The Flirt

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Extract

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La Vie Bohème

The ad appeared in the *Stage* in the second week of September, when the Edinburgh Festival was officially over and real life made its unpleasant appearance again in the collective consciousness of the large number of unemployed young actors who populate the London area.

It read:

Unique situation available for an attractive, well-mannered, morally flexible young man. Hours irregular. Pay generous. Discretion a must.

Please send photo and brief romantic history to:

Valentine Charles

111 Half Moon Street

Mayfair, London

Hughie Armstrong Venables-Smythe was sitting at his usual table, next to the window in Jack's Café, armed with a pen he'd nicked from the waitress, a strong cup of builder's tea and his mobile phone, which was running out of credit. Outside,

the sun was radiant, the air sharp with a brisk autumn breeze. Elderly shoppers, dragging battered tartan trolleys, paused to examine the merits of the half-price bleach in pink plastic baskets outside the Everything For a Pound shop on Kilburn High Road. Others hurled themselves into bargaining sessions with the red-faced Irish butcher, his bacon suspiciously reasonable.

Here, Hughie was among his people; living the front-line, hand-to-mouth existence of a jobbing actor in NW6, still quite a rough neighbourhood according to his mother, despite the recent boom in house prices.

Spotting the ad, he circled it and leant back, satisfied. In his trade, buying the *Stage* and circling ads was considered an entire day's work. He lit a fresh cigarette to celebrate.

He'd only just started smoking; Marlboro Lights. It was a disgusting habit. He'd picked it up from his girlfriend Leticia, who was full of the most delightfully disgusting habits known to man, of which smoking was easily the most socially acceptable. At twenty-three, it made him feel sophisticated. But then Hughie needed all the help he could get, especially as Leticia was a great deal older than him and more sophisticated than he was ever likely to be. Although they'd only been (he was thinking of calling it 'going out'. But was it really going out if in fact you never went anywhere or did anything but just met several times a week in strange, dark places to have wild, wordless, pornographic sex? Probably not. The proper social heading was more likely to be 'seeing one another', which

they'd only been doing for about two weeks), Hughie was already violently in love.

Ah, Leticia!

What was not to love?

Everything about her was perfect – from her glossy, black bob, doe-like brown eyes and soft, pink Cupid's bow lips, to the way she screamed, 'Spank harder, you horny little bastard!' in the alleyway behind the bespoke lingerie shop she ran in Belgravia.

Closing his eyes, he silently thanked the Lord above, as he did many times a day now, for the particular good fortune that forced him to sit down next to her on that crowded number 12 bus. From the first moment he felt her delicate hand creeping up his inner thigh as they passed Marble Arch to the hasty exit they both made at Piccadilly Circus, he'd known that the course of his life was changed for ever. Until that day, God had been little more than a vague concept but afterwards, Hughie concluded that no other force in the universe could've so perfectly answered all of his prayers.

Then, taking another drag, he frowned.

Leticia was a real woman, not some fluffy student. Deliciously perverse, she was also popular, ruthless and easily bored. How was he going to keep her? Love alone was not enough. A diet of non-stop delights and amusements was needed to sweep her off her feet.

Having no money was neither delightful nor amusing.

This was the torment he'd been warned about in drama

school: the very crux of *La Vie Bohème*. Here he was, a struggling young actor caught in the maelstrom of artistic integrity versus commercial demands. He imagined an audience observing his silent heroism and, with a gallant gesture, swept his mop of ash-blond hair back from his handsome face.

In fact, everyone he met expected him to be employed. How few people understood the fragile relationship between working in the acting profession and actually being paid!

Hughie took another drag.

Whatever happened to art for art's sake?

Hughie's mother and sister, Clara, went on endlessly about how was he going to live, to eat, to be a useful member of society, blah, blah, blah. But they were missing the point. And not for the first time, Hughie felt the familiar, frustrating weight of being a Venables-Smythe.

There was a time when being a Venables-Smythe was a destiny; a passport into the world of the English upper classes. However, by the time Hughie was born into the once-illustrious clan, all that was left to inherit was the name, posh accent and a mildly traumatizing public-school education. His grandfather had sold the family pile, priceless antiques and family portraits included, to an American hotel chain in 1977 for what had seemed an enormous amount of money at the time but in retrospect had been a bargain. Instead, he'd bought a badly converted flat in Chelsea, invested heavily in Betamax, and funded Hughie's father, Robert Armstrong Venables-Smythe, in his playboy lifestyle. His father, as attractive as

Hughie was now, had a taste for Ralph Lauren shirts, Gucci loafers, Italian cars and bubbly, big-breasted blondes. He met Hughie's mother, Rowena Compton Jakes, a nineteen-year-old, flat-chested brunette, shy to the point of being socially disabled, when she was working in the wedding-list department of Tiffany's. They were married two years later and Robert set up business as a Fulham estate agent. He knew nothing about the property market. He did, however, have a great deal of charm which he expended on long lunches at San Lorenzo with a series of young secretaries who called him Bobby.

When Hughie was five, his father disappeared in a mysterious deep-sea-fishing accident off the coast of Malta. His mother still claimed it was all a hoax but he never returned and his business went quietly bankrupt. This devastating blow signalled the beginning of Hard Times.

However, Hard Times give rise to great acts of heroism. And so it came to pass that Hughie's mother showed her true mettle. She painted the living room red, bought a few scatter cushions from Peter Jones and announced that she was now an interior designer of the Jocasta Innes variety. One stiff early-morning drink took the edge off her shyness. She maintained a veneer of social respectability by shopping at designer second-hand shops and, at tremendous personal sacrifice, sending her children to the best schools. Her single obsession was that they should gain not only the kind of financial security that had eluded both their father and their grandfather, but also launch themselves back into the bosom of their class.

And so, Hughie's older sister Clara diligently won a scholarship to study classics at Cambridge while Hughie, rejected from almost every institution of any note, enrolled in a third-rate drama school in King's Cross, where he set about studying his craft.

Every once in a while, Hughie tried to imagine his father's face. (His mother had systematically eliminated all his photographs.) What might he look like now?

Tucking the cigarette into the side of his mouth, Hughie took out the one remaining photo from his wallet. The faded Polaroid showed Hughie at three, holding his father's hand on a beach in Spain. Robert was bending towards him, his hand pressed into the small of Hughie's back. He was laughing, tanned, happy.

Hughie had studied the photograph for so many hours, over so many years, that it formed a memory where none existed. Sometimes he imagined he could still feel his father's reassuring touch, a firm hand guiding him through the unknown, towards a version of himself he would be proud of.

Hughie slipped the photo back into his empty wallet.

The Unknown: here it was again, looming before him.

He was just back from a three-week stint in Edinburgh performing in an improvised musical about homelessness called *Waste!* He couldn't sing much beyond 'Land of Hope and Glory' but he'd listened to enough Benjamin Britten during his Harrow education to pretend he was obsessed with atonal harmonies. Whenever he hit a sour note, he looked very serious and sang

louder. Over time, the rest of the cast came to admire his musical daring. (After the late-night drinking sessions, he'd done a lot more atonal singing than even he'd intended.)

But now he was back in London, living on the sofa in Clara's front room, and money was officially a problem. Actually, Clara was a problem too.

Clara had taken her mother's advice: she worked in a large business PR firm in the City. She walked like a man in heels and wore navy-blue suits, hair in a limp, mousy bob – a look that might have been sexy in a Miss Moneypenny kind of way on anyone else but Clara. Her hours and ambition were such that Hughie hardly ever saw her but she left little yellow Post-it notes telling him what to do (or not, as the case might be). Sometimes, Hughie felt sure that she'd come home in the middle of the day to plaster a fresh supply on everything he'd ever touched. 'This is NOT an ashtray!' on the eighteenth-century porcelain china planter given to her by her fiancé Malcolm (a china specialist at Sotheby's who was so obviously gay to everyone else in the world but Clara). 'Put the seat DOWN!' on the loo lid, 'Buy your OWN MILK!' on the refrigerator and 'Don't forget your fucking KEYS again!' on the back of the door, just as he was about to go out (without his fucking keys). True, he'd only meant to stay a few days but she was being a cow about the whole thing. Nothing had changed between them since he was six and she ten, bossing him around all day like a shorter, fiercer mother, only she was considerably more sober than their mother and therefore more relentlessly eagle-eyed.

Stubbing out his cigarette, he hailed the waitress.

A tiny, auburn-haired girl came over and handed him the bill.

'You don't, by any chance, take Amex, do you?' Hughie smiled. (The Venables-Smythe smile was something to behold – two dazzling rows of even white teeth, punctuated by dimples and a pair of intensely blue eyes.)

'I, ah . . .'

'Look,' he peered at her name tag, 'the thing is, Rose, I'm a bit short of change. But I'm a regular – you've seen me. I'm here almost every day.'

'Yes, yes . . . that's true,' she admitted. 'But this is the third time in a week you've been short.'

'Listen.' He stood up. 'I'll tell you what, why don't you spot me for one more day and I promise, on my mother's grave, that tomorrow I'll come in and make it up to you.' He smiled wider. She blushed bright scarlet. 'So do we have a deal?'

'OK.'

Hughie landed a quick kiss on her cheek. 'You're a star, Rose! An absolute star!' He swung open the door.

'Wait a minute! What's your name?'

'Forgive me! Hughie.' He offered his hand. 'Hughie Armstrong Venables-Smythe. Now, don't give up on me, Rose, will you? I'll be in first thing in the morning, you have my word.' And tucking his copy of the *Stage* under his arm, he left.

Once outside, he picked up a rogue apple rolling just out of sight of the fruit seller on the corner, rubbed it clean on

his jeans, took a bite and considered the ad as he strolled home.

Hours irregular. Pay generous. Both sounded just the ticket. But the moral flexibility excited him most. He was uncertain as to the existence of any moral substance in his nature to begin with. How did one know nowadays? What were the criteria? Apart from the most obvious guidelines (would you kill anyone? How do you feel about stealing from old people?), he felt curiously uninformed in this area. It was clear, though, that morally flexible was by far the sexier of the two options.

And Leticia would love him for it.

A Self-Made Woman

Leticia Vane jangled the set of keys in her hand and sauntered down Elizabeth Street. She was the kind of girl (and even nearing her mid-thirties, she still thought of herself as a girl) who was aware of how her body looked and the shapes it made when she moved. Even though there was no one about much before noon in this part of the world, she liked to think she was being watched and that people noticed in her a certain dangerous pleasure.

And indeed, Leticia Vane was in many ways her own finest creation. She'd taken what little rough material nature had allotted her and moulded, shaped, hacked away at it as a sculptor chips away at a hunk of marble.

Nothing remained from her previous life as Emily Ann Fink of Hampstead Garden Suburb. The uni-brow that God had seen fit to adorn her with was gone, plucked into two slim, expressive arches; the overbite long replaced; the dull, brown hair dyed a gleaming black that brought out the colour of her eyes. Her face was pleasing but, understanding that she was no

beauty, she'd taken a great deal of time over her figure. She ate once a day and smoked the rest of the time. Dying young was far preferable to dying fat. It had taken a lot of hard work to make Leticia Vane, the kind of work not a lot of people appreciated.

And of course there was the back story, too. One of two children of a chartered accountant and a depressed schoolteacher wouldn't do. Leticia wanted something more fascinating. So she transformed her parents into diplomats, serving in faraway countries. She'd been raised in a series of exotic locations; learnt languages (she was far too polite to show them off in public); had affairs at a preternatural age; been doted upon but still suffered from a past too secret and too painful to reveal to anyone.

She'd always longed to be exclusive. Rare. And now she figured she probably had another ten years to really enjoy the fruits of her labours. However, the fragile nature of her accomplishments made them all the more dear.

And so she sauntered, just in case someone was looking out of the window, wondering what that fetching young woman was doing up at this time of day. And with a swagger, she twisted the keys in the lock of the tiny shop.

Bordello was a lingerie shop but it had no shelves, no long lines of silk nothings swinging on rails, no emaciated mannequins with stiff nipples adorned in lace thongs. In fact it looked more like a small, turn-of-the-century Parisian drawing room than a shop. The walls were papered with fine black-and-white stripes,

the Louis Quatorze *fauteuils* were covered in ivory raw silk; a rare, cobalt-blue chandelier sent beams of azure light darting around the room. Leticia offered a bespoke service. There were no samples. There were, however, yards and yards of the most exquisite aged silk and satin in the palest colours: champagne, dove grey, pearl and thumb-nail pink. Bolts of filmy organdies were piled into corners and there were baskets with drifts of lace – antique, handmade, tiny works of art she'd collected from all over the globe. On a round mahogany table in the centre of the room, her sketchbooks were piled high, full of her latest creations. There were no changing rooms, only a luxuriously appointed bathroom to the rear, complete with an antique slipper bath, next to a narrow workroom.

Leticia was selling a sexual dream in which each of her clients starred. So she created a stage setting of subtle erotic chic; just glamorous and sensual enough to stir the imaginations of the women she catered to.

And Leticia Vane didn't cater to just anyone. Clients had to be referred. Exclusivity wasn't a matter of money nowadays; everyone and anyone had money. In order to be desirable, you had to be unavailable. Celebrities were the kiss of death to any business; as they went out of fashion, so would you. And she didn't make anything for women who'd had breast implants. Leticia's objections were purely aesthetic. They simply ruined the balance of her creations. She prided herself on being able to lend a hand where nature had been careless or abrupt. Her nightdresses all had inbuilt bras which she fashioned from plaster

moulds of her clients' breasts. Discrepancies in size and shape were all catered to and gently adjusted. By raking the insides of each cup, she made the breasts fall forward, spilling recklessly, yet never fully escaping, bound by tissue-thin layers of sheerest net.

She didn't make anything as vulgar as crotchless panties or cut-out bras, but she knew how to heighten the colouring, hand tinting the fabric of each design so that the nipples appeared pink and slightly swollen. And her famous French knickers were so silky and loose that they could easily be pushed to one side without ever completely removing them.

Leticia's greatest asset was that she understood men and sympathized with women. The difficulty with most lingerie was that it repelled the very thing it claimed to enhance. Not every man was thrilled to arrive home after a long day to find his wife trussed up in three hundred pounds' worth of bizarre, lurid corsetry – trying to act sexy in a get-up that had taken her a full half-hour to wriggle into. Both of them would be embarrassed by the effort of such a blatant overture; unsure of how to work various snaps and ties. Then there would be added pressure of having an unprecedented sexual experience that would warrant the expense. Leticia understood that when a woman went to such trouble, it was usually because her sex life had reached a crisis. But the very unfamiliarity of such a costume could make her feel ridiculous and, even worse, desperate. A deliberate performance always increases the possibility of sexual rejection.

Leticia firmly believed that quality was the result of quantity.

Good sex was simply a by-product of having a great deal of all sorts of sex; rough, slow, quick and to the point or dreamy and drawn out, random gropes, teasing touches, full-on oral feasts – all these things qualified as sex to her. And so, to facilitate an unconscious air of sexual susceptibility, she created heightened versions of everyday pieces; deceptively simple white nightdresses, only fashioned from such sheer material and cut so cleverly that they draped the body in a provocative, filmy gauze, accentuating the peek of nipples, hugging the curve of hips, lengthening legs; billowing beguilingly with each movement. Because they appeared so innocent and unassuming, they were undeniably erotic. Instead of shouting, 'Fuck me!' they whispered, 'Take me . . . see . . . I'm not even looking!' The cleverest bit was that, while a man couldn't help but be hypnotized by the erotic undertones, the idea of sex would be his. The pieces compelled a man to act, and made the woman feel languid. She could lie back and lure her husband into action. And a man who initiates sex always feels more virile than one who has it thrust upon him.

Leticia had been taught this invaluable insight along with the rest of her trade by her godfather, Leo. He'd been a West End theatrical costume designer. And like Leticia, he was entirely self-created. He smoked thin, black Russian cigarettes, probably had his nose done back in the sixties and wore his beautiful silver hair loose around his shoulders. His uniform was what he called 'an Audrey' – a black cashmere polo neck, black tailored trousers and soft, leather slippers he had specially made.

He laughed often and firmly refused to countenance any form of self-pity or pessimism.

He came from a different world – not just a theatrical one but from another age entirely – an age that had no qualms about artifice; that had no desire to appear natural, and understood that a little sleight of hand was nothing to be ashamed of. He'd been a dresser to Marlene Dietrich when she used to pin her scalp back under her wig; had sewn sweat guards into Julie Andrews's gowns in *My Fair Lady* and even adjusted the sleeves on Vivian Leigh's costumes so that no one could see her hands shaking after a bad night.

Leticia slipped off her jacket, hung it up on a hook behind the door and looked round with satisfaction. Leo was retired now but he adored the shop. The slipper bath had been his idea. (It shuddered violently if you turned on the taps but it looked exquisite.) He was the only other person who really appreciated her collection of lace or the rare quality of the bolts of beautiful fabric.

If it hadn't been for him, she might still be languishing in Hampstead Garden Suburb. He gave her a subscription to *Vogue* when she was eight. When she was ten, he presented Leticia with a little work table all her own in his studio. There she sat, making sketches, watching carefully as the greatest stage divas of the day were transformed from frightened, self-obsessed neurotics into creatures worthy of universal adoration. In her teens, he took her to the theatre, bought her her first cocktail in Kettner's, showed her how to pluck her eyebrows and

move in a way that commanded attention. He taught her the difference between presence, which includes everyone in its warm glow, and attitude, which keeps the whole world at bay.

There was nothing Leo couldn't render magical. Nothing he couldn't fix.

She opened her appointment book and examined the names. A romance novelist, a duchess and a rich American woman from Savannah. She didn't like more than three appointments a day and nothing before 11 a.m. Early morning wasn't sexy; once you were out of bed and dressed, the weight of the day pressed too hard on everyone's conscience.

Her phone buzzed. She flicked it open. It was Leo.

'Angel, how are we this morning?' he purred, his voice tempered by thousands of cigarettes.

'Brilliant. Are you coming in today? Please say you're coming! I've got an order for a silk kimono I can't make drape properly for love nor money. The woman has a bust like a mountain range. I promise to buy you a long, boozy lunch if you can fix it.'

'Would love to but I can't. Feeling a bit rough this morning. Truth is I was up late last night playing strip poker with Juan. You remember Juan, don't you?'

'That male nurse from Brazil?' She riffled through the morning post. Another postcard from her parents in Israel. More brown envelopes. How boring. She tossed them unopened into the bin. 'Didn't you decide he was too young for you? Does he even speak English?'

'Don't be catty, darling. His English has come on a treat. Besides,' she could hear him lighting a fresh cigarette, 'we don't waste our time on conversation.'

'Please! I don't want to know all your secrets!'

'You know them all anyway.'

She smiled. 'I have one.'

'Really? What or rather who is it?'

'Now who's being catty? His name's Hughie and he's delicious!'

'How old?'

'Oh, I don't know . . . early twenties?'

She heard him exhale. 'You need a real man, Leticia. Not some boy.'

'This from you!' She closed the appointment book firmly. 'Real men don't exist. Or haven't you noticed? Besides, he's only a fling.'

'They have feelings, you know.'

'I doubt it. All men want is sex. Especially young men.'

'And what about you? What do you want?'

Her fingers ran over a particularly exquisite and costly bolt of French blue silk organdie. 'Who cares what I want? It's what I can have that matters.'

'Emily Ann . . .'

She winced. 'You know I hate that name; it's so impossibly ugly!'

'Emily,' he repeated firmly, 'I'm concerned. These flings are getting to be a habit with you.'

'And why not? We live in a disposable world. There's no point in investing yourself too heavily.'

'You're too young to be so cynical.'

'Oh, please!' She sighed. 'Let's not do serious today! I can't; I'm not in the mood. I just want to have some fun. And Hughie's fun.'

'He's also real.'

'What am I now, some corrupting influence? No lectures – not today.'

'I'm only saying that you've got to be careful.'

'Stop, Leo,' she warned.

He ignored her. 'You pretend to be tough but we both know you're not.'

'I have to go.'

'Darling, I love you and I don't want to see you hurt.'

'What? By Hughie?' she laughed. 'See, that's the whole point! He can't hurt me! And I can't hurt him. We have rules, Leo. It's strictly sex . . . nothing more.'

'I've got news for you, sunshine. Rules or no rules, you're not in control of your heart. No one is.'

'Listen, I'll call you later. I have heaps to do and if you're not coming round I'll have to try to sort out this kimono monstrosity by myself. Speak later? And no more hot Brazilians, understand?'

She clicked the phone shut, pressed her hand over her eyes.

He was being so difficult.

And suddenly, it was back again; the dull ache, pressing hard.

It was an ache now, but for at least a year it had been a searing, slicing pain across her whole chest, like someone performing open-heart surgery without an anaesthetic. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep . . .

Damn him! Why did he have to be so . . . so judgemental?

She took a deep breath.

It didn't matter. It was all over now. She was on her feet again, better than ever.

In her workshop, Leticia put the kettle on and lit a cigarette. There was time between the duchess and the novelist to have Hughie come round. And leaning her back against the counter, she inhaled deeply and closed her eyes.

Hughie was so tall, so young, so classically handsome. And so easy to control! There were no power struggles, no coy dating rituals or manipulations. She rang, he came, they fucked. And then they fucked some more.

It was a simple relationship and, in a way, beautiful. There was something different about Hughie: a freshness. No deep thoughts or dark moods interfered with his performance. Of course, he had a lot to learn; a diamond in the rough. But that was exciting. And the best part was, he was insane about her. It was only a fling, but in every relationship there was the one who adored and the one who was adored. She'd done the adoring and preferred by far when it was the other way round.

The kettle boiled. Spooning the loose leaves of Earl Grey tea carefully into a Tiffany blue pot, she poured in the hot water. The aroma of bergamot filled the room.

She stared out of the window into the small garden at the back.

Leo was wrong. No one could hurt her again; she wouldn't let them.

Giving the tea a quick stir, she poured herself a cup. These were the hours she liked best; the day glimmered before her like a golden promise, untouched by disappointment or frustration. And sitting down at the table, she placed her teacup on a small bench well away from her work, unfolded a tissue-paper parcel full of silk and deftly threaded her needle.

The morning sun warmed her back, outside birds sang. Leticia sipped her tea.

Few things were more fragile than antique lace or the human heart.

Then she heard something.

Persistent, irritating.

Coming from the bathroom.

A dripping sound.

The kind of sound, in fact, that signalled the urgent need for a plumber.