

‘WHAT JEWELS WILL you be wearing tonight, Mother?’

The question was typical of Coco and it was equally characteristic of Kitty Jeffreys that she should take it seriously.

‘I’d thought of the topaz necklace,’ she said, ‘but perhaps it’s a little too much ... pearls might be better—the ones your father gave me when we were engaged.’

‘Not your *black* pearls, then?’ Coco sounded disappointed, excessively so for a man of forty-two. His mother at sixty-two was even better preserved and they made a handsome and interesting pair. I, at twenty-eight, felt old beside them, but then I had never had their self-absorption and passionate interest in what are usually regarded as trivialities.

‘Pearls always look right,’ I said politely, ‘even artificial ones, though of course one can usually tell,’ I added hastily, knowing that Kitty’s were real. She had managed to bring away all her jewellery, as well as many financial assets, when she and her son had left their island in the Caribbean after the death of her husband and, more importantly, the election of an all-black government. It had seemed suitable at first, though now it was turning out to be less so, to return to the West Country town where Kitty had been born and where her sister still lived. Coco, with his degree from one of the more obscure American universities, had been awarded a research fellowship in Caribbean Studies at the university. The local residents were worried about the influx of West Indians into the town and money had been given for a study.

‘I have to make *recommendations*,’ Coco said, his long, useless fingers caressing the side of his glass. He now began to speculate on what he would wear for the party.

Polo shirts were out now, he said regretfully, for that style had admirably suited his tall, elegant figure. The high white polo collar had framed his thin, rather swarthy face like a cravat and this, with his dark curly hair carefully brushed forward, had given him something of the air of a Regency dandy.

‘It’s only a gathering of provincial academics,’ I reminded him. ‘Most of them will be wearing dark suits and clean shirts. Professor Maynard always gives this kind of party at the beginning of the autumn term. It’s quite a tradition, but he’s retiring next year, so I suppose this will be the last.’

Kitty pouted. She couldn’t bear anything sad or coming to an end. She was said to have been a great beauty when, at eighteen, she had married the romantic stranger from the Caribbean over on a business trip. Even now she could look very pretty, though it was the prettiness of the twenties rather than the starker beauty of today. Coco had confided to me that she had sent her hair-piece to be styled at the best of the local hairdressers. He asked, a little anxiously I thought, how I was going to do *my* hair.

‘Oh, I’ll just wash it,’ I said defensively. ‘Straight hair is best left as it is.’

‘And yours always looks charming,’ he said smoothly.

Barbara Pym  
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