

KATRIN REDFERN

HARLOTS

[EXCERPT]

CARMEN WAS LEANING in the doorway in a tiny pink dress with the midsection cut out, telling us about her latest client, a famous tennis player. Sasha sat at the desk, painting her nails over an old copy of *Science* magazine. I lay on the chaise lounge, writing a poem and bleaching my teeth.

“Edible underpants are a good idea in theory,” Carmen said. “But in actuality they’re the texture of a damp Fruit Roll-Up. Everything got gummy and sticky. And it took him ages to eat them.”

“He ate the whole thing?” asked Sasha.

“Just the front. The back was a licorice thong. I wouldn’t recommend.”

“Duly noted,” said Sasha, turning her thumbnail red in three smooth strokes.

“But it was a moving experience,” Carmen said. “The effort he put in. We gazed into each other’s eyes as he ate the bows at the sides and chewed through the Fruit Roll-Up, and there was an undeniable melding of our spirits.” Carmen flipped her head forward and then back, piling her long dark hair on her head in loose coils so shiny they looked like pancake syrup.

“But then when he couldn’t eat any more of them I felt the

abyss that had first separated us return and stretch wide. I felt him, as he lay next to me cleaning his beard with a washcloth, receding back into a kind of detached solipsism.”

Sasha and I nodded in recognition. It was a common problem with new clients.

“So in a struggle to stay close to him,” said Carmen, “to let him know he’d brought my consciousness to the very surface of my body with his gaze, I reached over and ran my finger around his nipple – slowly, languorously! – until I realized my mistake. It was a nipple-sized mole, a couple inches closer to his armpit than his actual nipple.”

“Not the best finish,” I said, trying to keep my lips from touching the whitening gel on my teeth.

“No. Also his breath smelled like hummus, which was distracting.” Clients often smelled in ways we didn’t like. “And there was something like parsley in his teeth.”

Carmen took a new scorecard from the pile on the side table. “But we definitely shared that elusive, mutual recognition of intersubjectivity that’s so rare. He had that capability in spades. We were two arrows fired, meeting tip to tip. So I’m going to give him a ten for openness to authentic connection.” She began filling in the scorecard for his file. “And I’ll give him a ten for his sustained use of ‘the look’ while eating my underpants.”

“But a one for dental hygiene, surely!” Tiziana called out. “Leave mouthwash in the bathroom next time. Put that in the notes.”

Tiziana was a painter, though nearly blind, and highly

valued by clients for the sensitivity of her touch. She was working on a painting by the window, standing ten feet from her easel, scanning it through a small telescope. She would study one color at a time, then walk slowly forward, savoring the caress of the silk kilims and embroidered cicims on her bare feet, to the low table next to her easel, locating it with a quick knock to its side with the handle of her brush. Once the edge was found, she could feel to the jar where her brushes were kept, and to the palette. Using an eyepiece, she would work on another small patch of the canvas. Titziana's paintings were fierce and troubled, the latest a triptych rendered in rich teals and orangey reds; circus performers in a nighttime glade lit only by a sliver of moon.

Wearing a latex catsuit, Layla came in and picked up a pair of rubber gloves from the coffee table. "It's certainly possible to get two feet of rubber tubing up someone's bum, but it's a lot harder to get it out," she said, and walked out again, heels clacking down the hall.

The timer went off and I closed my notebook and wiped the whitening gel from my teeth. They ached in the cool air. I went to the mirror above the fireplace to have a look. Definitely a shade or two whiter.

I settled back on the chaise and tapped my pen on my notebook. "Girls, I'm stuck on the last line of this poem. What are some words that change everything?"

"*Unless*," said Carmen.

"*What if*," said Sasha.

"And what action best embodies the absurdity of hope?"

“Waiting for someone you know will never arrive,” said Sasha. I scribbled greedily.

Carmen lay on the window seat and placed cucumber slices over her eyes, careful not to disturb her eyelash extensions. “Someone tell a story,” she begged. We often entertained each other with stories from our former lives while waiting for the doorbell to ring, memories of how we came to worship this way. If another girl passed you the cloth monkey with the missing ears, it was your turn to tell. I always hoped not to get chosen. The other girls had seen the far corners of the globe; but I knew only London.

I took the monkey down from the mantle and threw it to Sasha, who caught it, careful not to smudge her nails. Her stories were often from her years as a Buddhist nun.

“When I last traveled to Mount Kailash in Western Tibet,” she said, “I climbed for several days; up to the Dakini Charnel Ground, a barren, rocky plateau on the north side of the mountain. This is the place where dead bodies are offered up for sky burial – *jhator* in Tibetan, ‘a scattering to the birds.’” Sasha hugged the monkey to her.

“There I practiced walking meditation among piles of bones and pools of blood, fat, and feces. The stench was putrid, even in the cold wind, and I could hear the flap of vulture wings and the howls of jackals close by.

“I came upon two faces shorn from their skulls, their bloody hair a tangled mess. Shaken, I barely managed to stay on my feet as I avoided stepping on these death masks. A man dressed in a ragged military coat approached and motioned

for me to lie down among rotting remains. I saw that Tibetans were sitting here and there among the body parts; a woman was pricking her tongue and others were pricking their fingers, drawing blood to symbolize death and rebirth.” Sasha spun slowly in her swivel chair.

“The man glared at me and again gestured toward the cold, slippery earth. I slowly lowered my body and lay back onto the messy ground. He drew a long, rusty knife from a sheath beneath his coat and began to mime chopping up my body. Wave after wave of fear passed through me. But gradually, gazing up at the snow-capped peak of Mount Kailash, I let go into the realization that I too am just blood and bone. Symbolic dismemberment is a rite of passage that opens you to the reality of your own impending death, because it’s harder to fear what one sees more clearly. Oh, sorry Titz.”

She looked over at Titziana, who rolled her nearly sightless eyes and continued working a new blue into a corner of her canvas.

There was a knock at the door, and the maid entered. She was a big, strong woman with a Cockney accent, a short, dykey haircut dyed a brassy yellow, and fading tattoos down her meaty arms. A huge silver cross hung from a chain around her bulging neck.

“We’ve got a walk-in,” she said. We’d been too engrossed in Sasha’s story to hear the doorbell. “Impatient fellow, bit annoying. A first timer.”

Carmen removed her cucumber slices. I straightened

my garters and felt for my heels beneath the chaise. Layla opened her compact and brushed a shimmery powder across her collarbone. Then we all filed out of the parlor, down the long vaulted corridor to the drawing room. When a new john came to the brothel, he was made to wait there until we came to stand in a line before him, so as to look him over and decide which of us might take him.

The man seated there now, framed by the Ionic pillars of the portico entrance, was reclining so far back on a deep sofa that he was dwarfed by the cushions, the grand Georgian proportions of the room, the huge crystal chandeliers. We stood in front of him, taking in his tailored suit, his comb-over, his foot tapping and gum chewing.

“What’s the third thing you’ll regret on your deathbed?” Sasha asked him.

He answered that he’d wish he’d led a less complicated life.

“You’re in finance, yes?” I asked. “You know we charge financiers and bankers triple because your labor produces nothing of value?” He nodded.

Layla took him, for what would surely be an arduous session. What always left us guessing were men who threw everything to the wind for sex, who were knocked legless by their desire for it but were phenomenally bad in bed! It was not as if they had an innate skill that needed polishing, or were even particularly sensual or physically aware. Like a tennis player who desires a partner of equal skill or better to fully explore their own ability, it was easy to understand

someone who wasn't well-matched at home desiring more. But almost without exception, these men were very average in the sack.