

About a Friend

By Jane Downing

This is about a friend. We met at university. I've read lots of novels which tell us this is where lifelong friendships are formed. *The Secret History* (1992). *A Little Life* (2015). But perhaps I am thinking about America. We do things differently here. She *was* a friend.

I will call her April.¹ That was the month she first invited me round to her place, after a lead up of post-tutorial coffees on campus and impromptu parties at one of the student residences where we clicked. That day in April we went on a shopping excursion to find a dress for a birthday party she was invited to. A special one, though April clarified, "She's not my mother-in-law. Frank² and I aren't married."

The last bit didn't really need to be said. As the song goes, we were only nineteen.

"Come back to my place for a cuppa," she said after being unable to find the right dress to impress. Her car was a little purple Jazz. A statement car.³ I was surprised when she steered onto the highway. Her house⁴ wasn't too far out



of town, but far enough that it had land and there was a long and winding drive passing the tennis court and a glimpse of a swimming pool behind a Hawaiian-inspired cabana.

We'd been discussing *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

¹ Not her real name.

² Ditto. I chose it because, frankly, I've come across a few dodgy Franks in my time.

³ If she'd bought it new the statement would be: LOOK AT ME. Since it was a used car: I'm *cheap* and cheerful, what a great deal.

⁴ The house she lived in with Frank. No financial ownership implied.

the whole morning.⁵ My comments about the role of Nick Carraway beyond simply being narrator were abandoned on sighting the neoclassical mansion at the end of the drive. “Are we dropping something off at your in-laws?” I asked, trying to keep awe from my voice.

April laughed. A tinkling delightful charismatic laugh. “I forget it’s not like . . .” She stopped herself from being too insulting about the abodes of the humble.

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Opulence is not a word that sits comfortably in my mouth. We’re not talking Versailles⁶ but we are talking the Dallas⁷ end of wealth display. To fully meet the challenge of describing where the girl who sat beside me in stuffy tutorial rooms learning about pedagogical theory laid her hat, I’d need to get out a dictionary of architecture. Behind the front door where most houses have a hallway, she had a entrance/foyer/lobby vestibule—an area big enough to swing a cat in. You know, one of those big cats. Tiger. Leopard. Jaguar. There were pillars. Did the Romans call it an atrium?

The kitchen with breakfast bar and walk-in pantry was bigger than my flat. April skipped

from bench top to marble bench top setting the kettle to boil, fetching down a choice of Twinings Teas—we settled on Russian Caravan—and bone china cups so delicate I fell in love with them instantly.⁸

“We’ll have it by the pool.”

I followed her through various rooms, passing leather couches and statement artworks. She looked like a doll in a dollhouse. Not much over one and a half metres, slight from years of gymnastics and trampolining at competitive level, with a long ponytail that swished independently of any sashaying coquettishness, and makeup so expertly painted you’d think at first she wasn’t wearing any. With one foot she manoeuvred a glass door and slid it open. A confetti of fading bougainvillea bracts rose around her feet as she led the way across the deck. They fell like dead butterflies in our wake.

As we settled on banana lounges beside the pool I was dying to ask what digs like this cost, but was not crass enough to do it.⁹

“It’s a saltwater pool,” she told me apropos of staring at the lightly chopping green water. “Chemicals are so bad for the environment.”

An alien life form stirred, a bottom feeder in the ecosystem of the pool.

“Do you swim here often?” I asked with a

⁵ Not really. This is a metaphor to buttress certain themes. The actual text we were studying in our Lit course at the time was *Moll Flanders* (1722). But that would be ringing quite other thematic bells.

⁶ TV series and place.

⁷ TV series *not* place.

⁸ As I had with April. In that “non-sexual, kindred spirit, besties through thick and thin, future godmother of my children” kind of way.

⁹ When the neighbouring property hit the market the answer was both eye-watering and gob-smacking.

tease in my voice. I knew by this stage that she'd met her boyfriend at school. She looked to-the-manor-born here, in situ, and yet I would never have guessed great wealth.

"We've only been here a couple of months. I used the pool constantly over the summer."

"What does your boyfriend do?" I pried.

"Frank does laps."

I laughed and her laugh joined in a millisecond behind.

"He works for his dad."

"And what does his dad do?"

She sipped her tea, judged it too hot and took it from her lips. "Not sure . . . Business."

I sipped my tea. Found it just right. In this world, to me, everything was unquestionably just right.

"Speak of the devil." April un-lounged from the pool seat and ran to the sliding door. "Come meet my friend," she called before dragging Frank into my line of sight, a silhouette of a man against the bright water-reflected light. "I'll get you a beer." April disappeared and Frank sat awkwardly on the end of the banana lounge. His weight upended it, so he leaned, seesawing the top legs back to the ground. The silence was as awkward as the tipping back and forth of the furniture.

Frank too, was only nineteen. Plump.¹⁰ He was an unformed boy in a business suit, tight across the shoulders, saggy at the knees. His

cheeks had no hope of growing a five o'clock shadow by the end of the business day.

I realised I'd have to talk first. "April says you do laps."

"I trained when I was a kid. Got to state championships one year. Now . . ."

"Now there's only so many hours in a day for work, rest and play," April finished for him. He kissed her hand as she handed over the long-neck craft beer.

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There's a difference between not knowing something at the beginning of a teaching semester and not knowing it by the end. Not knowing becomes wilful the longer time passes.

April lived in suspended animation in a fantasyland called Fuck You Wealth. And if I am here to confess, I have to admit I jumped in and played as animatedly as anyone else.

I became a regular beside the pool, with hot chips and coke, tea and dunking biscuits, and then as the year rolled on, we sat in front of the open fire, set, maintained and cleaned by discreet staff who came in while April was out at uni or shopping or hanging out in my flat for a change.¹¹

April's charity to me was as discreet as her staff. She'd pick up bills with admirable sleight of hand, letting me pay when it was just a couple of lattes. "See, we're even now!" she'd reassure me.

¹⁰ My mum explains the shapes of young men with the more generous term *puppy fat*.

¹¹ But only because my flat was conveniently within walking distance for between- tutorial breaks.

It took a while to realise I was excluded from the really ritzy stuff. The couples dinners in restaurants costing the equivalent of my weekly Austudy support payment—per head. The weekends skiing. The charter flights to a beach resort. The fun I caught glimpses of when she handed over her phone with photos of the new puppy they were considering buying¹² and I scrolled too far.

Turned out, one death was the difference between us. We shared so many touchstones of working-class childhoods and yet she had been catapulted into a different sphere when her grandfather had a heart attack and her parents put their inheritance toward a private school for April's last two years of schooling. They'd calculated the private-dividend called the old-school tie network.¹³ Her pathway to wealth turned out far more traditional than they'd imagined when she hooked up with Frank.

There is a fairytale that says humans originally had two heads and were sundered in two so we have to spend our lives finding our other half. In fairytale land April and Frank would have ended up together regardless. April liked that idea. I snorted champagne down my nostrils when she told me. As if he'd have ended up with a girl from the local high school.

At her 20th birthday party, I watched April and Frank—kindred spirits, soul mates, other halves made whole—cutting a cake in the shape

of the TARDIS because they were going to be together in good times and bad times and wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey times.

They announced their engagement then and there and everyone cheered, the socialites in diamonds on the chesterfields, the black-suited men at the bar, the young ones high on cocaine streaming in from the tennis court and rose garden. His parents. Her bewildered parents.

I was sitting with her mum on a pair of chairs shoved to the sidewall to clear the table for the cake cutting. Heavy upright chairs made of heavy old-growth forest wood. She'd been sitting there alone. I'd met her once before. We greeted each other like long lost friends meeting up on a shattered hunk of debris after an almighty shipwreck. She was wearing a khaki shade of green, what looked like her best dress for many years past.¹⁴ Her hair was a parody of ageing. She'd failed to tint away the grey to make herself look like all the other older women.

"Doesn't she look lovely?" she said of her daughter in butterfly wing sleeves.

I could only agree. I didn't have a critical bone in my body when it came to April. I skulled another glass of champagne.

I was also introduced to Frank's father that night. The Businessman. He didn't need to turn the charm offensive on me—I was nobody—and yet he had me in the moon-shade of the palm trees, real sky-dusters, pinned under the

¹² Cost more than my dad's car. Not sure if this says more about the car or the puppy.

¹³ Forgetting women don't as a rule wear ties in the workplace.

¹⁴ It had far too few frills for this season.

**I'm no fool. His eyes moved off my lips, the spell was broken
and I recognised his charm as the type my dad called smarmy.
You couldn't help falling for it in the moment; you'd be
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unwavering attention of his steel blue gaze as he asked my opinion on fracking and hip hop and the architectural design of the proposed new museum. He appeared to listen to my answers.

I'm no fool. His eyes moved off my lips, the spell was broken and I recognised his charm as the type my dad called smarmy. You couldn't help falling for it in the moment; you'd be desperate to scrub it off your skin after the fact.

There'd still been no indication in the exchange about the source of his wealth.

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By November April was begging me, "You don't need to go back home do you? Stay here. It'll be fun." That sort of thing, over and over. And then as semester ended and Christmas loomed, she insisted "We're too old to get caught in family traditions."

And yet, I really, really missed my family and was looking forward to returning to my hometown for the Christmas break. Until I got there. Was this what they meant by caught between two worlds? Dad's wisdom again, "Be

careful of champagne tastes on a beer budget."

Christmas Day in the backyard: the glazed ham cooking in the Weber, the aunts and uncles and cousins descending en masse, piling presents under the synthetic silver Xmas tree. A word surfaced. A Frank word. He could be a girly chatterbox when the drinks were in and the shyness out. I saw us through his eyes—dare I say lens.¹⁵ And the word was *bogan*.

We were indeed a feckless lot. Worse than dole bludgers. My family worked hard in actual jobs and yet couldn't maintain a savings account let alone accumulate holiday homes and racehorses and vintage car collections.¹⁶ How useless was that?

The Jatz crackers were an embarrassment. Hadn't Mum heard of artisan varieties, fig and ginger or cranberry and sunflower seed? I jammed two Jatz in my mouth before she could adorn them with grated cheddar. My brother winked and jammed in three. I swallowed hard and went for four. He managed five. Mum lost her grip, "Cut that out, are you six-year-olds?"

Knee deep in the kiddies' blow-up paddle-pool a few Proseccos later, I mentioned how

¹⁵ A university education can come in useful.

¹⁶ Though the line-up of old bombs down the driveway and two wheels over the gutter were on their way to being vintage.

much I missed April's pool. Not for the first time. Like, "Oh I miss April's pool."

"Who's this April when she's at home?" A cousin asked from one of the collapsible camping chairs circa 1982. "Is that your girlfriend?"

Frank's family name floated to the surface of the desultory poolside gossip.

"Did you say the Richy McRichface family?"¹⁷

Indeed I had.

"Your *poor*¹⁸ Uncle Ben. He's still a mess. On pills now," said Dad.

I heard new words. Ponzy scheme. Pyramid scheme. Scam. Scum. I heard about the thousands who'd lost their lifesavings and dreams of retirement. I heard how Richy McRichface had hidden the stolen money so nothing could be clawed back when the scandal broke. How the Panama Papers made this more than gossip.

My niece peed in the pool, a look of huge satisfaction on her sweet face and I heard nothing more¹⁹ above my own screaming.

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Having secret knowledge is unsettling. I've read it gives the holder of the secret power. Well, I think that is a very odd understanding of power.

April and I sat at her dining table²⁰ with books and notes and devices plotted between us. We

both hated group work. "Unless you're my group," April had winked in class. She argued the point with the tutor because really, who needs three members to make a group? And so I was confirmed as the chosen one in our group of two and it felt uncomfortably good.

The chandelier was a shadow of itself in the polished sheen of the table. We pretended we were aiming for a Distinction, knowing with me on board, we could get a High Distinction.²¹

April's huge gold locket clunked on the wood of the table every time she lent forward.

"Look," she said when she noticed me staring at it. "My Christmas present." She pulled the long and heavy gold chain to its full extent from her neck, letting it bite into her flesh at the back. She popped the locket open. "See, his mum put in photos of Frank and Primrose.²² My two loves."

That could have been the moment to mention the origin of the family wealth. It could have been the moment to ask the big question—did she know? Whether she knew or not, it was a big fat fact you'd need a lot of ethical manipulation to sit pretty with.

I chickened out. Stared at the images of Frank and the pug. "That thing about owners and pets and growing to look like each other . . ." I joked. She hit my arm lightly and laughed.

We got an HD. She was subdued that day.

¹⁷ You get the drill—a pseudonym created to protect the ~~innocent~~ guilty.

¹⁸ The emphasis indicating he meant the two meanings of the word.

¹⁹ Wanted to hear nothing more.

²⁰ Seats twelve.

²¹ No time to be modest. Incidentally, we were learning, too, how to use footnotes.

²² The puppy which had been duly purchased, hang the expense.

She was naturally blessed. When assets were doled out in heaven she was given beauty, the currency of our time if you are a woman. She was simply using the resources she had. Youth and beauty on the open market. Was she any different from anyone born with a gift?

Frank was in Sydney supporting his father in court. It looked good to display a loving family. She told me, “They are totally trumped-up charges of course. Fraud.²³ People are just jealous when someone makes good. Class warfare at its silliest.”

And this was the moment when I could have mentioned Uncle Ben living with Auntie Lou in the caravan set on blocks out the back of Pop Bruce’s since the foreclosure on their mortgage, and all the victims I didn’t know by name who could well be worse off. I could make this a dramatic narrative with blazing conflict. But that is not how the real world works.

Did I mention I’m a coward?

I blame my upbringing. A misread religious text somewhere along the way had my lot hiding more than our lights under a bushel. Keep your heads down. Don’t risk getting it lopped off. I may have superior knowledge, yet here all I could say was an anodyne, “It must be difficult.”

“It’s okay,” she reassured me. “Frank bought me this adult-sized Teddy to take his place in bed while he’s away. Let me introduce you to Theodore. Primrose hates him. Yaps like he’s

real.”

Primrose yapped from under the dining table at mention of her name, or maybe at the name of the giant teddy bear.

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There was only one solution to my discomfort.

As I drove away, with the palm trees around the pool receding in my rear-view mirror, I realised this was no oasis. This was a mirage.

No. That’s not entirely right. For the rich, such havens are an oasis from the cruel world of class envy. For the rest of us it is a mirage, a shimmer on the horizon we are told we can aspire to. Look what you can get if you work hard! As if.

April was not the one in court, she was not the criminal. So do I blame her for choosing to be one of the lucky few, for living high on the Trust Funds? Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes.

She was naturally blessed. When assets were doled out in heaven she was given beauty, the currency of our time if you are a woman. She was simply using the resources she had. Youth and

²³ Trump and Fraud in the same statement, and no hint of a pun.

beauty on the open market. Was she any different from anyone born with a gift?

And yet she could have spent her pretty penny differently.

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Obviously, this isn't about my friend. This is about *me*. I did the only thing open to me. I transferred to another university closer to home. The last day beside the Richy McRichface pool,

rugged up in cashmere scarves and drinking hot chocolate, April cried. "But I need you. I'll miss you."

"My family is important to me," I said.

A wedding invitation arrived in my parents' letterbox a few months later. The stationary was thick and gold-rimmed. The wedding vows were being exchanged at a resort in Thailand.²⁴ They were flying a hundred guests on chartered flights. The handwritten note read there was a seat reserved for me.

²⁴ I can see the groom arriving on a silk-bedecked elephant, but I am letting my imagination get away with me. Elephants in the room and all that.

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