

LOUISE RIMMER

Traffic

As a rule, I don't talk to customers. It just shines a spotlight on the weirdness. I often go as far as pretending that I can't speak a word of English. Over the years, I've truly mastered my 'baffled apologetic foreigner face'. It still comes in handy, every now and again.

No. I never spoke to my customers. But for you, I did. I spoke in my very best English. Because you lit me up. I don't know if it was your kind, dark eyes that irked my soul. Maybe it was the nostalgic sanctuary of that John Lennon accent, or the way that the neon lights created a halo around your head. I told you everything. Everything. I allowed you a glimpse into my dark world.

I still remember our surreal twenty-minute session, all those years ago. I remember your brightness and warmth. My mind clings to a fading image of you; the features are blurred, but the outlines are still strong. I know I will recognise you when I find you again.

I was at work when we met. I did not choose this career. Every night, I worked under the passive stare of Prague's red lights. They kept watch, reminding me of their presence with their barely audible buzz. Mother Gretl kept an eye on me, also.

We first faced each other in the gentlemen's lounge. I stood among the pink spotlights and dying rubber plants. You and your friends—a herd of awkwardly stumbling wildebeests—drunkenly scanned our bodies, choosing your prey. I posed in the line-up, drowsy-eyed and jaunty-hipped. *Showing off the goods*. Like they had taught us. She would beat me if I had not been chosen at least

three times by the end of the night.

Each night would leave me feeling a little less human, a little further from reality. Some nights were bearable, some nights were dark. There were other girls my age, but we were too weary from cultivating our numbness to have any energy left to spend on friendship. I didn't want to complain though. It had been my choice to leave my home with stars in my eyes, wanting to conquer the world.

Like most of my customers, you were British, travelling with a big group of friends. All male. I learnt that a 'stag do' is the strange name for this type of holiday.

I led you up the sticky staircase into one of the shadowy bedrooms. Cautiously, you perched yourself on the edge of the magenta satin bed. You looked up at me with an awkward stillness, as if somebody had just asked you to pose for a photograph. I heard the rustle of the cheap fabric as you sat down. I hated the texture of that satin. It went through me. The squeakiness, the slight ridging of the material. I hated those bedsheets with such vehemence that I even dared to ask Mother Gretl to change them. She wouldn't, of course, and she beat me for asking.

You found it hilarious that I felt such hatred for a type of fabric. I suppose that I must have sounded funny. I didn't have the English words to explain myself properly. If I meet you again, I will articulate that hatred properly—I will explain to you how it is the small things that sting when you're in a dark place. I also want to tell you that my hatred for satin has now gone. Life is better. I sleep on white Egyptian cotton nowadays. Because of you.

I began our session together in my usual manner. I strode towards you with the same falsely coy, mechanical sashay, which I had performed so very many times before. Stuck on repeat.

You startled me as you raised your palms to face me, like a traffic controller.

"I'm sorry love, can we not do this? The lads put me up to it for a laugh," you scoffed nervously, like a schoolboy in trouble. "I'm the best man. They think it's funny."

I rolled my eyes very slightly. I'd heard this one before. You British men, you're either very drunk or very nervous. The nervous

ones soon loosen up. And as usual, I wanted it over with.

“Relax, baby.” I put a hand on your shoulder, still in character. Robotic. Made of steel.

I felt your muscles tense with discomfort as I rubbed your arm. I tried not to notice.

“No really,” you choked, “I’ve got a fiancée at home.” You smiled apologetically.

“What is *fiancée*?” My English wasn’t great back then. I broke my rule by entering into a conversation, but you seemed different. And I couldn’t resist the opportunity to learn a new word.

“Fiancée,” you confirmed the correct pronunciation, kindly. “It means the person I’m going to marry. Engaged.” You pointed to your wedding finger, looking at me, wide eyed. “She’s called Melissa.”

I watched your countenance soften and your lips form a tiny smile. I stepped backwards, astounded as I watched you being comforted by a mere thought of her.

“Melissa,” I repeated, hypnotised. You really were strange. They never normally talk about their wives. Or *fiancées*. I tried to imagine how Melissa felt, being so loved. I couldn’t.

“Don’t worry. I’ll still pay the fee. I don’t want to waste your time, love.”

That’s still my favourite thing about the British. What a beautiful quirk, calling female strangers ‘love’. *Love*. The most intense emotion, used so flippantly.

The lads had paid for you to spend twenty minutes in my company. So, you made conversation.

I told you where I was from. You liked my name. I told you I was nearly sixteen.

“Holy shit, you’re a child.” You put your hands on your head, looking up, as if the ceiling was about to cave in on us. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I noted the pleasant contrast of your crisp white shirt against your mocha skin.

You shuddered as I explained—in my broken English—how I had ended up under the red lights.

“Two years, stuck doing this. Bloody hell.” You shook your head. “Do your mum and dad know you’re here?”

I last saw *Tata*—father—when I was ten. I was told that he had been shot dead, but I never knew who did it, or their reasons why. I left home before my mother deemed me old enough to hear the full story. After my father had gone, the money dried up quickly. *Mama*, once beautiful and formidable, became a shrunken and eerie animal. Entirely consumed by her grief, she was almost dead herself. My mother was conscious and busy, but it was difficult to find the light in her eyes.

She found a job, cleaning at the city hospital, thirty miles from our home. She would often go all day without even setting eyes on my little brother. I would lift him from his cot in the morning, and I would be the one to kiss him goodnight long before she would arrive home. She became a stranger to us, with her alien, clinical smell.

Like every fourteen-year-old, I brimmed uncomfortably with angst and ambition. I felt huge and suffocated in our tiny flat. Then I found a way out. The men had suits, money, cars. They quite literally promised us the world. They even paid for our passports and travel. I thanked God for sending these people into my path.

You weren't married yet, but you and Melissa have children. I like that British people don't do things in the right order.

"Two kids. Little girls." You smiled, raising your fingers in the signal for peace.

Aged three and one. Still only babies. I wondered if they had wide smiles, like their *Tata*.

As the only customer that hadn't seen me naked, it surprised me that you were the only man to notice my bruises. Maybe the others were willingly blind.

The worst thing about the beatings was having to look at Mother Gretl up close. Mother Gretl was a wiry and compact creature, with boundless aggression and excessive jewellery. Her rotten skin looked as if it had given up all hope and collapsed into her ugly skull. This caused her dark teeth and lonely eyes to protrude.

My limbs were a kaleidoscope of injuries. Some of the bruises were months old, but their yellow wash served as an undercoat for the deep purple hue of the newer bruises. You stared for a long time at my forearms, which were also stained by involuntary drug use.

You held them with a touch so light that it made me shiver.

“It’s just fucking wrong, this,” you said quietly, still studying me. “I know someone,” you said suddenly, straightening your posture, taking shorter breaths. “Yeah, I know someone. My mate’s sister. She works for a charity. Something to do with trafficking. Human trafficking.” I didn’t understand all of your English words, but my heart quickened in time with your voice.

You stayed for the full twenty minutes that *the lads* had paid for. We talked. I found it easy to make you laugh. You were patient when I wanted to learn new words. Joy made my chest swell as I learnt about Liverpool. I pictured a city, lit up and drunk with laughter, family, music, electricity. That night I cried in mourning. I no longer was accustomed to the darkness. I now knew that there was goodness, but that I couldn’t have it. I would now have to shrink back into the shadows after a taste of your light.

The raid happened one week after our encounter. I believe that it was you that saved me. I was escorted from the building by a bright-eyed charity worker with braids in her hair. As I took a final look over my shoulder, I caught a glimpse of Mother Gretl being manhandled by police. With no resistance, she allowed herself to be folded away. The officer guided her into the car with a firm hand on her small bony head, pressing her down like a jack-in-the-box. A shrunken clown. A small part of me hoped that they would not treat her too badly.

They brought me to London. I even went to school for a few weeks, but I didn’t quite fit in. I was safe, but lonely in my beige hostel room. I wanted to be near you, so I headed for Liverpool. I needed to know if it was you who shed light on the criminals who enslaved me.

To this day, the memory of our first night together sits defiantly, deep in my gut, a pile of glowing orange embers, still hot to touch. It keeps me awake as I ride the bus from colourful Toxteth, into the city centre. I work in a gentlemen’s nightclub, safely elevated on a podium. Because no one owns me now, I don’t work every night. I have money, a little flat. I even have friends. Because you taught me that I could.

I haven’t found you yet. I often look out for you in the streets of

Liverpool. I wonder if you will recognise me when we cross paths again.

It's Christmas soon. The streets are a rainbow of festive warm bulbs. As I travel to work, I lean my forehead on the steamy bus window. As it picks up speed, I stare at the houses flashing rhythmically under the strobing street lights. I wonder which one you are hiding in. I picture the beautiful Melissa, lounging in your happy home. Your babies will be teenagers now. I hope they are safe.

I know that our paths will probably never cross. I'm living in the shadows, an animal of the night. I survive on a combination of small pleasures: shots of Sambuca, the occasional line of coke, a song I like, flirting with revellers, but calling the bouncers on men who cross the line. I still sleep with some customers, if it suits me. Someone has to do jobs like this, accepting that darkness exists within everyone.

We discussed this on that strange night. You tried to deny the existence of this darkness.

"We're not all cheaters and perverts," you protested with a hint of jest. Your incredulous and childlike face almost made me believe you. I wanted to believe you.

"Well, I have no shortage of customers," I said dismissively, with a genuine laugh.

I still work under the sordid lights. This job is all I know. But this time, I am free.