, it looks like it’s just you and me, Nicola. Unless some of the others show up of course.’

Nicola gulped down the remains of her lager. She was beginning to suspect that Adam hadn’t mentioned anything to the other students about joining them in the bar. She said nothing and instead watched as the woman delved into her voluminous bag and pulled out sheaths of paper and showed them to Peter Buchanan, who appeared to be positively fascinated by what he was reading. It was the reaction Nicola had craved each time she handed in an essay. She observed the way Peter Buchanan kept touching the woman’s arm and could barely breathe when she saw him push a tendril of dark hair from her face.

She stood up. ‘I have to go.’

Adam stared up at her open mouthed. ‘Stay for another drink,’ he implored, ‘please.’ He lifted his paw-like hand in appeal.

Nicola felt like crying. ‘No, I just remembered I have to call my mum. She left a message earlier today. It might be important. I’ll see you around.’

She walked quickly back to her room, her eyes downcast, the air grazing her scorched cheeks. How idiotic she had been to pout and preen in front of the mirror. Disappointment, like a familiar, scratchy blanket, settled heavily on her shoulders. He had not seen her at all, had not noticed her existence.

When she rang from the communal telephone in halls her mother answered quickly, her voice reedy, stretched thin by emotion.

‘Where *were* you?’ she asked reproachfully. ‘Didn’t you get my message?’

‘I did. Sorry,’ Nicola said, heavy hearted.

‘It’s all been such a nightmare...’

‘Mum, what it is? What’s wrong?’

She could hear her mother blowing her nose and sniffing, and knew she had been crying heavily. As she waited for an explanation, she could feel the hot trickle of dread seep through her body, knowing only too well where the substance of her mother’s distress lay.

‘Your dad had to go to hospital this afternoon. He’s had another stroke, Nicola.’

Nicola pressed her forehead against the wall and wound the telephone cord around her hand like a stranglehold, cutting off the flow of blood to her fingers.

‘How is he?’

‘They want to keep him in for longer this time. They want to do more tests.’

Her mother began to cry, making little gasping, mewling sounds.

‘Mum, I’ll get the train tonight. I’ll be home in a couple of hours. Please don’t cry.’

‘I don’t know what I’d do if I lost him,’ her mother sobbed before hanging up.

Back in her room, Nicola threw clothes and toiletries and other belongings into a holdall, weeping fitfully as she did so. She angrily wiped off her lipstick, her hands trembling. Imaginings of Peter the Great, Paris lodgings, exotic countries and other escapades conjoined with the image of her father lying prostrate in a hospital bed, once again, his eyes wide and child-like with confusion.

As she waited outside the halls for her taxi she saw Peter Buchanan walk with his graceful companion across the campus. This time he spotted Nicola and waved to her. The woman glanced over, linking her arm through his. ‘Don’t forget chapters four, five and six!’ he called out to Nicola, not appearing to notice the holdall at her feet.

'I won't!' she said, smiling brightly and waving back.

The pair continued to saunter across the campus, arm in arm, heading in the direction of the visitors' accommodation block.

The thought of home and all that it entailed made her want to start sobbing again. The last time she saw her father he had lumbered around the house, angrily stamping his walking stick before him, the left side of his body hanging heavily. For years he'd been like a stranger to her, his voice blaring with bitterness and anger, or else he mumbled so quietly it was difficult to hear what he said. Most of the time he ignored her, his eyes glazed over with foggy thoughts or fury. How many times had he looked through her with brooding, unseeing eyes, making her want to pinch herself and run to the mirror to check she was really there, that she really existed?

As the taxi sped her to the train station, Nicola unzipped her bag to check her hastily gathered items. She wasn't sure when she'd be back, certainly not for Monday's tutorial. When she rummaged through her holdall she realised she had not packed one single book, having forgotten them all in her haste.

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