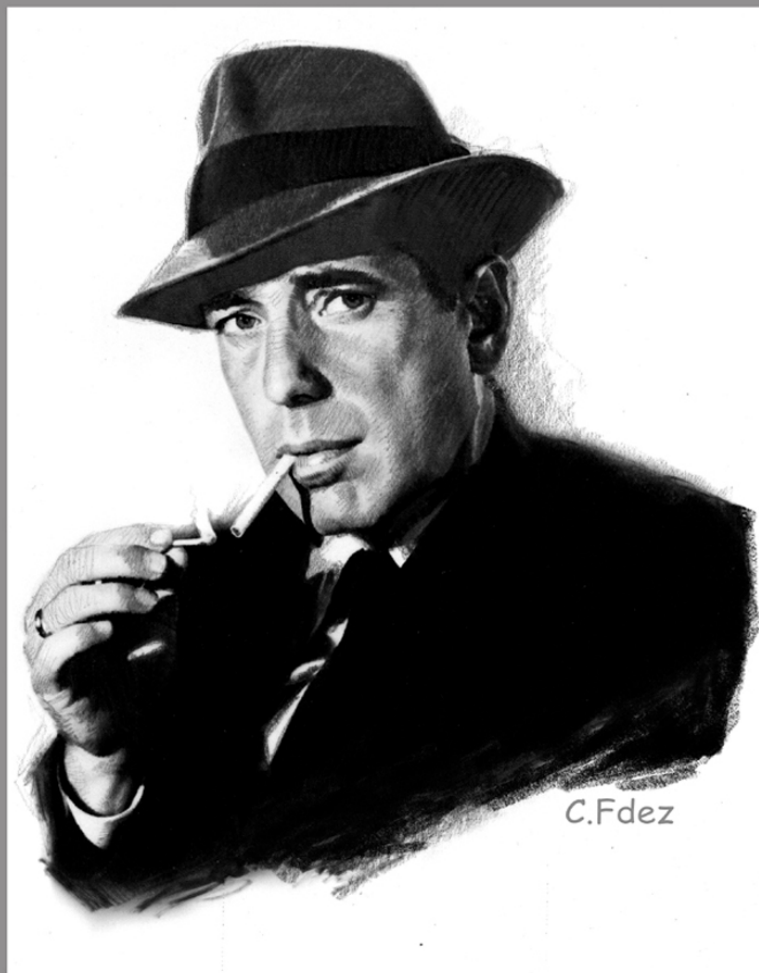


Here's Looking At You

Bradley Stoke



Sam held the black-and-white photograph of his first wife in the gnarled fingers of his hand.

“Here’s looking at you, kid,” he said, holding it up towards his failing eyes, as much aware of the liver spots on the back of his hand as of Jenny’s prim beauty. Her delicate hands were crossed over a pleated knee-length skirt and her face shone in the white sunlight of a distant age.

All Sam’s memories were in black and white. At the time they were in the same colour as any photograph taken in the modern day would be, but as all he ever had to remember his youth, from those grainy pictures of childhood to early middle-age, were in black and white, so too were his memories. Young people, especially those born since the 1960s, knew only a brilliant world of Technicolor but for Sam the past was remembered in the same monochrome as those Humphrey Bogart movies he and Jenny used to watch at the flicks. Except for the odd Hollywood epic or Disney cartoon, there was only black and white and the various shades of grey in between.

“Play it again, Sam,” he whispered, voicing one of the catchphrases Jenny adopted from the same wartime movie that inspired his own endearment to his dear departed wife. At least, he thought she was departed. For all he knew, though, Jenny might still be enjoying her dotage somewhere, perhaps with the son and daughter she took with her when they divorced and whom he hadn’t seen for many decades now.

Theirs was a romance, and then a marriage, that spanned the grey days of ration books and the steadily brightening days of the 1950s. It also spanned his years of National Service and study for his Accountancy exams. Two children and a house in Twickenham later, it all ended so messily. The photographs that recorded those

precious shared moments he and Jenny had enjoyed together were all that was left now. And she, as unable as he was still to watch *Casablanca* in quite the same way, was happy to leave these photographed memories to her ex-husband. What tangible memories did she have now? Or were they ones she'd still rather forget.

Sam didn't forget, couldn't forget, those happy days, even though right from the beginning he'd been unfaithful to her. There were the whores he visited with the lads during his National Service. The girlfriend he had at college while his guilt still prompted him to bring flowers back to his wife after every evening of infidelity. The syphilis he contracted which brought his deceit, and later his marriage, to an end when he had two women to confess that he'd been more unfaithful than even a mistress and a still loving wife could ever have imagined. A pursuit of the fairer sex that had been both his greatest source of joy and that of his eventual downfall.

But bugger it! He'd fucked his way through more women than most men had hot dinners and he wasn't sure he regretted a single moment of it.

Although there was no mirror across his cluttered living room to which he could refer, he knew he still cut a fine figure of a man. He might be stooped, his nails as tough as hell to cut, and his hair thinning, but he dressed well and he could still pull the women. Okay, they were women much the same age as him, smelling less sweet than he remembered Jenny's teenage flesh (indeed they sometimes smelt rather more like piss), but he was still a man who could give pleasure. Thank Christ for Viagra! Not to mention the lubricating creams that ensured that a woman whose passion exceeded her stamina didn't suffer unduly from the thrusts of his prolonged and stubborn erections. Modern Science was a wonderful thing and Sam was glad he'd

lived long enough to benefit from it.

There'd been no mention of medical matters in his conversation with Dorothy during the intermission of the theatrical production they'd both seen the night before. He was sure, however, that her interest in him was not confined merely to his extensive knowledge of the movies referenced by the play. What did modern theatre directors really know about *film noir* anyway?

Dorothy was a stately woman who had learnt that the best way to preserve her allure in advancing age was to be more truly her own self and less a caricature of the girl she once was. But even as he kissed her when their taxis drew up after the show, he couldn't help wondering what it might be to kiss the lips of a woman he'd seen age from youth to maturity, rather than someone who appeared as if she'd always been a sophisticated mature woman.

A woman, perhaps, like Jenny.

In those early days of courting, when the dance hall and the flicks were the best places to chaperone a dame for the evening, Sam remembered Jenny as a catch whose virginity was as easily prised from her as it was from any of the girls he'd dated while still at grammar school, taking advantage of the bombsites that dotted wartime London. But she was someone special: one whom for so long he was able to forego all other temptation. Indeed, if in his days in National Service he'd never discovered the pleasures of the ladies of the nights and the easy prey of the servicemen's favourite haunts, perhaps he and Jenny might have stayed together until even now.

He'd believed he was in love, and perhaps it was love he genuinely felt as he masturbated over the grainy black-and-white photographs he borrowed from his older

brother on those evenings he imagined and later remembered the visual delights of Jenny's proud bosom and the surprisingly hirsute curtains that hid the precious trophy of romantic conquest.

Although Sam imagined himself as a Humphrey Bogart when he was young, in his attitude towards women he was much more like the hero of those Ian Fleming novels he read so avidly in the 1950s. Women were easy prey and as long as you dressed and acted the part, they were fruit from a tree that never failed to give of its bounty. With a winning smile and a well chosen buttonhole, no woman was safe from his charm. Even now, as long as you made sure you never let your sartorial standards drop, there were plenty of women, still handsome if not as beautiful as they might once have been, who fell prey to his allure. A conquest, even one with hair as thin as his own, was one to relish.

Dorothy would be but one in the series of mature conquests that Sam was collecting. There was Betty whose eyes sparkled with the vitality of the youth they hadn't lost. Rose, whose naked breasts had a lift that plastic surgery could only hope to emulate. And, of course, Dulcinea whose exotic name promised treasures between her thinning thighs that even the smell of incontinence didn't lessen.

Of course, he could still afford to pay for younger flesh, a habit he'd still not foregone, but there was more pleasure to be gained from sex with a woman who appreciated him for other things than the interest on his investments that rewarded a job well done.

Sam still liked a young lady. He especially loved the way younger women exposed so much bare flesh, often letting their trousers hang dangerously close to the

zone after which he most lusted. Did they know how much pleasure they brought to an old man as he waited at the bus stop or queued at the supermarket checkout? Only a few hours earlier, he carried with him the memory of the smell and vital warmth of the bare waist that brushed against his left hand while his right hand gripped the strap on the crowded Jubilee Line. But he had lost the ability to distinguish the age of a woman of sixteen years and one ten years older, just as he now had a senior citizen's appreciation of the subtle distinctions of aging flesh.

It was after seeing *Casablanca* with Jenny that their relationship was first consummated. In those days, there were many more cinemas than nowadays and a film would continue to be shown for many months, or even years, after its first release. After all, there was no opportunity to rent out a film on video or to wait till it appeared on television. The Odeon was a grand venue, still boasting a pit where, in the days of silent film, a pianist would keep improvised accompaniment to the madcap escapades of Charlie Chaplin or the Keystone Kops. Sam was much keener on more recent movies and had a talent for mimicking the great actors. He had an excellent take on Groucho Marks, WC Fields, James Cagney, George Formby and Will Hay, but Humphrey Bogart was his favourite.

"Here's looking at you, kid!" he said to Jenny.

She giggled as he kissed her decorously on the lips.

"Play it again, Sam," she said in a higher pitched imitation of the great man's voice.

Sam complied with eagerness, grasping his beloved around the trim waist and planting a longer smoochier kiss on her lips. He noted with desire that she closed her

eyes in the same seductive way as the screen goddesses of his masturbatory fantasies.

“We can make more of the evening if you like,” he said at last when their lips parted.

He was encouraged by how flushed and excited Jenny looked.

“I don’t know how,” she protested unconvincingly. “My mum will be waiting up for me.”

“You can always say the bus was delayed,” said Sam. “I’ve borrowed the spare keys to my older brother’s flat in Chelsea. He’s away on business in Gloucester and he said it was okay.”

“Blooming heck, Sam!” Jenny exclaimed. “You’ve got it all planned.”

Sam smiled, but he didn’t want to let on that Jenny wouldn’t be the first young lady who’d joined him on the bed in his brother’s spare room. Indeed, he most certainly wouldn’t admit that his brother’s complicity had once extended to sharing a woman of particularly easy virtue who hadn’t yet learnt that she could do better by charging her male friends for the pleasure of her company.

“We can get there easily on the Circle Line,” he said, indicating the drab exterior of a bomb-scarred underground railway station.

Sam’s brother’s flat reminded him in later years of the apartment featured in *Brief Encounter*, although it wasn’t a film he’d seen at the time. Again, although it was as colourful as any Chelsea flat in the late 1940s might be, his memories were in black and white despite the fact that he had no photograph to remember it by. The photographs he had of Jenny of that time, most of them taken at the wedding, had none of the details of the dark brown freckles on her cheeks or the auburn hair that

cascaded over her shoulders when she removed her hairpins. And no photograph taken then showed her slim naked body when after many minutes of subtle perseverance he finally persuaded her to divest her clothes.

Her screams of passion were unfeigned but compromised by the pain of his initial penetration as bit by bit the intricate folds of her previously unviolated vagina gave way to Sam's thrusts. The second and third times that evening, when Jenny had at last recovered from the first, thankfully not very bloody, incursion, were even more delightful. Jenny had a natural talent for lovemaking that even now Sam believed was the best he'd ever known.

In those days, there were few examples, either filmed or photographed, that could guide the happy couple in their frequent abandon. Neither of them really appreciated the extent to which anal intercourse, one of Jenny's 'special treats', might be viewed as a fetish or even a perversion.

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously, as she proffered her arse towards his twitching penis.

"As sure as I'll ever be!" she said, with a smile that lit up her face more than any studio lights could an actress.

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!" said Sam, as he entered territory he'd never appreciated before in such a state of relative sobriety.

And the many times she arched above him as he thrust into her from below were done more to accentuate Jenny's desire for deep sensation than from any wish to emulate the unnatural poses of hardcore pornography. There was no doubt in both Sam's and Jenny's mind that sex was both a prelude to and a reward for marriage,

along with the delights of the two children born so close together.

There were fewer photographs of Jenny in the later years of their marriage and none at all after their shamefaced visits to the clinic. There were no photographs at all of Sam's other conquests in those years, except for Doris, his secretary, on one of the Accountancy firm's occasional excursions. It was ironically taken together with Jenny and the other partners' wives. There she was, simpering just behind the two of them with the sun setting over a stately home.

Maggie, wife number two, was even less well represented in the photograph collection. Like Jenny, all memories were in black and white, but there were no children and the marriage suffered very early on from his wife's all too well founded suspicions.

His third wife, Lauren, was the first of his wives to be photographed in colour, but now the print was faded and her red hair had lost its tincture just as in real life it must by now have lost all its shine.

There was remarkably little to remember Rosemary who was very nearly his fourth wife, and would have been if Sam had not switched his affection to the much younger Raquel whose photographs in brilliant Kodacolor filled more photograph albums than all his other wives put together. Theirs was a marriage that survived for almost as many years as his first, until the naïveté of her youth gave way to the acute disillusion of discovering that hers was not the only young flesh Sam coveted.

Although Raquel was the conquest about which Sam reminisced with most pleasure, she was neither as passionate nor as fulfilling a lover as Jenny. There were no shared moments in the 1970s that had as much mutual significance as those early days

with Jenny. She had no fondness for Sam's mimicking of Norman Wisdom, Spencer Tracey or Humphrey Bogart, and Sam had difficulty in truly understanding the appeal of Robert de Niro or Harrison Ford. They shared very few cultural pleasures. He really did not enjoy Marc Bolan, Rod Stewart or Elton John. The Beatles was probably as modern as his taste in music ever progressed. And much as he enjoyed Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly, he preferred Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett.

Sentimental fool that he was, Sam once took a holiday to Casablanca in the long gap between wives number three and four. This was a disappointment in one sense. The crowded, sweaty North African city hardly resembled at all the Casablanca of his imagination, except for the minarets and djellabas. There was no Rick's Bar and certainly no eponymous black piano player. He met more possible Ricks in the dives of Tangiers than in the bustling run-down streets of the newly independent kingdom's commercial capital. But, in one way, his holiday was no disappointment at all. The whores he sampled were amongst the very best he'd ever enjoyed and he was able to relish all the more sophisticated pleasures of the flesh that greater exposure to imported, under-the-counter, Soho pornography had stimulated in his imagination.

If only he'd known such diversions when he could have shared them with Jenny! He was sure that she'd have been as game as any prostitute and would have enjoyed his experiments very much more.

Sam doubted he'd ever be able to relish such deviations now. Even with the prostitutes whose telephone numbers he snatched from telephone booths, he wasn't able to rise beyond the vanilla challenge. However, Sam still enjoyed the thrill of the chase. The women he pursued with such success might be mere shadows of their

earlier selves, but he had an eye for which women were still up for it. Many older women had lost the urge, but there were those who were still well turned out and responded enthusiastically to his gentlemanly persuasion.

Although his more recent photograph albums were full of pictures of mature women with stockinged ankles, tight jeans, hair dyed deceptively young, and full bosoms in their final bloom, it was the more innocent photographs of a smiling Jenny who hid well the extent of her animal appetite that Sam returned to.

“Aren’t I enough for you?” she asked, when they’d made up for perhaps the last time, not many months before their relationship approached its final most ugly death throes. She held his erect penis between her fingers, his semen dripping down her cheek as much as it was into the fine hair of his thighs.

“Of course you are, my love,” he said, sincerely meaning it whilst at the same time reflecting that Doris for all her passion still drew the line at sex that took her mouth away from his towards the true proof of his manhood.

“Are you sure?”

“There’ll never be anyone better in my life,” he answered prophetically. “Why would I ever want to leave you?”

Jenny smiled as Sam’s penis stirred back into full life, in those days with no assistance from a little blue pill.

“Ooh!” she said with delight. “Play it again, Sam!”

“Here’s looking at you, kid!” he said in his best Bogart voice, positioning himself for re-entry into his wife’s welcoming vaginal grip.

The memory stirred something inside Sam. He held the photograph of his first

wife arm-in-arm with him on their wedding. It was a posed photograph, but it captured a truly happy day. At the time he thought himself the luckiest man in the world and he resolved as the rings were exchanged that this ceremony would have real meaning. She would be his Lauren Bacall and he the once dissolute but now reformed Humphrey Bogart. Surely, they would end their lives together with the same schmaltzy sincerity of the best Hollywood movie.

What would it be like now if he'd not so foolishly squandered his good fortune? He was sure that hers was an appetite like his that age could never diminish, even if she, like him, would need that little extra help to satisfy it. If only... If only...

Sam brushed his hand against his eyes. They felt moist, though he couldn't be sure if it was rheumy old age or sorrow that had made them so. If Jenny were here now, how different would his life be? How much better would it be to have memories he could share?

The phone rang. Sam was still not used to the strangulated warbling of a modern telephone and took a moment to stand up and answer it.

It was Dorothy, the woman with whom he'd exchanged numbers at the theatre the night before. She had noticed an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* for a retrospective of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall films at the National Film Theatre, and was wondering whether they should make the journey to the South Bank to watch them together.

"You might remember the films from when they were new," she remarked.

Sam most certainly did, but he wondered whether even now he could bear to see films that he recalled watching hand-in-hand with Jenny. Would it be unfaithful to

her memory to be seeing the same films with Dorothy?

“I have very fond memories,” Sam admitted. And then noticing a slight maudlin tone to his voice, he added: “But I’m sure there’ll be as nothing to the memory of spending the evening with you!”

As a flattered Dorothy giggled, Sam’s eyes scanned the room away from the piles of photograph albums he’d pulled out from the chest of drawers towards the collection of blue pills on the dresser.

Tonight was going to be another good one, he could see that. And good as his memories might be, and however much he still loved Jenny, nothing, but nothing, could match the pleasures Sam was still able and willing to enjoy.