

**Imitating Katherine Walker  
by Alexei Sayle**



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**IMITATING KATHERINE WALKER : ALEXEI SAYLE**

RORY SUDDENLY REALISED it had been over a month and Katherine Walker hadn't had her period yet, so obviously he needed to buy some Tampax for her. At lunchtime he got the bus right across to West London and bought an overpriced box in a Korean supermarket. When he got back to Katherine's room he opened the box and left it open on her bedside table: she would not be the sort of girl who'd hide such things away. Then the thought struck him, "Why would she leave a full box open on her bedside table?" So he had to take some out; but then immediately another thought struck him, "How many of these things did women get through in a...what would you call it, 'a session'?"

In the end, after much thought, he removed four of the things from the box then rode another bus right across to East London and left them in four separate litter bins. This took a considerable time since litter bins – unlike massive piles of litter – were few and far between right across East London.

When Rory got back to his flat it was late, he hadn't got any work done and he'd spent most of the day carrying sanitary towels around on public transport. Rory sat on the couch, put his head in his hands and wondered how he'd got into this situation. Where could you say it had started to go wrong? Six weeks ago he certainly hadn't felt like this, a month and a half ago he'd been optimistic and happy with a feeling that he was finally getting back on his feet after so many hard times.

From 1984 to the mid 90s he'd been a wealthy man, often appearing on 'The Money Programme,' or 'Channel 4 News', being interviewed about the massively successful business that he owned called 'The Classic Car Phone Company'. At the time when he'd had the idea for it he'd been a small-time publisher and the owner of one of the very first carphones, its bulky works built into the boot of his MG Montego. It had occurred to Rory one day that people who owned classic cars like E-Type Jaguars, Gullwing Mercedes SLs, Bentley Coupes, Porsche 356s, were forced to have the same mobile phones as everyone else, their angular modern 80s plastic lines clashing with the more curvaceous, leather and woodclad interiors of their vehicles. Rory's inspiration was to begin manufacturing a range of car phones that matched the insides of these classic cars: Bakelite handsets in place of plastic, chromed dials in place of push buttons, cloth wire in place of black cable. Soon the business expanded and he was making all kinds of things that didn't look like themselves: personal computers disguised as spindly Regency writing desks, CCTV cameras built into wrought iron lanterns to guard the gateways of converted Victorian warehouses and gilt rococo microwave cookers for the kitchens of Jewish homes in North London.

All was well until the internet boom of the late 90s. Making the mistake of thinking (as many powerful people do) that because he was good at one thing he was good at every thing, Rory invested all his money and some that wasn't his in a web site called 'mybums.com'. Now when he reflected on it he couldn't properly recall exactly what service 'mybum.com' purported to offer the internet user. Indeed now he wasn't entirely sure that anybody involved had the slightest idea what it was the site was supposed to do, apart from produce money like a mountain spring just by dint of its being a website. This supposition turned out not to be true.

His partner Jenny had taken the bankruptcy and the loss of their home quite hard but she had never openly blamed him for his idiotic greed and he was grateful for that. When they

managed to obtain the tiny two bedroomed housing association flat on a quiet street south of Kings Cross she stopped crying all the time and occasionally even managed a shy smile.

This tranquil period lasted until Byron and Danuta came to stay. Byron had been Rory's closest friend at University but while Rory had gone into business Byron never settled. Rory liked to think of the other man as his wilder alter ego, travelling the world, living with the Mud Men of Papua New Guinea, getting into fights in a bar in Vietnam, being the gigolo of an aged poetess in Helsinki. For the last four years, according to the occasional curt email, he had been working in Somalia for a Spanish medical charity called 'Medicos Sin Sombreros' (Doctors Without Hats) but over a fizzing phone line from Mogadishu Byron had yelled, "Rory mate I'm coming back to London, OK to crash for a while at your place?"

"Of course mate," replied Rory. "You know we don't have the money we once had, I mean the spare room is pretty small but yeah sure..."

"Don't worry. The old lady'll be cool?"

"The old lady'll be well cool."

"Great mate, see you next Tuesday then."

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During the intervening period between the phone call and Byron's arrival Rory spent many hours daydreaming about what it would be like to have his closest friend living with him. When they greeted Byron at the arrivals gate at Heathrow carrying a big funny sign saying 'Lord Byron' they found he had brought back with him from Somalia, a tropical disease which made him a ghastly yellow colour, six very big suitcases and an extremely bad-tempered Croatian woman called Danuta.

As Rory's battered Volvo estate turned into their street they passed on the left a little petting zoo attached to a children's playground, behind whose iron railings overindulged sheep grazed.

"What sort of sheep are those?" asked Danuta, who'd been silent the whole length of the A40, from the passenger seat.

"Ooh, I don't really know," said Jenny.

Danuta swore in Croatian then said mockingly, "Dey don't know what sheep it is dat live round de corner from dem... dey are idiots not to know what kind of sheep it is."

"So what kind are they Danuta?" asked Rory in a friendly, enquiring voice.

"I don't fucking know!" she shouted, "but then they aren't my fucking sheep are they you cretin?"

"I was only..." stuttered Rory before Byron cut across him, "Hey just lay off her mate alright? She's had a tough time OK?"

“Yeah, sure, I’m sorry,” said Rory, aware that Jenny in the back seat was giving him a look which implied he was a weak-willed weasel even though he could only see one of her eyes under the enormous suitcase that was slowly crushing her.

As soon as they arrived Byron and Danuta immediately went to bed in the spare room where they had a noisy argument followed by very noisy sex while Rory and Jenny hauled their suitcases up the four flights of stairs.

The two travellers emerged at one in the morning, woke their hosts up and forced them to cook a huge meal which they ate without stopping smoking. Byron and Danuta had brought with them twenty cartons of a brand of Somalian cigarettes called ‘Monkey Priest’ which they smoked constantly, so that acrid grey clouds soon hung in the kitchen like low mist over a swamp.

Over the meal Byron told them, food spilling from his mouth, how everything was better in Somalia and how the lives of Rory and Jenny lacked spirituality, then he read them extracts from his poetry and showed them drawings he’d done of Danuta seen from the back, kneeling exposed and naked with her behind up in the air.

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During the next couple of weeks Rory and Jenny endured strange smells in their toilet, violent arguments between their guests followed by even more violent making-up and a deluge of insults from Danuta concerning their ignorance of different types of sheep until one day Jenny suddenly said, “Rory I can’t take any more of this.”

“I know darling,” he replied “I’ll see to it.”

“Byron mate,” Rory said when the couple got back from the swimming baths, “sorry but we need the spare room back. Katherine Walker, Jenny’s best mate from school’s coming to stay, she’s just split up with her boyfriend so you know...”

Rory had been expecting some strong resistance from Byron but rather sweetly his best friend said, “Sure mate, if the chick’s in trouble. Me and Danu will check into one of those Bed and Breakfast places in Argyle Square. Only thing is I’ll have to leave our suitcases in the spare room ‘cos I’ll need to get at my poems and notebooks, change of clothes and stuff.”

Rory was so relieved at Byron’s easy acquiescence that he readily agreed to him leaving his luggage behind. It took him a while to realise that if Byron was going to be visiting the spare room often then he would have to fake Katherine Walker’s presence in that room.

At first he approached this task with enthusiasm: he got some Prada shoes Jenny had bought at Milan airport that were far too small for her and threw them on the floor, he got the two red silk Agent Provocateur bra and pants sets his partner had always refused to have anything to do with and lay them on a chair, he found a small stylish leather suitcase left over from their wealthy days at the back of their wardrobe and put in it other T shirts, jeans and tops that Jenny had grown too fat to wear. Then he happily stood back to look at his work and felt immediately deflated; he realised it was surprisingly difficult to get a sense of somebody’s

absent presence. At the moment it was just an empty room with some stuff in it, there was no hint of Katherine Walker's personality.

He went into the living room and took down 'Anna Karenina' (a book he'd always meant to read) from the bookshelf and laid it open at Page 49 on the table beside the bed. Next he picked up a glass and half-filled it with water, got some old scarlet lipstick of Jen's from her makeup box and with a strange tingling sensation in his calves smeared it on his own lips then took a sip and placed the glass also on the bedside table next to the book. Finally he sprayed the last of Jenny's 'Very Valentino' in the air. Again he stepped back and felt, with a deep sense of satisfaction that now Katherine Walker's personality was beginning to emerge. You could see that here was a bright, intelligent woman who wasn't afraid to look good; she liked sexy shoes, saucy underwear and vibrant lipstick. As he closed the door Rory felt a strong pang of regret that Katherine Walker wasn't really staying in their spare room.

"I see the chick's reading Tolstoy," said Byron after his first visit to his luggage.

"That's right," replied Rory, "she's a really clever woman, good-looking too."

"I'd love to know what she thinks about Anna."

"I'll ask her mate."

So Rory read the book lying in Katherine's bed wearing the cute pin-striped men's pyjamas that Katherine wore to sleep in and a few days later he went down to Leather Lane Market and bought Katherine some stylish designer knock-offs: three skimpy spaghetti-strap T shirts and a tight leather skirt that would show off her lovely little firm bottom.

Rory felt a sudden stab of annoyance at Jenny. "Why wasn't she more like Katherine," he thought to himself, "why didn't she wear sexy clothes and work out at the gym three times a week like the other woman did. Jenny really needed to pull herself together."

"She appreciates Tolstoy's ability in bringing Anna so vividly to life," he told Byron on his second visit "... but ultimately she says she despises her for falling so hysterically in love with such a transparent bastard as Vronsky when her husband is actually a better more moral man. She says she'd never do anything like that, she's got too much self-respect."

They then went on to discuss Katherine's sparkling academic record, the martial arts black belt she possessed and the affair she'd had with Lenny Kravitz. As the two old friends talked on into the evening it dawned on Rory that the awkwardness which had existed since Byron's return from Somalia vanished when they talked about Katherine Walker.

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About a week later Byron suddenly asked. "Do you think she's ever had sex with another woman?"

"Who Katherine?"

"Yeah."

“I’ll ask her,” said Rory, “that’s the thing - she’s so upfront you can talk easily to her about stuff like that.”

“Yes she has,” Rory told Byron on his fifth visit. “We had a bottle of wine together late the other night and she told me all about it. She likes men most – her exact words were ‘she’s got to have a regular supply of dick’ – but a couple of times she’s had crushes on women and you know... once or twice it’s led to, well sex... kissing and fondling and rubbing and stuff... but no sex toys. She thinks that’s unnatural.”

“Wow,” exhaled Byron with a far-away look in his eyes.

“Yeah wow,” said Rory. “She told me the thing she noticed when you’re like, kissing a woman is how small their mouths are, compared to men’s.”

“Oh God,” said Byron, “I have simply got to meet this woman.”

*What happens next? Over to you...*