

The Pilgrim

Chris Pleasance

There was a pub around the corner from us that we used to go to. The Pilgrim. It was nice, you know? Nothing fancy. No craft selection or wasabi peanuts. But nice. It had ivy up the outside, flower boxes under the windows, a little beer garden out front with a hedge, so you were off the road. Suzy liked that. Inside it had a real fireplace. I liked that. You can always trust a pub with a fireplace.

What I'm saying is: It was common ground. Somewhere we could both agree on. Which is why we used to go there when we were fighting. It was like our safe word: "Pilgrim?" It meant: "Let's sort this out." It meant: "I'm ready to talk." We had a running joke with George, the owner. Whenever he saw us he'd ask what had gone wrong. I'd tell him that he should start charging extra for the therapy. Suzy used to laugh.

We'd been fighting a lot, the last time we went. Nothing specific. We'd just been at each other for weeks, you know? There was this...tension. Like we were two horses tied to the same plough, pulling in opposite directions. Somehow everything turned into a fight: Who was doing the washing, who was getting the shopping, who was taking the bins out. Even asking how her day had been was grounds for a skirmish. In the end, I said it.

"Pilgrim?"

"OK," she said. "Be there at 8."

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I arrived before she did. I got a Heineken, finished it, ordered another. George asked whether she'd be joining. He asked if we wanted a table. There's one outside and one inside, he said. Best pick soon. I messaged Suzy, but didn't get an answer. I picked inside because it was getting dark.

I was on my phone when she walked in, so I don't remember how she looked. I can't even remember if we said anything to each-other. Like a greeting. I do remember the time: 9:08pm. She still had to look at the menu. Eventually, she chose the burger.

George took the menus and maybe I said something then, like: "Hey" or "Hello" or "What's up?" I remember she had this look on her face. Like she was bored. Like the face you make when you rush to answer the phone and it's a cold-caller. Right before you hang up. I don't remember if I said anything else, but I do remember what she said. She said:

"I need to go to the loo."

She left her bag by the table and went upstairs. I went back on my phone.

She never came back.

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You'd think it would be impossible to just up and vanish these days. You'd think. But really, what do you know? Do you know that you don't have to wait 24 hours before you can report someone missing? I didn't.

The police told us not to worry, that 99 percent of people get found within a few days. They told us we should have called sooner, but that Suzy would more than likely turn up.

They asked if she'd ever done anything like this before. If we could think of anywhere she might go. Anywhere significant.

After they left, I checked. Turns out that one percent of missing people is still 1,800 people. Every year. And they're almost never seen again, the ones that go missing for that long. Did you know that? I bet you didn't.

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They came back after a couple of days. Two officers; plainclothes this time. They told me that there's a door at the back of the pub, halfway up the stairs. It was propped open on the night Suzy went. The cooks hold it open using a grease bucket so they can get out into the alley to smoke. They told me that's probably how she got out.

The pub has no CCTV back there, they said, and the one camera on the street outside is broken. They asked up and down the street, but nobody remembered seeing her. We know she stayed in town for at least an hour, they said, because her phone pinged a few nearby masts. I asked if they could use the signal to track her — triangulate it or something like that. They said that's just a TV gimmick. It doesn't really work like that. After an hour, the phone disappeared. Maybe she turned it off, maybe she lost signal. Maybe both.

One of the officers took a folded piece of paper out of her pocket. It was a bank statement. She pointed to the last item, which had been picked out in yellow highlighter. An ATM withdrawal.

"It's in Portsmouth," she said. "Near the ferry terminal."

And then she handed me another page — a bank statement that she told me was from two months earlier. Another transaction picked out in highlighter. £90 at Brittany Ferries.

"It was for a ticket to Spain. Santander," she said. Then she picked up Suzy's bag, the one she had left in the pub, and handed it back to me. "We looked, and we couldn't find a return ticket."

I took the bag, wrapped my arms around it like a man clinging to driftwood in the midst of a shipwreck.

"Do you happen to know where she kept her passport?"

I shook my head.

"This may come as a shock to you, but we think she planned this."

I shook my head again. "She left her bag," I told them. "Why would she do that?"

The other investigator shrugged. "She left the bag, but she took her cards and phone. The only things in there are some papers and few other bits — tissues, lip balm, that sort of stuff. Nothing she would have needed."

"So we need you to have a think for us." The woman investigator got up, came over to where I was sitting, crouched in my eye-line. "Why do you think she left?"

My mouth opened, closed again, open and closed like clam shell. "I don't know," I said at last, because I didn't. She nodded in response.

They stayed for a while after that, asked a few more questions, had a hunt for Suzy's passport, which none of us could find. They let themselves out. They asked me to have a think, left a number and told me to call if anything came to mind. They left me sitting here at the kitchen table: Me in my chair, the bag at the other end, near her chair, as if the two of us were about to have dinner.

The clock ticked, the boiler hummed, cars passed the window. The world kept turning. But I was stuck, like a leaf in an eddy. Going round and round.

Who do I think she left?

Why *do* I think she left?

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We moved in together right after we graduated. It was exciting. It didn't matter that the place was a studio, that there were gaps around the windows so the wind got in, that you could hear mice in the walls at night. It was our first place. No more staying over at the weekend. No more double rent. No more quiet sex so the housemates didn't hear.

We were loud those first few months. We were naked every chance we got. Made use of every surface. It was amazing.

We had agreed that money didn't matter — an easy position to take when you have no money in the first place. Suzy was going to get into politics. I was going to write. She started volunteering for the Labour council, working shifts at a coffee shop on the weekends; I managed the social media accounts of the local library, and went there every weekend to work on my novel.

It was about a couple who lived their life on the road, adventuring across Europe. Like a modern-day Kerouac, is what I told people. They drove a camper van across the Swiss alps, slept outside in a meadow under the shadow of a mountain. They couch-surfed in Nice, sharing a croissant over a single cup of warm chocolat, on the terrace of a café overlooking the Mediterranean. They slurped wine from discarded jugs while watching the running of the bulls in northern Spain, lost in the fiesta, just like Hemingway. They were poor and life was hard, but they were happy.

Either of us could have got into recruitment, or finance, or PR, and things would have been easier. But we were determined to chase the dream. Maybe I'd pen a bestseller, or she'd become an MP. Then we'd be rich. We talked about it sometimes. What would happen, if. In the meantime we agreed to starve — for as long as it took, maybe forever. All we needed was each other and our dreams. I can't tell you how in love that made us feel.

The reality was less romantic. We dressed in musty clothes bought from charity shops that came with blotchy handkerchiefs or greasy combs still in the pockets. We learned to stitch busted seams back together and glue the soles back on to shoes. We took the lamb out of rogan josh and replaced it with cauliflower. Exchanged mince beef for mushrooms in our Bolognese. We had excuses at the ready for Friday night, Saturday evening, midday Sunday — invites to pubs, or restaurants, or brunch dates. Suzy's on the early shift, we're seeing my parents, we've got to run some errands. In the end, the invites stopped coming. The sex stopped, too.

It was around that time that we found The Pilgrim. I remember it was March. Some local election was on. Suzy had been out knocking doors and I'd come to meet her. The sky was heavy and the wind was cold. It wasn't really raining; more like the air was wet. When the breeze blew it cut right through you.

She didn't say anything when I arrived. I put my arm around her and we walked to the top of the road. When we got there, she sat on a low wall in front of the pub and began to cry. I didn't know what to say, so I took out my umbrella and opened it over us, for all the good it

did. After a while George came out to see if we were OK. That's how we met him. He invited us in and gave us two free cokes.

The week before, she'd applied for an apprenticeship scheme at city hall. It paid £18,000 a year. It seems silly now, but that was an unreal amount of money at the time. Enough to pay down our student overdrafts. Enough for new clothes. Enough for meat. She stirred the coke with her straw and told me that she hadn't got it.

"Nadine says I could go full time at the coffee shop," she said. "40 hours a week."

"Does she?"

"They've been advertising for a few weeks, but I think she wants me to have it."

"You never mentioned."

Because you didn't want to. Because you didn't think you'd have to.

"So what are you going to do?"

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We went back to eating meat. We stopped gluing our shoes back together and bought new ones. We moved to a bigger flat.

The new place was nice. Ex-council maisonette; two whole floors. I didn't wake up every day to the sound of Suzy making breakfast. She didn't fall asleep to the sound of me watching TV. Our sheets didn't smell like frying onions anymore. The sex came back though we confined it to the bedroom, now that we had a choice of multiple rooms.

As it turned out, Suzy didn't need to go full-time at the café. One of her applications to the council finally paid off. Information resource officer. It wasn't politics, but we agreed that once she was in the building, she could work her way across.

I was working full time by then too, a PR job for the council. We'd talked for a long time about whether I should take it. Whether it counted as selling out. In the end we decided it was the council, so it was okay.

I liked it. I liked commuting: Having a Tube line that I considered "mine," knowing where the doors lined up on the platform. I liked wearing my new jacket, my smart shirts, and my one matching tie. I liked going back out with friends again. I like telling them I was a "copywriter."

Suzy insisted on calling me a "writer" because I was still working on the novel. I had printed some pages out in the office and taken them home to scrawl on. I didn't have time to go to the library at weekends anymore, and we didn't have a laptop at home. Suzy used to smile when she found my like that, when I could find time to do it. She used to bring me coffee. I would take the cup without raising my head, as if I were too busy to look up, as if I was pushing at a deadline. Perhaps, at the time, I thought I was. But my adventurous couple had gotten stuck. I had taken them as far as the end of the fiesta, but now they were stranded in Spain with nowhere to go. Wherever I tried to take them next seemed wrong. All my carefully structured plot points started falling apart. Because I couldn't take them forward, I started going backwards. Taking out passages and putting them back in again. Changing things and then changing them back. Trying to find the problem and fix it. Trying to overcome the inertia.

After about a year in the new place, Suzy suddenly called "Pilgrim." She wouldn't say why. We booked a table for Saturday lunch and the question hung in the air all week like the threat of rain.

“I feel...stuck,” she said at last, blowing out the candle in the middle of the table.

“Uhuh,” I said.

She dipped her little finger into a pool of liquid wax, right up to her cuticle, then watched as it dried. “It’s just..” she sighed.

“Yes?”

“Is this really the way you pictured life turning out?”

I went to take her hand, but she was busy scraping the wax off her nail. It fell on the tabletop like snow and she watched it go. She never saw me reaching out to her.

“It’s not like I don’t like our life,” she said. “It’s just...is it enough?”

“I think I understand,” I said.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

She finished taking the wax off, like shedding an old skin, and looked up at me then. I reached out to her again and she took my hand this time. I stroked my thumb across her knuckles.

“It won’t be like this forever,” I told her. “I promise.”

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I got a new job. A business to business magazine. It was corporate as hell: A skyscraper in Canary Wharf, shirts with cufflinks, briefcases with locks; quarterly reports and year-on-year comparisons; corporate functions and lunch on expenses.

I bought myself a full suit, new shirts, a tie to go with each of them. I started wearing a watch. I shaved every day.

I didn’t tell Suzy that I was applying. When I found out I’d got it, I booked a table at the Pilgrim and told her to meet me there. We didn’t usually go there to celebrate, but I figured it was okay to make an exception.

I think she was expecting a fight so she was very quiet when she got there. I filled the silence. I told her that it would give her more time for volunteering. That she could take some time off work, if she needed. Try out as an MP’s intern. Go back to study. I told her we could afford to move again. Painted a picture of how it was going to be. Eventually I ran out of things to say.

“What about your writing?”

“I’ll write for the magazine.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I couldn’t remember where I’d got to with the book. Or where I’d left the draft. Where had my couple made it to? What had happened to them? I had a feeling that I broke them up, that it was better for sake of getting things moving that they went their separate ways. Or maybe that I had intended to do that, but never found the time to do it.

“I can get us a laptop,” I said. “And we can get a place that’s big enough to put in a writing desk. I’ll still have weekends, and I can write it then.”

She took her hand out of mine.

“I’ll finish it,” I said. “I promise.”

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The boiler clicks off, the darkness outside thickens, the clock keeps ticking. The world moves on. Why do I think she left? I think I have some idea.

I walk through our flat. The new one we got right after I started at the magazine. Across the parquet floor with the underfloor heating, past the bathroom with the little motion-sensor light that comes on at night, into the bedroom with the desk against the far wall — the one I promised her I'd get. With the laptop on it. Screen dark. Waiting.

In the top drawer. That's where she left it. My first draft. It turned out that she'd kept it, hidden away who-knows-where, waiting for me to pick it back up again. We put the desk together, unpacked the laptop and then she'd pulled it out of her bag. Slid it into the top drawer. Gave me a kiss and told me: "You can do it."

I haven't opened the drawer since, but I open it now. Empty. I open the rest of them, thinking that she must have moved it. But there's nothing in them either. My heart is thudding at the bottom of my throat. I can't say why. And then I remember the bag.

The police had called them work papers, but as soon as I open the metal popper and look inside, I know what the papers really are. Folded, coffee-stained, bent and furred at the corners. My draft. My words. My notes in the margins.

But alongside them, unfamiliar writing. Suzy's hand. I flick through and it's on every page. She has circled and scribbled, underlined and overwritten. *Love this* she wrote in one place, *scrap it* in another, *would she talk like this?* and *develop this further*.

My hands are shaking as I reach the last page. On the back there is a note:

This story needs an ending
I'll be waiting where you can find one
Your Pilgrim xxx

Spain, Santander: Where my couple got stuck, where they were supposed to break up, where they're still waiting for something to happen. I know where she's gone, but will she still be there? How long would she wait?

An eddy: One current pushes me on, carrying me downstream — through rapids and across rocks, over waterfalls and down hillsides, flowing to the sea and then across it, to where she waits. If only I can survive the swim. If only I can find her.

Another pulls me back, to the familiar shoreline, the safety of the bank. To friends and family who walk through this flat like ghosts, stand and sit in the places I had assigned to them, at the housewarming party we never threw, at the dinners never cooked.

The river runs on, the shoreline recedes. In a moment the vortex will break, and I will be carried away. For the moment it holds, and I let myself be held. I don't want to let go. Not yet.

Chris Pleasance is a journalist and writer from south London. He studied creative writing at Kent University, and his work has appeared in [Storgy](#) and [Bandit Fiction](#). He writes from and about places and people that are often overlooked in fiction, and the tenacious beauty of the locations and lives that play out there. He can be found tweeting @aspowritter