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AN ENGLISH UNOFFICIAL ROSE

The fashion in London that year was rags – expensive ones, but rags all the same. Women wore torn blouses and patched jeans, and their shoes were painted to make them looked scuffed and wrongly paired. Their hair was cut in a raggedy way – front hanks of it dyed pink and green and bright orange and blue. They wore plastic badges and safety pins, and they called themselves punks. The idea was for them to seem threadbare. It was a popular look, but it was not easy to achieve. It took imagination, and time, and a great deal of money for these spoiled wealthy girls to appear down and out.

But Sophie Graveney wore a smooth blouse of light silk the texture of skin, and a close-fitting skirt slit all the way to her hip, and steeply pitched spike-heeled shoes. The weather was uncertain, but most days were warm enough for a jacket. Sophie's was bottle-green velvet, with two gold clasps where there might have been buttons. She said she could not bear to be mistaken for someone poor, and was willing to risk being called unfashionable for her rich clothes. Styles change, but beauty is never out of fashion – I told her that. And no one expected this rag business and colored hair to last very long. People stared at Sophie. She was no punk. Horton, my boss at the London Embassy, had called her 'an English rose.'

I find it impossible to see a well-dressed woman without thinking that she is calling attention to her charms. Isn't that lady with the plunging neckline and that coin slot between her squeezed breasts – isn't she declaring an interest? Certainly that attractive woman in the tight skirt is making a general promise. At the same time, such women are betraying a certain self-love. Narcissism is necessary to that kind of beauty. It is the aspect that maddens lovers, because it is unreachable. Sophie's self-possession was a kind of inaccessible narcissism. In her beauty there was both effort and ease. Her hair had been softly curled, her eyes and mouth delicately painted, but beneath her make-up and under her lovely clothes was a tall strong girl in the full bloom of thirty, who jogged four miles before breakfast. She was healthy; she was reliable; she dressed as if she was trying to please me. I was flattered, and grateful. So far, I had no friends in London who weren't connected with the Embassy. I liked the promises of her clothes. I needed someone like Sophie.

After a month here I had a routine. It was a bachelor's consolation – my job, my office, my hotel room – and I hated it. It made everything serious and purposeful, and I suppose I began to look like one of those supersolemn diplomats, all shadows and monosyllables, who carry out secret missions against treacherous patriots in the (believe me) laughably false plots of political thrillers. It seemed pointless, this

austerity, and I did not believe in my own efficiency. I wanted to break free of it, to prove to myself that my job did not matter that much. I hated the implied timidity, the repetition, the lack of surprise in this routine. In a poor country – a hardship post – I could have justified these dull days by telling myself that I was making a necessary sacrifice. It is some comfort, when one is braving tedium, to know that one is setting a good example. But in London I wanted to live a little. I knew I was missing something.

No longer: Sophie and I were dining at Le Gavroche, having just seen a spirited Hamlet at the Royal Court. She smiled at me from across the table. There was a flicker of light in her eyes, a willingness to agree, good humor, a scent of jasmine on her shoulders, and a certain pressure of her fingers on my hand that offered hope and a promise of mildly rowdy sex. I was happy.

She talked the whole time, which was fine with me. By habit and inclination I never discussed my work with anyone outside the Embassy. I listened gladly to everything she said; I was grateful that I did not have to ask my ignorant questions about London. And yet, though she talked mostly about herself, she revealed very little. She told me her plans – she wanted to travel, see Brazil (‘again’) – she had friends in Hong Kong and New York. She was vague about what she was doing at the moment. She seemed surprised and a little annoyed that I should ask.

“‘What do you do for a living?’” Her accent was the adenoidsand-chewing-gum American drawl that the British put on when they are feeling particularly skittish, which, thank God, is seldom. She went on, ‘It’s not a question people ask in England.’

‘It wasn’t my question. I didn’t say, “What do you do for a living?” I said, “What are you doing at the moment?”’

‘I know what you meant, and you shouldn’t have asked.’

‘I wonder why.’

‘Because it’s bloody rude, that’s why,’ she said softly, and seemed pleased with herself. ‘Anyway, why should one do anything? I know plenty of people who don’t do anything at all – absolutely nothing.’

‘You like that, do you?’

‘Yes, I think there’s something really fantastic about pure idleness.’

“‘Consider the lilies of the field,” et cetera, et cetera.’

‘Not only that. If a person doesn’t really do anything, you have to take him for what he is rather than what he does. Your asking me what I’m doing is just a cheap way of

finding out what sort of person I am. That's cheating.'

I said, 'I don't see why.'

She shrugged and said, 'Daddy didn't do much, but Daddy was a gentleman. You probably think I'm a frivolous empty-headed girl who sits around the house all day varnishing her nails, waiting for parties to begin.' She worked her tongue against her teeth and said, 'Well, I am!'

'It's been the ruin of many a Foreign Service marriage – I mean, the wife with nothing to do but advance her husband's career. All that stage-managing, all those tea parties, all that insincerity.'

'I'd love it. I wouldn't complain. My headmistress used to say "Find a husband who'll give you a beautiful kitchen, and lovely flowers to pick, and lots of expensive silver to polish." That sort of thing's not fashionable now, is it? But I don't care. I like luxury.'

And although this was only the second time I had seen her, I began seriously to calculate the chances of my marrying her. She was glamorous and intelligent; she was good company. Men stared at her. She had taste, and she was confident enough in her taste so that she would never be a slave to fashion.

I was turning these things over in my mind when she said, 'What do I do? A bit of modeling, a little television, some lunchtime theater. You probably think it's all a waste of time.'

'You're an actress,' I said.

'No,' Sophie said, 'I just do a little acting. It's not what you'd call a career. Everyone criticizes me for not being ambitious. Crikey, of course I spend time, but I don't waste time – are you wasting time if you're enjoying yourself?' She did not wait for my reply. She said, 'I'm enjoying myself right now.'

'Shall we do this again sometime?'

'Again and again,' she said slowly, in a kind of heated contentment. 'Would you like that?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I really would.'

She reached over and touched my face, brushed the aroma of jasmine on my cheek – it was the most intimate, the most disarming gesture – and said, 'It's getting late –'

I kissed her in the taxi going back to her house. She did not push me away. But after a

few minutes she lifted her head.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘This is Prince of Wales Drive,’ she said. ‘Aren’t those mansion blocks fantastic?’ She kissed me again, then she took my arm and said, ‘Wouldn’t you like to live there?’

They were not my idea of mansions, but I found myself agreeing with her: yes, I said, and looked through the taxi window at the balconies. It was as if we were choosing a location for a love nest. Sophie squeezed my arm and said, ‘That one’s fun.’

I saw dark windows.

‘Wouldn’t it be super to live here?’ she said. And it seemed as if she were speaking for both of us.

I said, ‘It sure would.’

‘Are you looking for a place to rent? Your hotel must be rather cramped.’

‘I’m moving the first chance I get. I’m going to buy a place – renting is pointless, and anyway I’ve got two years’ accumulated hardship allowance to spend.’

She kissed me then, and we were still kissing as the taxi sped on, turned into a side street, and came to rest on Albert Bridge Road in front of a tall terrace of narrow houses. I paid for the taxi, then walked with her to the front gate.

She said, ‘Your taxi’s driving away.’

‘I’ve paid him. I told him to go.’

‘That was silly. You’ll never get another one around here – and the buses have stopped running.’

I said, ‘Then I’ll walk,’ and clung to her hand, ‘although I don’t want to.’

‘It’s not far to your hotel.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I just meant I’d rather stay here with you.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘You’re sweet.’

The English are frugal. They can even economize on words. Sophie gave nothing away. She planted a rather perfunctory kiss on my cheek, and when I tried to embrace her

she eased out of my grasp and said comically, ‘Do you mind?’ and took out her door key.

‘You’re beautiful,’ I said.

‘I’m tired,’ she said. ‘I must get some sleep. I have a big day tomorrow – a screening – and I have to be up at the crack of dawn.’ She gave me another brisk kiss and said lightly, ‘Otherwise I’d invite you in.’

I said, ‘I want to see you again soon.’

‘I’d like that,’ she said.

I was half in love with her by then, and in that mood – half-true, half-false – I strolled home whistling, congratulating myself on my good luck. London is kind to lovers – it offers them privacy and quiet nights and spectacles. Albert Bridge was alight. In the daytime it is a classic bridge, but at night all its thousands of yellow light bulbs and its freshly painted curves give it the look of a circus midway suspended in the sky. The lights on its great sweeps are very cheering at midnight over the empty river.

The next day I wanted to call her, but a long meeting with Scaduto held me up. It was eight o’clock before I left the office. Scaduto furiously preened himself in the elevator mirror as we descended to Grosvenor Square. He said he had called his wife to tell her he’d be late. She had screamed at him.

‘Get this,’ he said. ‘She says to me, “You never listen.” That’s interesting, isn’t it? What does it mean, “You never listen”? Isn’t it a paradox, or some kind of contradiction? Tell me something – has anyone ever said that to you? “You never listen”?’

I said no.

‘Right. Because you’re not married,’ Scaduto said. ‘You’ve got to be married to hear things like that. Isn’t that terrible?’ He began to laugh, and said, ‘You wouldn’t believe the things married people say to each other. You can’t imagine the hostility. “You never listen” is nothing. The rest is murder.’

‘Awful things?’

‘Horrendous things,’ he said. ‘What are you smiling for?’

‘What does it matter what people say, if you never listen?’

Steam came out of Scaduto’s nose – the sound of steam, at any rate. Then he said, ‘I’ve seen guys like you – nice, happy, single guys. They get married. They get ruined.

Unhappy? You have no idea.’

I was indignant at this, because I took everything he said to be a criticism of Sophie. His conceited and miserable presumption belittled her. I thought: How dare you – because his cynicism was about life in general, the hell of marriage, the tyranny of women. He was cheating me out of my pleasant mood, the afterglow of having met someone I genuinely liked and wanted to be with. I hated his sullen egotism: his marriage was all marriages, his wife was all women, he and I were brothers. Ain’t it awful was the slogan of this fatuous freemasonry of male victims.

I said, ‘I pity you.’

‘Keep your pity,’ Scaduto said. ‘You’ll need it for yourself.’

His voice was full of fatigue and experience – and ham. The married man so often tries to sound like a war veteran, and the divorced one like a man discharged because of being wounded in action.

I met Sophie for a drink a few days later. We went out to eat again the following week. On our first date I had wanted to go to bed with her. That desire had not passed, and yet another feeling, a deeper one, like loyalty and trust, asserted itself. It was compatible with lechery – in fact, it gave lechery an honorable glow.

And now she called me occasionally at work. She had a touching telephone habit of saying, ‘It’s only me –’ What could be easier or more intimate? She liked to talk on the phone. It was fun, she said, whispering into my ear.

About two weeks after Hamlet she called and said, ‘Are you free this evening?’

‘Yes,’ I said, and thought of an excuse to dispose of the appointment I had – a journalist that Jeeps had urged me to meet. I could meet him any time, but Sophie –

‘It’s a flat,’ she said.

What was she talking about?

‘Just what you’ve been looking for,’ she said. ‘Bang on Prince of Wales Drive. Overstrand Mansions. It’s at the front, with that lovely view.’

‘That’s wonderful – shall we meet there?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t make it. I’ve got a screening on. But you should go. I’ll give you the owner’s number. It’s a friend of a friend.’

‘I was hoping to see you,’ I said, interrupting her as she told me the price. ‘What about going with me tomorrow?’

‘This flat might not be available tomorrow,’ she said.

‘I’ll look at it this evening then.’

‘Super.’

‘Will you be available tomorrow?’ I said.

‘Quite available.’ She said that in what I thought of as her actress’s voice. Whenever she said anything very serious or very definite, she used this voice, and sometimes an American accent.

I went to see the flat. Its balcony was the brow of this red brick mansion block, and from it I could see my own hotel beyond the park and the river. This pleased me – my own landmark, in this enormous city, among the slate roofs and steeples and treetops.

The flat was larger than I wanted, but I thought of Sophie and began to covet it for its extra rooms. The owner, a friendly German, offered me a drink.

He said, ‘As you probably gathered, my wife and I decided to split up.’

I told him I had gathered no such thing, that it was none of my business, but the longer I sat there trying to stop him telling me about his divorce (it seemed to cast a blight on the place), the more I felt I was sitting in my own room, enclosed by my own walls, the crisp shadow spikes of my balcony’s grillwork printed on my own floor.

‘She is now back in Germany,’ he said. ‘She is an extremely attractive woman.’

Because I felt it was already mine, and because I knew it was a sure way of getting him off the subject of his wife, I said, ‘I want it – let’s make a deal.’

Later I gave him the name of the Embassy lawyer and said I wanted to move quickly. By noon the next day my deposit was down and a surveyor was on his way to Overstrand Mansions. Within a week papers were examined and contracts exchanged. It was the fastest financial transaction I had ever made, but I was paying cash – my accumulated hardship allowance from my Malaysian post, and the rest of my savings. It was my first property deal, but I felt in my heart that I was not in it alone and not acting solely for myself.

I had called Sophie the day after visiting the flat. I was, I realize, intent upon impressing her. Would she want me if she saw I was powerful and decisive? When I

finally found her, she was pleased but said she couldn't meet me. 'Quite available' meant busy. She had a 'sitting' or perhaps a 'shooting' or a 'screening' or a 'viewing' or an 'opening' or a 'session.' What did she mean? I had never come across these obscure urgencies before. Language is deceptive; and though English is subtle it also allows a clever person – one alert to the ambiguities of English – to play tricks with mock precision and to combine vagueness with politeness. English is perfect for diplomats and lovers.

Some days later I was making Sophie a drink in my hotel room – a whiskey. I had the bottle in my hand.

'It should be champagne,' I said. 'We're celebrating – I've exchanged contracts.'

'Whiskey's warmer than champagne,' she said, and sat down to watch me.

'How do you like it?'

'Straight,' she said. She was not looking at the glass. 'As it comes.'

'How much?'

'Filled,' she said, and showed me her teeth.

'How many inches is that?'

'Right up,' she said, and sighed and smiled. She had said that in her actress's voice.

There was no hitch, the survey encouraged me, and Horton – as if praising my on-the-job initiative – said that London property was a great investment. I was more than hopeful; I had, mentally, already begun to live at Overstrand Mansions. In this imagining Sophie was often standing at the balcony with a drink in her hand, or in her track suit, damp with dew and effort (running raised her sexual odors, the mingled aroma of fish and flowers), and she was laughing, saying, 'Do you mind?' as I tried to hold her, and driving me wild.

I had to be reassured that she needed me as much. We had not so far used the word 'love.' We pretended we had an easygoing, trusting friendship. I think I joked with her too much, but I was very eager – foolishly so. Instead of simply saying that I wanted to see her and making a date with her, I said, 'Sophie, you're avoiding me.'

It was facetious. I could not blame her for missing the feeble joke. But, unexpectedly, it made her defensive. She took it as an accusation, and explained carefully that she had very much wanted to see me but that she was busy with – what? – a 'shooting' or a 'viewing.' Then I was sorry for what I'd said.

The arrival of my sea freight a day later gave me an excuse to call her. She was excited. She said, ‘You’ve got the key!’

‘Not yet.’

She made a sympathetic noise. She sounded genuinely sorry I hadn’t moved in. And then, ‘What if something goes wrong with the deal?’

‘I’ll find something else.’

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘Nothing will go wrong. Actually, I can quite see you there in Overstrand Mansions –’

She didn’t say us, she excluded herself; but this talk of me and my flat bored me. And I was a little disappointed. I listened dimly, then hung up, having forgotten to tell her my real reason for calling – that my sea freight had passed through customs and was at the warehouse.

It was my furniture, my Malaysian treasures, my nat from Burma, a temple painting from Vietnam, Balinese masks, wayang puppets, and my Buddha and the assortment of cutthroat swords and knives (a kris from the sultan, a kukri from the DC) I had been given as going-away presents. I had bought the furniture in Malacca. It was Chinese – an opium-smoker’s couch, and a carved settee with lion’s head legs. The bed had carved and gilded panels and four uprights for a mosquito-net canopy. And I had teak chests with carved drawers, and polished rosewood chairs, and brassware and pewter. These and my books. I had nothing else – no plates or dinnerware, no glasses, no cooking pots, nothing practical.

I wanted Sophie to see my collection of Asian things. I knew she would be impressed. She would marvel at them; she would want me more. I longed to leave my small hotel room on Chelsea Embankment and spread out in Overstrand Mansions. I yearned to be with her.

She had picked out the flat, and in buying it I had never acted so quickly, so decisively. I was glad. She had made me bold. But I tried not to think that I had bought it for us, because it was too early – she was not mine yet. I hoped she knew how badly I wanted her. I could not imagine that a desire as strong as mine could be thwarted. At times it seemed simple: I would have her because I wanted her.

I thought: If only she could see these treasures from Asia! And I tried to imagine our life together. It was a wonderful combination of bliss and purpose, and it made my bachelor solitude seem selfish. What was the point in living alone? Secretly, I believed we were the perfect couple.

All this happened in the space of three weeks – the exchanged contracts, the arrival of my furniture, the numerous phone calls. I did not see Sophie in the third week, and it was frustrating because now it was Sunday. The German had given me the key yesterday; I was moving in tomorrow.

I moved in. She had led me here. I was grateful to her that morning as the men carried my tea chests of Asian treasures upstairs (and they called their moving van a 'pantechnicon' – I had never heard the word before and it pleased me). There was space for everything. This was the apartment I needed. She had known that, somehow, or guessed – another indication that she understood me. I was delighted because Sophie had made this her concern. But where was she?

I called her but got no answer. I tried again and managed, by speaking slowly, to leave a message with her charlady, who was exasperated at having to write it down. She read the message back to me with uncertainty and resentment.

That night I woke up and was so excited to be in a place of my own that I got out of bed and walked up and down, and through all the rooms, and finally onto the balcony. I was so pleased at this outcome, I vowed that I would send Sophie a case of champagne. I lingered on the balcony – I liked everyone out there in the dark.

My roaming in the night made me oversleep. I did not get to the Embassy until after eleven, and my desk was stacked with pink While You Were Out message slips. Scaduto had called and so had Horton's secretary, and there was still some paperwork to do on my apartment – insurance and some estimates for painting it. But most of the messages were from Sophie. Five slips of paper – she had been ringing at twenty-minute intervals.

My happiness was complete. It was what I wanted most, and it seemed to me as if I had everything I wanted and was in danger of being overwhelmed by it. The phone calls were the proof that she wanted me. I would send her the case of champagne, of course; but that was a detail. She could move in with me anytime. We would do what people did these days – live together, see how we got along. It was a wonderfully tolerant world that made such arrangements possible. I would have a routine security check done on Sophie, but if Horton questioned the wisdom of our living together I could always reply that I had met her at his house and that he had had a share in creating this romance.

The phone rang. Sophie's voice was eager. 'You've moved in – that's super.'

'You've been a great help,' I said. 'When can you come over to look around?'

'My life's a bit fraught at the moment,' she said. Her voice became cautious and a bit

detached. But she had rung me five times this morning! Then all the eagerness was out of her voice and with composure she said, ‘I expect I’ll be able to manage it one of these days. I’m not far away.’

‘We could have a drink on the balcony. The way you like it. Right up.’

‘Yes,’ she said, with uncertainty. She had forgotten.

Then I felt awkward and overintimate. Had I said too much?

‘It’s a very nice flat,’ I said.

‘I’m so glad for you. I knew you’d like it.’

I wanted to say Come and live with me! There’s enough room for both of us! I won’t crowd you – I’ll make you happy in my Chinese bed!

We worked at the London Embassy with the doors open. I could see Vic Scaduto just outside my office, talking to my secretary. He was impatient and held a file in his hand that he clearly wanted to show me. He made all the motions of wanting to interrupt me; he made his impatience look like patience. At times like this, Scaduto tap-danced.

I said, ‘Sophie, I have to go.’

‘There was something else,’ she said.

‘I’ll call you back.’

‘I’ve rung you half a dozen times this morning. Please. I’ve got so much else to do.’

She sounded irritated, and I could see Scaduto’s feet – shuffle-tap, shuffle-tap – and the flap of the file as he juggled it.

I said to Sophie, ‘What is it?’

‘You’ve moved in – you’ve got the flat. So it’s all settled.’

‘I’m going to buy you a case of champagne,’ I said. ‘I’ll help you drink it. I know a place –’

‘That’s very sweet of you,’ she said. ‘But two percent is the usual commission.’

I waited for her to say more. There was no more.

I said, ‘Are you joking?’

‘No.’ She sounded more than irritated now. She was angry: I was being willfully stupid.

‘Is that why you’ve been ringing me this morning – for your commission?’

‘I found you a flat. You had an exclusive viewing. You bought it for a reasonable price –’

I said, ‘Did you fix the price?’

But she was still talking.

‘– and now you seem to be jibbing at paying me my commission.’

Scaduto put his head into my office and said, ‘Have you got a minute?’

‘Write me a letter,’ I said, and still heard her voice protesting in the little arc the receiver made, the distance between my ear and the desk.

Scaduto smiled. He said, ‘For a minute there you looked married.’

Because Sophie’s letter was delivered by hand and arrived at the front door of the Embassy, it was treated as if it contained a bomb or a threat or an explosive device. It was X-rayed; it was passed through a metal detector; it was sniffed by a trained dog. I complained to the security guard about the delay, but in the event I wished that the letter had never come.

It could not have been more businesslike or broken my spirit more. It was one chilly paragraph telling me that I had moved in, that she had been instrumental in finding me the flat – ‘following your instructions’ – and that in such a situation two percent was the usual commission.

It was not a great deal of money, the equivalent of a few thousand dollars – not enough to be really useful, only enough to ruin a friendship. I could have paid her immediately, but I didn’t want her to be my agent – I wanted her love.

Instead of writing what I felt, I wrote logically: I had not given her an order to find me a flat; she had not negotiated the price; she had not been present when I reached agreement with the owner; she had played no part in the contract or any subsequent negotiations. Hers had been an informal, friendly function. If I had known that the fee was going to be two percent I would have taken it into account and adjusted my offer. She was, I said, presuming.

Then I contemplated tearing up the letter. I had either to destroy it or send it – I didn't want it around.

Sophie rang me two days later. She said, 'How dare you! Don't write me letters like that. What do you take me for?'

I said, 'I thought you were an actress.'

She turned abusive. She swore at me. Until that moment I had marveled at how different her English was from mine. And then, with a few blunt swears, she lost her nationality and became any loud, crude, bad-tempered bitch spitting thorns at me.

I sent her the champagne. She did not acknowledge it. And she dropped out of my life.

I learned one thing more. One day I found an earring in the kitchen. I called the German, who now lived in a smaller place in Pimlico. He came over and had a drink. He was grateful – it had belonged not to his wife but to his mother. He showed no signs of wanting to leave. My whiskey made him sentimental. He said that we were both foreigners here in London. We had a lot in common. We ought to be friends.

To get him off the subject, I asked him about Sophie.

'She brought us together, you and me,' the German said. 'She charged me two percent. But it was worth it. Here we are, drinking together as friends.' He glanced around the flat. He said, 'These English girls – especially the ones with money – can be very businesslike. And did you notice? She is very pretty. She lives with an Iranian chap. They all want Iranians these days.' The German laughed out loud. 'Even if you call them Persians they still seem boring!'

And then, to my relief, he began telling me about his ex-wife.