

The Beach Bird Club

Polly Heyrman

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For Mimi

The Palace

1

Lipnic market resembled a beehive in the sweltering conditions of a midsummer. A small tearoom with large windows situated at the end of the square filled up with locals, and the odd tourist. On the top floor two ladies just made it up the winding narrow staircase, which lead to a tiny roof terrace, and picked out a table. Erin, who was the eldest, often met up with Susan during daytime.

From the roof terrace the market could be seen. A plenitude of blooming flowerpots lingered on the wall and contributed to an acute bohemian touch. Bell Street with its pretty white houses, the result of an annually repeated painting process, fronted by black wrought iron fences, was just in sight. At the end of the road, a postman emptied a red letterbox. Lipnic was as cosy as it could get. Susan Conner, her friend, sounded curious. She checked out Erin's

new outfit, fired her questions.

‘So, how was last night? Last time you told me *about* David.’

‘Hmm, let’s see,’ Erin Breadshaw replied, whose voice displayed the cheerful charm of a weather lady, and wondered if she would tell all.

‘David is pretty great so far.’ She nodded, added, ‘Shall we drink Sangrias,’ a confirmation that a celebration was in order.

‘Oven warm asparagus wrapped in bacon sounds delicious’, Erin said, while she browsed through the menu and pointed at hors d’oeuvres with brightly painted nails.

Her friend Susan chatted happily and inquisitively in her Cumbrian accent and ordered bevvies and light canapés. Erin gazed in the distance. The slightly older woman radiated cuteness. Her face was round and pretty. The clothes she wore often made her stand out; she sported shiny kinky boots as usual, but this time she combined them with a summer hat and a vintage dress from a second-hand store, specialized in the old and worn look. A hint of the past and a feel of the nearly new, she called it. Erin had a passion for fashion, and craved masculine jackets. In combination with girly items she easily achieved a new-chic-style. Admittedly, she slept in garments, bonded with zips and buttons, cut off unnecessary fabric if she felt like it. Last time they met, two weeks ago, she hunted for designer bags, leopard hoodies, printed tees and coloured slim fit leggings. Her aim was to look unpredictable and safe but to make the most of her irregular body. Large breasts

and an impressive posture could be a burden.

‘Did you actually flirt with him?’ Susan asked while her friend examined fruit cubes in the orangey-red liquid and felt happy, the alcohol made her a little tipsy.

‘Can we have straws with these please?’ she asked a waiter.

The sun shone on their foreheads with a healing power that was capable of soothing even the most miserable soul. Who would have expected it? Erin had met David Maharaj, a work colleague. He first invited her for a barbecue at his parents’ house, where he ‘temporarily’ shared a room with his childhood memorabilia. A blue room, a small bed and a couple of posters brightened up the place, together with lots of tiny toys, collected throughout secondary school years. A while ago she talked about him to Susan over the phone but never mentioned him since. She remembered most parts. In the editing department of Garments & Sons they began work on the summer catalogue. Occasionally her friendly work colleague David pretended the printer near her had broken down. David talked about his life and interests. When he was absent, or not around during coffee breaks, she craved him and felt lonely.

‘Maharaj sounds undeniably exotic’, Susan remarked. Her eyes were made up with a koyal pencil. She wore a slogan t-shirt that said: *my flies are undone*.

‘Indian. The truth is Sue, he is desirable— jumbled hair, *loves*

fast food and beer, never drank champagne,' she added after the waiter had picked up the empty plate in front of her.

Her friends' eyes glowed, registered all the gossip facts. His description read like a recipe for cupcakes. Would it last this time around? A new man in Erin's life was a short-lived experience, like cheap fireworks that fizzled out as soon as you looked at it.

'Skin colour?' Susan asked.

'Exotic brown, you mean. Adopted when he was five. Went to England and tried to forget about his ancestors. His first name was altered.' A wink followed.

'Don't tell me. Hindu,' Susan said and squinted.

'As it happens, his father wanted his son to be called Deepak, but his mother preferred the name of one of her uncle's. Eventually he gave in, because his son already bore his surname and the family name would be honoured. He grew up to be a happy boy. When he was in primary school, tragedy struck when his mother died in a car accident. Out of grief, his father took a job in another village. Little David was put in an orphanage. Months later the Fletchers, childless and wealthy enough to adopt, visited. Some adjustments were necessary on both sides but all in all the Fletchers now treat him as if he was their own.'

'It sounds like a Disney story, his life.'

'He stole my heart Susan. This is it, true love, well, I hope. And I will see a social worker to straighten things out.'

‘How did you meet?’ Susan finished her drink, put her glass down and touched Erin’s arm.

Erin thought back of the first time they had met. Funny how it had all begun, after he helped her photocopy a manual. His hands touched hers, a zingy caramel body leant over the photocopier in the side room. A week later, they danced to music and watched ‘The Holiday’ together at her place. She heard his voice in the back of her head, and it triggered memories. “Hello there. Do you need a pdf converter on this machine?” he spoke softly and became shy, when she stared into his almond shaped eyes, shadowed by long lashes. She took a good look, the corners of his mouth curled up in a most curious way. “Well, sure, I guess so, if my colleagues need it.” Balanced on the tip of her chair she almost fell off when he stood closer to her. His eyes glistened like sand and eager lips drew her in —first a thin line— enthusiastically widened with each word he spoke. His skin exuded a sharp earth-like scent.

‘What is his voice like? You always say it is so important.’

‘Soft and gentle like a teacher’s, urgent. Commanding respect, like Indiana Jones.’

‘Hmm’.

They both laughed.

‘Tell me more,’ Susan demanded.

‘We kissed over the printer next to the coffee machine, after hours.’

‘At work. Seriously?’ Susan’s funny facial expression made Erin

laugh even more.

‘You’re *in love!* You are one lucky girl.’ Susan winked at her friend, who sat there dreamily, her mind filled with romantic thoughts. More people climbed up the stairs of the small terrace. Erin turned her head. Two Australian back packers, youthful, guitars on their backs, sat down on a table nearby. Presumably their first week as they still looked around as if they spotted a koala up a rain pipe. In this area there were many pretty houses, yet tourists flocked in as if it was the best part of London with its choice of eateries and pubs with lit fire-places. She jumped up, after she checked her watch.

‘Oh, that late already? I should go Susan, I need to get stuff for the summer fair and pick up my little one.’

They settled the bill and left. Susan had an appointment with her solicitor. The outbursts of disturbance, life pains, moments of uneasiness and uncertainty had piled up over the years. Going through a nasty divorce, Susan Conner’s daily life, in shrill contrast of Erin’s who was on cloud nine, sounded like a flashing alarm clock.

2

On the bus on her way to Garments, she saw people walk, some hurried as it was already eight-thirty in the morning. A Jewish woman in dark clothes with a pushchair held a plastic carrier bag. People on bicycles, pedalled hard to get ahead, a school with kids gathering in front of the gate, a bike with two girls in twin seats, their mother looking around, wondering whether to stay on or get off. A girl held a brown bag but it looked like a pussycat. A crossroad. A car crossed it and a little girl looked out of a half open window with stickers on it to keep a kid happy in a car during traffic. Yes, this was a city all right, smallish but noticeably large enough to see people dash off to work. She spotted a guy with groceries in both hands, a transparent bag contained oranges and a loaf of bread in the other, wrapped in light and white paper. The bus stopped. A lady squinted through her eyelids and grabbed a lighter from her handbag. Near the stop a man looked at the bus, a foreign face burped and his mouth made funny gestures, as if he just had a full breakfast. Another corner. Shopkeepers or assistants stood outside and people with brooms and buckets walked past the newspaper store and halted there. Further on, six stops away, a man in green trousers on a ladder painted part of a building. Then

the bus turned and arrived at the terminal. Now she had to walk fifteen minutes and start work.

In the course of her life, she dated stropic men. Possibly the wrong guys, but still. Some of those left, others were dumped, as she was unable to live with the slightest character imperfection. Misses Rose Reichner, a psychologist-social worker based at her work place, already knew that Erin had to like his voice, his manners and ways. Her man had to be gentle, treat her well. If they devoted their attention to someone else for too long, she stopped communication and the relationship would inevitably end prematurely. The reclining chair felt comfortable and helped her to speak out freely.

‘In my head, a thousand words fight with one another. It is hard to systemize, categorize and distil cells, if you like.’ She looked at the wall in the social worker’s office, stretched out on her back on the therapist sofa, and spoke in a gentle voice. There were faint stripes and a notice board with the letter of the room on: N. In some places she spotted imperfections, where the wallpaper was lined up unevenly. Erin’s mind wandered back to the last couple of years.

‘Doesn’t your body consist of cells? Yet in your head they are said to be thoughts as these cells have meaning. Do they? Staying in a relationship is hard for me.’ Erin shifted her eyes in an imaginary semi-circle. There, she knew she hit a sensitive spot. The older lady moved towards her quietly, not wanting to disturb, and

took a seat. It was important that Rose kept her distance in her work chair during the ‘*association process*’, to stimulate her patient to come up with ideas and expressions.

‘Continue,’ Rose said. Her croaky voice travelled across the room.

‘Random and over forty.’ She had reached the age of forty when she realised she had lived life randomly. When this conclusion came upon her, early this morning—as the answer of a question—she was looking at her wet clothes, colourful bras, tops in different patterns and colours, drying on a rack in her living room. To think there are always choices, options. She shook her head. Broken memories minimised the sense of betrayal, classified the past where randomness had prevailed. If someone wanted to interview her now, this is what he or she would get in their face, her weakness and her life. Lots of time to reflect, the appalling constancy causing bewildering consternation, thinking back about the days she had been misled, abused and brain washed, she realised she had *always* been a single mother. It hit Erin in the heart, the knowledge that it could have been different.

Erin resumed her monologue: ‘You should be a model, you are good at art, they keep telling me. Why don’t you become a teacher, my mother suggested when I was twenty-nine, you care for people. A social job would be better than working with a computer. A publicist, they told me at my previous job.’ She sighed. ‘I still don’t

know what to do with my life. And I am a forty-one-year-old, spent half of my life already.’ She sighed again. ‘I guess, to answer your question Misses Rose, the main problem areas are sticking with mister right and my daughter’s selective mutism. She keeps quiet when strangers are about.’ Erin was in love but she was unsure about things, so a counsellor was recommended.

‘Those two.’

The counsellor confirmed the outcome of the free-association exercise. The woman in her late thirties hesitated and pondered a brief moment the reaction of the social worker opposite her. All she ever wanted was to be free of worries. She lived in the warm area of Silverton Street, known as the heart of Lipnic. Her fashion friends and colleagues thought of her as kind hearted, sweet, though extravagant. Usually the extravagance came from the clothes she went for - elegant and chic but masculine or vividly dynamic. She had long dark hair that covered most of her back. Her eyes were impatient and impulsive, and when she was in love she became a hopeless romantic. One of her hobbies was styling hair –never her own– but what ex boyfriends liked most about her was her impressive posture.

‘A child with selective mutism and sticking to mister right,’ Rose summarised, those could be linked, not *as such* but in the same way as you don’t know how to deal with challenges, which is related to how you feel about yourself. You are your own person,’ the

counsellor concluded.

‘I am naïve, I’ve been told.’

‘Hmm, relationship issues, let me see. Would you say you have a complicated love life?’

‘I guess,’ Erin admitted while Misses Rose looked outside.

‘And those...partners, were they different?’

‘Yes, one with freckles, another with a mysterious job. All different characters all right, yet as bland as a slice of white sponge bread.’

‘Remarkable. Interesting. So, were they equally lovable would you say?’

‘Well, I was attracted to a few men just like I had a *few* jobs and none of it was ideal.’ She gesticulated with her hands, while her eyes scanned the ceiling.

Misses Rose took notes. ‘*Destructive* relationships, were they? No answer followed. ‘Do you think you deserve to be happy?’

‘I try to, but with men, I don’t know, I guess I dream too much about stuff that could be.’ It was a question she did not expect. Erin looked at her hands in her lap and felt a tear well up. She tried to compose herself. Miss Rose sounded so much in control of her life. Erin felt helpless, not able to pin point her problem. Perhaps her life was just hard because she was a single mother.

‘Let’s do an exercise. It is called role play. I’m sure you’re familiar with it.’

They both sat down on chairs in front of a desk.