

## REBUFFED

By

Michael Fleming

### Phase One

Fun, good sex, joke-sharing, creative co-energy, encouragement, large thin-based pepperoni pizzas with extra mushrooms washed down with cold Amstels, company when company was needed and space when it wasn't – those were the things we craved. We were traders of malleable thoughts. You scatted free verse, all angst and anger; me engineering sonnets and little acid pieces that you said were tantamount to Larkin about. Then you broke through with *The Net-Caster*. You told me you wouldn't have submitted it to *Poetry Review* without my encouragement. I felt an envy-free pride at the time. I'm still proud – it's a scintillating poem. It hangs over my battered desk. I'm looking at it now as I listen to the tattoo of warm rain on the window.

*The Net-Caster* was the first success either of us had had. And I felt good for you. I called my dad and told him you'd been published. At that time, you two had yet to meet. Your success seemed to be the opportunity for him to badger me into taking you to Thorpeness.

\*

This is my dad, Chris, I say. Dad, this is Emily. You hold out your hand but he ignores that and gives you a peck on the cheek and a hug. Blimey, steady on Dad, I think but don't say. I

can see your body stiffen. I should have warned him that you're not the tactile type when dressed. I should have warned *you* that Chris's awareness of feminism is rough-hewn. When he pulls your dining chair out, I wince. You play it with a serenity that impresses me. You're cutting Chris some slack; extending a line of credit on an unassessed risk.

Chris keeps pouring the red and asking you, and for balance me, about the writing process: subject-matter; choice of metre and, alarmingly, rhyming-scheme. He seems genuinely surprised, shocked even, that you've never written anything traditional unless it was to order. He clears his throat and announces that his rhyming-schemes of choice are A, B, A, B and A, A, B, B. He misinterprets the look of astonishment on my face, holds up a confessional finger and says, that to be hair-splittingly correct, he has written a handful of poems in A, B, B, A. Noticing that I'm still open-mouthed he confirms that he has recently taken up, as he puts it, the quill. He points to the three piles of paper on the sideboard. He says he can read us a few, if we'd care to hear them.

Working to keep any hint of panic from my voice I suggest we leave it until the morning, when we're all fresh. I'm thinking that by then I'll have come up with some engagement that screams for our attendance elsewhere. You read me like a *Ladybird Book* and say you'd love to hear some of Chris's (and you pause here and give me the merest hint of a sidelong glance) musings. You stretch out and plant your stripy-socked feet on the fourth chair - the one Mum used to occupy when it was the second chair and she and the dining-room set were in Chiswick together with Chris and, on occasion, me. Chris doesn't seem to mind as he carries the first of his piles to the table. He tops up the glasses.

Face flushed, he tells us these are poems based on homophones. I think this one will crack you up, he says, seeking to manage its reception. It's called, *Threw a Glass Darkly*.

*I threw a glass darkly,  
In a terrible mood,  
It bounced off the table,  
And scattered the food,  
It clattered the window,  
And shattered the pane,  
Throw a glass darkly?  
Never again.*

I manage an appreciative nod, shifting in my chair. You clap your hands and call out for another. You're playing the perfect guest. Chris is puffed up like a feather pillow. He flicks through the sheaf and, with a lick of the thumb, selects another page. This one, he announces, is a young boy talking to his mother. I'm not saying it's biographical, he announces with a smile presented as playful but which I can only read as wistful. It's called *Three Point One Four*.

*"That peach pie's way too small no doubt,"  
I said to Mum with some concern.  
"Of course it's not, I've worked it out,  
It's something you should learn.  
Taking the pastry and the peach,  
And given it's equally shared,  
That's three point one four slices each:  
Cooks call that pi r squared."*

You throw your head back and roar. I'm bewildered.

After another eight of Chris's poems I suggest to you we hit the sack. You say you'll join me momentarily. You come up an hour later and enter our bed like an inexpertly felled pine. In the morning when I wake you're already downstairs with Chris, drinking tea. I hear the dull clack of cups on saucers and your voices, though not your words, filtering through the sanded floorboards.

\*

After breakfast we walked along the beach to Aldeburgh. Gulls hung on thermal currents. The breeze blew in warm and the sausage-roll waves flattened and disappeared as the shingle consumed them.

Chris told us the stretch we were walking was part of the "Amber Coast" and that amongst the pebbles lay pieces of Baltic amber transported from forests that, aeons ago, became petrified. Brown resin, he said, had been released from tree trunks and subjected to enormous pressure. An unpolished piece of amber and a smooth brown stone may both look pleasing, Chris added, but it was only the amber, when buffed and held up to the light, that might reveal an inner beauty.

Chris had moved to Suffolk six months after Mum died - five years ago now. A new start, son, he'd said. But there's a room for you. I know you've settled in Brighton, but if you ever change your mind ... He ran a kiosk each summer for those in need of ice-creams, sun hats or puzzle books. The rest of the time he walked and played in the Aldeburgh

Ukulele Orchestra.

‘What kind of music do you like, Emily?’

You rapped out the names of some bands and could see from Chris’s face that he’d never heard of any of them. You took a flyer: ‘Plus, of course, a few greats: Stevie Wonder, Prince.’

‘Now you’re talking, Em. We do a couple of Stevie’s numbers in the Orchestra.’

‘Really?’

Over the next fifteen minutes Chris acquainted us with the company’s entire repertoire. His flow was broken only when we passed *The Scallop*, the beach sculpture dedicated to Benjamin Britten. ‘A fine composer and pianist by all accounts ...’ Chris said, ‘... but, according to folk-lore, crap on the ukulele.’

We didn’t find any pieces of amber yet the weekend trip proved pivotal. You and Chris got on famously: like a hearse on fire he said with a straight face. I think you appreciated his effort to impress and saw honest and good things in him that you suspected might lie a little deeper in me, waiting to be mined and polished.

Chris not only loved us as individuals, he loved us as a couple. In time it became clear that his keenest wish, which he never articulated but which flapped in the air like a sheet on a clothes line, was that we make children - make grandchildren.

Looking back it’s not hard to see that, as the foundation for a marriage, it was about as stable as that shingle beach in Suffolk.

## Phase Two

Journals chased you, the fattest of the Sunday papers courted you, competition organisers beseeched you to sit on their judging panels. Your collections were drooled over. Chris was your touchstone, that's the way it seemed to me. I think it was because his enthusiasm was unbridled and his raw wit fired yours. By contrast it was obvious I wasn't going to make it as a writer. I was becoming invisible in your glare. That was my conviction. And the aura wasn't confined to your professional life. It flooded the hallways of our relationship. It flowed under the door of any room you were about to enter. And increasingly, when you entered, it was to tell me something I didn't want to hear, or ask me for something I didn't want to give. And I found it was argument that best fitted the contours of my frustration.

In reality my invisibility was bugger-all to do with your glare. I wasn't selling anything. Although I claimed obdurately the opposite I was barely even *writing*. In the first three years of our middle phase I had one poetry collection published (sales poor), four poems included in obscure anthologies (sales, it seemed, confined to relatives of the contributors), an essay included in a Canadian review (the one that actually paid, thank God) and one short story printed *gratis* in the monthly magazine of that wildlife charity you supported. My novel progressed like a snail pulling a shed full of obsolete gardening equipment. At the time I said being dropped was a spur; that I'd get another agent – one who earned their cut. I'll say now, it was a mercy.

And so early in that middle phase, I could always find a reason not to go with you to those literary festivals. "The desk beckons," became my fig-leaf phrase. In truth I couldn't endure the experience of you starting the festival audience cheering when my job was starting the car when they'd stopped. So Chris did it, bless him. He chauffeured you to Hay, to Charleston, to Cheltenham, to Oxford. To wherever.

Something had to change and my decision to give up writing professionally and go into advertising with the excuse that it involved *some* writing, seemed a good move. I'd be a net contributor, I said; professionally valued. You told me I should wait a while longer - hang on for my big break. You had faith in me. You could support us both. That's precisely what I didn't want.

And Chris hated it. Even when I came up with my first successful corporate strap-line and began to be reeled in by, as he termed them, the louterati, even then Chris thought I was breaking ranks. I remember the question, posed with that little half-smile of his that killed me: "But why do you *want* to go to work on a cliché, son?"

You said you couldn't move from Brighton; it would damage your writing; take you away from your cabal of wise counsellors. So I was commuting to London and had too much time on my hands (as well as my feet). Our troubles began to pick up speed. The cushioning of time says things might have been salvaged had we started a family. But our timetables said we couldn't stop to take on passengers. When eventually, with mismatched enthusiasm, we tried, we found we couldn't. Unanimously, we were ripped open. It wasn't news to be believed until the tests confirmed it was.

I remember when I told Chris he wouldn't be playing the grandfather role - disappointment filled his eyes, his shoulders slumped. For a while he became a smaller man within which a yet smaller man seemed determined to eat his way out. I knew he felt crushed on behalf of everyone involved, including the never-to-be-born.

If I'd lied to Chris about the not-having-kids thing, said we were waiting a while, maybe, just maybe, our second phase wouldn't have been quite so corrosive. Okay, the two of us would have had to contain the devastation between us, but we could've let Chris carry on administering the myrrh of mirth. It would have been a justifiable deceit. Maybe our second phase could have been one of only two. Who knows?

The gravitational force that stretched Phase Two beyond its obvious life-span, that required of it a viscosity it would never otherwise have searched for, was Chris's sadness. You and I couldn't part company while his face was longer than his arm. We made adjustments but we knew they were merely top-coats. Trying to lift Chris had no beneficial side-effects on "us". We commuted and communed, not much else. Eventually, more than a year later, we could detect Chris coming out of it: a chirpiness crept into the odd phone call; a little attitude inveigled its way into the gait. And then you received that email, the one attaching his meta-limerick, asking for feedback. He said he'd rediscovered his mojo. It had been in his ukulele case the whole time.

### **Phase Three**

The moment of silence has grown from awkward to decisive; to the point where, quite clearly, nothing more needs to be said.

'Well I hope you're happy now!' you say, looking out of the window at the rain bouncing off the car roof. I suspect that leaving your umbrella on the back seat was a deliberate act.

In saying you hope I'm *happy*, you really mean *satisfied* - satisfied with an outcome of relationship-failure. We both know that was never my wish. And it's not as though you

didn't throw a few rocks into the sack that was our marriage. I think what you're really expressing is your despair at relinquishing something you'd been determined not to give up. But a compromise with the pain on only one-side is no compromise: it's either a victory or a defeat depending on your position. And we have definitely reached a compromise – each having won something we say truthfully we value and each having given up the one thing which we know is irreplaceable and the loss of which we will forever mourn.

Without turning around you say, 'It's exactly like the downpour when we went to see Chris play. It was this kind of rain: rain that makes you want to take off your floppy hat; rain that feels utterly fantastic running down your face; warm rain.'

Rain that smuggles away tears. You're referring to our day at the *Amber Coast Summer Festival* three months since. The Aldeburgh Ukulele Orchestra's set finished with Chris's own composition: the song you'd encouraged him to complete; the one you reassured him was visionary. We sat rain-sodden in the front row courtesy of tickets that Chris had sent us months before. Chris had winked at us when the orchestra, seated under a canopy bellied with rainwater, struck up the opening bar of that closing song.

Phase Three then, the shortest of our three phases, would have been even shorter had we not agreed, at your suggestion, to delay our split until after that festival. Our final outing.

The end consists of a mutual acceptance of the situation, the signing of forms and a deal over access to Chris, who aches for us all to remain friends. And now, having signed those forms on a battered desk above which hangs my favourite poem, you walk out into the warm rain.

\*\*\*