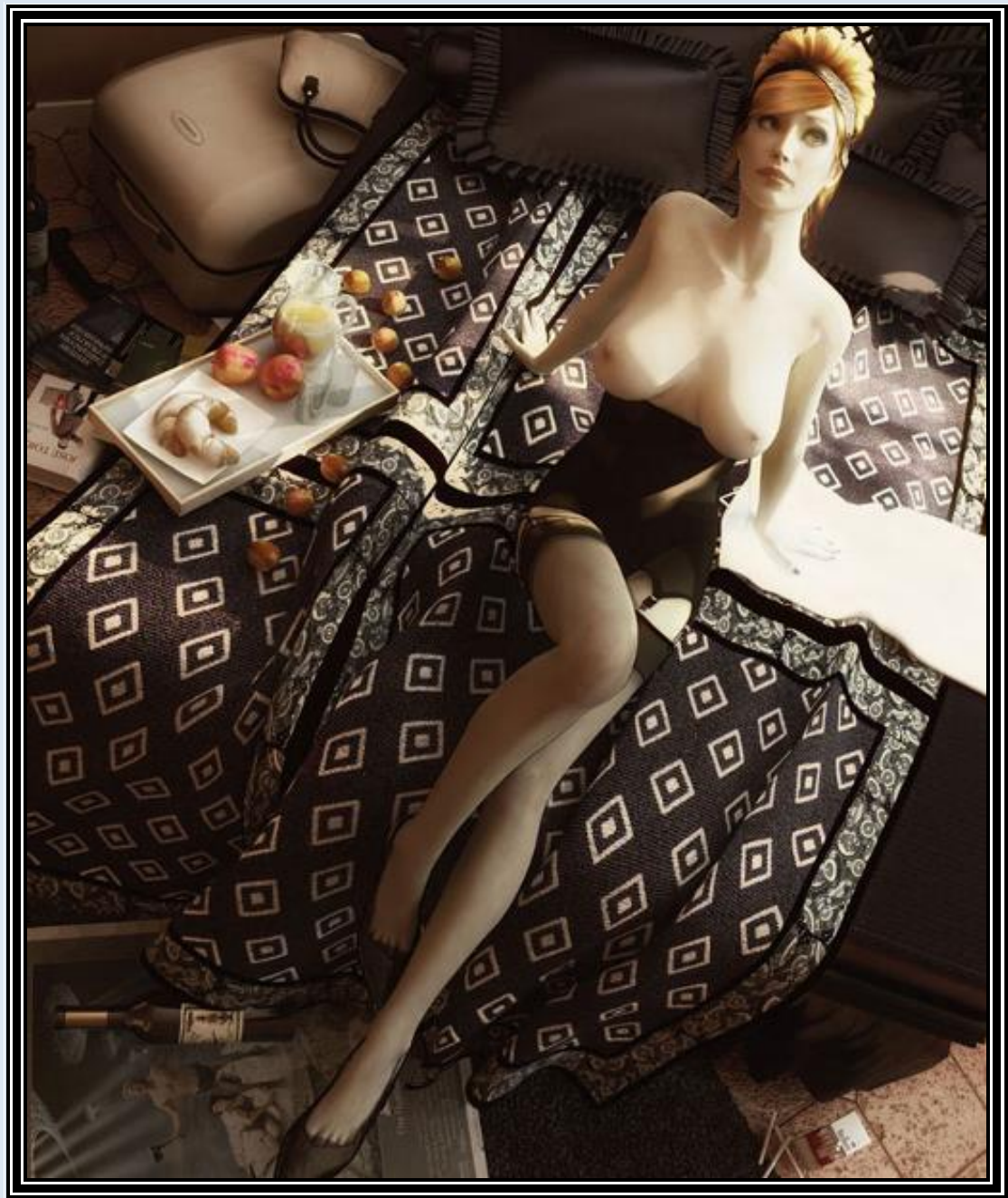


Disgust

Bradley Stoke



It was with nothing but disgust that Susan regarded the musicians whose subtle and accomplished performance was so enrapturing most of the other guests. Susan was conscious that she was a fraud in so many ways and her presence at the recital a sham. It was the music she should be appreciating rather than the musicians. She should be somehow transported to the higher plane that Franz Schubert had prepared for listeners to his *String Quartet No. 14 in D minor*: otherwise known as *Death and the Maiden*. Instead, her thoughts were chiefly focused on the huge bald spot in the middle of the cellist's pate. On the fringe and at the back his brown hair was abundant, but in the midst of this luxuriance was an obscene expanse of pink baldness. His head was bowed while he scraped his bow back and forth across the cello's strings, and all Susan could concentrate on was this naked excrescence that was in such total contrast to the lank long hair that flowed around the tonsure and over his shoulders.

All four musicians in the string ensemble were equally as disgusting to behold in one way or another. The man playing the viola was so fat that it was only by a miracle that the buttons of his white shirt dammed in a bloated discharge of pink belly that would otherwise overflow onto his lap. With every backward thrust of his bow, a hairy jelly-like engorgement extruded from between the straining buttons. The first violin was played by a man who had one eye at least an inch below the other and such an apology for a beard that it could only be excused insofar as it obscured his receding chin.

And as for the other violinist—the only woman in the quartet—however unprepossessing her musical colleagues might be, could even they stomach the horror

of ever having to fuck her? From her scrawny neck to her swollen ankles, the entire length of her body was shapeless and plain. Her skin was pale and blotchy. Her greying hair was tied back in a severe bow. And, only partly obscured by the frame of her unfashionable glasses, her left cheek was overshadowed by a nauseatingly prominent brown mole. Fuck! Susan was sure she could see three long sprouting strands of black hair. Couldn't the woman have at least plucked them out before she ventured into a public space?

The musicians were clearly in some kind of rapture as they scraped their bows back and forth. Their bodies were so tense and energetic that they each resembled some kind of large insect as their arms jerked backwards and forwards. Perhaps the music was good. Maybe it was the greatest music that had ever been performed—Susan was in no way qualified to pass judgment—but while she remained transfixed by the sheer ugliness and ungainliness of the musicians she could make no sense of the actual music at all: whether it was Allegro, Andante or Scherzo. The printed sheet promised that the fourth movement, after which all this torture would be over, would be a Presto, whatever that was. She hoped it would sort of invoke a sense of magic, like 'Hey Presto!', or even a bit of excitement, but all the lurching about from one almost-a-tune to another only made her suffering the worse.

The musicians weren't the only plug ugly people in the outsized music room. The private performance of the Aspettare String Quartet's recital was for the benefit and pleasure of guests hand-picked and invited by none other than Sir Kenneth Chandler: knight of the realm, patron of the arts and private philanderer. To Susan's eyes almost everyone in the audience was grotesque, with the exception of those

younger women who were there for much the same reason as she was. How was it possible for so much of God's creation to be so unhealthy, unwholesome and seemingly in-bred? In fact, if evidence was ever needed that God, if He existed, was either far from omnipotent or just playing a cruel and elaborate joke, then this could be confirmed by a scan of the corpulent, sallow-skinned, aging or misshapen men and women all sitting stock still in one of Sir Kenneth's more opulent chambers and at least pretending to listen intently to the Aspettare String Quartet.

Susan was familiar with most of Sir Kenneth's chambers, from the billiard room to the library, from the private cinema to the indoor swimming pool, and from the vast kitchen to the opulent bed chambers. And it was in this last room that Susan, and a few other of her colleagues and acquaintances, became most familiar with the most grotesque and least appealing aspects of Sir Kenneth and his many friends and associates. Sir Kenneth's naked body exhibited a blend of the scrawniness of middle age and the corpulence of good-living. But at least he was a man whose stomach didn't obscure or even flop over the proof of his manhood which he, like so many men, was so keen to flaunt at close proximity in Susan's face.

Susan had seen it all before, of course. She'd seen fat ones; thin ones; ones with a prominent bend; ones where the balls put the penis to shame (although they were most often also nothing to be proud of); dark ones; crinkled ones; circumcised ones; and very many that were either far too eager to jump to attention or needed a huge amount of attention to coax into any kind of useful life. There was always some consolation for the awkward fumbling, the clumsy manhandling and the unreasonable demands on her body. And these most often eventually found their way up her nose or

ingested in a ceremony more elaborate and often more pleasurable than the lovemaking it was intended to supplement.

At long last, there was the customary uneasy halt to the performance where the audience looked around at one another to judge whether an applause was required. And this would soon break forth when the cue was given by a couple of firm handclaps: usually initiated by Sir Kenneth who himself relied on a discrete nod from his decidedly cultured and foul-breathed cultural curator. And then like waves crashing on the beach or, more often, a strong wind against the window, applause would break out amongst Sir Kenneth's thirty or forty guests and continue until Sir Kenneth judged that it was time to stand up and stride, still clapping appreciatively, to the dais in front of the gathered audience.

Inevitably, this wasn't to be the end of the tedious cultural entertainment. Susan wasn't going to be let off that easily. As always, when Sir Kenneth congratulated a String Quartet he made a special request on behalf of everyone that they should perform an encore. The musicians would make an unconvincing show of not being prepared and then play the one memorable and even sometimes tuneful piece of music in their repertoire. Every so often, it would be a piece of music that even Susan recognised. Like *Greensleeves* or the *Hamlet Cigar* theme tune. These encores never usually lasted much more than five minutes, but this was usually the first time in the whole performance that the musicians and even some of the audience looked like they were genuinely enjoying themselves. Susan often wondered why these chamber music ensembles didn't skip the actual concert and just play a series of encores: seeing as it was the most enjoyable part of the evening. With, of course, a

very real promise that it would all finally come to an end.

“How did you enjoy the recital, Susan dear?” Sir Kenneth asked afterwards and when the far more important guests had been attended to and the musicians given enough evidence of the knight’s knowledge and appreciation of culture to speak well of him in future.

Susan couldn’t say what she really thought or she might never be invited to such an evening’s entertainment again. She would never say that it had been yet another excruciating hour and a half of having to stifle a yawn and trying not to fidget.

“Excellent as always, Sir Kenneth,” Susan said deferentially. “You have such excellent taste in music.”

Susan knew exactly which buttons to press. The knight smiled graciously and placed a discreet but firm hand on her wrist that was as bare as the rest of her arm from the sleeveless shoulder to the elegant bracelet.

“I’d like you to get to know Benedict Cosgrove,” Sir Kenneth said in a low voice. “He’s the chap with the short beard and cravat chatting to the cellist in the corner.”

“Who is Benedict Cosgrove and what is he to you?” Susan asked.

“Well, I’ll leave it to you to find out more about the man yourself. In fact, I’ve never spoken to him for more than thirty seconds at a time. All you need to know is that he’s a private investor and that I want him to invest some of his not inconsiderable wealth in my East European enterprises. Just make sure he associates an evening of high culture with a high degree of satisfaction that even Franz Schubert doesn’t normally offer.”

“Schubert wasn’t gay, was he?” Susan asked with some alarm.

“I don’t believe so,” said Sir Kenneth. “A bit of an old romantic I gather. Or a young romantic really. He died when he was about the same age as our Mr Cosgrove. It was from typhoid I think, but if young Benedict were also to die young I’d rather it was from a broken heart. Now, if you don’t mind...”

“Of course, Sir Kenneth,” said Susan as the knight wandered off to chat to a party of society ladies who dressed much the same as she did, but with rather more conspicuous expense and rather less sartorial success. There wasn’t much even the best dress designers could do to add polish to such turds. Their bare arms had neither the elegant slenderness of her own nor a pleasing plumpness. Their necks didn’t spring swan-like through a pearl necklace to culminate in a smooth face framed by a healthy head of angular-cut straight hair that almost but never quite brushed on the shoulders. Their faces were either thrust up on thick necks and squashed beneath frayed blonde-dyed hair or sprouted like stalks of asparagus topped with a head of hair that appeared to have been borrowed from someone else.

Benedict Cosgrove, mind you, wasn’t as much a crime to fashion and good taste as most of the corpulent, aging and mottled-skin gentlemen in the music room and accompanying salon, but he was scarcely graced with the looks of a movie star. However, as Susan steadily but deliberately weaved her way through the men (mostly) and women who greeted her stately progress, there was much she could already say about Mr Cosgrove. He had money. Lots of it, judging from the cut of his tailor-made suit and the apparent weight of his Swiss watch. And it was likely that he took moderate but not excessive exercise judging from his generally trim body and the

healthy sheen of his lightly freckled skin.

The best way to introduce yourself to someone to whom you've never actually been introduced before, Susan discovered, was to make your presence felt gradually rather than to break into a conversation presumptuously. And with so much mingling amongst guests it was a simple matter to walk straight up to the cellist who'd already attracted Mr Cosgrove's attention and shower praises on him.

"I've rarely heard a better rendition of Schubert's *Rosamunde Quartet*," Susan declared, hoping that this wouldn't be challenged or that her pronunciation as recalled from earlier in the evening wasn't too unconvincing. "Wouldn't you agree?" she added with a meaningful glance at Benedict Cosgrove while she tried to determine from his reaction whether he was gay, self-confident or socially awkward.

"I've never heard better," said the man, who from his inability to focus directly at her eyes was probably evidence that he wasn't overly self-confident and almost certainly not gay. In this company of unprepossessing women, Susan stood out as a beauty guaranteed to generate a spark in the eyes of all but eunuchs and the most steadfast homosexuals.

Susan now had to move for the kill. Someone else might net Mr Cosgrove or he might decide to quiz the cellist yet further. She slightly furrowed her brow.

"Excuse me, sir," she said directly to her target. "Haven't we met before somewhere? I can't recall where exactly. Was it at Covent Garden perhaps? Or maybe the Wigmore Hall."

"Goodness, madam," said a clearly flustered Benedict Cosgrove. "I really don't remember. I doubt that it was the Wigmore. I've not been there for several

years.”

“I *do* recognise you,” Susan persevered. “Maybe it was at a party somewhere. Mr Cosgrave, isn’t it?”

“Cosgrove,” the mark corrected. “Benedict Cosgrove. But you can call me Ben. I don’t recall your name?”

“Susan Worstenholme,” said Susan using one of several assumed surnames. “So, Mr Cosgrove, how well do you know my cousin Kenneth?”

“I didn’t know you were related, Mrs Worstenholme,” said Benedict Cosgrove.

“By grace of marriage only,” said Susan. “But I must correct you, Mr Cosgrove. I’m not yet a married woman. Worstenholme is the surname I’ve had from birth. I guess I still haven’t found the man whose surname I wish to take. Is your wife here?”

“My wife?” said Mr Cosgrove, for a moment looking sufficiently startled for Susan to wonder whether there might actually be one. “No,” he continued with his eyes trained meaningfully towards Susan. “I haven’t found my life partner yet either.”

Careful, thought Susan. This was a fish that could only be netted once and then thrown away. And, in any case, there was not a single man associated with Sir Kenneth who could become a meaningful long term association. Not, that is, if she wanted to remain in his good favour.

“I’m sure that day will come soon,” said Susan. “So, tell me, how is it that you know my cousin?”

Susan had practiced such gambits many times before. If she hadn’t, she could

so easily stumble and then fall very badly. And then where would be her reputation? And it was her reputation rather than her birth-right or even her sexual stamina that kept her in jewels, pearls and designer clothes. It was her reputation for elegance and the promise she could deliver when required in a manner that wouldn't shame prospective clients that paid for her twice-weekly hairdressing appointments, the apartment in Lisson Grove, and an occasional coke habit. As an inevitable result of having been married and divorced several times over, Sir Kenneth had many cousins, most of them through marriage: But Susan was one cousin Sir Kenneth would most definitely deny if challenged, especially as any such consanguinity would have compromised the sex he'd enjoyed so many times with her.

As Susan understood it, there were two duties she was expected to perform for Sir Kenneth. The first was easily dispensed with.

"I have absolute faith in my cousin's business concerns," she said when Benedict mentioned that he wasn't convinced whether the proffered business opportunities in Azerbaijan and Georgia were really such sound investments. "I've always taken his advice in such matters and it's been more than enough to supplement my private income. But as they say, you should never invest more money than you can afford to lose."

"Sound advice," Benedict said, as if he'd never heard the cliché before. "But I would be foolish to lose money when I don't need to. Are these markets really performing quite as well as Sir Kenneth would have me believe?"

"I'm not a businesswoman, Mr Cosgrove," said Susan. "I'm simply someone who's profited many times over from the good advice of a cousin who's always more

than delivered on his promises.”

First job done.

Of course, Susan knew that offering a confident assessment on Sir Kenneth’s business proposals was only likely to be successful if there was some kind of follow-through that would persuade Benedict Cosgrove that there were benefits from an association with Sir Kenneth that had little to do with the value of the stocks and shares he was eager to offload. Thankfully, this was a man in every way as predictable and malleable as Susan expected.

As she expected, Benedict was currently residing in a suite in a five star hotel in Central London while he conducted business in the City. His room boasted an excellent view over the River Thames towards the Houses of Parliament, and if Susan was so minded, Benedict would be more than happy to show her an almost unparalleled panorama of the city.

Susan didn’t want to admit that she’d seen many great views of London from the hotel rooms of many of Sir Kenneth’s business associates and even some who’d never had the pleasure of his acquaintance. Furthermore, Susan had no intention of telling Benedict who these men were nor what they invariably revealed to her in all its flabby, fleshy, grotesque glory. Nor would she divulge just how little she enjoyed being squeezed beneath the sweaty, hairy, overweight body of a man who farted loudly, smelt foully and sometimes took rather too long to get his business over with.

At least, when Benedict revealed his cock, not long after downing many more whiskeys than Susan would ever permit herself on a working day, it was nothing he needed to be ashamed of. It wasn’t of porn star dimensions, for which Susan was quite

grateful. On those few occasions when she'd sampled such delights—on a professional basis only—she felt that engorged mass far too deep inside her for rather longer than she cared for. In truth, she preferred something she could very easily forget. However, if only it was always so easy. Men's cocks were so often disgusting and when they didn't seep out urine or semen, Susan would rather she'd never get to find out. Thank goodness for prophylactics, without which Susan would never go anywhere. Not only did they protect you from the feel of a cock and whatever might spurt from the end of it, condoms disguised and even improved the very look and taste of the bloody things.

Presentation was key. Not only in bed, but in all the stages before. Susan had to be a convincing society heiress: if one rather more self-confident and liberal with her body than any you'd ever met sober. And after too much imbibing alcohol, snorting lines or necking pills, such women when young and unattached often made an unseemly virtue of demonstrating just how far they could go. Nonetheless, most society gels—whether debutantes or otherwise—however bold they were, could never pass muster in Susan's profession. So many of them had horsey laughs that matched so well their horsey faces. Many of them so took for granted their natural superiority over the plebs, the downtrodden middle-class or the servant classes, that they mistook bold experimentation as sufficient experience to boast about for the rest of their married lives. This often meant that they were able to claim they didn't need sexual experimentation after marriage as they'd already had enough of it before their father had given them away on the aisle. But few society women, even the young ones, had skin as smooth and sensuous as Susan's. Few, very few, had such a naturally beautiful

face that didn't need to be caked with foundation and cream. And few could satisfy a man quite as well as Susan could.

It wasn't that Susan actually enjoyed it very much. If she thought deeply about the paunchy, pot-bellied, saggy-arsed, drooling men who'd fucked her, she'd be frigid. Like women of an earlier century who didn't believe in sexual pleasure for themselves, Susan was expert in making the men who fucked her believe that she'd truly enjoyed every thrust, that she savoured the taste of their semen and that she quite enjoyed being fucked up the arse. And, for a tad more money and with the right client, Susan could pretend to enjoy rather more than was strictly vanilla. Even bondage and a light spanking was an available option and given the demand for it amongst the moneyed and privileged, one worth enduring on occasion.

However, it was vital that Benedict wouldn't be left with the impression that Sir Kenneth's cousin was anything less than a lady—however good a fuck she might be. So: not too much eye-contact, appreciably laboured reluctance to remove her clothes and a show of tightness in a twat that had long since gained an elasticity denied most society women. Fortunately, the fashion for shaven pudenda had become so prevalent that it no longer inspired comment except amongst the older and least experienced men of her acquaintance. A tattoo, however, was definitely out of order. It had cost her rather more to remove the discreet tattoo of a spiky red rose on her shoulder than it had been to acquire. That had been when she was younger, more naïve and probably still had a residual belief in true love despite the already considerable evidence to the contrary that the only men worth surrendering for love alone would never be the ones who could keep her in the luxury to which she'd now

become accustomed.

And so with enough reluctance and reserve to appear more like a woman of good-breeding than one of easy virtue, Susan was able to convince Benedict that he was truly taking her to places she'd very rarely, if ever, been before. The two fucked on the bed, fucked on the floor and fucked against the window to the hotel suite that looked over the Houses of Parliament. Benedict fucked her vaginally and Susan sucked him off royally. Benedict achieved orgasm three times with a decent pause between each spasm, while Susan faked hers at least twice as many times. Susan was sure Sir Kenneth would be delighted with the services she'd provided his prospective investor.

Eventually, Benedict slumped on his back exhausted in the way men usually were after sex while Susan took the opportunity to examine the man who'd just been fucking her.

In comparison, even without his clothes, he was still much more presentable than most of the men Susan did business with. He wasn't perfect, of course. Few men were and almost no man in a comparable situation to Benedict's ever could be. Judging from the lines beginning to furrow his face and the paunch swelling over his waist, he was a bit older than first appearances suggested, but not excessively so. And he'd farted at the most inopportune moment during the fucking.

But then Susan wasn't expecting to see him after they had breakfast together, which they did, of course, in the hotel suite pushed in on a trolley by a nervous maid who must surely have seen a naked woman in bed with an older man before.

Susan was expecting some kind of a gratuity or tip from Benedict. These were

normally more substantial than the agreed price for her services. This was already quite substantial thanks to Sir Kenneth's generosity and the value he attached to the value of her services. But how to get a tip from a man who, despite everything, still seemed to believe that Susan was the woman she'd claimed to be?

Thankfully, Susan knew exactly how to stage an opportunity for a gratuity. While Benedict was settling his bill at the hotel reception, Susan idled just by the tourist shop in front of a glass cabinet which presented a selection of jewellery and timepieces. She was less concerned about the quality of the items on display and more on the price being asked for them and the question of how easily she could sell them for the hard cash she really wanted.

"What are you looking at, my dear?" said Benedict, who could scarcely now address her any longer as Miss Worstenholme.

"Such a beautiful watch!" Susan said pointing at a £5,000 item which would surely not exceed Benedict's budget.

"It is, isn't it?" he agreed, with barely a glance. "And it can tell the time as well. Would you like it, my dear?"

"I would give anything for a watch as beautiful as that," said Susan.

"No trouble," said Benedict who pulled out his American Express card just as Susan expected.

As Susan watched the transaction take place, the only regret she now had that couldn't be washed off in the shower, was that she could have set the amount that Benedict Cosgrove could afford substantially higher.

And, as Susan slipped on the watch on her elegant slim wrist, this was one

thing that for the brief while she'd be wearing it wouldn't disgust her at all.