

## Featherweight

By Janet Gilbert

"And here's one called Rattlesnake Roll," said Catherine, "but with no serpent whatsoever! Just a 'mélange of crab, octopus, cream cheese, smelt egg, avocado and cucumber.' Boring description. Perhaps I could punch up the menu for them."

"Perhaps," said Alaric.

"Your turn, dear."

Alaric sighed. They once spent happy evenings sharing wine lists with each other, glorious things filled with poetry and nuance. He actually kissed Catherine for the very first time right after she read—in a suitably breathless voice—the entry for a lush Cabernet Sauvignon simply dripping with the nectar of honey.

But now Catherine was pregnant, and those lovely winey words just made her thirst for forbidden fruit. Raw fish was another no-no, but she never yearned for sushi, so here they were, turning Takahashi's bill of fare into a kind of performance art.

"Alaric? Everything all right?" asked Catherine.

He looked at his wife sheepishly. Another Easter Island moment, as his wife called them, when his spinning brain turned his rugged face into granite.

"Forgive me, Catherine. I just thought of a possible ending to Chapter Five. A cliffhanger, as it were."

"Good show! Plots can be such a pain."

"Indeed," said Alaric. "Would you mind if I..."

"Of course not," Catherine assured him from their coziest chair, the plush olive green with the ottoman. "We ink-stained wretches must strike while the iron's hot, to quote the time-worn cliché. Have at it, sir."

Alaric got up from their second coziest chair (the shabby beige with no ottoman) and crouched solicitously before Catherine's feet.

"Thank you for understanding, love. Do you need anything first? A hot milky drink or some of that marrow chutney you love so much?"

Catherine giggled. She had craved marrow chutney exactly once, in her second month, but Alaric still remembered.

"I'm fine, sweetie. I'll just knit a little and turn in early." Catherine pulled up her workbasket and set to turning the heel on a "stay-put" baby bootie in 2-ply yarn.

Alaric shuffled to his study and closed the door. Truth be told, the ending of Chapter Five was still a mystery to him. Back in his book reviewing days, Alaric was never at a loss for words: harsh words, haughty words, words that ripped an author to little bits, but now his editors were bright young things who demanded a cool, dispassionate tone from their contributors.

"Surely you understand, Mister Lydgate," reasoned Ms. Allsopp, the new *Currents in Culture* chief with the long ginger pigtails. "Times have changed, and so have writing styles."

"Now you can start that novel!" said Catherine when he glumly shared the news. "You have the most wonderful material, I've always thought."

To his surprise, Alaric did indeed have the "knack," and now he happily wrote thrillers set in the cutthroat world of anthropology. Eminent blowhards he had known and loathed often popped up in titles like *The Kinship Diagram Killings* and *Mitsogo Murder Mask*. Catherine hadn't the heart to tell him that people rarely (actually, never) recognize themselves in print.

*What a curmudgeon I am*, he thought suddenly. *Some father I'll be.*

Goo Goo and Gaa Gaa had never been in his vocabulary. He had no nieces or nephews or really any close family, only his pushy sister Gertrude, now living in Africa with her friend Hortense. And thank goodness for that. Gertrude would surely nag Catherine to have the baby outdoors, behind the lilac bush to the sound of drumbeats.

Try as he might, Alaric simply could not picture himself as someone's papa, and neither could his friends and neighbors, judging from their reactions at the news.

"Oh! How...nice," said Mabel Swan, the stunned widow next-door.

"Really? At your age?" blurted her sister Rhoda Wellcome.

"Say good-bye to your career," sniffed Dashwood from the colonial office. "Children do suck the life out of one. That's why I've never procreated."

Everyone was thrilled for Catherine, of course. She was sweet and funny and smart and loving and infinitely patient; in other words, a perfect mother-to-be. Their child would be lucky to have her.

*And then there's me*, thought Alaric. Born grim, with a face to match. One of society's featherweights. Even his own mother called him weak.

But what if he could change all that? People changed all the time, they stopped drinking or smoking or telling off their boss. Surely he could train himself to look less forbidding! Jolly was a real stretch, but he could aim for pleasant, at least. A pleasant father in suburbia. The very thought made him smile all the way to the bedroom, and he kept smiling until he fell asleep, with Catherine snoring softly beside him.

The next day, Catherine was nursing a cup of Earl Grey at their breakfast table when Alaric bounded in, humming a happy little tune. She looked up with surprise. He could be quite grumpy before noon.

"So you did finish Chapter Five last night! Congratulations!" she said warmly.

"Not quite," admitted Alaric, "but no worries. Shall we take a turn along the river before porridge?"

"A walk sounds divine," sighed Catherine, patting her bump, "but a waddle isn't quite the same. Plus my feet hurt."

"Poor darling, shall I rub them for you?"

"Maybe later, dear. Now run along and get some nice fresh air. We need you strong and healthy for baby."

Alaric protested—he hated to leave her alone—but Catherine was insistent. He fetched his tweed jacket and went outside.

Across the street, elderly Mister Dulke was weeding the tulip bed while his angry little dog ran about. Alaric usually hurried past to avoid conversation (and a nip from Peaches) but his new “pleasant” regime required contact.

“Good morning, Dulke!” he called out cheerfully. “Basking in nature before the bacon-and-eggs, eh?”

Mister Dulke’s head shot up. Alaric Lydgate rarely greeted him, but there he stood, looking like he’d just won the National Lottery.

“Digging in the dirt is better than vitamins, I always say,” said Mister Dulke.

Peaches charged toward Alaric and nipped his hand. Alaric patted his little head, while Mister Dulke gawked at the sight.

“Sorry, mate, Peaches does get excited,” he said. “Will you and your lady get a dog when the heir arrives?”

Alaric shuddered at the thought, though he kept on smiling.

“Probably,” he lied, edging away.

“Children need a pooch,” Mister Dulke yelled after him. “Our five kiddies always had a bow-wow around the house.”

Alaric had a sudden inspiration. Maybe he could train a dog to remind him to smile! A little nip on the hand to ward off the Easter Island look. Alaric made a mental note to re-read Pavlov, and then headed for the bakery with the steamed-up windows.

Once inside, he gazed at the offerings in awe, like they were jewels in the Tower of London. It was the pleasant thing to do, after all.

“Everything looks delicious! How will I ever choose?” he marveled.

The short flushed woman behind the counter gaped at him. Mister Lydgate’s wife always did the talking while her husband hung his head nearby.

“Half a dozen cream scones, please,” said Alaric.

“Ah, a treat for the mum-to-be! Baby’s coming soon, right?” chattered the baker.

“Yes, very soon.”

“Well, my two tots simply thrived on sugar. Sure, fruit and veg are important, but sweet things keep them happy.”

“I’ll...I’ll tell my wife,” promised Alaric.

“Please give her my regards. She’ll be the perfect mum,” said the baker.

Alaric sincerely agreed. He paid her and darted out the door.

On the way home, Alaric gave his mouth a much-needed rest. No one was in the road and his cheeks hurt from so much pleasantness. Hopefully his facial muscles would soon adjust to their rigorous new workout.

Outside the Swan house, noted anthropologist Digby Fox unloaded two small children from his car. He looked a bit harried, but Alaric approached him anyway, for practice.

“Hello, Digby! Visiting your mother-in-law?” said Alaric.

“Yes, Mabel and Rhoda offered to watch our babes while Deirdre and I attend the paleoanthropology symposium in Bristol.”

“How kind of them,” said Alaric.

“We’re quite lucky,” agreed Digby, grabbing a little blue suitcase from the boot. “Finding childcare can be overwhelming, as you’ll soon discover.”

Alaric sighed despite his vow to remain upbeat.

“Fatherhood itself seems overwhelming,” he muttered. Digby set down the suitcase and looked directly at Alaric.

“Would you like some advice from a frazzled dad of two?” he asked gently.

Alaric cleared his throat and nodded.

“Just be yourself,” said Digby with conviction. “Through and through, always and forever, as the poets say.”

Alaric gruffly thanked him and headed for home. Catherine was still at the breakfast table, crossing out entries in a long list of baby names. Alaric put the kettle on and arranged the scones on her favorite “Rose Chintz” plate from the church jumble sale.

“Pfft! Why in the world did I ever consider ‘Fiona?’” snorted Catherine. “A name that instantly brings to mind a pallid girl with a sour expression. ‘Jasper’ is even worse! What if he’s born with a lisp? Children can be so cruel.”

Alaric laughed.

Catherine put down her pencil and looked wistfully at her husband.

“I’d like to name our daughter—and I’m convinced it’s a girl—after our mothers. What do you think? Shall she be Rosemary Prunella or Prunella Rosemary?”

Alaric winced. Prunella Hyde Lydgate was a stern sniffy woman he’d much prefer to forget.

“Rosemary sounds lovely, but Prunella makes my mouth pucker,” joked Alaric.

“It does, rather,” chuckled Catherine. “Have you a better idea?”

“Absolutely,” he beamed.



Rosemary Catherine Lydgate looked exactly like her name, with her blushing cheeks, rosebud mouth and pink-tipped toes. Her parents fell instantly in love with their beautiful precious angry squawky baby that refused to sleep at night, and only fitfully in the daytime.

“Rosemary is fine,” the doctor assured them. “Some infants are just, well, noisier than others. She’ll settle down sooner or later.”

But as sooner turned to later, Alaric’s “pleasant” persona transformed into constant anxiety. He desperately wanted to make Rosie happy, but how? She was far too young for a puppy or even a jam roly-poly from the steamed-up bakery. What was wrong with their little girl?

Alaric discovered the unfortunate answer late one night, when Rosie woke up screaming yet again. As he

lifted his yowling angel from her cot, she shot him an Easter Island look.

*This is my fault*, he suddenly realized. *Me and my gloomy DNA*.

Alaric rocked Rosie until she finally fell asleep, and then crept back to his study and donned his favorite Yoruba mask from Africa. Raking his fingers through its raffia beard never failed to soothe him.

Alaric sat at his desk for a long time, pondering the universe, until Rosie cried out again. He hurried to the nursery before she woke Catherine.

“Shh, little one. Mummy’s sleeping,” he whispered, picking her up.

Rosie stopped howling at once, and patted the stringy beard with one little hand.

“Daddy bought this mask in Africa,” he said softly. “Nice, isn’t it?”

Rosie gurgled with approval. Alaric walked her around the house until she dozed off again, her tiny fists filled with raffia.

The next morning, Professor Digby Fox pulled up to the Swan house with his children in tow. Granny Mabel came out to greet them.

“So which conference is it this time?” she asked brightly, feeling a bit used. There seemed to be so very many conferences.

“Human sexuality: past, present and future,” replied Digby. “A broad topic, to be sure, but utterly fascinat—”

“Good heavens!” hissed Mabel. “Look at that!”

Digby turned to see Alaric pushing a pram. He wore a resplendent African mask, most likely Bokongo, Digby thought.

“That poor infant will be traumatized,” scoffed Mabel. “What’s wrong with Mister Lydgate?”

Digby chuckled.

“Absolutely nothing, dear mother-in-law,” he said. “He’s just being himself.”

Alaric tenderly re-adjusted his little girl’s pink lacy blanket and leaned in close.

“Once upon a time in Africa, a tortoise had a pretty daughter,” he began.

Rosie goo goood, followed by a hearty gaa gaa. It was going to be a perfect day.