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Vocational Girl

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Extract

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Ninety-Three Days On

I RAN HOME, IN THE end. Not really ran all the way, I hailed a taxi: but it is fair to say that I fled for my life, who knows, maybe for more than my life, dressed only in Jimmy Choo cracked metallic silver four inch heels, no-crotch Wolford fishnets, beige cashmere jacket – sequined, Christian Lacroix, but well cutaway – and without my purse. Fear and anger propelled my flight. Mother told me once that I should never go to a party without the fare home: as it happened I had a folded twenty-pound note in my pocket.

The party – though that may not be quite the right word – was in Hampstead, a couple of miles away from where I live in Little Venice, by the canal. It's not really me to walk any distance by day let alone night, if only because my heels are so high, so it was just as well the money was to hand. Otherwise I might have killed the anger, decided escape was too much like hard labour, too much strain on the ankles, stayed, and been

destroyed. I don't need hindsight to know that I was within a sulphury whiff of it.

I had borrowed the £20 from the rent money, which I hide as cash between the leaves of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, on the grounds that no-one else but me is going to open it. I'd put it in the pocket of the Lacroix jacket at suppertime on June 21st, having perhaps some intuition of what was to come – a feeling of adventure in the air on that midsummer's night – where it was to stay until 20th September, the date of my flight.

I do love Lacroix. Not just for the pocket, I'm in his debt for that, but the way the clothes make you feel so extravagant, dramatic and luxurious: textures surprise and delight, discretion and glitter exult in tandem. I like to think that's my style.

During the ninety-three days of my dealings with Alden X and his painter friend, Ray, I could not focus on Wittgenstein, nor even on Kant's somewhat easier *Copernican Revolution* nor my twenty-four volumes of Jung's *Collected Works*. I was meant to be getting on with my PhD thesis on 'changes in the group psyche as created through faulty perceptions of reality as exacerbated by implicit distortions of meaning in the new lingua franca: Bill Gates' Microsoft'.

But during that summer, the year I turned twenty-six, if I turned the pages the words meant nothing: they hung alien and unconnected on the page. If I tried to

write nothing came. It worried me. Can the life of the flesh so undermine the life of the mind that one loses all powers of reasoning? Or interest in them? Or perhaps it's okay to take lust and intellect in shifts, and not to try to live a balanced life and kind of synthesize your own Prozac, like you're supposed to do.

At The Front Desk

I WORK PART-TIME IN ONE of London's plusher hotels, The Olivier in Covent Garden, and it was there at my post behind the reception desk that I first met Alden, on June 21st last year. At eleven that morning I had checked in a Mrs Matilda Weiss and her party. She traveled with a posse of three – nutritionist, personal trainer and lawyer. She had booked into our Premiere Suite, 406, the others into cheaper rooms on the second floor. Mrs Weiss was a botox-happy Manhattan matron and socialite in her fifties, passing for her thirties, newly divorced, slim as a rake; dressed in taupes with heavy gold hung here and there. She was not a pleasant person, and caused trouble from the start, demanding instant personal access to the chef for her nutritionist; and installed in her suite, sent down to demand black grapes instead of the white ones in the complimentary fruit bowl, banging on that they were too acid. Takes one to know one; she'd know all about acid. Some

guests never feel at home until they have registered a whole string of quite ingenious complaints.

Two hours later, at ten to one precisely, Alden came towards me in his wheelchair, broad-shouldered, energetic, cheerful, brown floppy hair, a man with bright-eyed film-star looks, though rather more in the square-jawed manly Warren-Beatty mould of yesterday, than today's softer, more troubled Tom-Hanks-ish look. Late thirties, I thought; wealthy. His suit was good, his wheelchair Italian and custom built. He had a paid companion to push it, a pasty young-old little man with an egg-shaped head, over-large, dark, watchful eyes and clammy hands, whom I was eventually to know as Lam.

I paged Suite 402 to tell Mrs Weiss that Mr Alden X was here for lunch and for my pains was rewarded with: 'Lunch – with that fucking crazy? He is joking? Tell him to shove his interior designs up where no sun shines, is that interior enough? Or can't he reach, sitting in a wheelchair?' and further words to this effect.

I held the phone further away from my ear but the contemptuous voice crackled on, the others now hearing it the better before I realised what I'd done. Lam frowned in concern – his lugubrious eyes seemed even panicky – but Alden just smiled and said quietly,

'Don't worry about it, kid. Just put the receiver down.'

So I did.

‘It’s an ill wind,’ said Alden. ‘Perhaps you’ll have a drink with me instead?’

I had to say yes, but not because he was disabled and might have interpreted any reluctance on my part as insult. I was curious. This is embarrassing, but I’m going to say it anyway: faced with a good-looking and vigorous man in a wheelchair one’s mind instantly goes to practicalities: can he, can’t he? Was he born like that or was there an accident? Will he get better or is it permanent? How does he manage? Does he confine himself to oral things; was the important part of him permanently limp, or even altogether gone? Perhaps it was part of his minder’s remit to hoist his master on to all fours so he could perform? Or did he just lie on his back? Or...what? I wanted to know. I needed to find out. Because I’m a philosopher, and trained to ask questions about the world of phenomena? Or my natural curiosity, like that which killed the cat.

I said we’d have to wait for the concierge to come back. Max was down in the kitchens trying to soothe the chef, who was still miffed because of the earlier insult to his white grapes, a special purchase – they had a particularly fine flavour and delicate skins – flown in from the Andes or wherever they grow them in June. My shift was technically over at one o’clock, but if Mr –?

‘Call me Alden,’ he said. ‘Alden X.’

– If Alden didn’t mind waiting five minutes or

so, my shift would be over and I'd be free, I said. Conversation with someone in a wheelchair is difficult. You have to talk down to them, as if they were a child. I rather wished I hadn't said yes, and then felt guilty for wishing it. Also, I was slightly miffed because he hadn't asked me to lunch but only for a drink. I know the girl behind reception can hardly expect to be treated with the same courtesy as a guest, but even so these social distinctions can make you paranoiac if you're on the wrong side of them.

He asked me what my name was and I said 'Joan Bennet,' and added that I was only temporary staff. I had a proper profession. He asked me what that was and I said I was a nursery school teacher. I was working extra hours at the Olivier to pay for a course in teenage counseling. He said that sounded very virtuous and I said I was.

What else was I to tell him? The truth? That my name is Vanessa d'A. and I have a double first in philosophy, and while working towards my PhD I earn money best as I may? Nothing puts most men off like too much class or cleverness in a woman. It's still true: they need to feel they're your superior. Best to come over as a nurse or a teacher, and there are no disappointments; everyone knows where they are and cocks rise uninhibited.

I am virtuous enough, in my way. My mother once told me that the only difference between a professional

girl and the others is that the first take money for sex and the rest don't. She's a lady vicar in the Church of England with her own vocation, so I take her word for it. She could even be a bishop one day if Synod ever gets its act together about female equality. I do not sell my body for a living. I see it as the temple of my soul, as my mother explains to me that it is, and so I respect it accordingly. It's just that a temple will need its roof mended and its doors and windows painted and the rest, which requires money. I am not cut out for regular employment. I'm useless with computers, and offices make me claustrophobic. I could set out to marry a rich man but that might have to limit my sex life, and I'm not ready for that quite yet.

I am what Max the concierge describes as a vocational, rather than a working girl. I like sex; I'm good at it, and sometimes I feel it's what I'm best at; what I feel I'm for.

Unaccompanied men, especially when in a strange land, are often at a loose end sometime of an evening: Max the concierge will point them in my direction: not too often – but once or twice a week or so is acceptable. I am a nice girl, a good girl and an educated girl: my face stays soft and vulnerable and the corners of my mouth turn upwards, not down. I am a rosy sort of person; friendly; people stop me to ask me the way, knowing I can be trusted to give a true answer. Rather too rounded for a catwalk model, though with a little

help from a seamstress I know I can get into their cast-offs: I have friends in the fashion houses. A little waist, full breasts, very long legs, shiny reddish hair – people ask me if I use henna but that's just the colour it is – slim thighs, little feet and pretty hands. I have not much to complain about.

If men care to give me gifts for services rendered that suits me very well. A couple of hours a day behind the desk at the Olivier pays peanuts but is a good way of making contacts. The hotel gets an excellent class of clientele – prices range from around £400 a night for an ordinary room without a river view, up to £2,000 for a suite. We are a favourite with EU officials, NGO senior staff, wealthy Americans, UN magnates and Japanese tourists; nothing too flashy or corrupt.

If I had been born Japanese, my natural habitat would have been in a tea house, as a geisha. Nothing too vulgar, nor up-front, but if the clients feel like sex as well as conversation – well so do I, and should they like to give me presents, I don't have a problem with it: my rent is high and I have to fund my own way through college. In the long term the only place I see for myself is in academe. Meanwhile there are my clothes to pay for – I have a princess's taste but a commoner's income. I hope I don't sound too defensive here. Because I frequently have sex without requiring or expecting payment: although, oddly, men often prefer to pay than not to pay. The transaction is less value-

loaded: no sense of emotional obligation is left drifting in the air. It is more like paying one's psycho-therapist: then it is clear that 'friendship' has been bought, and with a time limit.

In the Bound Beast and Bumpkin

ALDEN TELLS ME HE is a musician, an interior designer and an 'applied conceptual artist', and I say,'Quite the Renaissance man!' Which is slightly over-clever for Joan, and Lam suddenly speaks up in flat, nasal tones:

'Mr X – true Leonardo,' just as I'd forgotten he existed. Then Max comes back, says it's okay for me to go, and nods us over in the direction of the bar of the Bound Beast and Bumpkin, a designer pub which crouches in the lee of the Olivier, where its staff meet out of hours, a few drugs are brought and sold and high-class hookers congregate.

Max is tall, grizzled, lugubrious and around fifty: he is dapper and neat and self-contained and wears a red carnation. Max has a smooth line of talk which keeps guests happy and a dangerous glint in his eye which keeps staff docile. He is the outer and visible sign of the Hotel Olivier's dignity. His wife long since

learned to live without him: his love goes to the hotel. He started as a bell boy and is now head concierge and doubles at reception if required; he is the link between the hotel and the outside world; he knows every theatre, every restaurant, every call girl in town; he bribes and blackmails in the hotel's interests; he has a hot line to the local cop-shop; he has his favorites amongst the cab drivers; he takes a modest cut from everyone for putting business in other folks' way, as is his due, and sometimes boasts to me about the tens of thousands he has in cash beneath his bed.

'Except,' as he says rather unnecessarily, being a wary kind of person, 'it isn't really under my bed.'

Max seems to like me. I dress tastefully, even modestly, I'm cool and efficient behind his desk, and if I find myself in Larry's Bar at the hotel with a guest, after work, it is with Max's permission. I am well-spoken: I don't attract the wrong sort of attention. He once told me I was good for the bar trade. We get top film and music people, even writers, scientists, all kind of interesting sorts in, and super celebrity models too, so I took that as a compliment.

'Wheelchair access is better at the Beast than in Larry's,' says Max: it sounds ingenuous, but there is a subtext. What he means is that wheelchairs are not welcome in the hotel bar. The Olivier offers wheelchair access to all floors and public spaces, but the well-heeled public, though happy to pay lip service to the

blind, the deaf, the dumb, the physically and mentally incapacitated, does not want its nose rubbed in disability when it has its hair let down, enjoying itself.

Better if Max had said nothing. I felt quite upset on Alden's behalf. He had already that morning been snubbed by Mrs Weiss, and humiliated in front of me. Now his eyes were bright as if there were tears brimming just behind them. Maybe he was just blazing cross, but hiding it. I resolved to be as nice to him as I could, and on our way to the Bound Beast shook my hair loose from its pins, undid the top three buttons, pushed up the sleeves of my white ruched blouse, and by the time I sat down opposite his wheelchair and was finally able to engage with him on the level and not from a height, I felt we were kind of pals, on the same side, almost joined together at the hip in some way. I smiled at him as if he were God's gift to women – which I could see that, were he not in a wheelchair, he might very well be.

'You have an interesting smile,' he said. 'You're not as obvious as you pretend – I like that.' His voice was quizzical, strong and low and had a slight Yorkshire growl to it. He was at ease, so I was at ease. I felt honoured to be noticed, to be more than just essence of girl but girl with detail: girl fascination. But then I wondered if his flanks were thin and withered, or strong and firm like normal. How could I know? Would it matter? Probably not. As a child I used to rescue birds

the cat bought in, befriend the bullied, adopt African children and so on. I've always liked lame ducks. But then he wasn't acting lame at all.

So I wondered what he wanted. A drink with a nursery school teacher because his lunch date had fallen through? Company, any would do, and that was that? He was hardly the lonely type though: so why?

Lam brought drinks and chicken sandwiches with cash Alden handed him, put them in front of us, then went and sat by himself at another table and read his newspaper, not resentful, but humble like Uriah Heap; the role made him comfortable. So he acted as servant and not some kind of companion. The Leonardo comment was incidental. And he seemed uninterested in me. Perhaps he was gay? He had a small mouth and a tapered chin and a plaintive air of incipient victimhood. I was pretty sure about Alden's sexual orientation and he was the opposite of plaintive. If he was a victim, he asked for no favours because of it.

'A tenth of the price and twice as good as lunching in your hotel,' said Alden. He had a good appetite: broad white orthodontist-teeth bit into thick chunks of fresh crusty white bread. I nibbled at the chicken, leaving the bread. Personally I would rather have lunched at the Olivier. The mayo here was too sharp, out of a jar.

'It's not my hotel,' I giggled, and he put up his hands in a no contest gesture and made a face and grinned, then shook his head.'Thank you for keeping me

company, Joan. God, that woman is a bitch.'

'I don't think it's nice to call any woman a bitch,' I said primly, in my Joan persona. His eyebrows rose a bit. 'How do you know her?' I said, changing tack.

'It's a business relationship,' he said. 'Is, was..? Probably still 'is'.'

There were two or three professional girls at the bar, swinging legs, eating lunch, waiting for their pimps or the odd punter to come along, eyeing me and my new acquisition up, smirking and whispering behind hands, but not aggressively, perfectly friendly. They don't seem to mind me. I don't take business away from them, or only in such small quantity it scarcely affects the price of fish. Anyway, I put business their way from time to time, whenever I depped for Max behind the concierge's desk.

Alden told me he owned a design agency. It was called Arts-Intrinsick. I looked it up later that afternoon on Google. It was 'working towards a unified vision of art, design and sound', which could have meant anything, or nothing, but so far as I could see its mission was to bring together private art collectors, architects and 'sound sculptors to embrace the senses in a functional, luxurious and sophisticated environment'. Bullshit, it seemed to me but plausible enough to work. What did I know? In other words if you were a very, very rich divorcée like Mrs Weiss and liked to buy paintings and art installations as an investment, you would

then employ Alden to create a state-of-the-art gallery within your own home, where you could display your collection to its advantage against a background of specially composed sense-enhancing music.

I had no doubt Arts-Intrinsick would thrive: there is a plenty of free-floating money to be netted in the art world – especially if you are not an actual painter. I have a step grand-father, Lord Wallace F, grand old doyen of British architecture, and so I know all about that from him, and from my grandmother, who had the misfortune to be married to him for a time. Wallace was a horrid man, though his scathing dismissal of what he called 'art-world scum' and 'culture nomenclature' could be quite energizing; no doubt it would have included someone like Alden in it. I felt the more protective towards him, having to struggle not just against the handicap of his disability, but the contempt of the likes of Wallace while he tried to bring his vision to reality. Wallace had a point perhaps, but froth would be a kinder word than scum. But then I liked Alden and didn't like Wallace: judgment follows where emotions lead.

Alden and I chatted; we talked of our families. He came from a Yorkshire vicarage – had gone to grammar school – he'd played with the village soccer team, which suggested an accident later in life, but he was not prepared to go into details – the Royal College of Music, then fine arts at the Slade – he was multi-

talented, evidently – a job with the Warhol Foundation – and then on to start his own business. No marriage. A light laugh – it wouldn't be fair: he couldn't have children. What about me?

I resisted the temptation to say I too came from a clerical family, only on my mother's side, and as Joan Bennet presented him with a portrait of a lower-middle-class Essex family – father an out-of-work printer, mother a social worker, two sisters working in a call centre, a brother in trouble with the police. I implied that I loved working with children: I was not ambitious, other than I wanted to make a difference, you know? I added for good measure that I was Plymouth Brethren, and he looked quite intrigued – a sect in which sex is a source of neurotic guilt, and where else, these days, can you find that?

For hit-and-run sex it is useful to be someone else: if you feel bad about it later for any reason, why then, it wasn't you that did it. If you get emotionally hurt, it is someone else who suffers. The kernel of you stays intact. I rather liked this Joan of mine. She had a cuddly, kind heart and would certainly go to bed with Alden, if that was what he wanted, if only out of compassion, because she was whole and he was not. She would not of course expect financial reward.

I would use Joan again: the thought quite stirred me. Being Joan as well as Vanessa added spice to the expectation of adventure. It was almost as if I could be

both male and female: dom and sub, top and bottom, the one who did, the one done unto.

So, Alden was infertile. I felt restless on my chair. Why couldn't we just get on with this? But would it work? Men can be infertile for reasons other than mechanics. He would lie on his back: I could sit on top of him. If the worst came to the worst he could use a vibrator. Lam could run out for one, in the role in which he was now running backwards and forwards to the bar with whiskey sours for Alden and over-sweet cocktails – made of crème de cacao, brandy, cream and nutmeg with two little umbrellas on top – for me, that seeming obviously the sort of thing Joan would drink.

Luigi the barman at the Beast, with his Robert de Niro looks, was ever one to foster intimate relationships in his bar; he had coated the drink with a thick layer of nutmeg, rather than the normal bitty sprinkle. Alden told me it was aphrodisiac and I pretended ignorance, which is usually popular with men, for the less you know the more opportunity they have to enlighten you. He gave me a full break down of the spice's chemical composition.

He asked me if I had a boyfriend, and I confessed that I had been engaged for four years to a Geology student who'd then walked out on me and married my best friend. A tear or two came into my eye. I really took myself in. He sympathised, and I said really, I was okay, but I'd given up on men. You couldn't rely

on them, you couldn't trust them. He said, 'We men, perhaps we're not all the same'. I said perhaps I didn't know very much about them really.

He set about impressing me. One of his 'environments', he said, had been had been written up in May's Vogue. But his real passion was music, sound. He had had some acclaim recently – a ten-minute piece for percussion on Radio 3 last year, in a series called Minimalist Maelstrom – and he was currently struggling to deliver a twenty-minute commissioned piece called Thelemy: The Silence of the Senses, again for Radio 3. He asked me if I liked music and I said I was quite keen on trance. He laughed and said that figured and reached out and took my hand and held it a moment. When we touched a spark of static electricity clicked and leapt between him and me. It was probably co-incidental – there was a new carpet in the bar – but it left me with the feeling that the energy ordinary people wasted walking round built up in some kind of inner battery he had, and was ready for use; his eyes were so bright.

He said he was an avant garde man himself and I asked him what he meant by avant garde and he said 'in the forefront' and I said that seemed a dangerous place to be, in the front line of the battle, and he said yes, that's what it was: he was in the forefront of the battle against stupidity and man's inhumanity to man. I would have asked him where women fitted in but

remembering in time that I was Joan, not Vanessa, just nodded appreciatively.

Alden and Joan were really getting along together rather happily together in fact. And then of all things the great diplomat Max came in, escorting Mrs Matilda Weiss; who looked me up and down as if I was something the cat had brought in. She sat down at our table all conciliatory frowns and smiles and mwah-mwahs, simpering and apologizing all over Alden. While they were thus engaged, Max gave me a very definite little nod towards the door, telling me I should leave, and since Alden had lost interest in my presence, so I did.

And I thought that was all there was going to be to it, and that I wouldn't see him again: I was furious. But Lam came out into the street after me with a message from Alden – an invitation: that if I was free that evening perhaps I would join him and some friends of his for dinner at home? 8.00? Wear something pretty? He lived in Hampstead and would send a taxi.

I hadn't felt so happy since I was six, when I saw my father walk in through the door, returned from a week away, during which time I was sure, quite wrongly, that he'd run off with the au-pair. It was like waking from a bad dream to find your teeth haven't fallen out, the house hasn't burned down, and the world is a far more wonderful place than the disastrous one you have become reconciled to overnight. A sudden,

gratuitous, lift of the heart. I gave Lam my address, and would have gone straight home to doll myself up, already working out what Alden's idea of 'pretty' might possibly be while I waited for the taxi: but Max had something else in mind.

Suite 402

A well-known Centre Court tennis player was checking in when I left the Bound Beast and came back into reception. I will not tell you his name, not even the initial, but he is as famous for his sexual impetuosity as for the speed of his serve: over 140 miles per hour. His wife was not checking in until the next day. He was a shock-headed blonde, stocky, lovely and healthy looking, and barely thirty. Women in the foyer were already huddling and staring. Max caught his attention and moved his eyes enquiringly towards me: I felt an involuntary tingle of response as I watched him look me briefly up and down and nod approval to Max.

'Perhaps you could help our guest up with his bag,' said Max. And so I did, though, God knows the tennis star was young and strong enough to carry it for himself, the porter's desk for once was well staffed, and I was off-duty.

Max usually gives me some warning, and a free range of options – yes, no, never, perhaps, what's in it, and some time to think about it – today for some reason he did not. But I chose not to make a fuss, and just went along with it: I wanted adventure. I had been thoroughly stirred up sexually and then dismissed, and I was still shaken. I owed Alden less than nothing, yet it was partly the thought that I owed him this to serve him out which drove me to smile my consent. Max gave the glimmer that for him passed as appreciation – a slight loosening of his impassive lugubrious features. I was often surprised that men found courage as they did to approach him regarding their sexual needs – but there's nothing like sex, I suppose, for stiffening the sinews.

I trotted ahead of the great Wimbledon server, carrying his bag for him with both hands. The expectation, amongst equals, that the male carries the burden for the female, is overruled when such class distinctions are at play. In the great scale of things my position as servant far outweighed any traditional rights as a female. I resolved to make a note of it when I got home and see if I could work these ideas into my thesis. The different meanings of serve: an internet server, a tennis server, a servant...

Had my hair been thin and grey it could have changed the balance, he could have said 'let me', but my hair was doing its glossy, tumbling thing since I'd taken out the hair grips earlier, and it's amazing the

effect undoing a button or two on a staff uniform can have. We had crossed into the roles of the chamber maid and he the young master, and we were locked in.

I put down the bag – heaven knows what was in it, did tennis players do weight lifting? – and used the card to open the door of Suite 402. I heaved it inside and started on the usual spiel about the master switch, the air conditioning, how to call the maid to do the curtains, the Carreras marble bathroom floor and not to remove the non-slip pad, and so on, but my voice faded away because the famous tennis player was leaning back against the closed door with his flies already unzipped and his serpentine member moving upwards and outwards, a willful, independent, questing thing. It was a blonde's penis, moderately thick, but long and pale, with veins taut as if they were muscles, and impressed even me. All it had taken was three slight nods, Max towards me, his towards Max, and mine to Max, not a word spoken, and all this, within minutes, was not just possible, it was inevitable, already really happening. But such was the panders' art, I supposed, and why Max had so much cash beneath his mattress, or wherever he really put it away.

Not all women enjoy fellating, and many do it just for the man's sake, but I have more than broken myself out of that habit: I have come to love doing it. I like the feel of my lips being stretched, the incorporation of

the chthonic male other into the mouth from which I speak, the head from which I think, the face which is my polite persona in the non-sexual intercourse of polite society. The teasing and honouring with the tongue, like the anointing of a priest-king, I revel in it almost – though never quite – as much as I do full penetrative sex in my cunt, where the superego is entirely absent.

The fact that you do this for a stranger adds to the marvel of it, and the religious reference in kneeling gives intensity to the obeisance, as if a god someone has whisked you out of the crowd for this moment of intimate selfless sacrifice, and will whirl you back into it again afterwards, some symbolic act of union accomplished, leaving you the more for it, not the less, and the rest of the world outside ignorant of the secret ritual, unknowingly saved.

I was on my knees in front of him, his prick in my mouth, which was steered by his serving hand wound firmly into my hair. First the tip to be circled, then the whole sucked and given up, sucked and given up. It tones the mouth muscles: keeps the lips firm and full. Now he pushed his pelvis forward into my throat, my head pressed against his flat sportsman's belly. I could scarcely breathe but that too is a discomfort one quickly gets to like, once one stops panicking.

Sex is a cheap way of escaping the compulsive nature of ratiocination. That is to say, in the language of everyday, rather than the language of my PhD thesis,

fucking stops you thinking, and that can be a relief. But since blowjobs only take up half the mind, not the whole of it, there's enough room left in one's head, observing, for being one's own voyeur, and thinking discursively, even creatively. What I was thinking about now was ancient Babylon and the temple whores of Ishtar.

My father is a classical scholar of the traditional dusty and distant absent-minded professor type, and he had me reading Latin from the age of five and Greek at seven. He kept a clutch of books on the top shelf of the library, away from my eyes. These of course were the ones I later sought out when he wasn't in the house, standing on a chair and books to get them down. It was thus, when I was ten, that I'd first came across a passage by Herodotus about Ishtar's sacred harlots written two and a half millennia since.

'Babylonian custom,' he wrote, 'compels every woman of the land once in her life to sit in the temple of love and have intercourse with some stranger... the men pass and make their choice. The money that passes hands makes the act sacred, but its amount is of no consequence, the woman will never refuse, for that would be sinful. After their intercourse she has made herself holy in the sight of the goddess and goes away to her home; and thereafter there is no bribe however great that will get her. So then the women that are tall and fair are soon free to depart, but the uncomely have long to wait because they cannot fulfill the law; for

some of them remain for three years or four.' I liked temple life. My vocation was to serve Ishtar today, and the Hotel Olivier was her temple. I was fair, not short, I was comely enough to return home almost at once, but I preferred to leave it a while.

Herodotus also observed that many of the temple whores returned home to marry and have children, but that was then. Personally I'm for an academic career when this period of my life is over. I believe later Sumerian texts advise against marrying a professional temple prostitute, since she would tend to be too independent. That figured. 'Besides being accustomed to accepting other men, she would make an unsympathetic wife'. Indeed. She would make comparisons and that is hard for a man to take. Joan Bennet, the figment I had created for Alden the cripple's benefit, was a girl of little experience if not downright virginity. But she was an aspect of me, taking my shift at a sacred duty: I was no professional.

As I reflected on these things, the tennis star came, but went on and on – with all the stamina of someone used to world championships – until my knees were sore, my mouth began to stiffen and threaten cramp, and my interest waned. I was beginning to be bored. I made him come again, and gasping, removed myself and lay back upon the bed, half hoping he would take matters further to a different and less mechanical conclusion but he did not: his wife was joining him the

next day and he probably liked to be faithful. For many men, like President Clinton, sucking doesn't count. In church car parks of the Democratic mid-west bumper stickers were displayed during his time of trial taking, in his support, the biblically arguable view that Eatin' ain't Cheatin.

But now my champion was on top of me, his trousers kicked away, thrusting down into my mouth from a more productive angle, unnaturally huge balls banging my nose, and finally reason abandoned me and I squirmed and gasped as he stretched and jerked and shrieked and more semen spurted at 140 miles an hour, and trickled down my throat and that was – finally – that.

Freud said there was a vaginal orgasm (superior) and a clitoral one (inferior) but in my experience there is also an oral one, linked more to the imagination, the shock and wonder of the event, than to any physical stimulation. You observe it in the mouth but you feel it in the vagina.

It seems rude to wash one's mouth out after such an encounter so I desisted, rearranged my dress, as he did, finished the guided tour – here is the television wand, here the pay-movies card, here the spare pillows; was there anything else you required, sir? – while he retrieved his chinos, looked in his wallet and peeled off two Centre Court tickets for Wimbledon.

'Men's Finals on June 28,' he said, handing them to

me. 'You'll get fifteen hundred each on eBay. Unless you want to watch me win.' Tickets were in great demand. And he hadn't had to pay a single thing for them. It seemed remarkably like cheating to me, and I felt a spasm of indignation. But a goddess's servant is required to accept what comes, and be grateful with noblesse oblige: no doubt rare Centre Court tickets sanctify the act as well as money, if not better.

The champion thanked me, asked me with albeit genial impatience to stop rambling on about the room – it wasn't the first hotel room he'd been in and he could see with his own eyes where the minibar was – ran his fingers round my mouth, iron-fleshed as they were from many a racquet handle, and assured me I was surely 'the best', whatever that meant, and I left. I was tongue-tied; I think I bowed first.

As I left 402 I passed La Weiss going to her own suite. She looked right through me as though I were not there: hotel staff are often invisible to the guests, like the wallpaper. She seemed quite pleased with herself. Perhaps she had managed to beat Alden's fee down in whatever project they were jointly involved in. I worried for him: I wasn't sure he was necessarily tough enough to look after his own interests. I was feeling sorry for him again. I remembered the way the stored energy had leapt between him and me – and the feeling of repletion that usually follows the closure of a successful sexual act had gone into abeyance before

I even made it to the lift. I wanted Alden, though in what manner and with what choreography I could not be sure.

The stocky personal trainer, with neck almost wider than head, who was booked into 314 – a much cheaper room – opened the door of Suite 406 to Mrs Weiss, and he wore no clothes. That must have had plenty to do with her earlier reluctance to meet Alden for lunch. Nothing will do for some people, when they first set eyes on an hotel bed, but that they use it for sex. And some women become foul-mouthed while they're in rut.

Max held out his hand as I came down into the foyer and I gave him the two tickets. I don't do eBay. A friend of mine had their identity stolen from using it, and I am more computer-illiterate than her. Anyway, I can't stand a bargain: I like to pay full price. Show me two similar objects, one cheap and one expensive, and I go for the dear, investing it with some extra magic. If eBay has magic, I don't know what it is. And Max was expecting the tickets. That was why he had given me no choice but just told me, by inference, to get on up there quick before someone else got hold of them. Max is a Wimbledon junkie; he saw his opportunity and moved quickly. He would probably hand me, what? – probably a grand in cash in his own sweet time. We were, after all, partners, in a team.

I got off home as quickly as I could, with less time now to make myself 'pretty' for Alden.