

THE ENGLISH HAREM

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

Spinners

Death of a Superhero

THE ENGLISH HAREM

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The English Harem

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In pious times, ere priesthood did begin,
Before polygamy was made a sin,
When man on many multiplied his kind,
Ere one to one was cursedly confin'd...

– John Dryden (1631–1700)

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits – and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire!

– Omar Khayyam (1050–1123)

1

THE SCHEME OF THINGS

To cope with the tedium of her work, Tracy often let the beat of the scanner lull her into daydreams.

As she swiped groceries over the laser beam, *blip... blip... blip... blip... blip... blip... blip... blip*, she let her fancies take many forms, but her usual game had begun to spin out of control.

Her daily entertainment involved, by a small act of imagination, substituting the sullen, depressed, suburbanite customers at the Tooting branch of Sainsbury's for famous personages from history, from television and films, and from books. Already that morning she had served Joan of Arc, Lawrence of Arabia, Princess Leia and Omar Sharif. Interspersed between the run-of-the-mill shoppers, these phantoms came out of nowhere, glorious in their courtly regalia, in perfect lace or pantaloons or Saharan burnous, drawing from their antique wallets, pinch-purses and *porte-monnaie* their sovereigns, ducats, doubloons and denarii, and forcing Tracy, when it all got too much, to shut her checkout – apologizing first to some Scheherazade of *The Thousand and One Nights* – and rush to the water fountain to gulp mouthfuls from her cupped hand. When she returned to her till, however, the mad roll call would simply start all over again. The truth was that she didn't even have to summon these ghosts any more. They now came of their own volition: Lord Byron from the Albanian portrait, Julia Roberts in several different outfits, Cat Stevens – her favourite singer – exactly as he appeared on the *Matthew and Son* album cover in 1966, Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff and Johnny Weissmüller's Tarzan: these last two in their original black and white, of course.

In the middle of such a procession, actually while laser-swiping the groceries of Elizabeth I, *blip... blip... blip*, the inevitable happened: she confused fantasy and reality. When Her Majesty Regina popped a packet of Mr Kipling's Bakewell Tarts into her handbag without paying, Tracy chose to look the other way. Store detectives apprehended the old woman on her way out. They led her to the back of the supermarket so she could empty her bag, give her address and weep.

At Tracy's dismissal interview the video evidence clearly showed a bent-over pensioner ineptly thrusting the tarts into a bamboo-handled carpetbag with Tracy doing nothing to stop her. But how could she begin to explain herself, when she felt she was extending to a monarch the courtesy of turning a blind eye?

"You were dreaming again, just admit it," her supervisor demanded from the edge of his desk, looming above her with the pretence of concern on his face. "I can't help you if you won't help yourself, Trace. What in Jesus' name were you thinking about?"

Under his aggressive gaze she withered as usual. She offered nothing in defence. He sighed heavily. He liked her, he said, but what could he do? His hands were tied. "You know how I feel about you." His foot grazed her naked calf. An accident? She had to look away.

She was a good worker, he continued, with a great head for prices, the best he had ever seen. But if she couldn't explain herself he'd have to let her go.

But Tracy couldn't open her mouth. With no stomach for a reply she let her thoughts stray instead.

"Tracy? I'm waiting. Trace? Are you even listening?"

But it was too late: she was beyond his reach already.

"Tracy!"

She didn't even remember leaving the supermarket. She rode the bus home. Then, as she turned east, unemployed for the fourth time in two years, a scrap of sunlight fell onto her shoulder. Craning her head, she orientated her face. Warmth flooded into her. As she stirred from an elaborate daydream, in which she played the heroine, she returned to her senses and began to feel irrationally excited about the future.

* * *

The washing machine clicked onto full spin and sent a tremendous vibration across the flat, rattling teacups and ashtrays as well as Eric's box of rusty motorcycle parts on the balcony outside. God knew the number of floors below which were also affected by his unstable machine. As the block's unofficial maintenance man he knew all too well that, at twenty-three floors, the building resonated like a tuning fork.

That afternoon it had been his plan to try taming the washer once and for all, but his mind had wandered.

A manual of operating instructions for another washing machine, thrown out three years before, had ensnared him, and he was still studying its faded pages when the front door opened.

"Got the bloody sack, didn't I," his daughter announced theatrically, throwing down her backpack, as if in a rage. "Personality conflict."

But he didn't lift his head from his reading. "Oh no," he muttered.

It was clear to Tracy that he hadn't heard. Such an overprotective parent would definitely have more to say than this.

"Unbelievable actually. Dad? Did you hear me? Dad? I got the sack. I said I got the push."

"Who did?" He lifted his head.

"Personality clash. But it's okay. I was sick of it anyway."

Concern at last reached his features, filling his motorcyclist's face, ruddied by decades of speed without a visor, years of craning around juggernauts, buffeted by headwinds. "They don't have personalities. How can there be a conflict?"

"Anyway. They still fired me."

In the course of Eric Pringle's life two things were dominant: his own happiness and that of his daughter, but in reverse order.

Tracy came first with Eric, that is to say, his pleasure was a corollary of hers. In recent years this unnatural level of stewardship, a by-product perhaps of his own unemployment, too much free time on his hands, had drawn adverse comment. Some friends told him that his devotion was an excuse for not engaging himself. He could not live life through another, especially not a

child. Meanwhile he had let his own life slide, let it rust like his motorbikes.

“How did it happen?”

“I don’t know. They sacked me. Bam. Like that.”

“Why? What did you do?”

She shaped her reply. “I did nothing.” This was strictly true, and she didn’t want to further alarm her father. She knew how brittle he could be. “Doesn’t matter, though. Best thing. I’ll find something else, don’t worry. I’m actually going to go and look for something else this afternoon.”

It was important she tell her father not to worry. After all, here was a man who had all his daughter’s milk teeth stored like trophies in a special container; a man who showed off the small accidental scars she’d given him as a child with the pride of a war veteran; a man who was unable to sleep at night unless tranquillized by the home-again click of her bedroom door. “How can they sack you for nothing?”

She shrugged, then looked over his shoulder. “Are we getting a new washing machine then?”

“Forget about the bloody washing machine. That’s my problem. What the hell are you gonna do for a job?”

“I’ll be fine, Dad. I’ll get something else. Got an idea already, actually.”

“Like what?”

“Tell you if I get it, okay?”

She left him with just this morsel and went to her room and shut the door.

He stared at the familiar back of the bedroom door, pondering what his daughter might have in mind now. Two misfits around the house was two too many.

Closing the manual, he went back to the washing machine. When he plugged it back in, he took some satisfaction from thinking he had repaired something in it, even if it wasn’t the actual problem: a slow leakage of water about which he had done nothing.

When his wife Monica came in from work, puffing heavily, Eric was still standing by the machine, a wash in mid-cycle, waiting to see if all the heavy moving had of itself cured the leakage problem. Such luck would raise him in her esteem.

“Oh good,” she said, surprised to see the much-delayed job being addressed. “Miracles.”

“No leaks yet.”

“Repairman finally tinkering with the lift as well. Hell must have frozen over.” Their flat was on the twenty-third floor. The lift came in handy up there.

“She got the sack,” he reported, eyes peeled for the first hint of a puddle.

“She didn’t!”

“Personality clash, she said.” The puddles forming at Eric’s feet were incredibly viscous.

“Oh, no. Where is she now?”

“Fort Knox.” He nodded to the hallway, towards the locked door.

Seven years before they had both given consent for Tracy to have a lock put on her door. They could never have foreseen the consequences. Since then they had not once been allowed back inside their daughter’s bedroom. *Not once, in seven years!* Not to vacuum – Tracy did this herself – not to talk to her – she’d come out, closing the door quickly behind her – not to bring her a single cup of tea – this would be left on the carpet, like a pagan offering, a snake of a hand later drawing it inside. They had learnt the hard way the subtle determination of their only child, and also something of the geopolitical carve-up of a house containing a teenager: the patrolled borders, the annexed territories, the delicately negotiated ceasefires, policies of détente and rapprochement. Realizing it was farcical, all the same Eric had a comic image he repeated like a mantra: “The balloon went up with us holding on to it. We just always meant to let go.”

“Yoo-hoo!” It was Emily Powell, Emily the next-door neighbour, Emily yoo-hooing and finger-waving, Emily freshly widowed, her life unwinding, coming over, as usual, to cry.

Now in her early fifties, just like the Pringles, she had a daughter, Christina, who had been an old classmate of Tracy. This one detail had flung the Powells and the Pringles onto parallel tracks: achievements in one family read as criticisms in the other. Where Christina had won a scholarship, triumphed over expectations and gone to Oxford, Tracy had dropped out and gone to “assist

Lord Sainsbury”, as Eric put it. On the negative side, Graeme Powell had died, and Eric was still alive. It sort of evened itself out, Monica supposed.

“She’s been sacked,” Monica informed Emily, before she had even processed the fact herself.

“No! Who? Tracy? No!” Emily also knew who “she” was. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s so clever. She’ll be fine. Just fine. How terrible. Poor thing.”

Monica turned back to her husband. “Why?”

Eric gave the answer he had heard from Tracy. “Conflict of personalities.”

Emily nodded. “That happens. She’ll find something.” But it was hard to sympathize. She had her own worries. She took a seat as soon as one was offered.

The long wait for Tracy to emerge from her room and provide them with more details allowed Emily to deliver, in a low voice, the next instalment of her grief about the death of her husband, taken by non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma two months earlier – a withering, miserable exit. Today she had found the courage to drop a bombshell: he had not been faithful.

The quake drew Monica to the kitchen door, and Eric from his thoughts about the washing-machine manual.

Together: “No! Emily? No! No!”

Emily collapsed in tears as she told, with waxen pallor, and between sobs, that Graeme had divulged all on his deathbed. The confession almost constituted the man’s last words. Even so, Emily had not released her grip on his frail hand, she said: after all, he was dying, until, Emily continued, he slipped away, destroying her twice, all inside five minutes. Nice work.

“Oh, Emily. That... that’s... just...” But there were no words for such life lessons in pain. Monica could only try to guess at the place where such an experience left you.

“Jesus,” gasped Eric, anger being the male response – anger, and *I knew something was going on.*

Emily had brought her own box of tissues.

Comparatively irrelevant details now followed. The woman had been a florist, at Harrods, “nice for some”, a simple and generous woman as Graeme told it. And the six-year affair had

not even been called off. Death had to do what human will-power had been incapable of.

The ghastly revelation now out, it fully explained to Monica and Eric’s minds Emily’s constantly blood-drained looks since the funeral, her near-agoraphobia.

In the middle of Emily’s tale of woe, Tracy emerged from her room, hands defiantly on hips, pleased as Punch about how she looked – which was exactly like a hooker – and excitedly pronounced her bright, new and happy ambitions.

“So how do I look? I’m going out to get a new job.”

Tracy naturally assumed that she was the cause of everyone’s obvious distress.

Behind her locked door in the preceding thirty minutes, she had emptied her wardrobe onto her bed and sifted through her clothes. The resulting “look” was no mishap, but more the result of careful judgement calls. She would need to look sexy tonight for what she had in mind. This was the real world that she was entering, not some supermarket, and she knew how it worked. Cleavage, legs, a come-on smile, a tart’s formula; as with any safe-cracker, the right combination was all you needed: *click clack*, you’re in.

She was excited but very nervous. Her hand shook as she emphasized her eyes and lips in front of the mirror. Within hours she could be counting out the cash from her inaugural night right there on her bed.

As she put on extra make-up, running a pencil along her eyebrows with added pressure, she began to realize what a person loses when they lose a job. After all, the checkout position had not been without its advantages. It had never asked anything that she had not been happy to give. Her time was not particularly precious to her, no great sacrifice was involved. Her brain didn’t fret about being underused; she had no illusions about herself: she was good with numbers but no great brain. She was destined to spend her life serving others. And lastly, the job possessed what all jobs must: the ability to swallow hours that would otherwise have to be spent convincing yourself you are happy, liked, fascinating, valid, captivating, talented, going places, sexy,

funny, worthy of love, complex. She had seen a character in a book described as “complex”. It seemed the highest goal of all.

She put down her eyebrow pencil and licked the base of her finger to work loose her gold heart ring. She then held it between thumb and forefinger and glided it back and forth across the lower rim of her eye, where a throbbing sty was forming. This grandmother’s cure never failed. If her relationship with the doting Ricky Innes, apprenticed in his father’s morbid family practice over in Tooting, didn’t work out or solve anything, then the ring he had given her, her only golden possession, would always be useful for containing these nascent sties.

“Hi,” he had said, when they met as strangers in a pulsing nightclub.

“Hi.”

“Whatchoodo den?”

“Checkout. Sainsbury’s. How about you?”

“Mason.”

“What, like... Freemason?”

“Nah, nah. Nuffin’ like that.”

“Mmkay. So, what, like a bricky then or what?”

“Nah, nah. Monumental mason, yeah.”

“Oh, so like... monuments then?”

“Nah, nah. Gravestones.”

“Gravestones?”

“Simple as that.”

“You’re joking! You never make gravestones?”

“Dead serious. Joke. Top’a da line. Whatsa matter?”

The monumental mason, her very own master’s apprentice in the art of gravestone-making, had given her a ring to cement his intentions – if not his love – which she now, blinking and clearing her eye of accidental tears and tucking her brown hair behind her ears, slid back onto her finger.

She was ready.

“Like a slut,” her father finally answered, accurately summarizing the feelings of all the adults.

Their shared expressions, however, were less of disapproval than of wonder, a wonder about whether all of later-life screw-ups, like

the one they had just been discussing, started way back here, at Tracy’s age, with a young person dressing up to go out.

The outfit was clearly unacceptable. The skirt barely descended to cover the arse, the high heels and piled hair were wildly provocative, as was the make-up. The lycra halter neck, which squeezed into existence a previously unseen cleavage, created a body that no one in the room associated with Tracy.

“I’m going out job-hunting,” she explained.

“Job-hunting?” Eric shouted. “At this time of night?”

“I’m late. See ya.”

Monica gazed at her husband with a “Who goes out to search for work at this hour?” look.

Eric took this up: “Looking like that? It’s after... it’s five, five-thirty!” he said, consulting his wristwatch.

“I know. I’m just going to look for restaurant work.”

“Don’t make me laugh. Now sit down and forget that for now. Tell your mother what happened today.”

“Sorry. I’m serious. It’s the only time managers are in. Bye.”

Before anyone could stop her, she was gone. Eric shouted after her from the doorway, but her pace quickened down the corridor and she was soon gone, down the stairs, forgoing the lift, her heels audible, the image of her swinging derriere and upper thighs loitering in his mind.

“I’m serious. Maybe she’s gonna go on the game.”

Emily had gone. He and Monica sat side by side on the tall, new kitchenette bar stools. Monica laughed and tried to fit a new word into her cryptic crossword. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She was trying to complete the clue: *H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O. Five letters.*

Eric monitored developments over her shoulder. “I’m not joking either.”

“Not in a million years.”

“Often from normal backgrounds.”

“Not this normal.”

He pressed an elbow into her ribs. “Be serious, will ya?”

“Not the type.” She chewed her pen. “Five letters.”

“That’s the point. There *is* no type, is there? They come from all walks of life, and the parents *never* know. Most prostitutes...”

“Oh shut up!”

“...most pros are ordinary girls just like Tracy. Not the ones strung out on drugs, not the deadbeats. It’s the ordinary ones that make all the money, do all the trade.”

“Seem to know a lot about this.”

“That’s what all the blokes want. Ordinary girls. Daughters of people like us, who never even bloody know a thing. We kiss ’em on the cheek, say seeya, they move out, seem to be doing well, buy a car, a house – good girl – then two houses, then two cars – hang on, something a bit funny, a boat!... Jesus Christ, ten years later they write a book: ‘Why I Became a Whore’, know what I mean?” He rubbed his forehead feverishly. He had worked himself into a state.

“She’s not sexy, Eric. Her mind doesn’t work that way. Doesn’t even think like that. Not a sexy girl.”

“Coulda fooled me. And if she can do it with that Richard geezer she’s seeing, then she could do it with anyone.”

“It wouldn’t come into her head.”

Eric did not say so, but the source of his anxiety was an article in the very newspaper that Monica was about to write on.

“Water,” she said.

“How d’ya get that?”

“See?” She filled in the blanks.

“What?”

“That’s clever, innit? H... to... O.”

This is more like it, Tracy thought. *Taste of Persia? Even the sound of it is promising. I’m on the right track now.*

The Chinese, Thai and Italian places she had just tried, and been turned away from, had lacked atmosphere and the requisite glamour. But this was different. All the mysteries she required of life could be imagined with relative ease in a place like this. This was what she was looking for: not a mere job, but a turn in the road, an imaginative departure.

Its dim interior was filled with eastern ornaments; tapestries on the walls depicted ancient battles or tranquil forest scenes; small low tables were set in intimate clusters amid pools of amber light leaking from camphor-smelling lanterns.

The man who stepped forward from behind a fretted screen was fiftyish, balding, compact, with the forlorn air of someone whose life had been spent in the study of human nature. Reaching behind his back he attempted to unlace a flour-dusted apron that flowed all the way to his ankles. His face was lined by the activity of laughter muscles. The sheen of his skin gave it a polished finish. They looked at each other in the dim light with the calm solemnity of people who instantly realize they are from entirely different worlds. “Yes please?”

He stepped forward. In full light he was better able to appraise her. She noted the look of alarm on his face as his eyes drifted down to her cleavage, her naked legs. But fortunately she also witnessed the look’s disappearance as his eyes clinically moved back up again. He looked startled. *Click clack*, she thought.

“Can I help you?”

“I was wondering about the job in the window.”

“Job? Oh, I see.” He laughed and seemed at once relieved.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?” She became confused again.

“Well, this is a *Persian* restaurant.”

“I know. I can read.”

“Good. Well that’s something.”

Bastard, she thought.

“I mean, we have no jobs, I am sorry.”

“You have no jobs?”

“Nothing. Thank you.” He scrutinized the scantily clad young lady before him: he hadn’t been gone from Iran so long that he didn’t find such displays of exhibitionism disconcerting. To him she was the picture of delinquent English youth, dressed up for Allah knew what, everything but a ring in her nose, a head full of pop charts, everything he detested. He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Then why have you got a sign in the window?”

He turned to look towards the door. “There’s a sign in the window? I don’t know what it is doing there. You are absolutely right. I will take it down right now.” Tracy didn’t move. She watched him as he went to the door, untaped the card and removed it. “I apologize. Thank you for coming in.”