Working Stiff

Grant Stoddard

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Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature

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PROLOGUE

I held it in my hands. Once detached from my body, my genitalia seemed much more impressive. Bouncing it in my left palm and then in my right, I reckoned its weight and volume. I held it closer to my face, closer than hours of stretching, straining, and forcefully curving my spine had ever got me before.

'It's perfect,' I kept saying to myself in between gulps of supermarket merlot.

With some hesitation I put it to my lips. I immediately grew fearful that Tom Wheeler or one of the cowboys from the ranch would drop by at any moment, and that it's secretly observed private moments like this that give us city folk a bad name in these parts.

'Magnificent!' I concluded as my lengthy inspection continued. I opened another bottle.

I would have been a lot happier about the respectable amount of water my disembodied penis could displace when dunked in a pint glass, or the number of papers it could

anchor on a breezy terrace, if I wasn't financially bound and contractually obligated to insert it into my bottom.

Given its ultimate destination, I took solace in the fact that I hadn't immortalised the organ at its absolute largest. This was by circumstance rather than design; maintaining a thumping erection whilst balls-deep in two pints of tepid plaster of Paris for 120 long seconds had proved a task I wasn't equal to, what with my mania, cabin fever, debilitating homesickness, and recent anxiety attacks.

I poured a glass of wine and felt the dip in temperature in the sprawling house. The fire was beginning to die out. There was more cut firewood under the house, but since my next-door neighbour's horse was viciously torn apart by a mountain lion, I was dreading to go rooting around down there after dark. I had self-diagnosed the episodes I'd been having over the past few weeks as anxiety attacks and hoped that I'd seen the last of them. Holing up in a ranch house in the Sierra Nevadas for three months seemed like a fantastic opportunity to get some writing done, but it soon transpired that I really wasn't at all up to the challenge. The weeks of isolation, the paranormal goings-on, the burning to death of a ranch hand, the packs of nocturnal terrors that patrolled the area around the house, and the cessation of my livelihood – the gonzo sex column I wrote for the sex website nerve.com – had all suddenly come to bare and sent me stark raving mad and so very far from home.

Holding an accurate facsimile of my own member in my hands, it's hard to believe how little action the thing actually saw over the course of its first twenty-four years. Since then, of course, it's played a starring role in some of my greatest adventures. I imagined that a cross-section of it would reveal a series of concentric rings, just as one could reckon the harsh winters and long summers from a felled oak. Each ring of the member might similarly speak of its own history: the lengthy humiliating dry spells, the blissful monogamous periods, an orgy, a week spent at a BDSM retreat, and, of course, Lisa.

What's really remarkable about the thing is how little wear it seems to have shown for all the miles I've put on it in the name of a half-decent salary and comprehensive health insurance.

'It looks good,' said Jamye. 'Are you ready to do this?'

'Not yet. In a few minutes,' I said.

Jamye had arrived from San Francisco the evening before. I had been counting the days to her arrival since she decided to drive out and keep me company for a while. She's a great friend; I know her from my adopted home, the East Village. Aside from the previous day's grocery run to the comparative metropolis of Oakhurst, I hadn't seen another human being in the week before she arrived. The house's position on the brow of a hill, looking into a steep valley, meant that I could see the headlights of her rental car for the twenty minutes it took her to wind her way around the hill to its apex. I almost hugged her to death when she pulled up to the house.

I'd told Jamye about my latest and ultimate Nerve assignment over the phone and she'd said she'd be more than happy to assist me when she arrived. She's a sex educator and virtually unflappable. After she dropped her bags she mixed the plaster for the mould. We left the plaster cast to dry overnight.

The inherent symbolism of the situation was certainly not lost on me. My leaving Nerve was tinged with acrimony, sour grapes and bleatings of betrayal and disloyalty. Rufus Griscom, Nerve's CEO, had remained civil, *nay friendly*, towards me, even as his lawyers threatened legal proceedings that would no doubt scupper my eponymous TV pilot. It was his deeds rather than his words that yelled 'Go fuck yourself.' How I allowed it to become a literal instruction, I'm not sure.

'Will you hug me afterward?' I asked.

'Of course! I'll be very gentle. Promise,' said Jamye.

She disappeared into the bedroom and re-emerged wearing a dildo harness over her pyjamas, which were covered in little cartoon penguins.

I tossed the last remaining log and some newspaper on the fire to warm up the room a little, took off my bathrobe, and got on all fours on the shaggy rug.

'It's going to feel strange at first, but it gets better,' said Jamye. 'I promise.

She took the mould of my penis from the mantel and inserted it through the silver ring in her strap-on harness and ran her hand up and down it, as if she were masturbating. My friend Jamye was sporting my cock. It was strange, but I'd somehow allowed myself to become quite numb to it all. It was work. People talk about becoming their jobs, and for better or worse I'd sort of become mine.

My appointment to the position of Nerve's resident sexual guinea pig was based on my willingness to try things that most people, especially those with legitimate literary aspirations, wouldn't deign to. When, after a few instalments, the column became very popular, my desk became a depository for all kinds of sexual toys that companies had sent us to promote vis-à-vis me sticking them up my bum and writing about them. If I didn't intercept mail containing the penis-stretching system, topical arousal cream, or the scrotal augmentation starter kit from a company called Monster Nuts, chances were I'd be spending my weekend test-driving them. It wasn't until I was writing about the intricate workings of my nether regions that I had to devise a way of dealing with the thought of friends and family back home in our dreary little English commuter town reading it.

What would they think? Who was I kidding? I doubt they even remembered me. But what if they did? Would I be publicly shamed if and when they saw me again? And what's more shameful, commuting over three hours a day to be a mortgage broker in the city, only to flop into the doughy arms of a local girl each night for curry and telly, getting legless on the weekends at a chain theme pub or . . . this?

I'll come back to that.

Being in another country, in an alien job, and surrounded by 'sex-positive' Ivy League grads who sang my praises and commended my bravery made it easier, but the fact remained that I didn't even want to think about my own prostate gland, and precisely why I was professing its awesomeness to an international audience of countless strangers was completely beyond explanation.

Jamye rolled a condom over the prosthetic, squirted some lube onto the end of it, then very tenderly applied a squirt to my bum and gently rubbed it in.

'Okay?' she asked.

She placed her hands on my waist.

'Wait!' I said and downed the remaining merlot.

'Okay,' I said, acutely aware that I was at the end of something big.

1. 4089

When I met her, Beatrix Cecilia Montague was somewhere between seventy-five and eighty-five years old. She was born in colonial India and attended a posh girls' finishing school in Harrogate, Yorkshire. Her hobbies included bridge, golf, and tennis – her mother was the all-India women's tennis champion. She made sure she never missed an episode of *EastEnders*, *Neighbours*, or *Coronation Street*, owned a beige fifteen-year-old Ford Fiesta and a cockatoo named Dippy. She smoked a pack and a half of Lambert and Butler cigarettes per day, washed and reused the half dozen pieces of cling film she owned, and seldom arose before eleven. She delivered a right-wing newsletter throughout the neighbourhood regardless of inclement weather. Her hair was salt white and pepper grey save for a pompadour, stained the colour of egg yolk from cigarette smoke. Her entire wardrobe was polyester and sported all sorts of unclassifiable stains. On any given day she could smell of faintly spicy sweat, pet stores, or musty cupboards. She didn't flinch when using racist, empirical

terms like 'golliwog' and 'pickaninny.' Beatrix Cecilia Montague was my college roommate.

Mrs Montague – I never once addressed her as anything else in three years of living with her, so I won't here either – was above all else a woman of principle. She wasn't in the business of taking advantage of anybody and was vigilant in ensuring that she wasn't being taken advantage of herself. This is what I knew about Mrs Montague prior to meeting her: in her inconveniently located ground-floor flat in leafy Hanwell, W7, she had a spare room that she rented to students for twenty-five pounds per week. She had one pet, a cockatoo, she was a smoker, and she would not be providing meals.

'Twenty-five quid?' said Sandra, my mum's best and brassiest friend, when I told her about my bargain over a meal from Mandarin Court, an establishment known locally as 'the chinky'. 'Blimey, that's cheap, innit? A cockatoo? Are you sure it doesn't say she's looking for a cock or two?'

Getting a cheap place with no lease was of the utmost importance to me. Here's why: I was not exactly college material. A precocious five-year-old, I had peaked early intellectually. Since then I'd become bone idle and had developed a socially debilitating love of heavy metal and had a D+ average. Undeterred, my dad threatened severe economic sanctions unless I at least *tried* to get into a university.

On the day of my A-level results, I, along with everyone else who had failed to get the grades they needed for a place at their chosen university, scanned the broadsheet supplements made up of ads from different schools trying to entice those without a place to secure one over the phone. Places at better schools were snapped up instantly by the most qualified, but the trickle-down effect meant that a lot of the shittier universities were practically dragging people in off the street regardless of their academic aptitude. That's how I got in.

Upon getting a place at Thames Valley University my plan was to leave Thames Valley University. I felt by the age of

eighteen there was barely any room left in my brain to learn any new stuff – even 'Media Studies' – but I *also* knew that my attending university, even for a semester, would make my father a happy man. Nobody in our family had gone to college and it was my father's ambition that I should be the first to go, in spite of me expressing absolutely no interest in furthering my education or even having the grades to get into anything but the most piss-poor of institutions. In our town, going to university was far from expected from a child, and I felt it unfair that I was being randomly singled out to attend. In my class at school, I would say less than one in twenty kids went on to uni.

All I really wanted to do was play in what I now realise was a dreadful rock band. My plan was a tightrope act: I had to teach my parents a lesson about not overestimating their children, but I knew that if I made that lesson an expensive one, I'd never be able to forget it. That's why when I saw Mrs Montague's ad in TVU's Accommodations Office, I knew I had found the perfect housemate. TVU had no student housing but instead provided listings of whole houses to rent with other students or rooms to rent within a family home or private residence. In either situation, it was unheard of to pay less than fifty quid a week.

Before my mother and I took a train to London to meet her and see the available bargain room, I hoped that Mrs Montague was a sexy divorcee, or better yet, an independently wealthy widow in her early forties, yearning for the company of an eager house boy as per the ad's insinuation. The way I saw it, what a sultry Mrs Montague could teach me in the bedroom would ultimately have a more practical application than anything I'd glean from a patchily attended semester of Media Studies classes at Britain's worst university. The school's only real claim to fame is that it used to be Ealing College of Art and was attended by rock heroes like Queen's Freddie Mercury, The Who's Pete Townshend, and Ron Wood from the Rolling Stones. With such a

rock-and-roll precedent, I idly hoped that, if nothing else, a bit of uni might bolster my chances of rock stardom.

After a week spent convincing myself that I'd be spending the autumn at the mercy of a nymphomaniacal Anne Bancroft type, my mother and I pulled up to Golden Court, the grand name given to what looked like a run-down assisted living home. Mrs Montague opened the door to her dusty little flat. To my utter horror she had about forty years on the Mrs Robinson character from my sordid imagination.

She ran a wrinkly hand through her thick wild hair and peered at us both from behind her bifocals.

'Hello, you must be Grant,' she said with a dark brown voice and a throat that begged in vain to be cleared. 'And you must be Grant's mother. Won't you both come in?'

She turned on her heel and we followed her down a narrow hallway. My mother was trying hard not to make eye contact with me. She was finding a lot of amusement in the thought of me shacking up with the old buzzard and was very close to succumbing to a fit of the giggles.

Mrs Montague showed us in to one of her two living rooms and introduced us to Dippy, who was emitting cranium-splitting squawks at the rate of about two per second. The late-afternoon sun picked up the thick dust that filled the room and gave everything a tangerine aura.

'The bird came from my grandchildren. A gift if you please. Heaven knows what they were thinking.'

She turned on her heel to fetch tea and biscuits, both allowing my mother to expel some of the laughter that was threatening to shake her apart and treating us to another rear view of her trademark quick march. I'd never seen a senior citizen walk with so much haste and conviction. Long, quick strides, each foot planted down as if stomping an injured field mouse out of its misery.

'Ain't she posh?' said my mum, and she struggled to regain her composure.

In fact Mrs Montague was just about the poshest person I had ever met, and in the truest and most literal sense of

the word. The various knickknacks from Africa and India around the room suggested a colonial past, the dust and tatty furniture suggested a chaotic one. She hurriedly returned with some tea in chipped pastel-coloured mugs and an assortment of biscuits arranged on a glass plate.

'Well, you must tell me about your journey.'

When you are raised in the borough of Thurrock in Essex, London is often referred to as 'town', and a visit to the capital might be signified by saying that you are simply going 'up the road'. The insinuation of geographical proximity to the nation's mighty capital is of course borne out of the indignity of residing in one of the UK's cultural blind spots. Conversely, to Londoners, Essex is a far distant and unfortunate place. The way Mrs Montague oohed and aahed through my mother's recounting of the ninety-minute trip, you'd think we'd trekked in from the Congo.

Growing up, I felt incredibly intimidated by and ill at ease in London. All of my family had lived there at one time or another but had all moved east long ago. As a child I would accompany my mother on day trips to Covent Garden, Kensington High Street and Knightsbridge. I vividly remember the filth, the overtly sexual atmosphere, the punks, seeing the black, the brown and the Irish for the first time and being frightened and confused by the maelstrom of stimuli. I felt an immense relief when it was time to get back on the train and go home.

As a teen, I'd only go to London to see my favourite bands play, a bitter-sweet experience. Skid Row at London Docklands Arena, Def Leppard at Earls Court. Heavy metal fans were a rare and unpopular breed of teenager in our town. I had an overwhelming feeling of fraternity as my long-haired and much put upon chums and I drew closer to the venue, the number of virginal, acne-ridden, problem-haired, studded-leather-jacket-wearing brethren growing thicker and more vociferous on the streets. In the leafy commuter villages of semirural England we metal heads scuttled around in the shadows, trying to avoid the thor-

ough beatings our getups so clearly invited. Here in London, far out of arm's reach and earshot of the incensed local 'trendies', we strode triumphantly, singing 'Youth Gone Wild' at the top of our lungs. In reality, the youth, as wild as we were, had to get back to Fenchurch Street station by 10.56, when the last train to Essex carried us home, drunk deafened, and temporarily vindicated. The race back home often meant that we had to leave a show halfway through the encore, the strains of our favourite band's greatest hit singles still playing as we made a desperate drunken dash for the tube.

I saw London, and by association any big city, as a big, pulsing, offensively cool, sexual, scary hassle that served only to highlight my virginity, provinciality, and lack of savvy. As I sat there with Mrs Montague and my mother, I sort of couldn't believe that I would be actually living in the belly of the beast. But Hanwell, in reality, was far from the belly of the beast. Okay, so it had a metropolitan postal code and was crisscrossed by red double-deckers, but it was too far west to have any urban cred whatsoever.

Mrs Montague had an abnormally jowly and wrinkly face; in the telling daylight it appeared positively scrotal. I could only count four tombstone teeth on the top of her mouth. A rare wide smile exposed two large gaps on either side of them. She was taller and thinner than most old ladies, although she was always bent at the hip, ensuring her precise height remained shrouded in mystery. Mrs Montague gave us a quick tour of what would be my room, as well as the kitchen and bathroom we would share. My room was pokey, eight feet by six and a half, only room for a narrow little bed and quite dim, the ground being level with the windowsill. The bathroom contained a tub but no shower. I also couldn't help noticing a threadbare toothbrush whose handle was in the shape of a naked man with an erect penis. The kitchen was painted a weak yellow and boasted thick, dusty cobwebs wherever possible.

The whole afternoon was just a formality; I knew that Mrs Montague's pad would be perfect for my plan to waste precisely the right amount of my parents' time and money.

The following week, as my parents drove off home after delivering me and my personal effects to Golden Court, I started to wonder why they didn't once ask me if I was sure that I'd be okay living with some wild-eyed old bat. They thought either that living with a relic would be somehow character-building, were agreeable with her bargain asking price, or had got wind of my ill-fated plan and were fixing on teaching me a lesson of my own.

My going to university garnered me only pity from my school chums, who couldn't fathom why I had agreed, albeit under duress, to go. They wanted fast cars, sharp clothes, booze-fuelled holidays in warm climates, and, a couple of years down the road, enough for a down payment on a house in or around Corringham. Uni would just be putting that all off for another three or four years, slowing down the fags and booze-fuelled march to a plot in a local cemetery.

My farewell drinks do at the White Lion Pub was more like a wake.

'Well, looking on the bright side,' said John, who, despite being two years younger than me, was already pulling down a good salary at the Bank of England, 'you might actually get your balls wet, for once.'

My friends were always riding me about my status as a sexual non-starter. Every Friday night a group of four or five of us would drive to some obnoxious super-club to 'pull birds'. John, Martin, John, Matt, and the other John would invariably snog a handful of birds and probably get their hands in their knickers on the dance floor, a manoeuvre we called feeding the pony a sugarlump. I, on the other hand, ended up as the designated eunuch. I would have loved and appreciated an anonymous tug-job in the parking lot of the Pizzazz! nightclub. It seemed that normal sexual experiences like that were being doled out willy-nilly to my crew, while

the only visceral pleasure I could count on was rounding out the night with a gyro from Memet's Abrakebabra.

If any of us could have benefited from three years of undergraduate bacchanalia, it was probably me.

'I'll be asking you to make yourself scarce every second Wednesday,' said Mrs Montague with what I was beginning to realise was a permanent phlegmy rattle.

She watched me stack cans of baked beans and pasta onto my end table, windowsill and under my bed.

I was told that all of the real estate in the refrigerator was accounted for and that I should also stick to 'non-perishables' that I could store in my room.

'You can stay in your room on these occasions if you've nowhere to go but you may not use the bathroom, as movement can be distracting.'

She went into the other room to watch the Sunday *EastEnders* omnibus but carried on talking to me in her haughty, horsey tone. 'On those occasions, you ought not to drink a lot of fluids. Bridge tournaments, don't you know. Distractions. We have our home games here. We play Putney next week. Putney! They are awfully good but oftentimes late.'

And then, with a drag on her cigarette and a heavy sigh, she added, 'To the victors go the spoils, I suppose.'

She stopped for a long, loud slurp of tea. When it came to imbibing hot fluids, she had this interesting habit of giving her month a running start, beginning a powerful inhalation before she had even lifted her cup from the coffee table.

'I saw your banjo.'

She was referring to my Fender Stratocaster.

'I trust that you won't be playing it while I'm about. I can hear everything. I'm like a hawk.'

The theme tune to the UK's most watched nightly soap opera began, and even from the next room I could feel that Mrs Montague had been placated.

'I say,' she shouted from the living room in a softer, sadder tone, 'would you care to watch *EastEnders* with me?'

And so began a ritual. Mrs Montague would knock on my door with exactly enough time for the kettle to boil, the tea to steep, before the opening credits finished.

I always found it interesting how my haughty housemate took such an acute interest in a gritty soap opera about the cockney underclass. I'm sure she saw it as a sociological documentary.

'Would you credit it?' she cried after an unexpected turn of events, her arms gesticulating wildly. 'The gall of the man! I don't like him at all, Grant. No, not one bit.'

Most nights, Mrs Montague ate her supper on her lap whilst watching *EastEnders* with me. When I went to the kitchen to make the preshow tea, there was often a singular potato, a diminutive piece of fish and a solitary sprig of broccoli all cooked to death in singleserving-size cookware. Prior to her tucking in, I routinely caught her eyeing me up in my peripheral vision. Content that I was engrossed in what was on TV, she pulled a Pepto Bismol-coloured plate from her mouth that harboured two of her four top teeth, and placed it on the telephone table that sat between our two threadbare chairs. It was at this time that the loud rotary-dial phone would typically ring.

'*God's teeth!* Who is calling me at this time?' she screamed.

This often sent great globs of semi-masticated food flying in my general direction.

'Four-oh-eight-nine?' she'd answer brusquely, her excellent diction compromised by her temporarily toothless mouth.

Mrs Montague was evidently still living in a world where phone numbers were made up of only four digits; 4089 became a sort of code word for my friends from home to allude to my supposed intergenerational-sex-for-affordable-lodgings trade.