

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Nail Varnish

by Richard Wilding

“Anyway, what about your story?”

She nods towards my book and I make what I believe is a self-deprecatory gesture, as though I am reluctant to admit that I am part of the literate classes and intent on hiding my erudition lest it be mocked. All this in one gesture. “Um, just something I bought on a whim.”

“May I?” She holds out her hand for the book, which I pass over to her. Her fingernails are painted midnight blue and she, or someone; I presume her, has painted a small star onto each nail. That must have taken her ages. She would only go to that trouble for someone special and I feel a slight swell of anger on her behalf that that special someone has become a no-show. She is wearing a pleasant perfume to go with the nail varnish but underneath it, her breath has the slight hint of cheese about it, or old milk. I try to concentrate on the perfume as I hand the book over. She gives the back cover a read and opens it at random. “*No one makes love like they make a wall or a house,*” she reads. She looks up at me, those large date-like eyes widening in mock shock. “*They catch it like a cold. It makes them miserable and then it passes, and pretending otherwise is the road to hell.*’ Well,” she says, “that’s not a very positive outlook on life, if I may make so bold.”

She hands the book back to me and takes a sip of her gin. There’s nothing to suggest in that sip that she tastes anything untoward which is reassuring, although I suspect that I may have to buy her another and soon, because before we know it the Bored Latvian Barmaid Collective who are running The Smugglers with such lacklustre intent will ring the bell for last orders and I can’t see them volunteering to work a single minute longer than their contracted hours.

I wonder what they get paid? I wonder, do they have degrees? Are they trainee doctors, or particle physicists? Are they well read? Did they come to England as economic migrants, desperate for any work that could put food on a plate?

“Don’t answer me, then.”

It is her. She has been talking to me and I must admit, my mind had wandered, as it has a habit of doing. “Sorry,” I say. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“I said my name’s Rose. What’s yours?”

I tell her and she holds out her hand. We shake, the formality of which endears me to her. “I like your nail varnish,” I say.

“Why, thank you kind sir,” she says in a terrible American accent, and flutters them in front of her cheekbones. She is a little heavy-set. At a glance, I’d say she is ten stone.

“Another gin?” I ask.

“Go on, then,” she says, “I’m game.”

Yes, I think. And I’m a hunter.