



ALL THE KING'S HORSES

her. She was, believe it or not, very happy to meet me. At a closer look, she no longer resembled Carol. Their common blondness and fragility were striking, but Beatrice had a closed face, voluntarily so, and not very likeable. Whereas Carol tried hard to please, and to please precisely through her vulnerability, Beatrice was nothing but defensiveness and aggressively good manners. Finally, she picked up a second guitar and began to play as she checked us out.

When Gilles and I left, they were still playing, but Gilles had arranged to meet Carol the next afternoon.

It's nice, when you're tired and a bit drunk, to find a big white bed and to sleep there with a boy you love. Besides, this was one of the things the girl in question had been singing to us about. We were happy and in love. In love with us, in love with Carol, in love in a vague way, and it was late.

"Are you happy?" I asked Gilles.

He said yes with his head and put an arm around my neck. Me too, I was happy.

I

This medley of blue sashes, ladies, cuirasses, violins in the hall, and trumpets in the square was a spectacle you only see in novels.

Cardinal DE RETZ.

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wine bottle by tapping it gently, over and over again against a wall. We were drinking again. Carol was good on the guitar. All of the sudden - modestly - she changed from her pleated skirt into jeans. "I buy them in the young boys department," she was saying. She sat cross-legged on her narrow bed, facing us. She sang well, and classic songs: girls who are beautiful at fifteen, their boyfriends gone to war. Girls who lose a gold ring by the riverside, crying about the seasons passing, who never give up on love. Girls who go into the woods, who are still dreamed about on ships that never return from sea.

I told myself she was no idiot, congratulating myself for discovering such a charming creature. Anyway, Gilles was into her. He'd bought her all those pickles and was speaking to her in his seductive, serious voice. I was into her too. My feelings rarely went further than this.

She drank correctly, this girl, for a twenty-year-old. Sometimes straight from the bottle to show she was a liberated woman.

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us a lot. Our youth confirmed his own, I guess.

And me, I was trapped in a conversation with his wife.

"You must meet my daughter," she was saying, "She's almost your age, but still so unformed. Your company would do her a world of good."

Indulgence and boredom don't usually mix. I weighed the lady's dull friendliness. A girl like that - and so out of it too - it was hard for me to picture. But you have to be interested in people. I asked what the little girl was up to.

"Painting. I guess she has talent, but hasn't found it yet."

"Like her dad," I said rudely. This was when I learned she wasn't the daughter of Francois-Joseph, but the product of a previous marriage.. I ended my sentence by warmly assuring her I'd love to meet Carol. Was my willingness faked? I wished Gilles was in my place. He seems naturally nicer than me.

managerial capacity, or by stupidly offering advice.

Nothing works better than a trap avoided.

The detachment I'm capable of when making water run or finding cups would slyly distance me from the group discussing obscure editions. Together we served a dark liquid that provoked friendly indignation. Objects of their general reproach, we inevitably felt like accomplices. To exploit this advantage, I turned the conversation to Carol, a little ironically, speaking of the offspring of great people. Francois-Joseph, happy to busy himself with her again, wouldn't shut up. Disconcerted, she kept quiet. I gathered that she lived far from here, in the 16th arrondissement, and that she played guitar. Gilles was quiet too and watched us with an interest I recognized.

But I was the one who offered to take the girl in our taxi. And when Gilles caught up with me in the hallway and asked what we were going to do next, I answered:

"Score, of course."

Joseph," she answered and undulated gracefully in her chair.

Francois-Joseph was so sensitized to her shyness that I couldn't help getting behind his awkward attempts to pry her out of it. He had probably been stuck for a long time in this false position. Maybe it was because she was the object of such annoying attentions that I began to watch Carol.

A twenty-year-old girl easily makes it clear to fifty-year-old men that they're out of the picture, and this one better than anybody. I took advantage of the moment she went into the kitchen to make coffee. I helped.

I was submitting half-heartedly.

Standing up, she was so small and amazingly slim. The mussed bangs, the short blond hair, and dressed in a white, child-size shirt with an open collar under a blue sweater, she looked half her age. Her clumsiness was studied: Carol wasn't making coffee but chaos, ostensibly. This was to give me a chance to fail, either by exposing the slightest manage-

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"Do you like her?" I added.

I got the same yes. That was normal. Because, in fact, if Gilles ever stopped liking the same girls I did, it would have introduced an element of separation between us.

For Guy

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I don't know how I realized so quickly that we liked Carol. I'd never heard anything about her until the day before, in a little gallery packed with those people who always show up at the openings of painters destined to be unknown. The few ex-friends I met there were precisely the ones I would have liked never to see again. In a voice that was too loud and wanted intensely to sound worldly, the gallerist was talking about her shoes, so that an important visitor would understand she was already distancing herself from the failure she felt coming. Contrary to custom, this opening was not doubling as a cocktail party: there was nothing to drink.

When I scanned the room for Gilles, I saw the painter talking to him animatedly. A little group was already forming around them. This was a bad painter and a charming old man, the product of an obsolete modernism. Gilles was answering him without seeming bored, and I admired his ease. The old painter had already been forgotten a generation before ours, but this didn't discourage him. He liked

And she watched me from the corner of her eye, no doubt waiting for the moment I wouldn't be able to hide some sign of jealousy. She sang in a slightly lower voice now, a little more child-like. The tobacco, she said. But I knew it was to please. And, also to please us, she remembered some touching anecdotes to show us how young she still was, how naïve, how she still put her faith in the good, poetic people. Her guitar was a faithful animal that followed her everywhere. She didn't understand or like anything besides painting and the sea. And, of course, a stuffed bear.

At three in the morning someone knocked at the door. The racket we were making should have brought out the neighbors an hour ago. But it wasn't the neighbors. Another Carol appeared. Same height, same age, same skinny, not very innocent, teenage allure. Same close-cropped blond hair.

The double entered, looked at us unsmilingly, and changed in a flick of the wrist from a skirt to jeans, probably bought in the same young boys department. So this was Beatrice. I assured her I'd already heard so much about

place. He seems naturally nicer than me.

Finally, after mentioning Beatrice, her daughter's best friend who wrote really good poems for her age, and to whom she was planning to give the Rimbaud book she'd just bought, she invited us over for dinner the next day.

The dinner was fun. Francois-Joseph, no longer worried about the fate of his canvases, was living it up. His friends paraded out - in the usual order - all the ideas from thirty years ago, which was nice. People from those times give such a big place to dark humor that even their stupidity can come off as ambiguous. When the charms of the woman who sold the paintings but didn't serve us any dessert were sarcastically evoked, Francois-Joseph praised her big hips.

"Not like you, Carol," he said. "You still don't have much to distract the gentlemen."

"But style is catching up to me, Francois-Joseph," she answered and undulated grace-

I don't remember talking in the taxi. I felt good, I was tired. Gilles would naturally take over now, if only out of politeness. The story was easy to follow. We passed the Pigalle, where there was an all-night deli. We got some wine and some salted almonds. We had to give this night a party feeling. Carol asked us to buy her pickles, as a favor, observing our surprise. Gilles ordered an extravagant quantity, plus some onions in vinegar, some capers - who knows what else - and offered them ceremoniously to her. I added my contribution in the form of red and green pimentos, not ugly to look at and, for no extra cost, uneatable.

Each in our role, charming, charmed, we climbed eight flights, turned a lot of corners. We arrived in an attic. As she should have, Carol lived in a maid's room which she payed for by giving lessons to friends' kids. So she enjoyed her total freedom, she said. Her parents wouldn't have refused her staying with them, but in that case she wouldn't have been able - for herself or for others - to boast such a fiery claim.

We were sitting on the floor, like Indians in the little room. Gilles showed Carol how to open a

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