

NO-ONE OF THAT NAME

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Bucharest, for the foreigner, centres on the Corinthia Hotel. I was a foreigner and so I in turn centred on a revolving bar stool at the downstairs bar. I did the only wise thing when you are new in a new city and you don't know prices or drinks - I ordered a beer. The bar girl poured me a light lager which frothed with promise and felt cold. I looked straight ahead at me and the rows of bottles, squat, tall, small, familiar and unfamiliar and counted how many I knew and how many, a lot more, I did not know.

The malaise of a first night in yet another city was beginning to take hold. No contacts to be made till next day, no background to think against, no knowing where to go. In sum, no company and nothing to do except have a beer and spin out time until I could eat a dinner I didn't need because I had been eating all day it seemed, on aircraft from Nairobi through Athens, changing flights and killing two hours and then on to Bucharest. A dismal ride on an airport bus with strange company over glistening wet cobble streets seen through misted windows to the hotel. My business was to inspect samples from new piece goods and make orders for summer delivery UK. It was now November – wet, cold and grey.

They say there is always a cure for boredom and depression and that it lies with the individual if he just makes the effort.

“Right, Mark, my bowy, you feel buoyant”, I convinced myself, “Full of fund and optimism, ready to go and what is more companionship is all around you if you only look”. In the bar mirror I could see my confident sales smile showing through and I almost blurted out a greeting. In case I did, and was misunderstood, I pedaled on the bar rail and swung myself

round on the stool. Drink in hand, I leaned my back against the bar and looked round the austere bar room.

High ceilings and harsh tube lighting, about six tables with up to half a dozen semi-easy chairs round each one. All were occupied by groups of men except one – which was why it caught my attention. I was to learn in the next 72 hours that bright colours and good tailored lines are not a feature of the city appearance – neither are slick design or original accessories. But it wasn't the sharp red blouse or a plain black mini or even the jet-black hair drawn down over her ears and lying carelessly on her shoulders, one strand curling under, which took my eye – but the sense of still detachment. As if all her pale beauty and grace and love and loveliness reflected, but were uninhabited by, a soul.

She was looking slowly round all the men who were in her range of vision willing each and every one to look at her – and as it happened no-one did. So when her eyes shifted towards the bar and met mine she must have seen a trace of the smile still visible on my face. She didn't smile but got up easily and fluidly and walked gently (that is the only word) across to where I sat. She came right up to me so that I could see how freshly young she was – and looked straight at me. Her coat was on her arm.

“Hello”

Her eyes were deep green like bottle glass and deep with warmth, but a warmth reflected, not contained – as if I was looking at a picture of loveliness which captured everything except life. I should have made some polite remark about mistaken identity – the stools on each side of me were occupied – and excused myself. Instead, I finished my lager in one draught and with a hand just touching her upper arm I started to move us away together as if we had met by design and with expectation.

“Let's find somewhere we can sit down”, I said.

She didn't even nod – her affirmative was all understood and unsaid and we left the bar and went to the first floor lounge. Right across the long foyer and up the wide spiral staircase, silent on thick carpets and silent in our own nearness. There was no past, only a complete present and un contemplated future, behind an opaque curtain which brief time and stark reality would lift. A short, dimly-lit presentation with no script to guide two living players.

We made our way to a corner table with bench seats on two sides built against a wall – she slid in one side and I on the other. I passed out my cigarettes – she took one, inspected it, murmured “English” – not “thank you”, and waited for me to light first hers, then mine. A first puff and the waiter appeared, flatfooted, depressingly obsequious and visibly tired with a drooping tray just balanced on the palm of his hand. We went through the ordered routine swiftly – two scotch and soda earned a quick response even in a Socialist Republic tourist hotel.

“I’m Mark – and you?”

“Tanya”.

For the first time she gave me a little smile, just the slightest quirk but it showed for a brief second in her eyes and I laughed out loud because the sun was through the clouds – I could almost smell hot, dry earth after a long-awaited thunder shower, a breath of newly freshened air driving sultriness away – and I laughed and took her hand and brought it up with mine onto the table where we could see them both.

“How can you laugh, like so?”

“Like *that*, not like *so*! I can laugh because the sun has come out and you put laughter in my heart and it spilled over for you to take some back, if you like.”

“You mean that I have made you laugh, I think. But I hadn’t done nothing – and what is spilled over?”

It all came out in almost one breath, each thought tumbling over the next. With the flower vase and at the expense of the carpet, I explained ‘spilled over’ and *her* laughter spilled over too. And I found myself laughing once again, renewed with happiness – so this time she helped me and her person – which was all I had so far met – became inhabited at last. She leaned nearer to me as she took my laughter into her eyes and mouth and throat and her hand held mine and with its pressure reproached me, almost, for my gift – which after all was hers, not mine. We were together in a crowded lounge harassed by conviviality and rent with loud discussions but we shut the doors on everything and this became our world, unpeopled, save by us.

Two hours, some sigarettes and only two drinks later, we felt the same unquestioned need to go – to move away upon the wings of promise. I knew by then that we would make love

because, loving even briefly, it must be so – not because earlier when I asked her why the search (so obvious) for me, she paused and became detached again.

“Because money is all that matters in the world”, she said with seriousness. “It is only money which makes life more possible, more bearable – it cannot be good, life, only better or worse. Even when it is worse it is still better if you have money – dollars”.

We had edged away from that sad, dark corner – back from shadows into sunlight once again. Tanya was seventeen, but only just, and her philosophy had developed from two years’ experience which altered only in frequency according to the ebb and flow of tourist traffic. She never looked for Romanian *lei-coupons*, as she called them – only dollars, pounds and marks (I wished I wasn’t ‘Mark’, but chased away the thought). She offered no plans and dropped no hint as to where the money went, on whom or what: she was an engineering student in the daytime. Soon after I had learned she had a little flat, her own, we rose and left and four tycoons swept down and took our table – loudly stole its charm and raped its happy, short past.

The first night, I did not know the way, the route, how far, how long, we walked – strolled rather. Slowly, she never gave directions right or left, she guided me this way or that, her arm around my waist. I marvelled at the sweetness of her scent and the pleasure of her nearness at my side and questioned nothing, no-one – God or me or her. Accepting just the rightness of the moment as it was. No tomorrows.

The flat was small. Two rooms, a tiny kitchenette – to me the furniture seemed sparse and the trappings of personal existence few and unstriking to the eye – but that was later. Tanya made coffee, which we never drank, because in passing we forgot, and kissed and were lying on the bed – on top, entwined, impatient with the clothes which the world and climate made us wear and soon, between the sheets, discovered, delighted, wholly one, untrammelled by the smallest interfering garment. The completeness of surrender, the agony of ecstasy, the joint fusion drifting into languor, murmured words and sleep and peace – and the promise of a new awakening.

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The crash of knocking on the outside door, like the first clap of thunder in an unexpected storm, beat us unmercifully to consciousness and fear. Tania was sitting up as I leapt from the bed, struggling with unhelpful trousers and pulling on a shirt. The door, no sooner

unlatched, was pushed sharply in. I staggered back, protesting at two intruders – plain clothes, identical raincoats, wet, and hats not taken off. They made straight for the bedroom as if they knew the way and pulled the bedclothes from naked Tanya, who said no word and did not protest, but got up with a quietness that denied I or anyone was there – and dressed. They crudely watched every secret of her body as she did.

“Do not protest”, she said without a glance. “They will not speak English”.

And they did not, but talked at her in turn and left me standing, irresolute, ignored. The door slammed behind them as they left – with Tanya. I looked at our empty world – an abandoned bed, a twisted sheet, a scent of love, two cups of coffee, cold, undrunk – memories with no substance. I dressed in fear and took my leave.

All night I walked the city and drew no comfort from its drab, dark scene, ignored its rain and hated everything I had not done to help the helpless.

The next day, the same day since night was harshly stolen from our grasp, went by without my conscious contribution. Samples matched and touched and tried; prices, costs, contracts, delivery dates, invoices all passed before my ken – experience alone dictated valid answers in which I myself seemed to have no part. I thought I made one friend in Vasiliu, export manager at the textile centre.

That night as soon as darkness fell I returned to find the flat, not knowing what I should expect - empty – silence, arrest, or what? Tanya was there, alone.

“It is quite simple”, she said, looking clearly in my eyes, but not belonging any more. “They were State Police. They said if I wanted to open my legs for foreigners I must register as a prostitute since the law is so. They will protect me and look after my medical care – and take their share. If I will not agree they will stop my attending the university and see that I cannot get employment. So, there is no choice”, she shrugged. “Now you must go. They will come back for my answer quite soon tonight. Don’t speak, just go”.

I swallowed my thoughts, my hopes, my pride and my shame and rose to my feet. All the courage seemed to be in her, not me. My lane would take off the following day for London and home, security, the barriers of safety society likes to build but will not let you scale unhurt. I did not try to take her in my arms to kiss her lovely mouth or feel the wholeness of

her body up against me – I turned to go. At the door I looked back to where Tanya still sat. She got up and held the door for me to leave – on the threshold I turned and caught the brief anxiety of a smile.

“It was good, so good. Yes?”

She shut the door. So once again she saved my pride for me and left the unforgettable memory unspoiled and self-hate diluted by a few hours of human happiness – the rarest, sweetest gift on earth. I was glad I had not thought of leaving money.

My friend, Vasiliu, was a friend. I told him all the story, begged him to find out, use influence, anything to help Tanya escape from being the victim of the State and men who were Police. When he knew all there was to know he spent the day out of contact while he made enquiries to see what could be done. He promised to meet me at the airport departure lounge that evening, and did.

Vasiliu reached me at the exit gate just as I felt the boarding card being taken from my hand. I looked back in despair at his solemn face.

“Mark, I’m sorry. I have asked in every possible quarter but the answer is always much the same – ‘Tanya? There is no-one of that name’.”

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I stumbled through the gate.

It rained the whole way across the tarmac.



Hall Dane/Hugh Thomson was best known for his African stories based on his experience as a District Commissioner, some broadcast on the local Lusaka radio. ‘Katakwala’, or ‘He who stirs up the leaves’ was the nickname given to him by the Africans he dealt with – the title, you notice, of his Autobiography. But all through his life his way of dealing with the impossible aspects of his personal life was to write stories – some of them transparently based on his own situations. Nonetheless, of the few stories that have survived amongst his papers, this one (to a daughter) is a surprise. Is it totally imaginary, or was he, in fact, the leading character? He did a huge amount of foreign travel away from home (home being Africa, Iran or Malta) – and in his later years in Africa he would be tasked with leading delegations of Zambian Government Ministers to Europe where they would, indeed, have come across tourist prostitution.

Whether this story is based on direct personal experience or not, it does sum up in a nutshell that mystery of human life – that somehow in the arms of a woman (any woman) all cares of the world will be temporarily erased. In this almost mystic brief encounter we have the basis for that cosmic ritual known in the Ancient Near East as ‘the Sacred Marriage’ – a ritual enacted by the ruler and the high priestess in the main temple at the start of the New Year – performed specifically to bring order, love and fruitfulness to the whole country.