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The Villa Girls

Written by Nicky Pellegrino

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The Villa Girls

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Prologue

I'm happy being single, really I am. There's no space in my life for a man. No room in my cupboards for his socks and jerseys, nowhere for his jars of hair wax or shaving sticks. I don't want his pictures hanging on my walls or his TV taking up my living room. I don't need any company. My life is absolutely fine the way it is. There's nothing that needs changing.

Most people find that difficult to believe. They insist on offering eligible friends and throwing awkward dinner parties. It's as though choosing a path so different to the one they've followed is almost an insult. And that's odd because I'm happy for them. Marriage and babies, they're perfectly good things. It's just that I don't want them. Not at all.

So what do I love so much about my life? Well, waking early every morning to the dirty London light and hearing the hum of the city beyond my sash windows. Drinking the first exquisite cup of dark-roasted coffee as I lean against the bench in my clean, white kitchen. Eating a slice or two of toasted sourdough from the bakery around the corner.

I really love my flat – the two lower floors of a tall house in Belgravia, bought with what was left of my parents' money. The walls are painted in pale shades and the floors are bleached wood. There's hardly any furniture and yet there's still a place for everything – shoes in a cupboard by the door, magazines in a neat pile with white spines aligned, surfaces empty and clean. I love the way it looks.

And I love my morning walk past the shops to catch

the tube eastwards to the studio I share with my business partner Johnny Wellbelove. Here light streams through long windows and there's another kitchen, all gleaming silver and industrial. One entire wall is lined with shelves to house the oddments of crockery I've collected over the years, drawers are filled with folded coloured linens and mismatched cutlery.

It's here that Johnny photographs the food I cook and style for him. We work for magazines and book publishers, mostly together but sometimes apart. Johnny is what my mother would have referred to as 'camp as a row of tents'. He's funny and flamboyant, and I like that about him. It means I don't have to be.

As Goodheart & Wellbelove the pair of us have been together for long enough to be an effortless team. And yes, we love what we do.

So I'm that unfashionable thing: content. To me there's no reason to be constantly striving for the next triumph or trying to reach a higher rung on the ladder. I'm happy with what I've got. Why would I need more?

And yet even I understand why we need to climb out of our lives now and then, no matter how well arranged they might be. I can see that it's good to visit new places, to dip in and out of other people's worlds before coming back to our own.

I love my life in London but there are times I need to get away from it, just like anybody else. And I guess that's one of the reasons why for all these years I've carried on being a Villa Girl.

Rosie

The Villa Girls happened by accident, and I was the least likely part of them. It all began during the final summer of our sixth form. I remember the day quite clearly. It was one of those mornings when we were supposed to be sitting in the library revising quietly for exams but instead I'd sloped off for some time on my own, just as I did whenever I got a chance those days. Often I caught the tube up to Hampstead and walked over the heath or wandered aimlessly around shops and markets. I spent hours in galleries and museums or sat in parks. Anything rather than go back to the place I was supposed to call home.

I was fairly new to skiving off but had discovered the secret was to do it in plain sight. So I never tried to run or sneak away. Instead, I walked confidently, head held high. And if the worst did happen and a teacher loomed then I made sure I had an excuse ready: 'Off to the doctor; women's troubles.' It worked every time.

On that particular day, I'd shaken off school and was walking through the Barbican Centre, skirting the hard edges of a building to shield myself from the wind, when I noticed Addolorata Martinelli sprawled on a bench near the lake, smoking a cigarette and wearing a bright blue hat pulled over her dark curly hair. She must have been bunking off too and clearly didn't care who saw her.

She glanced over as I walked by and I heard her calling out to me far too loudly. 'Hey, Rosie Goodheart. Aren't you supposed to be at school?' The heads of several curious

passers-by swivelled and I kept walking as though I didn't have the faintest idea who she was.

If everything had been normal that summer then Addolorata would have left me alone. The pair of us had been in the same class for years but we'd never come close to being friends. Even now she's got one of those personalities that seems to seep over the edges, and in those days there was always some sort of drama going on: boyfriend trouble, break-ups, pregnancy scares. Addolorata was noisy about it, too, as though the rest of us were only there to be her audience. As a general rule I hardly ever spoke to her.

But this was the summer everyone in my class had been told they had to be nice to me. To keep an eye on me, even. And so instead of letting me walk on alone, Addolorata got up from her bench and followed.

'Hey, Rosie, are you all right?' she called, again too loudly. 'Where are you going?'

I stopped to let her catch up so she didn't have to shout. 'Nowhere in particular,' I told her.

'So why aren't you in school?'

'I'm sick of revising.'

'Oh yeah, me too.' Addolorata lit another cigarette and offered me a drag, which I refused with a shake of my head. 'I don't care about the exams anyway. When I've finished with school I'm going to work in my father's restaurant and it's not like I'll need A levels for that.'

'I guess not,' I said economically, hoping she'd give up trying to coax a conversation out of me.

She might have left me alone then if not for the ten-pound note that came blowing down the street straight towards us in a strong gust of wind. Addolorata bent to pick it up and we both looked round, trying to see who might have dropped it. There was no one in sight.

'What do you think we should do?' I asked.

‘Spend it, obviously. That’s the rule with found money: you have to get rid of it as quickly as it came to you.’

‘I’ve never heard that one.’ I was interested now.

‘Well, possibly I’m making it up,’ Addolorata admitted, laughing. ‘But let’s spend it anyway. We could go and get dim sum.’

I had no idea what she was talking about. ‘Get what?’

‘Dim sum. Chinese dumplings. Haven’t you ever had them?’

I shook my head. ‘Don’t think so.’

‘Really?’ She sounded amazed. ‘I’ll take you to my favourite place. You’ll love it.’

We caught a bus to Chinatown. I don’t know how Addolorata knew about the restaurant she led me to. It was down a narrow side street and you had to ring on a buzzer beside a scruffy-looking door and climb two flights of bare wooden stairs that led to a long, undecorated room. The place was crowded with Chinese people and between the packed tables unsmiling women pushed huge stainless-steel trolleys piled high with steaming bamboo baskets.

Addolorata wasn’t the least bit intimidated by any of it. She found us two seats at a shared table and chose the food she wanted. With a finger she waved away the shrivelled chicken feet, a nod brought crescent-shaped fried dumplings, sticky rice wrapped tight in dark green leaves, doughy pork buns.

‘Taste this,’ she told me, plucking a prawn dumpling from a basket with her chopsticks. ‘Oh, and this is really good too.’

‘Do you come here with your family?’ I asked, watching Addolorata load up a dumpling with hot chilli sauce.

‘What? God no, my father wouldn’t eat stuff like this. I come by myself usually. I really enjoy it.’ She poured some tea from a dripping pot. ‘Sometimes I bring a book or magazine, but often I just sit and watch the expressions on people’s faces as they eat.’

It seemed an odd idea to me. 'You like to watch people eat?'

She nodded as she grabbed at another dumpling with her chopsticks. 'Especially Chinese people because they sit for a long time over their food, talking and drinking tea, savouring little mouthfuls. They're interesting to watch. It's like witnessing a tiny slice of their lives.'

Curious now, I looked more carefully at the old man and the young girl across the table from us. They were making their way through a shared plate of crab, cracking the claws with a hammer and sucking out the sweet white meat inside. Beside us was a larger group feasting on steamed leafy greens covered in a silky sauce and platters piled high with fried squid. The whole restaurant was filled with the sound of friends and family gathering over food. It hummed with happiness.

'So what do you think of the dim sum?' Addolorata asked. 'Do you love it?'

'I like the way it looks,' I told her, 'the baskets and little dishes of dipping sauces. It's pretty.'

She gave me a sideways look. 'But do you like the flavours?'

I'd thought most of it tasted pretty good so I nodded and Addolorata used that as an excuse to take more from the trolleys: gelatinous rice-noodle rolls, little squares of shrimp toast, deep-fried silken tofu. Far too much for me to eat. I worried this was going to cost more than the ten-pound note we'd found and tried to make her stop.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'On weekends I do waitressing shifts for my dad. I've always got a bit of cash on me.'

It was only once we were out on the street again, full of dim sum and not sure what would happen next, that Addolorata asked me the question I was sick of hearing.

'So how are you doing anyway, Rosie?' she said awkwardly. 'Are you all right?'

I gave her the reply everyone seemed to want: yes, I was fine. And then I tried to get away from her.

'Thanks, that was great,' I said, moving off a few steps. 'Really delicious. I'll see you tomorrow, I expect.'

'Hang on, Rosie.' Addolorata looked worried. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You're not … I'm just … going somewhere.'

'Not back to school?'

'Of course not.'

'Well, where then?'

'To Liberty.' It was my favourite place back then, still is really. 'I'm going to look at scarves and handbags.'

Addolorata laughed. 'Really? Why?'

'It's what I like to do.'

'So can I come with you?' she asked.

'I'm fine on my own, you know; I don't need company.'

'Maybe I'd like to come.'

I gave up trying to shrug her off and together we walked through the side roads of Soho and down Carnaby Street. She seemed to know this part of London as well as I did. But she didn't know Liberty, with its small rooms filled with luxury. She hadn't ever visited its collections of designer clothes or browsed its glass cases of costume jewellery, the squares of screen-printed silk scarves, the boxed stationery – all of it chosen by people with taste. We spent ages walking through each floor, touching things we couldn't afford and ended up in my favourite place of all, the beauty room, spraying our wrists with perfume and smearing our skin with samples.

'Mmm, this is lovely.' Addolorata misted the air with Chanel No 5. 'I wish I could afford a bottle.'

'Didn't you just say you always had loads of cash from waitressing?'

'Yeah, but I'm hopeless at saving up enough to buy anything proper.' Addolorata set down the bottle and smiled at the sales assistant. 'I spend it all on things to eat.'

By now it was growing late and outside London's treacly light was thickening into gloom. Liberty had switched on its lamps and seemed even more like a jewel-box, its counters heaped with things anyone would want to own, its air smelling of new fabric, polished wood and empty afternoons.

'I should go,' Addolorata sounded reluctant. 'My mother will be expecting me home.'

'Yeah, I guess I should head off too,' I agreed.

It wasn't until we were more than halfway back up Carnaby Street that I pulled the bottle from my pocket. 'Here you go.' I held it out to her. 'This is for you.'

'What?'

'The perfume you wanted. Chanel No 5.'

'You took it?' Addolorata looked astonished.

'It's only the sample. Half of it's been used up already, see?'

'But still, you stole it.'

'Hey, if you don't want it, no problem.' I shrugged.

'No, no, I'll have it.' She took the bottle and shoved it deep into her jacket pocket.

It wasn't that I was trying to shock Addolorata, or impress her even. The only reason I'd taken the perfume was that she seemed to love it so much. And stretching out my hand to scoop it up was the easiest thing in the world. But now I could tell she was looking at me in quite a different way.

'What if they'd spotted you?' she asked.

'Well, they didn't,' I pointed out.

'If I got caught doing something like that my parents would kill me.'

'But I don't have any parents.' I said it matter-of-factly. 'Not any more.'

'Oh no, damn it, I'm so sorry.' Addolorata looked appalled. 'I shouldn't have said that. I just kind of … forgot for a moment.'

'Don't be sorry. It's not your fault.'

She fell silent for long enough for it to be uncomfortable and then, as we turned the corner into Broadwick Street, Addolorata asked me a question. Just one little question but it ended up changing everything.

'Hey, Rosie, what are you going to do once school is finished?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'What about you?'

'I'm going to Spain. Toni's aunt is letting us have her place in Majorca for a few weeks.'

'That sounds good. Lucky you.'

'So do you think you might like to come?' she ventured. 'It won't be very exciting or anything. We're just going to lie in the sun and live on San Miguel beer.'

'Me?' I said, surprised. 'Toni wouldn't want me, surely?' Toni was another girl I barely ever spoke to, part of that same crowd, with their noisy boyfriend troubles and the packs of condoms posing obviously in their handbags.

'Why not? A bunch of us are going. One more won't make any difference.'

'But Toni doesn't like me.'

'I don't think that's true. She doesn't even know you.' Addolorata fingered the outline of the fragrance bottle in her pocket.

It was true that I didn't have any idea what I was going to do once the exams were finished. School was the only constant left in my life. Yes, I hated the teachers and their dreary lessons, but at least they were something to run away from. Where would I be when I didn't even have that?

'You're living with your aunt, right?' Addolorata asked. 'Would she pay your airfare?'

'Things didn't work out with my aunt. I'm with an uncle now.'

'Well, perhaps he'd help out. It won't cost much, just the flights and food. My dad's paying for me … It's meant to be an advance on my wages. Can you get the money somehow?'

I thought about being in another country, far away from here, with foreign voices I couldn't understand, different colours, foods and faces. 'Maybe … I don't know … I'll think about it,' I said.

'I'll tell the others then, shall I? It'll be fine, I'm sure it will.'

EXTRACT FROM ADDOLORATA'S JOURNAL

Oh bloody hell, I'm going to be in so much trouble when they find out who I've asked to come to Spain. My family's always telling me I'm too impulsive and now I see they may be right. But I can't go back on it now, not if she says she wants to come. Poor little thing. Her parents all smashed up in their car on the M6 and now she's living with some uncle and always seems so lonely, even though she must have some friends, I suppose. I'll have to make the others go along with it. I mean, it's only a few weeks and there'll be loads of us. Hopefully she won't start stealing stuff over there and get us all arrested …

God, she's a strange girl. I keep thinking how I'd be if my parents were wiped out like that. Not like Rosie Goodheart. I've never even seen her cry. No one has …