

A DILL PICKLE

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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2
3
4 AND then, after six years, she saw him again. He was seated at one of those little bamboo
5 tables decorated with a Japanese vase of paper daffodils. There was a tall plate of fruit in
6 front of him, and very carefully, in a way she recognized immediately as his "special" way, he
7 was peeling an orange.

8 He must have felt that shock of recognition in her for he looked up and met her eyes.
9 Incredible! He didn't know her! She smiled; he frowned. She came towards him. He closed his
10 eyes an instant, but opening them his face lit up as though he had struck a match in a dark
11 room. He laid down the orange and pushed back his chair, and she took her little warm
12 hand out of her muff and gave it to him.

13 "Vera!" he exclaimed. "How strange. Really, for a moment I didn't know you. Won't you sit
14 down? You've had lunch? Won't you have some coffee?"

15 She hesitated, but of course she meant to.

16 "Yes, I'd like some coffee." And she sat down opposite him.

17 "You've changed. You've changed very much," he said, staring at her with that eager, lighted
18 look. "You look so well. I've never seen you look so well before."

19 "Really?" She raised her veil and unbuttoned her high fur collar. "I don't feel very well. I can't
20 bear this weather, you know."

21 "Ah, no. You hate the cold. . . ."

22 "Loathe it." She shuddered. "And the worst of it is that the older one grows . . ."

23 He interrupted her. "Excuse me," and tapped on the table for the waitress. "Please bring
24 some coffee and cream." To her: "You are sure you won't eat anything? Some fruit, perhaps.
25 The fruit here is very good."

26 "No, thanks. Nothing."

27 "Then that's settled." And smiling just a hint too broadly he took up the orange again. "You
28 were saying - the older one grows -"

1 "The colder," she laughed. But she was thinking how well she remembered that trick of his -
2 the trick of interrupting her - and of how it used to exasperate her six years ago. She used to
3 feel then as though he, quite suddenly, in the middle of what she was saying, put his hand
4 over her lips, turned from her, attended to something different, and then took his hand away,
5 and with just the same slightly too broad smile, gave her his attention again. . . . Now we are
6 ready. That is settled.

7 "The colder!" He echoed her words, laughing too. "Ah, ah. You still say the same things. And
8 there is another thing about you that is not changed at all - your beautiful voice - your
9 beautiful way of speaking." Now he was very grave; he leaned towards her, and she smelled
10 the warm, stinging scent of the orange peel. "You have only to say one word and I would
11 know your voice among all other voices. I don't know what it is - I've often wondered - that
12 makes your voice such a - haunting memory. . . . Do you remember that first afternoon we
13 spent together at Kew Gardens? You were so surprised because I did not know the names
14 of any flowers. I am still just as ignorant for all your telling me. But whenever it is very fine
15 and warm, and I see some bright colours - it's awfully strange - I hear your voice saying:
16 'Geranium, marigold, and verbena.' And I feel those three words are all I recall of some
17 forgotten, heavenly language. . . . You remember that afternoon?"

18 "Oh, yes, very well." She drew a long, soft breath, as though the paper daffodils between
19 them were almost too sweet to bear. Yet, what had remained in her mind of that particular
20 afternoon was an absurd scene over the tea table. A great many people taking tea in a
21 Chinese pagoda, and he behaving like a maniac about the wasps - waving them away,
22 flapping at them with his straw hat, serious and infuriated out of all proportion to the
23 occasion. How delighted the sniggering tea drinkers had been. And how she had suffered.

24 But now, as he spoke, that memory faded. His was the truer. Yes, it had been a wonderful
25 afternoon, full of geranium and marigold and verbena, and - warm sunshine. Her thoughts
26 lingered over the last two words as though she sang them.

27 In the warmth, as it were, another memory unfolded. She saw herself sitting on a lawn. He
28 lay beside her, and suddenly, after a long silence, he rolled over and put his head in her lap.

29 "I wish," he said, in a low, troubled voice, "I wish that I had taken poison and were about to
30 die - here now!"

31 At that moment a little girl in a white dress, holding a long, dripping water lily, dodged from
32 behind a bush, stared at them, and dodged back again. But he did not see. She leaned over
33 him.

34 "Ah, why do you say that? I could not say that."

35 But he gave a kind of soft moan, and taking her hand he held it to his cheek.

1 "Because I know I am going to love you too much - far too much. And I shall suffer so terribly,
2 Vera, because you never, never will love me."

3 He was certainly far better looking now than he had been then. He had lost all that dreamy
4 vagueness and indecision. Now he had the air of a man who has found his place in life, and
5 fills it with a confidence and an assurance which was, to say the least, impressive. He must
6 have made money, too. His clothes were admirable, and at that moment he pulled a Russian
7 cigarette case out of his pocket.

8 "Won't you smoke?"

9 "Yes, I will." She hovered over them. "They look very good."

10 "I think they are. I get them made for me by a little man in St. James's Street. I don't smoke
11 very much. I'm not like you - but when I do, they must be delicious, very fresh cigarettes.
12 Smoking isn't a habit with me; it's a luxury - like perfume. Are you still so fond of perfumes?
13 Ah, when I was in Russia . . ."

14 She broke in: "You've really been to Russia?"

15 "Oh, yes. I was there for over a year. Have you forgotten how we used to talk of going
16 there?"

17 "No, I've not forgotten."

18 He gave a strange half laugh and leaned back in his chair. "Isn't it curious. I have really
19 carried out all those journeys that we planned. Yes, I have been to all those places that we
20 talked of, and stayed in them long enough to - as you used to say, 'air oneself' in them. In
21 fact, I have spent the last three years of my life travelling all the time. Spain, Corsica,
22 Siberia, Russia, Egypt. The only country left is China, and I mean to go there, too, when the
23 war is over."

24 As he spoke, so lightly, tapping the end of his cigarette against the ash-tray, she felt the
25 strange beast that had slumbered so long within her bosom stir, stretch itself, yawn, prick up
26 its ears, and suddenly bound to its feet, and fix its longing, hungry stare upon those far away
27 places. But all she said was, smiling gently: "How I envy you."

28 He accepted that. "It has been," he said, "very wonderful - especially Russia. Russia was all
29 that we had imagined, and far, far more. I even spent some days on a river boat on the
30 Volga. Do you remember that boatman's song that you used to play?"

31 "Yes." It began to play in her mind as she spoke.

32 "Do you ever play it now?"

1 "No, I've no piano."

2 He was amazed at that. "But what has become of your beautiful piano?"

3 She made a little grimace. "Sold. Ages ago."

4 "But you were so fond of music," he wondered.

5 "I've no time for it now," said she.

6 He let it go at that. "That river life," he went on, "is something quite special. After a day or
7 two you cannot realize that you have ever known another. And it is not necessary to know
8 the language - the life of the boat creates a bond between you and the people that's more
9 than sufficient. You eat with them, pass the day with them, and in the evening there is that
10 endless singing."

11 She shivered, hearing the boatman's song break out again loud and tragic, and seeing the
12 boat floating on the darkening river with melancholy trees on either side. . . . "Yes, I should
13 like that," said she, stroking her muff.

14 "You'd like almost everything about Russian life," he said warmly. "It's so informal, so impulsive,
15 so free without question. And then the peasants are so splendid. They are such human beings
16 - yes, that is it. Even the man who drives your carriage has - has some real part in what is
17 happening. I remember the evening a party of us, two friends of mine and the wife of one of
18 them, went for a picnic by the Black Sea. We took supper and champagne and ate and
19 drank on the grass. And while we were eating the coachman came up. 'Have a dill pickle,'
20 he said. He wanted to share with us. That seemed to me so right, so - you know what I
21 mean?"

22 And she seemed at that moment to be sitting on the grass beside the mysteriously Black Sea,
23 black as velvet, and rippling against the banks in silent, velvet waves. She saw the carriage
24 drawn up to one side of the road, and the little group on the grass, their faces and hands
25 white in the moonlight. She saw the pale dress of the woman outspread and her folded
26 parasol, lying on the grass like a huge pearl crochet hook. Apart from them, with his supper
27 in a cloth on his knees, sat the coachman. "Have a dill pickle," said he, and although she was
28 not certain what a dill pickle was, she saw the greenish glass jar with a red chili like a
29 parrot's beak glimmering through. She sucked in her cheeks; the dill pickle was terribly sour. .
30 . .

31 "Yes, I know perfectly what you mean," she said.

32 In the pause that followed they looked at each other. In the past when they had looked at
33 each other like that they had felt such a boundless understanding between them that their
34 souls had, as it were, put their arms round each other and dropped into the same sea,

1 content to be drowned, like mournful lovers. But now, the surprising thing was that it was he
2 who held back. He who said:

3 "What a marvellous listener you are. When you look at me with those wild eyes I feel that I
4 could tell you things that I would never breathe to another human being."

5 Was there just a hint of mockery in his voice or was it her fancy? She could not be sure.

6 "Before I met you," he said, "I had never spoken of myself to anybody. How well I remember
7 one night, the night that I brought you the little Christmas tree, telling you all about my
8 childhood. And of how I was so miserable that I ran away and lived under a cart in our yard
9 for two days without being discovered. And you listened, and your eyes shone, and I felt that
10 you had even made the little Christmas tree listen too, as in a fairy story."

11 But of that evening she had remembered a little pot of caviare. It had cost seven and
12 sixpence. He could not get over it. Think of it - a tiny jar like that costing seven and sixpence.
13 While she ate it he watched her, delighted and shocked.

14 "No, really, that is eating money. You could not get seven shillings into a little pot that size.
15 Only think of the profit they must make. . . ." And he had begun some immensely
16 complicated calculations. . . . But now good-bye to the caviare. The Christmas tree was on
17 the table, and the little boy lay under the cart with his head pillowed on the yard dog.

18 "The dog was called Bosun," she cried delightedly.

19 But he did not follow. "Which dog? Had you a dog? I don't remember a dog at all."

20 "No, no. I meant the yard dog when you were a little boy." He laughed and snapped the
21 cigarette case to.

22 "Was he? Do you know I had forgotten that. It seems such ages ago. I cannot believe that it
23 is only six years. After I had recognized you today - I had to take such a leap - I had to take
24 a leap over my whole life to get back to that time. I was such a kid then." He drummed on
25 the table. "I've often thought how I must have bored you. And now I understand so perfectly
26 why you wrote to me as you did - although at the time that letter nearly finished my life. I
27 found it again the other day, and I couldn't help laughing as I read it. It was so clever - such
28 a true picture of me." He glanced up. "You're not going?"

29 She had buttoned her collar again and drawn down her veil.

30 "Yes, I am afraid I must," she said, and managed a smile. Now she knew that he had been
31 mocking.

32 "Ah, no, please," he pleaded. "Don't go just for a moment," and he caught up one of her
33 gloves from the table and clutched at it as if that would hold her. "I see so few people to talk

1 to nowadays, that I have turned into a sort of barbarian," he said. "Have I said something to
2 hurt you?"

3 "Not a bit," she lied. But as she watched him draw her glove through his fingers, gently,
4 gently, her anger really did die down, and besides, at the moment he looked more like
5 himself of six years ago. . . .

6 "What I really wanted then," he said softly, "was to be a sort of carpet - to make myself into
7 a sort of carpet for you to walk on so that you need not be hurt by the sharp stones and
8 mud that you hated so. It was nothing more positive than that - nothing more selfish. Only I
9 did desire, eventually, to turn into a magic carpet and carry you away to all those lands you
10 longed to see."

11 As he spoke she lifted her head as though she drank something; the strange beast in her
12 bosom began to purr . . .

13 "I felt that you were more lonely than anybody else in the world," he went on, "and yet,
14 perhaps, that you were the only person in the world who was really, truly alive. Born out of
15 your time," he murmured, stroking the glove, "fated."

16 Ah, God! What had she done! How had she dared to throw away her happiness like this. This
17 was the only man who had ever understood her. Was it too late? Could it be too late? *She*
18 was that glove that he held in his fingers. . . .

19 "And then the fact that you had no friends and never had made friends with people. How I
20 understood that, for neither had I. Is it just the same now?"

21 "Yes," she breathed. "Just the same. I am as alone as ever."

22 "So am I," he laughed gently, "just the same." Suddenly with a quick gesture he handed her
23 back the glove and scraped his chair on the floor. "But what seemed to me so mysterious
24 then is perfectly plain to me now. And to you, too, of course. . . . It simply was that we were
25 such egoists, so self-engrossed, so wrapped up in ourselves that we hadn't a corner in our
26 hearts for anybody else. Do you know," he cried, naive and hearty, and dreadfully like
27 another side of that old self again, "I began studying a Mind System when I was in Russia,
28 and I found that we were not peculiar at all. It's quite a well-known form of . . ."

29 She had gone. He sat there, thunder-struck, astounded beyond words. . . . And then he asked
30 the waitress for his bill.

31 "But the cream has not been touched," he said. "Please do not charge me for it."

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THE END