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Mr Patel's Membership Application

The morning after we got back from Ireland, Elizabeth was up early. I found her in the kitchen reading emails and text messages from her office on her mobile, which I had not allowed her to take to Ireland, because she would have spent the entire time taking calls. The previous night she had been too tired to do anything except crawl into bed.

She was stalking up and down the kitchen with a mug of Nescafé in one hand and her mobile in the other, muttering to herself.

'Everything all right?' I asked, appearing in the doorway in my dressing gown and slippers.

'No, everything is *not* all right,' she said. 'I go away for a few days and not one thing – not *one single thing* – that I asked to be done has happened. Celia will *kill* me. I probably won't have a job by tonight.'

'Oh, dear,' I said, pacifyingly. I had never actually spoken to Celia, Elizabeth's editor and boss, but she appeared to be a strong-minded woman.

'It's all right for you,' she said, turning on me. 'You can wander into your blessed club at any time you like and have a long lunch and be home in time for tea. If I get away from the office before eight tonight, I shall be very lucky.'

‘Shall I book a table at the Italian?’ I asked.

‘If you want something to eat tonight, then yes. I won’t be doing any cooking.’

She drained her mug of coffee, slammed it down on the sink, and left, banging the front door behind her.

It wasn’t just the office. Our relationship had not been easy of late. Sometimes I wondered whether it had ever been easy; I wondered why Elizabeth had even married me in the first place. Because I’d asked her, I suppose. I knew why I had married Elizabeth. She was my chance. She was my one chance at happiness, normality, and all the things I wanted. If I was capable of love, I loved Elizabeth. But my version of love wasn’t always enough to keep her happy.

I went back to my dressing room, and put on a dark grey suit, a pin-striped shirt and a dark blue tie, and then came back into the kitchen and made myself a slice of toast and a pot of coffee. While I bit into the toast and sipped the coffee, I read the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*; then I folded it and put it in my briefcase to finish later in my office at the club.

Grouchers was a quarter of an hour’s walk from the flat, and as it was a dry morning I decided to risk leaving the umbrella at home. The streets and squares were bright with the luminous light of early autumn, the leaves in the small park I walked through just beginning to turn, the air warm and exhilarating without the stuffiness of a summer’s day in London. I walked at a leisurely pace down Baker Street, across Oxford Street and into the outskirts of Mayfair.

Here was my place of work for a few months every year: a private members’ club called Grouchers, after its

founder Emmanuel Groucher, a successful wine merchant who had lived near Oxford Street towards the end of the nineteenth century. The club was established in a town house, at the corner of a small mews, which was held on a long lease on very generous terms from the estate of a Duke of Rotherham, who had once been a member. Grouchers did not have the political or social connections of some of the better-known clubs farther south, in and around St James's Street. It aspired to be nothing more than a club where members could lunch or dine together, and escape for a few hours from their wives by playing bridge or backgammon. There were no bedrooms. There was a pretty dining room, a bar, a morning room, a couple of card rooms, and a vast marble space occupied by gentlemen's lavatories equipped with mahogany and porcelain furnishings. There was a hall with a porter's lodge, a cloakroom, an extensive wine cellar in the basement, and that was Grouchers.

It suited me. I found its dignified spaces reassuring: the committee rooms lined with leather-bound volumes; the dining room with its oil paintings of racehorses or still lifes featuring dead pheasants; the morning room where the only sound was the rustle of pages being turned as members considered their sporting bets for the day. I was comfortable with most of the other members too. No one ever asked a personal question; indeed, few questions were ever asked. Most conversation was in the form of grunted affirmations when another speaker execrated the latest remarks of some politician or other, or else the performance of the English cricket team. I appreciated the calm routines and predictability of life at Grouchers.

When I joined the club – or, more truthfully, was pushed by Peter Robinson into taking out membership – it was like putting on a uniform that said everything about me that anyone needed to know: I was simply a member of Grouchers. What I might have been before I joined, no one cared. I had passed the entrance requirements, and therefore I was one of them.

The only qualification required to join Grouchers was the support of six members – which Peter Robinson organised without any need for effort on my part – and an understanding that the candidate was ‘a gentleman’. Emmanuel Groucher had once memorably defined the concept of what a gentleman was by saying: ‘Whatever it is, it’s not the sort of damned fellow who talks to everybody at breakfast.’ In fact it was impossible to get breakfast at Grouchers, so there was no practical way of carrying out this test on aspiring members. Nevertheless, the idea was understood at Grouchers, and most of its members barely talked at all, let alone during meals. Conversation in the dining room tended to focus on requests for the butter dish or the salt to be passed. In the bar, or in the gaming room, one was allowed to be more loquacious as long as it was within measure. No female, apart from Mrs Thornton and the waitresses that served us at lunch or dinner, had ever set foot in Grouchers.

The members were mostly Londoners: solicitors, accountants, chartered surveyors, retired soldiers. They all dressed and behaved with the greatest degree of respectability. One never saw brown shoes being worn with a blue suit, or a loud tie. Most members erred on the side of sombre in their dress. Now, as I walked through the small squares and side streets that lay along

my route to Grouchers, I was conscious of different feelings about the club. It no longer seemed, as it once had, a haven or refuge. I was conscious, for the first time, of a question forming itself in my mind: what was the point of Grouchers?

When I arrived at the club James, the day porter, was in his lodge and he greeted me.

‘Morning, Mr Gascoigne. Did you win your game of golf in Ireland, sir?’

‘Lost it, I’m sorry to report, James.’

James shook his head and smiled sadly, whether in commiseration or in despair at my obvious lack of technique, one could not say. I went down the corridor and through the door marked ‘Private’ that led to the offices. Here was a room occupied by Mr Verey-Jones, the club secretary, who dealt with every aspect of club life except one. I had worked with him now for several years and had no idea what his first name was or, indeed, if he had one.

Verey-Jones employed the staff, and managed the wine cellar, and worked out the menus with the chef; stored the cigars and organised for the decorators to come in once a year to smarten the place up when we closed in August. He chaired the Club Rules Committee, a small group that was more enigmatic than the Druids. Every five or ten years the committee produced a minor amendment to the rule book, which was studied with the closest attention by all members when it was finally posted on the noticeboard.

When Verey-Jones saw me come into the office, he stood up, brandishing a slip of paper.

‘Ah, Gascoigne. I think we’ve got it. I think we’ve finally got it.’

He waved the slip of paper in front of me, looking as Neville Chamberlain must have looked when he got off the plane on his return from Berchtesgaden. I took the paper from him and studied it. It said:

Bye Law no. 31: the words ‘members are requested not to have their mobile phones switched on and should not use them on the club premises’ have been replaced by ‘members shall not use their mobile phones (or other electronic equipment) on the premises’.

‘Ah, yes,’ I said, ‘very good.’

‘The use of the word “shall” is so much more prescriptive, I feel,’ said Verey-Jones. ‘It took us a long time to come up with the right word, but I feel it has been worth it.’

‘Yes, indeed it has,’ I said.

Verey-Jones looked at me for a moment to see whether I might be a little more enthusiastic but when I said nothing further, he commented, ‘There’s post for you, Gascoigne. I hope you’re with us for a day or two, as there’s quite a backlog. Mrs Thornton has the letters for you.’

Mrs Thornton was the secretary who did the typing and bookkeeping for the club and really, if anyone kept the place going, it was her. My role as membership secretary was a relatively new position, created to relieve Verey-Jones of his excess workload, about which he had been inclined to complain in recent years. I think I was of some help to him, in a minor way. We both knew that I didn’t need the money, which was a fairly small stipend. We also both knew that I had the confidence of the membership, an important point if one was to be entrusted with

managing the process by which applicants for membership to the club were admitted – or were not admitted. So when I said to Verey-Jones, ‘I’m here for two or three days, but then I’ve got to go up to Scotland to check up on things there,’ I knew it would irritate him, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He grunted, and withdrew behind his desk. I walked across the office and straightened a picture that was hanging slightly crooked, a drawing of Oxford Street in the 1890s featuring Emmanuel Groucher’s wine emporium. Mrs Thornton greeted me with a friendly smile and a cup of coffee, and then handed me a sheaf of post. I thanked her and started to go through the letters. About half came from the sons of members being put up by their fathers or uncles, and admission was almost automatic unless the family had a history of falling behind with subscription payments. There were a couple of names I did not know, but the members introducing them I did, and I felt confident they would not put forward anyone who would not fit in. There was one letter I put to one side: it was from a man I knew to be a recruitment consultant, and he wanted to introduce a colleague as a member. I imagined them turning the dining room into a place where they interviewed people; something that had to be stopped. I decided to have a word with Verey-Jones later, to see how we could knock the idea on its head. Then there was a letter whose handwriting I recognised immediately. It was from Peter Robinson, my barrister friend.

‘Dear Michael,’ it began, and ran on through a few lines about what an outstandingly good member his proposed candidate would be, and how he had found

six members to support him. My eyes skipped over all this and came to rest on the candidate's name. It was Vijay Patel.

This gave me something to think about. On the one hand, if Peter Robinson was putting Mr Patel forward, then I could be sure that Mr Patel would be in every way an excellent future member of the club. Peter's judgement was impeccable. On the other hand, if Grouchers had any defining characteristic it was as a refuge for prejudices of every sort that could not be aired in public. Indeed, it might be said that Grouchers was a fantasy world, where perfectly normal middle-aged, middle-class men were transformed for a few hours by a collective mania into behaving and speaking as if they were inhabiting some last outpost of the British Empire in the 1950s.

I thought I ought to have a word with Peter about his candidate when he came in at lunchtime. Before then I had time to finish the rest of my post, dictate some letters to Mrs Thornton, and still have quarter of an hour to spend doing the Sudoku puzzles in the newspaper.

During lunch I spotted Peter coming into the dining room and gave him a nod. When he had finished eating I came up behind him at the coffee urn. 'Peter. How nice to see you. Can we have a quiet word?'

Peter turned and smiled. He filled two cups of coffee, one for each of us, and then we repaired to a far corner of the morning room that was reserved by tradition for confidential conversations. We sat opposite each other in two huge armchairs covered in cracked brown leather.

'It's about Mr Patel, isn't it?' said Peter, as soon as we had sat down.

‘Yes, it is. Tell me a bit more about him.’

Peter shrugged and said, ‘Not much to tell. He’s the son of a Ugandan Asian businessman who came here in the 1960s to get away from Idi Amin. Vijay’s an investment banker, very successful. He has beautiful manners. He is by far the best amateur spin bowler in our part of Hertfordshire. That’s how I know him.’

Peter and Mary Robinson lived in Hertfordshire at weekends and Peter was mad about cricket. When I said nothing, he went on, ‘And yes, he would be the first member of this club who didn’t have white skin.’

‘Some members might feel a little uncomfortable about your choice, Peter,’ I said gently. ‘You know it is my job to mention possible difficulties. The last thing we want is to have a member’s candidate blackballed. Especially a member as widely respected as you.’

‘That’s bollocks, Michael, and you know it,’ said Peter firmly. ‘Vijay is as English as any of us.’

‘That’s not how some members might see it, Peter,’ I replied. He smiled. Tall, thin and rather overfull of nervous energy, Peter was a leading light in a high-powered set of chambers specialising in human rights legislation. He enjoyed a fearsome reputation among judges and I could see why he was considered to be good at his job: the smile was intimidating. Peter was, I suppose, my closest friend: I had known him for over ten years.

‘My name’s Robinson,’ he said. ‘Some people might say I was descended from a Polish Jew, and that my name means “Rabbi’s son”.’

‘Are you?’

‘I might be. Gascoigne means you come from

south-west France. You might well be more of a Gascon than you are an Englishman, whatever that means. Few of us know who we really are.'

'Well, of course I'll put him in the book,' I said. 'If that's what you want.'

'This place needs waking up,' said Peter. 'Otherwise members such as myself, much as we love the place, are going to start resigning.'

Before I could think of an adequate reply Peter stood up, and patted me on the shoulder.

'I never got round to hearing about your golfing trip in Ireland, old boy. I'll have to leave it to another time. It doesn't seem to have done you much good. You look peaky.'

Then he left, and a moment or two later I stood up and went over to the membership book, which sat on a table near the door. In the column marked 'Candidate's Name' I wrote 'Mr V. Patel' and in the column marked 'Introduced By' I wrote Peter's name. The last column left space for the minimum requirement of six signatures of men who had been members for at least five years. Then Mr Patel would become a member of Grouchers – unless someone put a black ball in the box.

The last candidate for membership to be blackballed had been a cashiered former major in the Royal Artillery whose application to join had nearly succeeded, until the story about his misappropriation of mess funds had been circulated. That was in the 1980s, and on the day of his election a single black ball had been placed in the box. His application had thus been unsuccessful, and the member who had proposed him had felt compelled to resign.

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I went back to the office and began dealing with some correspondence about preferential rates for Welsh and Scottish members. The argument being advanced was that, as they used the club less often, being farther away, they should pay lower subscriptions. English members were objecting, saying that this meant they were subsidising, for no good reason they could see, the Welsh and Scottish members. It was the sort of argument Grouchers excelled at: incapable of ever being resolved to everyone's, or indeed anyone's, satisfaction and likely to rumble on for at least the next generation while filling up several filing cabinets' worth of correspondence. Verey-Jones's own comment summed up the dilemma.

'Of course,' he said, as he handed me the latest file of members' letters on the subject, 'I have Welsh ancestry and a London address. So the question is one about which I find I am peculiarly sensitive.'

I resisted pointing out to him that I had a Scottish address. My sensitivities were obviously not considered to be in the same league as his.

At about four o'clock I decided I had had enough. Verey-Jones was doing the monthly stocktake in the cellar, so I straightened all the letters and papers on my desk, told Mrs Thornton that I would be back in the morning, put my newspaper in my briefcase, and went out past the porter's lodge.

'Mr Gascoigne, sir?' said James, as I passed. 'There's a lady waiting outside to see you, sir.'

'Is it Mrs Gascoigne?' I asked, surprised.

'No, Mr Gascoigne. The lady has been waiting since two o'clock.'

‘Why wasn’t I told?’ I asked in amazement.

‘She didn’t want to disturb you, Mr Gascoigne.’

This was awful. Some poor woman had been waiting outside to see me for two hours. What on earth could it be about?

‘It’s an Indian lady, sir.’

James could barely conceal a smirk. I knew no Indian ladies. There could only be one possible explanation, bizarre as it might seem.

‘You should have told me anyway, James,’ I said angrily, and strode outside. A small, attractive woman in a sari was standing at the foot of the club steps. She was not tall, but stood very upright, and wore a sari of dark green flecked with red. Her long dark hair fell to her shoulders. Her eyes had beautiful dark brown irises, surrounded by a white so white it looked almost blue. Her face was heart shaped, and olive skinned.

‘Mr Gascoigne, sir?’ she asked. It occurred to me that she must have been asking everyone who left the club since two o’clock the same question. That meant that half the club would know about this.

‘Yes, that’s me,’ I said.

‘I am Mrs Patel,’ she said. She was clutching a small parcel in her left hand and did not put out her right. I did not know whether I should offer to shake hands with her or not. I made a slight bow instead.

‘I’m very pleased to meet you,’ I said. ‘I have just been hearing about your husband from Mr Robinson.’

‘It would mean so much to Mr Patel to be a member of this club,’ said Mrs Patel suddenly. ‘His father would have been so proud. Please, please, Mr Gascoigne. You are a person of great influence, I know. Do your best for him, I ask you this favour.’

I started to mutter something about how it was up to the members, but she was not listening. She had said what she had come from Hertfordshire to say. Instead she thrust the small parcel into my hand.

‘This is burfi. It is an Indian sweet, most delicious, with silver almonds. Please take this gift from me.’

I had no choice but to accept the parcel. Then she turned, and walked off with surprising speed. I looked down at the silver foil and sniffed: an odour of boiled milk came from it. When I looked up, Mrs Patel had gone.

That evening, as Elizabeth and I sat in the Italian restaurant around the corner from Helmsdale Mansions, I told her about Mr Patel. She was not amused.

‘You men at Grouchers,’ she said. ‘You ought to be locked up. Half the House of Lords are Ugandan Asians these days, and you worry there’ll be a fuss if even one comes into your miserable club.’

‘How was *your* day, darling?’ I asked. Elizabeth’s tirades on the subject of Grouchers made me uncomfortable. Grouchers had become an important part of my world in recent years. It was my anchor, the rock upon which I stood. One needed a firm footing upon something solid. There were too many treacherous quicksands and strange currents in the world.

‘It was hell,’ said Elizabeth. ‘And, to cap it all, Christine’s pregnant.’

I was going to ask who Christine was but remembered just in time that she had been Elizabeth’s PA for the last three years.

‘She’ll want maternity leave, of course, and then I’ll have to put up with temps for God knows how long

until she decides whether or not she wants her job back.'

'I'm going to ask Peter and Mary up to Caorrun to stalk and play golf next month,' I said to Elizabeth. 'I'd like you to be there. Can you get some time off?'

I knew she would be able to. Although Elizabeth complained endlessly about her job, she seemed to be able to extract a remarkable amount of free time from her employers.

'Do I have to?'

'You can ask Anna and David Martin as well, if you like,' I said. Anna was Elizabeth's new friend. Her husband, David, was another member of Grouchers, one I knew rather less well than Peter. But the Martins would help make up a party; I didn't care, as long as Elizabeth would be entertained, and would overlook the deficiencies of Beinn Caorrun for a few days. I just needed to get away from London. I wasn't feeling myself at present.

We finished our pasta and decided to have coffee back at home, so I paid the bill and we walked back to Helmsdale Mansions. Elizabeth's mood had mellowed after a couple of glasses of wine. I had drunk nothing with dinner, but decided that I would have a malt whisky as a nightcap. Then I remembered the burfi, that Mrs Patel had given me. Bribe or not, it might as well be eaten.

'I've got a treat for you,' I told Elizabeth, and told her the story about Mrs Patel, and her strange offering.

'How very peculiar,' said Elizabeth. 'I don't normally like Indian sweetmeats. I find them sickly.'

'Those are the ones you get in restaurants,' I said. 'This is home-made. I bet it will be delicious.'

But when we got back to the flat I could find no trace of the little package in silver foil. I looked everywhere, in the kitchen, even in the bin, in case I had absent-mindedly thrown it out, but it was nowhere.

‘You must have dropped it on the way home,’ suggested Elizabeth.

‘I could have sworn I put it down on the hall table,’ I said.

‘You’re becoming very odd, darling,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Perhaps you ought to see someone about it.’

I went and poured myself a large whisky, and turned on the ten o’clock news. I was growing tired of people telling me I wasn’t myself.

In the middle of the night I awoke and sat bolt upright. The bedroom curtains stirred in a soft breeze that was blowing in from somewhere. Something had awoken me, I thought at first; something like a whisper. Then into my mind came the words that had been in my dream, a dream in which the wind made the green tops of the trees bend before it, and in which bright red berries glinted.

Few of us know who we really are.

Somehow this thought made me feel profoundly uneasy and excited at the same time. Where had the words come from? I lay awake thinking about them. Where did one’s sense of self come from: was it one’s upbringing, or genetics, or from belonging to a club like Grouchers? I felt there was an answer out there, not far away, in the darkness. It was almost as if I could reach out and touch it. Then I remembered that those were the words Peter Robinson had used at lunchtime the previous day, when we were talking about Mr Patel. At once I was calmer, and settled back on my pillows,

feeling sleep returning. Elizabeth slept soundlessly and deeply beside me. As I fell asleep the whisper returned.

None of us knows who we really are. None of us knows who we really are.

The next morning, before lunch, I went into Grouchers' bar and ordered myself a dry sherry. Someone touched me on the arm as I took it from Pierre, the barman, and I turned to see Peter Robinson. Beside him stood a tall, good-looking, dark-skinned man with jet-black hair brushed back from his forehead. He smiled at me, waiting to be introduced.

'Michael, this is Vijay Patel,' said Peter. 'I thought I'd let him see for himself what Grouchers is like. Can you join us for lunch?'

'I'm Michael Gascoigne,' I said, taking Mr Patel's outstretched hand. 'Delighted to meet you.'

'Likewise,' said Mr Patel. 'This is a treat for me.'

I could not really refuse the invitation, so I sat with Peter and Mr Patel at lunch. Mr Patel turned out to be everything Peter Robinson had said: urbane, intelligent, charming. At the same time, he looked slightly bewildered, as if he was not quite sure why he was there. I suspected that Peter had strong-armed him into applying for membership, as he had done in my case, as part of his campaign to make the club conform more with his own view of what it should be like.

'By the way,' I said, 'please apologise to Mrs Patel. I'm afraid I lost the cake she very kindly gave me yesterday, and so never got the chance to taste it. Please thank her from me in any case. It was such a kind thought.'

Vijay Patel put down his knife and fork and looked a little confused. He smiled uncertainly.

‘Cake? Mrs Patel?’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand you correctly.’

‘Burfi, it was called, I believe,’ I said, remembering what Mrs Patel had told me.

‘Yes, burfi is a well-known Indian sweetmeat. Most delicious. But who is this Mrs Patel, please?’

Now it was my turn to feel confused.

‘Mrs Patel? I assumed she was your wife?’

Peter said, in a tactful voice, ‘Vijay is not married.’

‘Not yet, I’m afraid,’ said Vijay Patel. He laughed, but still sounded uncertain.

‘Your sister?’ The lady I had seen was too young to be the mother of this man.

‘I have no female relations in this country,’ said Vijay Patel. ‘All boys in our family, you know. Now who could you have met? It is beyond me to explain it, Mr Gascoigne.’

Now I was more than confused; I was embarrassed. I felt myself beginning to colour.

Peter said, ‘Why don’t we go next door and have a cup of coffee?’

‘I’d love to join you,’ I replied, ‘but I really must get back to my desk. So nice to have met you, Mr Patel. I look forward to seeing you here again soon.’

I stood up, and so did Vijay Patel, and we shook hands. Then they went into the morning room, and I went to the porter’s lodge to find James.

‘James,’ I began, ‘do you remember that Indian lady who came to see me yesterday afternoon?’

James looked at me in surprise.

‘Indian lady?’ he asked. ‘I’m sorry, sir. Are you sure? There were no ladies here yesterday, except Mrs Thornton.’