

GOSSAMER JOHN

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Remember the old tunes, the good tunes, the tunes they used to play summer evenings when Gossamer John his blue glasses reflecting the late sunlight walked softly through the streets his footsteps spreading slices of sound wherever he went. *Lillibulero* from a thousand corners, lilting and fresh, the kind that awakes last pigeons nesting dustily where the warmth won't reach them. Do you remember Gossamer John?

His tray of rubbers for sale around his stringy neck, Gossamer John steps into the last orange rectangle of sun falls between the buildings this time of day understand? His eyes flick left and right the way a man used to moving on and moving on flicks his eyes, not worried, just an instinctive trade reaction, like the way a gunman flicks his thumb always fanning back that .38 hammer even at cocktail parties. 'I have this good selection of rubbers for sale young marrieds appreciate them more than most,' he whispers, he has vocal cords like a throstle. Thin and vibrant, the words saw out into the grainy evening. His call of trade almost like a folk song, sung at unusual pitch that makes cups vibrate in saucers and teeth buzz.

'You need a skin, I got them all,' he says hoarsely, holding up between his greasy fingers the small grey packets. On his tray the whole range from plain teats to ones with Mickey Mouse faces on the end and frills down the side. He has this special condom based on Beethoven's 3rd Concerto – it has fluting down the side so as it slides air is blown musically in sharps and flats. 'Culture while you copulate,' says Gossamer John, not slyly, but so old now that he means it.

Gossamer John 56 years old in raincoat stained by foul weather and beer. You are not advised to get too close, he doesn't smell too nice. Not the smell of dirt, but the smell of rubbers. He's been selling them 30 years, and the smell gets into a man's system. 'It's – ah – like being a fishmonger,' he says from a distance, lighting a shredded Old Holborn and blowing fragments of smoke into the afternoon street. 'Rubber gets in your blood, and at night you even sweat the smell of johnnies.'

Late nostalgic summer evenings – the sky a chip of ceramic blue behind the gilded trees and earthenware buildings – drinking warm wine from a goblet of milky porcelain – the lazy sound of traffic drawls over the windowsill and a plane dawdles shards of gold – a Parker Pen of the skyways – early 1950s distant planes looked like spoons – who should walk there but Gossamer John?

So we sit in the office of the *Evening Vestibule*, last newspaper in the flapping canyon of Fleet Street, drinking coffee from cardboard cups and smoking with sleeves rolled up. Newspaper publishing these days a guerrilla business; hit-and-run drivers and smash-and-grab burglars employed to hurl bundles of papers 90 mph to the besieged news stands, where old men beat off the howling students with their wooden legs. I feel that capitalism is coming to an end and don't say I didn't warn you –

'Piccadilly news stands out of action. One of our Strand stands has gone missing...'

And that's the way it goes day after day, circulation shrinking as the lines go dead. Last week in Clerkenwell Road a newsvan found blazing and its driver strangled with the strap of his own canvas satchel. Litter shuffles like old men across the deserted streets. The Government have locked themselves in the Imperial War Museum and aren't coming out for anybody. 'One step nearer and we'll open fire...'

Gossamer John still tramps Oxford Street, his basic commodity in his tray, now and then stepping on a clockwork spider some other vendor has sent snapping at his ankles. 'Clockwork spiders are disgusting and hard to sell,' he says from experience. 'Now condoms, who doesn't need condoms? And how often do you have to wind them up?'

Nothing the same as it was; different flavour now all over England. The wires are buzzing and humming mournfully across the grey fields where nothing grows but weeds. Quiet echoing streets

like an ancient ruin you step into out of the sun. Their eyes lethargic, their movements slow motion in a hundred years of dense crystal fluid. 'There comes a time when a nation grows tired...' We print the news but news is getting short. Nobody is doing anything any more. No fêtes opened, no roads built, no politics. The Law Courts shut down too long ago for anyone to remember, and the benches are shrouded in sheets. No one commits crimes any more, because who's to say what's a crime and what isn't? The nation changed too fast for the definition. You feel the dead hand of history across the streets of London?

The phone rings shrilly. We all stare at it. I pick it up from the cradle and say, gently, 'Hallo?'

It's Roy Globe, also known as Tarzan Jones the Golden Chauffeur, go-between from Jack Malone's new syndicate The Eternal Heroes, which provides brave men cheap for suicidal jobs, provided you don't mind brave men with a kink who can't get work as regular brave men. Globe's particular bent is vegetables, like he can't even look at an aubergine without shivering and trembling and turning white. He won a George Cross in Korea and exchanged it for a cos lettuce, later that night the military police found him in a back alley in Seoul, trying to make love to it. 'What's the matter with you?' he was screaming at it. 'Why don't you respond? You just lie there like a bloody cabbage!' He was kept under observation for two years, and eventually released, but he proved to be a recidivist. Jack Malone employed him after paying his fine for a charge of sexual assault on 3 lbs of King Edwards in a woman's shopping bag.

Globe runs the difficult strip between Hyde Park and Knightsbridge for us, three times a day sometimes more. Today he has news.

'I found George Macfries under an oak in the park. He was frozen solid. That's all I know. It was too dangerous to stay around long. He was white – covered in ice.'

'Tarzan,' I say patiently. 'It's the middle of summer.'

'Who knows what it is?' he says frenetically, and slams the phone down.

I sit there looking out over the dying street and chewing the end of my pencil. Sharp taste of cedar, tinged with cold graphite. George Macfries the Night Editor of the Evening Stairway for 45 years, now dead in Hyde Park, frozen stiff and we can't even get out there to bury him. He didn't even get a gold watch and a handshake. That kind of occasion died too long ago to remember...

Alone in its immunity to the cold spring wind blowing across Bloomsbury is Tin Type Hall. While other buildings fade and crumble, Tin Type Hall seems to grow cleaner and fresher, almost as though its gilded Gothic spires are sucking the nourishment from the streets leaving husks. Tin Type Hall its massive studded doors always locked controls everything in the city from gas and electricity to refuse disposal. Unapproachable except by telephone, and even then the chances of contacting who you want a thousand to one. It's useless sending them letters they just fade from memory. Only one man can approach Tin Type Hall, that's Dr Cary, and the last we heard he's dead...

Gossamer John this evening walks into the offices of the Evening Sandyacht and says he has a rumour. I go down into the marble entrance hall where he's waiting all huddled up over his tray, his greasy hands fingering the canvas straps. He refuses to come upstairs, says he'll get branded as an informer. My footsteps echo across the black-and-white 1950s hall.

'Hello, John.'

His watery eyes glance up through blue lenses. 'Hello yourself.'

I pass him a Senior Service and he lights it carefully, shielding his eyes from the matchflame.

'How's business?'

He breathes out twin tusks of smoke. 'Business is always good, Mr Crisp. I serve some of the biggest pricks in the country.'

I nod. 'Hear you have a rumour.'

'It's possible.'

‘A five-pound rumour?’ I take a note from my wallet, crease it between my fingers and point it at him. Gossamer John stares at it ruminatively, his grey tongue chasing remnants of food around his mouth.

He takes the note. ‘It’s possible.’

‘What do you hear?’

He stares at me unblinkingly through blue glass, through the blue transparent layers of another century. Layers of blue lens over further layers of blue lens; smooth glass surface sliding over smooth glass; edgy squeak of hard mineral.

‘You heard of the Mysterious Babies?’ he says.

‘Well?’

‘Well you heard of them?’ He seems to be impatient. I notice that a fine powdery ash is sifting from the creases in his raincoat.

‘Yes. What about them?’

‘Well they’re here. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

Don’t say I didn’t warn you the Mysterious Babies. Last heard of on the mind’s rim. Last seen making their exit from faded brown photographs of the Wiltshire hills. The Mysterious Babies walking always just out of mind’s reach, always just round that corner and nothing left but a stir in the air and even that’s suspect. Mysterious Babies warbling in the magnetic wires of the city, threading their messages through whose unknown connection, tracing out over skies already darkening with thunder. The Mysterious Babies don’t say I didn’t and that’s always suspect. Don’t say the Mysterious Babies. Well you heard of them?

‘I’m going to smuggle this one into town.’

‘Yes. What about them?’

‘Hallo? Is that you?’

(Smooth glass surface sliding over smooth glass surface sliding over smooth glass surface. A thousand blue images of another century; a thousand Gossamer Johns disappearing behind the corners of the city.)

‘Is that Twin Tusks?’

‘A thousand Mysterious Babies.’

So I arrive at The Love Affair. The Love Affair is a kind of permanent nostalgic area where all your pain is played out, everybody participates sooner or later. This time just a quick shot before I get out to the arduous task of tracking down the Mysterious Babies. It’s a small shabby building just off Powis Square Bayswater. Thunder begins to roll like great wheels around the horizon, and lightning walks on stilts over the tenement roofs. I pull up my collar against the warm rain beginning to measles the pavements and knock at The Love Affair door.

The door is opened by Jackie Tusk, also known as The Flying Cutlet because of his gymnastic homosexual incest with his twin, Bonzo Tusk, who today is sitting back, orange shoes on the cluttered reception desk, smoking a perfumed cigarette.

‘Hallo dear,’ says Jackie. ‘Come for the usual?’

I nod and hang my coat on the Edwardian hatstand. The reception is lined with fluted hardboard painted pink, and from somewhere the quiet strains of Debussy. Bonzo blows a long string of smoke rings, one after the other, and they shudder across the room until they’re caught by the draft and twisted apart.

‘Just like life somehow,’ says Bonzo. ‘One minute you think you’ve got all the holes you want lined up, next minute they’re off with a bloody great poof.’

(Kenneth Horne, dismembered and bleeding, is rolled savagely amongst the razor-sharp slices of broken radio valves.)

The Love Affair far from a joke. Come and sit in this plain chair with me. What do you see but this tree-lined suburban street that day with the sky like pale glue and suddenly the sounds and the wind coming into focus and you’re there holding her hand as you walk slowly back discussing love.

'I can't imagine,' she says, 'loving anyone but you.'

Now hold it, hold that image because it's trembling and breaking and if you don't hold it you'll be back at that violent day after the car smash when you nail your teeth to hell's door and drive in black battered car down the cold aisle of marriage to nobody. You can't survive vicar's harm. You can't survive cold smile of the church, Jesus like a frosty murderer his smile harvesting love on the breezy plains where nothing but corncrakes calling harshly against stormy Westphalian trees...

'Is that you?' Hold that image. Hold it. Hold that image.

And for a moment you might see her eyes, still waiting for an answer, her brown eyes still waiting for you as the thick fluid of time rises like a transparent wrinkled heatwave, thickening and clotting layer upon layer, until the eyes fade, the sound fades, and you are back here with Jackie Tusk shaking your shoulders and the chilly road outside where it's still raining.

'Are you all right?' Jackie gives (an uncertain smile.) His fingers scratch at the roots of his strawberry-blonde hair. 'Bonzo, doesn't he look like death?'

'You do,' says Bonzo with equanimity. 'You look just like death.'

Jackie winces. 'You shouldn't get so emotional, Mr Crisp. None of it's really real.'

None of it's really real. I fade from sight across a misty day on the beach, my feet barely touching the ground, leaving no footprints but instead a trail of smoke. Last autumn evening of the world. Last signs, last leaves. Do you remember Gossamer John?

Harrumph. Who are you?

Gossamer John, sir.

Your worship.

Gossamer John, your worship.

Did you on or about the 30th October of this year purvey or cause to be purveyed or otherwise distribute by trade or cause to be distributed by trade divers items or articles contrary to the Contraceptive Marketing Act 1912. And did you on or about the same date accept or cause to be accepted money or kind or similar remuneration for the said divers items?

I don't sell divers items, sir. I sell johnnies.

Johnnies, your worship.

Er could you explain Mr Pellfall exactly what the defendant means when he refers to er johnnies...?

Certainly, your worship. Johnnies is a slang or colloquial term for an instrument of vulcanised rubber which is appended to the male genitalia during the marriage act for the purpose or purposes of arresting the transmission of seminal fluid from one partner to the other. Or vice versa.

Thank you, Mr Pellfall. I thought for one horrible moment you were going to say something coarse.

Gossamer John, how do you plead? Are you guilty of the crimes set out in the charge, or not guilty?

Yes, sir.

This court finds you, Gossamer John, guilty of the offence of purveying items of vulcanised rubber, and hereby orders you to pay a fine of £45 and court costs of £2 12s 6d. And just thank God this is 1968. In the fifteenth century, we'd have locked you in the pillory and burned your johnnies under your nose.

(The court rises like a flock of dusty black vultures and is soon flapping across the grey afternoon Thames, before it is lost from sight behind the smoky spires of London's churches...)