

A mother's reassurance: his violent temper merely reactionary—a girlfriend always pushing, needling. She must have behaved whorishly, publicly shaming Felix; otherwise, he'd never have bludgeoned her. Presently, mother and son, hands grasped tight—mother in an armchair, son on the sofa arm—surmising horrors, arrive at an uncertain agreement: was the wallop justified? Both think yes, maybe. Felix watches his mother glow—SoHo's gaudy clip joints hum through mid-century modern blinds—and her neon outline, busty but dignified, remains open; does it soothe every male conscience like this? Glancing down to a painted fingernail, Felix remembers: it's Saturday night, and lurches to his feet—bank cards clap loosely in Wrangler jeans—and, in bending to kiss his mother's lips, thinks of good times rolling on. He must buy Johnny a drink; otherwise accusations of miserliness will reemerge: "Didn't know you had a Jew cock, Fe. If you got money, fucking spend it!" Felix takes Johnny's jibes in stride (for when Johnny is flanked by young women—as he often is—he takes the nuclear option: rally the rest of the boys, goad Felix into exposing himself—uncircumcised, thank God). Pathetic, Felix thought, that anyone could ever be meaningfully hurt by Johnny. It was the talk that made Dean Street. People could say whatever they wanted, insult anyone they liked. No one held any real prejudices.

Felix slunk from doorway to street, and, floating through the traffic, a nasal voice cut across the strip. Felix looked up to see the wiry South Asian Dev Singh running in a mock jog, arms outstretched. The two hugged tightly.

"You smell damn good," Dev said, squeezing Felix's buttocks.

"Where you headed?"

"Work."

"Long," Felix stretched the vowel.

Dev shrugged, puffed his cigarette, and stepped back, looking Felix up and down. "The fit is crazy," he paused, "sexy guy."

"Love."

"I'll shout you."

And the two men again hugged.

Felix started his night with a drink at *Lizzy's*. It had, in its previous iteration, been home to a working men's club; the preservation of its working-class origin, in excruciating aesthetic detail, much pleased Felix. On one side of the room, a luminous sign advertising 'Tuesday Night Bingo!' hung, presumably untouched from 1987—delightfully kitsch—and on the far end, a newly installed, though suitably retro, disco ball spun on its axis, admittedly invoking a dizzying nausea in the young man.

"Your house white?" suggested the barkeep, a plump and red-faced—though not bad-looking, Felix routinely thought—Australian woman. She spoke with a forced pleasantness inherent to the Australian accent, which made the young man bristle.

"The Chablis."

"Must be pay day," the woman teased through eerily perfect teeth.

Felix half-smiled. "Treat myself," as he hadn't worked in years. "Bit empty," he turned from the bar.

"It won't be," the Aussie scoffed. "It's Bertie's birthd—"

"I know Bertie," he interrupted, keen that his inflections would tell of his experience with

Bertie Rosten's naked body—nipples like Rolos. "So, when are they due in?" he added, hurriedly, fearful the barkeep might now consider him a misogynist (or sexual show-off). Felix turned back to the bar, the disco ball's dim spray of light travelling with him; but the barkeep had moved on to another customer. Felix's Chablis had been placed in front of him, and he duly paid £9.75 on the contactless card reader.

"£9.45 last week," came a ragged woman seated two barstools over. Felix had not, prior to this comment, noticed her presence, which was indeed curious—an atmosphere of decrepitude usually made Felix instantly ill at ease, and her frailty was violent, overt. Now, while stealing glances at this *thing*—his lower abdomen squeezing at his mother's risotto—Felix was increasingly troubled by more than just her appearance. Through a loose babushka, through gory eyeholes—corneas painted in wet pink—through the drippings of a hanging, bulbous nose, nostrils flared above a tooth—nubbed chalk—gripped betwixt large, filthy lips, her manner was relaxed, devoid of any self-consciousness. And this fact, above all else, terrified Felix.

"Does it?" Felix nervously misspoke.

"You were here," she understood.

"What?"

"You were here last week."

"Yes."

"So pay attention to such things."

"Sorry," he did not know why he said this, "rip-off Britain," he added with a smile.

"Not for me."

"What?"

"I'm very rich," she laughed, "and you are too?"

"No, no..."

She stood up. "Yes, yes, yes." Then, as if to flaunt her grotesque crippling, she groaned and began a slow stump towards Felix. "Yes, yes, my spoilt little boy," she muttered repeatedly, slowing her crawl, approaching his place at the bar.

"Do you like to give? If only to help the ladies," she asked casually, as if he were facing her.

"I don't have any change."

"I am rich!" she groaned. Felix darted his eyes about the room—it was dead. Still, he reddened. The haggard woman, sensitive to his disposition, apologised before limping away.

"Mr. Felix," she added, sidestepping through a door's threshold, "come and see the girls—they will love you." She was gone.

The birthday party brought in a racket; by God, arriving with gusto: the excellence, and excess, of youth defiled the space at once. Tight physiques dancing close; a sticky world of gaunt beauties moved freely, timelessly, expressions true, boogie new. It was disco—disco music—born of sneakers, of clicking heels, fraying skirts, of clinging jeans. Man, it was a scene.

"Nothing worse than a sad prick at the bar..." Johnny appeared, already piss drunk—deep breaths.

"A pint for my granddad then, barkeep," came Felix, unease lingering. (Fucking hag.)

"A grandson of mine'd've pulled a bird by now!" The two men hollowly laughed; Johnny leaned into the bar, filling Felix's peripheral vision with sagging flesh and the un-ironed collar of a pink Tommy Hilfiger shirt.

"This is Ghila. Israeli—but that's not her fault." Johnny gestured with his head to a person behind.

"Hi."

"Hello."

Felix, twisting, took in Ghila's elegant, angular visage—God knows how young this one was.

Johnny handed the girl a wallet—"It's with the notes, babe"—and she shot for the toilet, leaving the big boys to their big business. Presently, a delicate provocation surfaced, one whittled of the candour of privacy—of a (mostly) subdued male intimacy:

"S'never right to hit a bird, Fe."

"Don't."

"You know that."

"Course." Felix stared forward.

"Good."

"She's—"

"A lesson."

"Yep." Johnny looked at Felix's face and hated what he saw.

And then Ghila returned, mini dress adjusted—oriental. Felix admired how it smothered her figure: fish fillet, breadcrumb batter.

She started up briskly, "Your dad played bass for *The Big Sticky Ox Boys*. The singer—Terry Simons?—I would... or would have. Woof!" Then, looking at Johnny nervously, she added, "it's good for 50 a g," and handed him back the wallet.

Some people have no tact, Felix thought, how little they know... and yet they talk! Simons was a scumbag and a thief. Felix stared crossly at Johnny. (Leash your woman, old man.) Johnny rolled his eyes, shrugging. (He wished to reassure Felix that an *Ox Boy's* songwriting dispute—a matter of production credits—had, indeed, resolved unjustly. The court had ruled in favour of Simons' dubious suggestion: a royalty split favouring himself. "Daylight robbery!" Felix's father often said.) Ghila, blissfully unaware, continued her talk, and Felix—with visions of Terry and Ghila copulating on his father's grave—felt any lingering arousal for her vanish. Johnny, knowing Felix's temper, suggested to Ghila: share a cigarette... outside. (Don't mention his dad, Ghila. I warned you. You should keep your mouth shut.) Felix eyed a damp Daily Mirror.

Bertie's do did rage on: laughter and slang, European chic; perfumed kids, stale cigarettes. Everywhere at once, Bertie Rosten—or, rather, the Bertie Rosten of a Bertie Rosten birthday party—worked the room like a Jew televangelist. Around her, Great Britain, the Britain of newspaper copy, burned: gas, electric, water: rage, rage, rage. Yet Miss Rosten—a celebrity without fame—spoke of a life most vibrant: farcical happenings, witty *faux pas*. A woman genius, the truest Millian sort: an individual, an experimenter. Felix kept one eye above the paper, sneaking peeks at the ever-virile room; and yet, even since the arrival of Bertie Rosten—unmissable in her gregariousness, a social dominatrix—he saw nothing.

Sinking another Chablis, Felix remained chained to ruminative struggles. He sat in fear: fear of the hag that had visited him; he thought of her single tooth, decaying, and then of violence—violence he'd wrought—a delicacy crushed by closed fist, Christ Felix... a girlfriend's nose dripping with blood. "Johnny dares preach..." He stewed, jaw tightening, "Mr. Nosy Bollocks." Felix closed the newspaper. He had perused in search of a shock—could today's Britain shock

today's man?—Felix the abuser, a term he knew would stick; how he resented it. But, *au contraire*, in reviewing headlines, Britain didn't appear to be broken at all! Perhaps Felix had numbed to our suffering. "Good," he thought, laughing. Or maybe he wept—who could tell?

The club parted, and Dev Singh, chiselled jaw directing his light-footed step, entered *Lizzy's*—he was so thin. Was Dev done? Finished at work? The present hour: what was it? A pub shift, Felix knew, lasted several hours. Felix ordered another Chablis and tapped the £9.45. "Oops, I've charged you last week's price." And as the Australian giggled, beams of party light stung Felix—a hollow sting, like when, occasionally, ejaculations are painful, you know? Miss Rosten, weaving to Dev, squirming under dark jeans, writhing with intent—her thong, by degrees, now exposed—plainly wanted that Sri Lankan badly. Observing their looming embrace, Felix recognised their mode: Dev and Bertie—madly in love. Felix rose urgently, carelessly spilling his drink.

"Ah, matey," the barkeep moaned, "be a bit careful."

"Piss off."

She was stunned. "You what?"

"Piss off," Felix said again, his voice rising, "back to Australia. It's wonderful there, isn't it? Hot too. So go back. Why come?" The Aussie made her response, inaudible to Felix, and he fought his way out, clutching passerby, stabilising himself, groping and clawing where familiar faces smiled openly. Though intending to navigate around Dev's eyeline, ensnared by light and wine, Felix's destination felt predetermined—it was inevitable and, in the club's luminosity, unquestionably of a divine nature. And so the two friends came face to face.

"Fe-Fe! Yes! See my DM?"

"Nah. Been a weird one," Felix said, his mouth full of saliva.

"Bro, this Polish donny came into work—Nykolai—and, anyway, he's a regular. Anyway, he starts..."

"You and Bertie?"

"Oh. Yeah—couple months. Anyway, this Pole is fucking wedge. Tonk. Singing Elvis..."

Felix was swaying and butt in: "Blimey. She's been working her way through," he coughed, "but yeah, sorry, go on, Elvis—" then smiled wickedly, "yeah, no, so she's moving a bit loose. So what? SoHo. Nice, nice, nice. What song?"

"What?" Dev soured.

"The Polish guy?"

Dev's face re-softened. "Can't say I'm interested," his voice filled with magnanimity, "Bertie's Bertie." The amount of pity in his eyes made Felix feel inhuman.

"Yeah, she's chilled."

Felix's foreskin was cold. He felt fat—and, sure, he was a little fat. Who wasn't these days? Dev (outlier). Dev (Absalom). Bertie, who, up to this moment, had been chatting elsewhere, turned round to see the boys. She smiled. There was definite pity in her eyes. Felix knew regret. But pity knocked him out. He wished Bertie a happy birthday. Winsome and sophisticated, she was a real person—a collector of paperbacks. So he left. And once more, turning to face *Lizzy's* interior, Felix saw what he saw. Dev and Bertie—madly in love—laughing and touching, lost in whatever they were discussing. He knew—for certain—that they weren't talking about him.

Felix was back on the street. Here narrow alleys opened into vast plains of hustlers and hasslers: most had clawed their way up from the dirt, had grown to serve silver-spoon babies—they eased your hard-on, filled your void. It don't cost much... massage parlours full of young Asian girls. You dig? Even amongst this rabble, Felix now felt a moral inferiority (though he was absolutely, superiorly drunk). Woozily, he heard the neolithic chanting of football fans—on a different night, he'd be with them. Tonight, he headed home. A loaded word. While boarding at Brymore Boys in Somerset—'home?'—a beaky-nosed schoolmaster, known for philosophically abstruse assemblies, had, when Daddy died, become Felix's friend. He too died; the school built a bench. The engraving: *For Mr. Chaykin. "Though we are dependent on society as well as the air that sustains us, and though other men compose the system of relations in which the curve of our actions takes its course, it is as individuals that we are beset with desires, fears, and hopes, challenged, called upon, and endowed with the power of will and a spark of responsibility."* Society? Dependable? Felix felt his eyes welling. Willpower? What a gas. And Mr. Chaykin—where was he? Dead. Dead as a fucking doornail. Same as father; ha! Rockstars are rarely at home. Then they leave forever. So? So what? So, what—you hit a woman? So, you hit a woman. Felix, you hit a woman. "Felix hit a woman." That's what they'll say. Let them.

When a black man fell down some steps, Felix looked up from the pavement. He knew the African. A street preacher; the type to shout "Jesus!" at you; and on a nervous day, maybe you'd jump. There was no crucifix: the dark man gripped a bottle of rum.

"He diiiieeed for our sins!" the man sang. "And today Jesusss Christ waaas rebooorrrm!" Naturally, this kind of antisocial behaviour, a disorderly dominance of the side streets, shamed Felix; indeed, inconvenienced him. Where had this bloke fallen from? A cardboard sign hung above the steps, posted up in an open doorway. Its hallway shone red, for the bulb had lit it to do so. Scrawled in marker pen, the cardboard sign read:

Eastern European models upstairs.

Come and see the girls.

They will love you.

The African was right: Saturday night rolled into Easter Sunday. Felix was submerged—the duvet drowning boy, swimming in that same ol' bed. The smell of sizzling bacon filled his room; his mother, from the kitchen, whistled joyful renditions of half remembered melodies. A large chocolate egg had been placed at the foot of his bed. Felix sat up and ate the whole thing. He closed the blinds and went back to sleep.