

# Condescension

*There's an awful lot of condescension in compassion, and an awful lot of contempt in condescension.*

by [Jillian Becker](#) (May 2023)



*Femme a la Robe Rouge (La Penseuse)*, Louis Valtat, 1928

My name is Katherine Lawson. I am not a professional writer

(I'm a software architect, wife of an attorney and mother of a grown-up son and daughter) but I felt I had to write about this incident that happened many years ago. It haunted me. My hope was that writing about it—forcing myself to record the whole disgraceful story—would put it to rest for me.

It's about Bernice Bergman. She and I were friends for years. She became, at my invitation, one of my small circle at university, though she was rather different from the rest of us. More ... serious. Even when still in her teens, she was seriously intellectual. Although I considered myself intellectual, I thought she was rather too much so. Too much—I can bring myself to say now—for any of us genuinely to *like*. But we never excluded her from anything we did together as a group.

The seven of us continued for some years after graduating to meet often, for coffee, walks, visits to National Trust manor houses and famous gardens, Sundays on the beach at Brighton. Whatever we did together, wherever we went, Bernice was with us, as *belonging* as anyone else. *Why* since we didn't really like her? Because we were nice people. And ... well ... to be frank (and strange as it may sound now), we felt sorry for her. None of us ever said so, but we did, for reasons I'll explain. And anyway, *why not*? It wasn't so hard to be in her company. Bernice was never disagreeable. Far from it. She was perfectly amiable. It was just ... *how she was*—not *charming*, not *appealing*. And the way she ... interacted ... with people, being either too quiet in a gathering and not contributing much or doing the opposite by *going on and on* talking too much, too long.

And it was also, frankly, her appearance. She was ... unfeminine. You could even say severe. She wasn't the ideal girlfriend to arrive at a party with. She could "turn off the talent," as Suzanne Metcalf let slip to me once, meaning the men of course, but laughing apologetically as soon as she'd said it. I ... we ... assumed that Bernice would never marry, that

she was *doomed* to spinsterhood and—almost as certainly—lifelong virginity.

How did she look? She was the tallest of us. Her black hair, with a blueish light in it, was straight and smooth, cut neatly to the level of her earlobes. Her skin was white, like that famous white Italian marble. She had a long neck and a flat chest—a hollow chest it seemed, because she was slightly stooped. (Something to do with her spine, since her childhood.) Her eyes were so dark they were nearly black, and her glasses made them seem to protrude. Because of her myopia she would come too close to you to see your face better when you were standing alone with her. If you instinctively took a small step back, she advanced close again. You got the impression that she was peering into you. She had very long legs, abnormally thin, which made it seem that she strutted like a bird.

But I don't want to give the impression that she was a *freak*. She was just a bit odd. In fact, her features were fine, and if it hadn't been for that oddness about her—the seemingly stiff gait, the round shoulders, those slightly magnified eyes, and most of all her lapses into a sort of *pressing intensity*—she could be described as ... well, her face itself, though not alluring, not sexy, did have a sort of beauty.

It was the *pressing intensity* that was off-putting. And I was the one she *pinned down* most often, and longer than any of the others. She liked to inform, to examine, to question, to analyze, to explain—always in a good-natured way, but persistently. Exhaustively. *Exhaustingly*. “You see, Kath, there are *these* points that cannot be overlooked ... ” She just couldn't let a subject go. She held me in Oxford Street once for nearly an hour telling me, against the roar of traffic, how and why she disagreed with Hegel (very cleverly, it's true, and her memory was amazing), and she would have gone on, she said, to tell me why she was amused by Kierkegaard if she hadn't had to hurry off to an appointment.

I was always tactful with her. Though I didn't accept every one of her invitations to a *tête-à-tête*, I did often spend time alone with her, and I did listen to her.

She was interested in an astonishing number and variety of subjects. Economics, history, mathematics, physics, politics, philosophy, linguistics, etymology, literature, music, astronomy ... Unlike the rest of us, she had mastered French at school, and while she was at university majoring in maths and physics, she taught herself classical Greek. She played the viola. An amateur quartet she was part of gave free lunch-hour concerts at schools and retirement homes, and she performed solo at charity functions in hotels and church halls. She said of her playing that it was "often good, but never as good as I'd like it to be" –although she practised for at least an hour every day before breakfast, she told me.

She subscribed to specialist periodicals, scholarly monthlies and quarterlies concerned with books, art, politics, and more, in French as well as English. When she hosted us all together, reciprocally, twice a year, for a Sunday brunch in her book-crammed three rooms (plus a luxuriously fitted kitchen, which she said she "never used for cooking, only for making tea and coffee and re-heating bought meals in the microwave"), on the second floor of a large terraced Victorian house in Kensington, we'd see the magazines stacked at one end of the long table which was her desk when it was not needed for the buffet spread (supplied by a caterer).

She belonged to academic societies. She attended public lectures on almost anything. She even went to hear talks on parapsychology and Sufism and took a few classes in transcendental meditation. She explained to me, at some length, why she'd dropped "all that mysticism". "Open mindedness is sensible," she concluded, "but skepticism is indispensable." (She could and often did come up with short pithy sayings, some of which have stuck in my memory.)

After she had read something or heard a lecture, she longed to talk to the writer or speaker, usually to explain why she disagreed. She wrote to authors but seldom got a reply. And she didn't often manage to engage the attention of a lecturer packing up to leave the hall. So the longing was almost always frustrated. She made do with telling me—alone of our little crowd—what had been asserted and why it was right or disappointing. I would try to concentrate on what she was saying, all the while regretting that I was launched on a time-consuming session. A chunk of a morning could be lost to me as I listened to her expounding her opinion of something I did not care much about. Only *sometimes* she genuinely held my interest. And if I had read the book or heard the lecture that she laid out on the dissecting slab, I could turn her monologue into a discussion. I liked to, actually. In truth, she never said anything trite, she only said *too much*. When I paid attention I could learn things that might stay with me—things I might even pass on to someone else.

Once I invited her to see a play with me—I forget now what it was—because I unexpectedly had a spare ticket and both the first two I asked were otherwise engaged that evening. “All right then, I’ll ask Bernice,” I thought, and did. I was careful to meet her there, not arrange for either of us to pick up the other, knowing that she would sit in a car outside her house or mine for a weary time talking about the play if we did not part as soon as we emerged from the theatre. Not that her opinion of the play wouldn’t be worth hearing. It would just be too long.

She worked for a huge financial institution *and* found the time to produce a dissertation and get a post-graduate degree in economics. We liked writing “Doctor B. Bergman” on the envelopes of birthday cards and thank-you notes. I think at that point we all felt a little proud of being her friend—while still feeling no less ... how best to put it? ... *charitable* towards her. We did talk about her when for some

reason she was unable to be with us, but we didn't *criticize* her. Not *ensoriously*, I mean. No one ever said she could be exasperating, or that she was a bore. I believe we all *wanted* to like her. Because, as I said, we were nice. Or if we were not *very* nice, at least we were not ... I mean, I was pretty sure none of us was actually *unkind*.

What did we say about Bernice? That it was wonderful how she found time to do all she did. "Don't forget she never has a date," Diane Bialsky pointed out once, and hastily added, "I only know that because she told me. I don't think she was joking."

"Or has her hair styled or her nails done," Suzanne said, but not in a deploring way. Just telling it as it was.

"She doesn't care very much how she looks," said Aadita MacTaggart, who is half Indian and was the most beautiful among us (though Felicity Maher was more glamorous). "It's just not interesting to her. And she's right, of course. All sorts of things are more important."

Actually, Aadita was mistaken. I didn't correct her but I knew that Bernice was not uncaring about how she looked. At our informal get-togethers she was dressed like the rest of us, comfortably in jeans, cotton shirts or sweaters. But I saw her, as the others did not, when I went to those lectures in clubs and guildhalls, and when I met her now and then on a working day for a quick lunch or early evening cocktails. I saw her wearing tailored suits with silk blouses. Expensive things—though all in drab colours that did nothing to brighten her generally dull appearance. She looked neat but never chic. Those of us who had to be careful about our weight would have loved to be as slender as she was. Though not as *flat*. Flatness, it occurred to me, was one of her chief characteristics. Her body was flat, her shoes ("Ferragamo," she told me when I asked) were flat, her voice was flat.

Her full-length concert dress—which I remember well because I went to hear her perform almost every time she told me she would be playing—was black and high-necked. It was a garment a nun could have worn, its austerity relieved only by a diamond—a real diamond—brooch just under the right side of the mandarin collar. She wore the same dress and ornament at her concerts for years, from her first term at university to at least the year after she became a Somebody with responsibility in the world of her career. And really, why would she need another? It met the need, it conformed to the convention, it was right, it *worked* for her. The starkness of her black-and-white look—and her height—made her a striking figure on the platform. She never wore make-up. But once, as she was taking a bow, I noticed, from the front row, that her cheeks were pinkish, and I wondered whether from pleasure or a blush—before deciding that it could only be from pleasure, so I clapped a little harder and a little longer because ... because—please believe me—I *did want* Bernice Bergman to be happy.

I seldom went back of the platform to tell her I'd enjoyed the performance. I'd usually hurry off home and send her an enthusiastic note next day. It was on one of the rare occasions when I did go "behind" to speak to her that I said how pretty her brooch was and asked her was the diamond real. "Yes," was all she said in reply, and went on to talk about the music. So I missed the opportunity to ask if it was inherited—from a grandmother perhaps? (Her parents were alive, retired to somewhere in Italy.) Or was it a gift, and if so from whom and why? Most likely she'd bought it for herself.

Soon after she won her doctorate, Bernice got a new job that paid her more than anyone else among us had any realistic hope of in our near futures. It was something fearfully dry, needing her to deal with a lot of statistics. For that too we simultaneously admired and pitied her—and *for that* we could openly declare our pity to each other because it was the job



we were criticizing, not her. Bernice herself didn't say much about it, fortunately, even to me. Probably, we assumed, it didn't greatly interest her, but it gave her the means to do what she enjoyed. Interested in it or not, she must have been good at it, because she rose rapidly in the firm, and after she'd been there for little more than two years could afford to fly first class to exotic places for her holidays and stay at famous hotels. How did we know where she stayed? We would ask and she would tell, saying the names casually. Not at all in a boastful way. That would have been utterly unlike her. She would hold forth about the birds and beasts of a foreign land, its monuments and museums, its history, its rate of inflation, the music and food and customs of the people, but had nothing to say about the details of the accommodation—which some among us would have liked to know.

"So she does enjoy luxury," Diana said to me. "We all thought her taste was austere, but ... well, aren't you surprised?"

I said I was, but I was fibbing. Because I knew about the diamond. And the others should have adjusted their perception of her when, almost as soon as she began to earn a six-figure income, she had bought a sleek, superbly elegant, conspicuously luxurious, burgundy-red Bentley. She didn't speak of it to us, and none of us as far as I know ever asked her to. (We seldom deliberately raised a subject with Bernice for fear of "starting her off".) But "why" was a question to poke and ponder when she wasn't with us.

"She wouldn't have bought it for show-off," Diane said.

We all shook our heads. "Never," we confirmed.

"She drives about the country quite a lot," Aadita said. "It's her work. Meetings all over the place. I know she was in Edinburgh last week for a meeting with some politicians. Bernice would choose a car for its reliability. Don't you think?"

“Quite regardless of its looks,” I agreed.

“And regardless of its cost,” Suzanne added.

“It just happens to look gorgeous,” Aadita said. And we all nodded. We were only giving Bernice the respect that was her due.

“Do you think she enjoys all the perks of her job?” Diane asked me. (They all knew I saw Bernice more often than anyone else did, so they assumed my opinion would be more reliable.) “There must be parties, receptions, dinners.”

“I don’t know if she enjoys them,” I admitted. What I did not say but thought, was: “She might enjoy them, but anyone stuck with her might not.” And it is likely that the same thought went through the minds of the others.

There were questions that I’m sure we all would have liked answers to but never asked aloud. In my thoughts, whenever Bernice arose in them, those questions recurred. Had she ever been in love? Had an affair? *Was* she still a virgin? Was she a suppressed lesbian? (Not that we would have had any feelings against that. None whatsoever.)

The one among us who gave most consideration to appearance, image, style, clothes, was Felicity. Clothes were her vocation. She was a costume designer for plays and operas. For herself she made copies of famous designers’ unaffordable dresses. And she was the first of us to become engaged to be married.

Soon after she told us she was engaged—asking us to keep it secret for some unrevealed and unfathomable reason—we gave Felicity a “kitchen shower”. We didn’t know that it was wholly unnecessary. She’d told us nothing about her future husband, and when we made the offer she didn’t decline it—for some equally unfathomable reason. We turned up with our gifts at her quite small but pretty house in Islington. I brought her a

cocktail shaker and a set of twelve martini glasses. Bernice brought her a latest-model electric mixer-dicer-masher-peeler-juicer with its array of attachments—and explained at length how the mechanism was able ingeniously to vary its motions according to the use it was put to. Felicity kept still while Bernice talked, almost certainly thinking of something else, such as “when will this come to an end?” but occasionally nodding politely or mumbling “mm-hmm”.

We sat at a dining table decorated beautifully with silk lilies and real fern, and sipped teas made of herbs or fruit, and popped tiny replicas of eclairs and madeleines into our chatting mouths. We drank four bottles of Asti Spumante out of tulip glasses, crooned a dreadful old-school song feeling sentimentally the sweetness of friendship, then followed Felicity upstairs to her workroom at the top of the house to see the dress she had made for her forthcoming engagement party. It was on a tailor’s dummy, one of four standing each on its only leg in front of a shelf holding a row of starkly white polystyrene heads, some bare, some with wigs, some with wigs and hats.

She asked for our “frank opinions” of the dress.

“I copied a model I liked at this year’s shows in Milan. I saw a film of them. I’m not sure how it will go down in London.”

We all declared the dress “adorable,” except maybe Bernice. I didn’t notice whether she said anything or not. And then Felicity opened a wardrobe and brought out a fur coat that her fiancé had given her the day after he’d put sapphires and diamonds on her finger—which we’d exclaimed over downstairs while beginning to revise our vision of Felicity’s likely future.

“He’s not exactly handsome,” Felicity had told us. “You’ll see when you meet him at the engagement party. His name’s Bruce, did I tell you? He’s fifteen years older than I am. He’s been

married before, but they had no children, and it's been more than five years since they divorced. "

"Bruce is obviously not pushed for a penny," Eleanor Unwin remarked as she stroked the mink. "But you won't be able to wear it of course. Some animal-rights loony will spray it with paint the moment you appear on the street in it."

"I won't be on the street in it," Felicity said. "I'll be in his Rolls."

"Let me put it on?" Suzanne asked.

"Sure," Felicity said. "You'd look good in it. ... There, didn't I say?"

Suzanne pouted haughtily at her image in a long triple mirror.

"Anyone would look good in it!" Diane said. Suzanne took off the coat and handed it to her. But though she held it up to admire it, Diane didn't put it on. "It's too heavy for me," she said. "Here, you try it, Bernice."

"No, it's okay," Bernice said, shaking her head slightly and putting up a hand to mean stop.

"Come on," Diane cajoled her, and she heaved it up on to Bernice's shoulders. She seized one of Bernice's wrists and pushed her arm into a sleeve, then did the same with the other arm.

Bernice did not go to the mirror. She scanned our faces for information.

And we gazed back at her, our expressions blank, giving, we hoped, nothing away. There Bernice Bergman stood in the bulky black fur, the neat head on its long neck protruding from the top of it, a length of thin legs supporting it. If the fur had been feathers, the look couldn't have been more suggestive of an emu.

We dared not let our eyes meet each other's, fearing to betray what we surely all felt—a throb of forbidden *Schadenfreude*. Is there a spring of *spite* in every human heart? Was there one of us who did not feel it rise in her?

Felicity spoke up. A saviour! “No. It's not the right style for you, darling.” She helped take the coat off. “But come over here,” she went on, smiling, and beckoning with her ringed hand. “Please, Bernice? Just for a moment?”

Bernice took a stiff step or two towards her.

Felicity pulled a chair away from its position in front of a dressing-table. “Sit here – and turn your head a little this way towards the window. I'll need the light.”

Again Bernice did as her friend asked.

Felicity carefully took off Bernice's glasses, folded them and laid them on the dressing-table. She put two fingers under Bernice's chin, lifted it slightly, then reached for a tray of colours and a small brush. Gently she stroked a soft rose powder on to Bernice's cheeks. She stepped back, put her head on one side, and nodded. “Nice,” she said. She took up a tube of lipstick. “Open your mouth just a little,” she said. We were all transfixed, looking at Bernice where she sat with her head tipped slightly back, her face towards the light, allowing it to be decorated. I remember I thought at that point, “If Bernice sees what a little make up can do for her, she might start using it.” The colour on her lips was an intense red. “Close your eyes,” Felicity asked or ordered her. Bernice closed her eyes. Her eyelids were made olive green. It was an ugly colour. “No,” Felicity said. “That's too strong. Unless I make the blush stronger.” Again she worked on the cheeks, making them redder. Still Bernice did not glance at the mirror. “Oh,” Felicity said, laughing lightly, “d'you know what, Bernice? I meant to make you up as if for a date, but it seems I'm making you ready for the stage. Well, okay. That's

what I'll do then." Smiling broadly, laughing short laughs, she extended the red on Bernice's cheeks into two round discs, taking the colour all the way to the ears and the jawbone. She stepped back to appraise her handiwork and burst into a guffaw. That made the others laugh loudly too, with hoops and gasps, as much perhaps at Felicity's laughter as at the bizarre thing she was doing. I *did not* laugh. I was not even smiling any more. I was ... aghast. Felicity took up the lipstick again. I almost shouted, "No! Don't!", but I did not move, I did not speak. (Why?) She smeared the lipstick round Bernice's mouth, up to the nostrils and down over the chin—and there Bernice remained, sitting and letting her do it. Not once did she pull away or utter a sound. Felicity could hardly catch her breath, swaying forward and back, and wiping away tears of mirth with a wrist. And still her victim stayed in the same position, not uttering a sound, her smeared mouth slightly open, her gaze steady on her assailant.

Felicity stopped laughing abruptly, and as though driven helplessly by urgent purpose, took a few hurried steps to the shelf behind the dummies in search of something more to ginger up the exciting game. Her hands hovered over the polystyrene heads and fell upon a curly red wig. She snatched it up, dashed back to Bernice—who still had not moved—and tugged the thing down over her victim's glossy black hair. It was an attack. I hated it. Truly, I could almost have wept for Bernice. And the others? Their laughter died down but one or two made laughing sounds, breathily, nervously, in short bursts. I looked from one to the other. No one met my eyes. Diane and Suzanne were both covering their mouths with their hands to stifle laughter—or words—and only Aadita, hunching her shoulders and clasping her hands tightly together, seemed to be distressed.

And Felicity was not done. To consummate her act, she took up the lipstick again, brought her grinning face down close to Bernice's, and dabbed a spot of red on the tip of her nose.

She straightened and turned to look at us ... for appreciation? None of us moved or spoke. We stared back at her.

Finally, *finally* they were all as appalled as I was.

Bernice—or the grotesque caricature, the living lampoon that malice had made of her—remained seated, moving only her head to look at us.

Our faces, our silence told Felicity she had gone too far. “I couldn’t help it,” she pleaded, her lips trembling slightly. “Sorry, but the temptation was too strong. And look ... I mean, doesn’t she ... make a great clown?”

No one answered. We just stood there, not even glancing at “the clown,” as Felicity went on searching face after face, her own turning red.

Then I too searched those faces, wanting someone ... Aadita? Eleanor? ... to meet my eyes and show anger, to ally with me against ... the outrage. They were in various shapes of horror or embarrassment. Suzanne’s was in a rictus, a stretch of the mouth that was—far from a smile—a distinct grimace of disgust. Diane’s lips hung loosely, stupidly open. Eleanor held a hand flat over her mouth. Aadita put both her hands over her eyes, unwilling—as were all of them—to meet mine. I turned back to Bernice—and found her looking calmly, directly, at me. I felt my cheeks grow hot and knew that I too must be blushing. But why? I had done nothing. I hadn’t even laughed.

“Bernice ...,” I blurted, and reached out, taking a step towards her. Upon which she rose from the chair, lifted off the curly red wig and placed it on the dressing table. She put on her glasses and went to the door, not slowly but not hurriedly either, opened it, and half turning towards us called lightly, “Bye now,” and was gone. Nobody replied. We heard her steps on the stairs. Nobody went after her. We heard the front door open and close. I hurried to the window and the others followed me. We watched our friend Bernice cross the street to

her Bentley. She did not look up to see if we were there. When she'd closed the car door we could not see her, the windows being opaque from the outside, but we went on watching until the car was out of sight.

Then I too called a brief "Bye, everyone," and hurried down and out to my Volvo.

As I started off I said aloud, "I hate Felicity!" When I turned into the street where I lived, I said aloud as if I'd just had a revelation, "Actually, I hate them all. They're all swine. All of them." Lying on my back in bed that night, I suddenly mumbled, "Oh god I hate myself!" I switched off the bedside light and lay for a while staring into the dark—then confessed aloud: "The truth is, I hate Bernice Bergman too! She's also to blame. Because ... in plain truth ... she's an unutterable bore. She deserved it. What she got. Didn't she? Yes. She deserved what she got."

I thought it probable that I would never hear from Bernice again. That none of us would. If she does call me, I planned, I'll respond just as I always did, but I'll not call her. A month went by and she did not call. I asked myself why I should care. After all, I had not—or only sometimes—enjoyed her company.

I felt no inclination to call any of the others. And none of them called me. We were avoiding each other.

I learned at the hairdresser's—my hair stylist told me—that Felicity (whom I had sometimes encountered there but was glad not to that day) had cancelled her engagement party, though not her engagement.

Two or three weeks after that Bernice called me at last, from her office as I was sipping my early morning cup of tea in bed. She invited me to join her for dinner in the Lobster Bar at the Savoy. I accepted without hesitation—why not?—and as soon as I'd finished talking to her realized that I felt a



sense of relief, though it took me a while to acknowledge *from what*. It was not just because it meant that our friendship was still on. I had told myself that I wouldn't care if it was over. No—the feeling of relief was because the shame—my shame—had been lightened. Not extinguished, just lightened.

I resolved to listen to her that evening however uninterested I was in what she dilated on and no matter for how long.

I was deliberately a few minutes late, not to seem eager for a reunion, and found her waiting for me at a corner table. We did not touch cheeks as we had usually done.

As soon as I was seated opposite her, she asked, "How have you been?" and did not wait for an answer before going on to say, "There's a splendid production of the Barber at Covent Garden. If you haven't seen it yet, don't miss it."

She was still explaining just what was so good about it when our wine was poured and still when our lobster orders arrived—the meat taken out of the shell at her request and quite to my satisfaction as I hate wrestling with those sharp shells. I nodded. I asked a question or two. I vowed I would go and see the opera as soon as I could get a booking.

When our plates were removed, she ordered Armagnac for both of us without asking me if I wanted it. She turned from the waiter back to me and said, with no change of tone, "And now I'll tell you why I was disappointed in you, Katherine."

Taken by surprise, I stared at her speechlessly for a few moments. Then I said, "I think I know why, Bernice."

"You do? Oh. Right. Well, that's good. I'd hoped that you would, eventually."

"Bernice, you must remember—I did not laugh. Not all of us did. I don't think Aadita laughed, or only at first. I think she was as ... " I didn't know whether to say "outraged" or

“upset” and settled for “stunned as I was.”

“It didn’t matter to me what the others did,” Bernice said impatiently. “That’s what I suddenly realized you didn’t get about me. I suddenly realized that. It’s you who disappointed me. Not them. You’re the only one I’ve thought of as my friend. I did believe that we understood each other. In the partial way people can understand each other. So let me put it this way. I believe we *sufficiently* understood each other. You’re the one—the only one—who came to my concerts. You’re the one I had real conversations with. Because you can evaluate ideas, make your own judgments. I felt, when we talked, I wasn’t squandering my own thoughts. So I hoped—I expected—to see that you were as ... mildly amused, okay, but ... *uncaring* as I was. But no. You pitied me.”

“I was appalled by what Felicity was doing.”

“You pitied me.”

“All right, if you want to put it that way, I pitied you. And you feel that was—what? Demeaning?”

“Oh no. I wasn’t humiliated, I was disappointed. As I said. Disappointed in *you*. You really let me down. I don’t mind being pitied by people who are not my intellectual equals. I tolerate them. I have to. They’re a very big majority. But I thought you were, you see, someone I could meet on my own level.”

“Well ... what do you feel I should have felt? Was there something I could have done, or should have done ...?”

“You might have spoken to me. About something quite different and apart from the nonsense that was going on.”

“If that’s what you wanted of me, you could have said something. *You* could have spoken to *me*. Why didn’t you?”

“I realized as soon as some of them started getting

hysterical, losing control of themselves, that it was a moment to see what you—”

“A moment to test me? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I suppose I am. I suppose that was it. Yes. I couldn’t see your face clearly, but I could see *you*. If you’d spoken to me—about anything—the day’s headlines or whatever. If you’d even just shrugged at me” —she demonstrated a shrug— “I would have shrugged too. If you’d separated yourself—gone to the window and looked out. The episode needed to be *diminished*. Made light of. You see, I had really thought that you—”

I seized her accusation.

“So I don’t measure up to your expectations of me? The others you’ll take as they come, but I must prove myself worthy of you?’

“I wouldn’t put it like that ... I’m not saying ... “

I got up. I opened my purse and dealt a few ten-pound notes on to the table. “That should cover my bill,” I said. “Good-bye, Bernice.”

I strode out.

And I walked to my car with the figurative—perhaps a literal—spring in my step. I was free of a silly shame. I was free of—yes—*pity*. I was free of a moral weight that I had borne for years. I would never again have to endure one of Bernice’s interminable monologues.

But in the days that followed, a teasing thought kept recurring to me. So all that time when we were virtuously condescending to her, *she was condescending to us?*

Well, to the others. She’d esteemed me—more than I deserved. I knew that, and it hurt. If I hoped never to meet her again—and hope so I did, though I told myself it was a matter of

indifference to me whether we met or not—it wasn't because she had offended me, as I pretended in the Lobster Bar, but because she still, even after she told me how I had disappointed her, *still* had expectations of me *which I could never live up to*.

Over the next few months, our group undramatically dispersed. Felicity moved with Bruce to New York, where they would have their wedding (to which, she wrote on postcards, we were all "of course" invited if we should "find" ourselves in America.) The rest of us kept in touch for a while with telephone calls and a few coffee mornings—none of which was attended by everyone—as if to prove to ourselves nothing much had changed. But as the years passed, contact was kept by Christmas cards, with perhaps a line or two of news about a wedding, a birth, a change of job, a move to a larger or smaller house. And there were moments of feigned delight when two of us "bumped into each other" in the street or at some event. Or at the hairdresser's. There I sometimes saw Eleanor. We would smile as if delighted, wave, pull heads out of dryers to say a few words. She or I said "lunch" once or twice, but we didn't do it. Neither of us wanted to risk the other bringing up *what had happened*.

Occasionally Eleanor had a snippet of news about one of the old circle. She had seen this one on the beach at Cannes, that one at the opening of an art gallery. And it was from her I learned that *Bernice had married*. Yes, our burden, our moral cause and failure, our guy, our butt, our laughing-stock, married an officer in the RAF. "Air Commodore Something," Eleanor said. "A handsome man, so I heard, big and handsome, and ... I think ... from a wealthy family." She frowned and pressed a forefinger and thumb to her forehead, as if striving to remember what someone had told her when she wasn't paying enough attention. It was of little importance to her. I pretended it was of little importance to me.

Years later I learned from another source that they had four

sons. And last year I read in the *Telegraph* that Dr. Bernice Bergman (she kept her maiden name, as I have too) was awarded a CBE for the work she had done heading an inquiry into something to do with higher education, producing conclusions that were discussed in newspapers, on television, on radio, on the internet, as the findings and recommendations of “the *Bergman Report*”.

Are you wondering, as I am myself, if envy as well as remorse has driven me to tell this story? And why tell it now? Well, a few days ago the *Daily Mail* published a picture of Bernice Bergman and her husband attending a state banquet at the White House in Washington, D.C. I have the paper here on my desk. Her name, but not his, is in the headline. She stands beside him, slightly stooping. The hair of both is grey – hers longer than it used to be—and both are smiling, though not broadly. He, a civilian now, looks—yes—handsome in black bow tie, stiff white shirt front, satin lapels. She—not as thin as I remember her, but still amazingly slender for an aging mother of four—is elegant in a close-fitting ankle-length crimson dress. The diamond brooch glitters near her right shoulder, matched by a pair of long diamond earrings. Her glasses are narrow, and tinted so her eyes are invisible. She really should have put on lipstick to match the dress, but her lips are as severely natural as they were all those years ago except on that one ... *everlastingly* ... shameful afternoon.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was

Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *City Journal* (US); *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe); *Encounter*, *The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Salisbury Review*, *Standpoint*(UK). She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is [www.theatheistconservative.com](http://www.theatheistconservative.com).

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