A Partisan's Daughter

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Published by Harvill Secker

Extract

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I

The Girl on the Street Corner

I am not the sort of man who goes to prostitutes.

Well, I suppose that every man would say that. People would disbelieve it just because you felt you had to say it. It's a self-defeating statement. If I had any sense I'd delete it and start again, but I'm thinking, 'My wife's dead, my daughter's in New Zealand, I'm in bad health, and I'm past caring, and who's paying any attention? And in any case, it's true.'

I did know someone who admitted it, though. He was a Dutchman who'd done it with a prostitute during his national service. He was in Amsterdam and he was suffering from blue balls at a time when he was on leave and had a little money in his pocket. He said she was a real stunner, and the sex was better than he had expected. However, the woman

kept a bin by her bedside, the kind that is like a miniature dustbin, with a lid. You can still get them in novelty shops. Anyway, after he'd finished he eased off the condom, and she reached out and lifted the lid off for him out of good manners. It was packed to the brim with used condoms, like a great cake of pink and brown rubber. He was so horrified by that bin of limp milky condoms that he never went to a prostitute again. Mind you, I haven't seen him for twenty years, so he may well have succumbed by now. He liked to tell that story because he was an artist, and probably felt he had a Bohemian duty to be a little bit outrageous. I expect he was hoping I'd be shocked, because I am only a suburbanite.

I tried to go with a prostitute just once in my life, and it didn't work out as I had expected. It wasn't a case of blue balls so much as a case of loneliness. It was an impulse, I suppose. My wife was alive back then, but the trouble is that sooner or later, at best, your wife turns into your sister. At worst she becomes your enemy, and sets herself up as the principal obstacle to your happiness. Mine had obtained everything she wanted, so she couldn't see any reason to bother with me any more. All the delights with which she had

drawn me in were progressively withdrawn, until there was nothing left for me but responsibilities and a life sentence. I don't think that most women understand the nature of a man's sexual drive. They don't realise that for a man it isn't just something quite nice that's occasionally optional, like flower arranging. I tried talking to my wife about it several times, but she always reacted with impatience or blank incomprehension, as if I was an importunate alien freshly arrived from a parallel universe. I never could decide whether she was being heartless or stupid, or just plain cynical. It didn't make any difference. You could just see her thinking to herself, 'This isn't my problem.' She was one of those insipid Englishwomen with skimmed milk in her veins, and she was perfectly content to be like that. When we married I had no idea that she would turn out to have all the passion and fire of a codfish, because she took the trouble to put on a good show until she thought it was safe not to have to bother any more. Then she settled in perpetuity in front of the television, knitting overtight stripy jumpers. She became more and more ashen-faced and inert. She reminded me of a great loaf of white bread, plumped down on the sofa in its cellophane wrapping.

Englishmen don't like to talk about their troubles, but I've had enough conversations with other men like me, usually at a bar somewhere, usually trying to delay their homecoming, and always reading between the lines, to know how many of us get clamped into that claustrophobic dreary celibacy that stifles the flame inside them. They get angry and lonely and melancholy, and that's when the impulses come upon them. I sometimes wonder whether the reason that puritanical religious types are so keen on marriage is their certain knowledge that it's the one way to make sure that people get the least possible amount of sex.

The woman was standing on a street corner in Archway, looking as though she was pretending to wait for someone. She was wearing a short skirt and high boots, and her face was made up too much. I remember lilac lipstick, but I may have invented that image subsequently. It was winter, not that you'd ever know what season it was in Archway, because in Archway it's always late November on a good day, and early February on a bad one.

In fact it was during the Winter of Discontent. The streets were heaped high with rubbish, you couldn't buy bread or the *Sunday*

Times, and in Liverpool no one would bury the dead. You couldn't get heating oil, and even if you had cancer you were lucky to get into hospital. The comrades in the trade unions were trying to start the revolution, and our particularly hopeless Prime Minister's ship was holed beneath the water. I've always liked being British, but that was the worst time I can remember, and the one time when it was impossible not to be depressed about living in Britain. Back then we all needed some prospect of consolation, even if you weren't married to a Great White Loaf.

The girl wore a fluffy white fur jacket. She had litter whirling about her in the cold wind, and she was like a light glowing in the fog. She seemed a well-built girl, and I felt a lurch of attraction that I couldn't help. There was a buzzing in my groin and a slightly sick feeling in my stomach.

It was the first time I'd ever knowingly spotted a prostitute, and I realised that I should just drive on. What if you get taken inside and someone mugs you for your wallet? You'd probably be too ashamed to go to the police. Even so, after I got to the end of the road it was as if my willpower had been mysteriously cancelled out. Something took control of my

hands, I did a three-pointer at the end of the street, and came back down. I found myself stopping beside her, and winding down the window. It was all against my better judgement, and I could feel palpitations in my chest, and sweat forming on my temples. It occurred to me that I would probably be too anxious to manage anything anyhow.

I looked at her and she looked at me, and I tried to say something, but nothing came out. She said, 'Yes?'

I wasn't sure of the formula, so I said, 'Have you got the time?' because that was suitably ambiguous. She looked at her watch, shook her wrist and put it to her ear. She said, 'Sorry, it stopped. I get bad luck with watches.'

She had a nice voice. It was soft and melodious, with quite a strong accent that I couldn't place.

I tried again, and said, 'Are you working?'

She looked at me with a puzzled expression, and then enlightenment dawned. A whole gallery of expressions crossed her face one after the other, from indignation to delight. Finally she laughed and put her hand to her mouth in a way that was really very sweet and charming. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh, you think I'm bad girl.'

I was appalled, and started gabbling, 'Oh, I'm so sorry, really I'm very sorry, I didn't know, I thought, oh dear, I am so sorry, it's so embarrassing, forgive me, please forgive me, a horrible mistake, a horrible mistake.'

She continued laughing, and I just sat there in my car with my ears burning. At that point I should have driven away, but for some reason I didn't. She stopped giggling, and then to my surprise she opened the passenger door and got in, bringing with her a tidal wave of heavy perfume that I found very unpleasant and stifling. It reminded me of my grandmother in old age, attempting to disguise the odours of incontinence.

The woman sat next to me and looked at me with a pert expression. She had dark brown eyes and had her shiny black hair done in the kind of style that I believe is called a bob. It suited her very well. As I said, she was a well-built girl, with wide hips and large breasts. She wasn't the sort I would normally have taken a fancy to.

'I called cab,' she said, 'but it didn't come, and I waited long, long time, so you can take me home, but I regret I don't sleep with you just now.'

'Oh,' I said.

'It's not far,' she said, 'just few streets, but I don't like to walk. This place is full of bad ones, bloody allsorts.'

I was shocked. I said, 'You shouldn't be getting into cars with strange men. Something might happen.'

She shot me a contemptuous look and said, 'You wanted me in your car just before, when you thought I was bad girl. Before you didn't tell me not to go getting in car.'

I said, 'Yes, but –'

And she interrupted me with a wave of her hand: 'But nothing. No bullshits now. I live down that way. You give me lift and that's how you say sorry. And you protect me from other strange men. OK, let's go.'

I delivered her to a place that doesn't exist any more. It wasn't far from that bridge at the top of the hill where alcoholics from the drying-out clinic used to commit suicide by throwing themselves down to the road below. It was a whole street of semi-derelict terraces that must have been grand once, but back then it was full of abandoned cars and litter. Not many houses had intact window frames, and nothing can have been painted for years. There were wide cracks in many of the walls, and you could see that there were tiles missing or

broken on almost every roof. All the same, it seemed quite a friendly and unthreatening sort of place, and that was indeed what it turned out to be. It was a street full of poor people and transients who wanted to live in peace and for whom decorating would have been expensive and pointless. It all got demolished and redeveloped during the Thatcher era. I was sad about that, but it needed doing, I suppose. I passed by when they were wrecking it, and I asked the demolition men for the street sign. I've still got it somewhere in the garage.

When I stopped the car she held out her right hand very formally, and said, 'Roza. Nice to meet you. Thank you for the lift. I hope you find someone nice to sleep with.'

I took her hand and shook it. I thought I ought to give her a false name, but couldn't think of one. I was embarrassed by my name anyway. I'm not from a well-to-do family, and I always thought it sounded pretentious. 'I'm Christian,' I said, having been reduced by confusion into telling the truth.

'Christian?' she repeated. I suppose it must have been a name that she thought didn't suit me.

'My parents thought it sounded posh. Everyone calls me Chris.'

Just before she left she leaned down to the window and smiled at me seriously, 'So, Chris, how much were you going to give me?'

'Give you?'

'For the sex, you know?'

'Oh,' I said, 'I don't know. I don't know what . . . I have no idea . . .'

'So, Chris, you never been with bad girl before?'

'No, I haven't.' She looked at me with sceptical indulgence, and I felt my ears begin to burn again.

Roza said, 'They all say that. Every one. Not one man has ever been with bad girl before. Never never never.'

I was thinking over the startling implications of this when she added, 'When I was bad girl I never took less than five hundred. I didn't do cheap.'

With that, she turned and climbed the tilting steps to her door. She waved at me gently, with a strangely old-fashioned circular movement of her hand, and before she went in she said, 'You come by sometime and I give you coffee maybe, I don't know.'

I just sat there for a while with the motor turning, and the Archway rain began to fall more heavily. I'd worked out by then that Roza

must indeed have been a prostitute, but wasn't any more. I wondered if I had offended her at all, or if I had merely amused her. It felt as though she had been teasing me.

I don't know how to classify my falling in love with Roza. I've been in love often enough to be completely exhausted by it, and not to know what it means any more. When you look back afterwards, you can always find another way of putting it. You say, 'I was obsessed, it was really lust, I was fooling myself,' because after you've recovered from being in love, you always decide that that wasn't what it was.

Every time you fall in love it's a bit different, and in any case love is a word that gets used too lightly. It ought to be a sacred word that's hardly ever used. But it was then when I was sitting there in my car with the engine running and the wipers slapping that I began at the very least to fall into fascination. You can call it love, if that's what suits. I think that that's what I would call it.