

IN DEFENSE OF ROGER HERRINGS
GRAHAM MASTERTON

Roger Herrings claimed he had fornicated with quality; but I, I had just ridden my Maltby Speedwind bicycle, fast as possible down the fast bits, and walking whenever there was a gradient.

It was a summer hot enough to turn the roads to liquorice, and the oak trees smudged into a haze, and the aroma of drying grass hurrying unexpectedly around the hedges as I pedalled. On my way! To meet! Miss Jessica! Roland!

Whom I had never fucked. Sad to say, mutter-mutter.

But whom I would have been glad to.

I was 19 and my father was freshly dead. He had fallen down the open hatch of a convoy ship from the Argentine, and cracked his skull open on a red-white-and-blue slab of frozen meat.

I loved him quite, but it was embarrassing for me. So I said he had been gored by a bull, which made my friends wince in horror rather than guffaw and have to pretend that shock had temporarily unbalanced them.

You see.

So it was hard for me to separate fact from fiction. I could even imagine the blunt horn forcing a rude entrance into the gut, and blundering bloodily through that soft apparatus.

In which so many a Guinness had been enjoyed, at the Hairy Beast, on warm country afternoons, when the sun shone dusty through engraved glass, and many a straw-streaked boot creaked, and voices now hummed their elegy. For my dear dead Dad.

& Roger Herrings, who was 25 if a day, but had 4F'd his way out of the Army, and now in the summer of 1947 sat lazily in the heat, his white pigeon chest bared to the warbling air. Said to me: "Then there was Judy. A peach. A *peach*. You *should* have seen her. All hot, and sticky as a pot of marmalade, and I got it in there like a pitchfork in a load of manure. Grrrrmmmmffff."

The Brylcreem on his short black hair shone. & though somehow there was always the lurking envy which said no girl like Judy could bear that hair bobbing and weaving in her water-soft face, I knew that he'd done it, for he only told lies about drinking.

When I rode off on my bicycle. My Maltby Speedwind. Standing in the saddle and heaving my weight onto each pedal one after the other. I felt like a schoolboy virgin.

& my life of solitary sins stretched behind me. *Descendat supervos et maneat semper.*

And now! I was on my way! To meet! Miss Jessica! Roland!

Here's Group Captain Douglas Bader the legless air ace swooping down on Peenemunde in his Typhoon *Angel Five to Angel Leader Angel Five to Angel Leader Bandits at Nine O' Clock*. And the whirling Messerschmitt trapped between my hairline sights ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah vvveeeeoouooooowwww karRROOOOOMMM.

Here she was. Jessica. Standing in the tender ripples of afternoon summer, seen through the underwater of my memory, Miss Jessica Roland. She of the pointy nose and the high round forehead and the long faery hair that drifted and settled and rose and floated around her like the restless seaweed on a distant shore.

& tiny pointy breasts under red gingham.

& large myopic eyes of blue.

& lickable spindly legs, with ankle-socks. Seventeen. Not a bomb had touched her, not a fiery plane had marred her; through the death of my Dad she shone and shone and

shone like a radiant beacon, rising from the misty waves of all my memories, so pure and purely, swelling the world with warmth and hope and direst love. To me. On my Maltby Speedwind.

She had freckles. And a habit of crinkling her nose that dissolved me each time into complete breathlessness.

“You look boiled,” she said.

“Yes. It’s scorching, isn’t it?”

I dismounted, and slipped off my bicycle clips like a man going into church. *In seculae seculorum*. We’ll have a faint background of organ music here, please. Bach’s Prelude in G Flat Major.

I left my bicycle securely padlocked and we walked along the lane, my hand sweating into hers.

“I’ve come to a decision.”

She said. And my heart peeled out of formation and spun toward the sea.

“I’ve decided not to see you any more.”

“Oh.”

And I rode and rode my Maltby Speedwind, with my breath screaming in my throat, miles and miles and miles down the fast bits and the gradients and the corners and the curves miles and miles and miles. And stopped on a hilltop that I did not know, silent and humid and unfamiliar, with metallic clouds sitting like eyebrows on the rounded Wiltshire hills.

The telephone. Press Button A.

“Jessica. It’s me. Can I see you?”

“I’ve *told* you. I’ve decided not to see you any more.”

“Jessica, I love you.”

“But I don’t love you. It’s no good. I just think it’s silly going on.”

“But you haven’t even *tried* to love me.”

“I still like you as a friend.”

“What good is that to me? Jessica, you don’t understand. I *love* you.”

And then the coppers were used up, and she dwindled away down the line from this fraught and lonely phone-box, where I now stood, caged in red, a smaller figure than ever before, as if seen from an aeroplane from a great distance, farther and farther away until I was no longer visible to the human eye, and you’d have to strain to see me through a telescope.

I cried for a while, and then I was 20, and the Bank opened its doors for me. It was winter.

I sat behind the counter, caged in bronze. A high, pedantic clock paced out my afternoon. With drawerful of money on my left. And a sugar-scoop on my right to shovel it out with.

A thousand pounds in one drawer. In various denominations. Large white crinkly fivers, big enough to wrap a haddock in. Green pounds. Brown ten shillings. And coins with edges you could strike a match on. I stole none of it.

I saved up my salary. I saved ten pounds. And then I carried it, and my virginity, to the West End. On the tumbrel of my sadness, to be weaned into corruption.

“Excuse me.”

Suspicious young eyes in sooty makeup turn my way. It's a dour afternoon in Wardour Street, with the sky like corroded copper. A few cold spots of rain, and a man hurries like Dracula in black umbrella and midnight coat.

"Wodger want, ducks?"

"I'm terribly sorry, I hope you don't get the wrong idea. But are you..."

"Two poun ten a frow, fiver all night."

Hmm. Cheaper than I thought. That will leave me five pounds for new bicycle tyres, and perhaps even a new saddle.

"Erm. Yes. That seems to be all right."

"What does? Two poun ten a frow or fiver all night?"

"Erm. I think the two pounds ten will do."

Jessica led the way into the orchard. The apples were dropping. She melted to the ground like honey sliding from a slice of fresh bread, her arms already outstretched to take me into their sweet caress, and the breeze around my bared erection and around her loins joined us already, though there were frail panties to negotiate and finally her little cries and whimpers, and her teeth biting my ear.

"Stebbing saw you coming out of a house of ill-repute."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Stebbing saw you leaving the premises of a prostitute."

"Oh."

I could only stare at the watch-chain that held him together, and not at the mottled face, broad as the sun, and white-whiskered, with terrifying eyes one could easily fall into, and dwindle away for ever.

"The Bank is a moral Bank. I am responsible to your parents until you come of age, not only for your business welfare but for your moral welfare. I shall have to write to your father."

"My father is dead, sir."

"Oh."

"He was gored by a bull, sir. And died."

"I am sorry to hear that. Then I must write to your mother. You understand that I do not wish to upset her, but she must know of this."

"Yes, I understand, sir."

"Good. You may return to your work."

That afternoon I took a thousand pounds out of my cash drawer. Then I walked out of the Bank and into the street. Then I walked back into the Bank and put it all back.

Then I got a letter from my mother. On the prickly front doormat. At my diggings with their horrendous wallpaper and eternal lingering odours of fried eggs and stale genitals.

It amounted, this letter in its spidery pale-blue writing, to excommunication. *In nomine patre, et filii, et spiritus sancti*. You filthy creature, what would your dear father have thought of you. But my dear father was too busy lying crushed in Bath Cemetery, with the impression of chilled sirloin on his unsmiling face.

Down, down the suburban streets on my Maltby Speedwind. Silver lamp standards erect on both sides, a thousand metal erections to herald! The arrival! Of my erotic self!

And a strange vacant second when life diminished from me, and I was lying with skinned knees in the road, and my bicycle wheel ran tick-tick-tick-tick on its side.

Are you all right.

Yes. I think so. I've torn my trousers.

Why don't you come inside for a moment. I can put some iodine on that.

Yes yes thank you I think I will. Do you think I might have a cup of tea.

Of course. Sit down here and I'll get you one.

Group Captain Douglas Bader the wounded air ace lies in a German PoW camp, blood spattering the floor. *Ah, das Englische Schweinhund. Sind Sie krank? Was möchten Sie hier?*

What room is this. A warm room. With large chairs well-covered in gold braid. And a fat walnut drinks cabinet in the corner, chunky with bottles of gin and Scotch and brandy. And a painting of a country scene, its surface glossy and webbed with cracks. Original.

Then the woman returns, with iodine in a brown ribbed bottle, and a towel, and a small enamel basin of water.

"Raise your trouser-leg."

"Like this?"

"That's right. My goodness what a graze. It was a good thing I saw you. You just went straight over the handlebars."

Hmm. Ignominious for the son of a man gored by a bull.

She squats down, dabbing with orange-stained cotton wool. Her face is young, 30 perhaps, and slightly elfin, as if her great-great-grandmother was a halfling.

And my eyes furtively descend to her skirt, stretched tightly across her thighs, and deeper inside a long, enthralled look at slender legs sheathed in shiny brown nylon, the white flesh held fast in suspender-clips. And a bulge of white panties, full as a butter-muslin of blackberries.

"What's this?" she says unexpectedly.

And shocks me out of my seat by laying a calm hand on my hardened tool under my trousers.

"What's made you like this?"

& as I sit the strange invalid, one trouser-leg rolled up like a novitiate Mason, her fingers unwork the tin buttons of my fly, and out it rises into the expensive room, so naked a piece of meatwork, and all the fittings so well-polished! My prick! Beholds! An original oil!

Then she with her cotton dress high-lifted, a Lautrec woman at the bath, straddles and spraddles my chair, so that we're coupling, by God, and my true virginity is lost not to the thunder of symphonies, as I had once imagined it would be, but to the quiet amused squeaks of flesh on flesh, and whispers and murmurs of peculiar delight.

And I ride! My Maltby Speedwind! A chariot! Not to the Bank today!

But to the station. Where I board. A westbound train.

To stand in the sibilant graveyard over the grave of my father.

Whose ghost. Which is me.

Has been laid at last.