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PHILIP Ó CEALLAIGH  
THE PLEASANT LIGHT  
OF DAY

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by  
Philip O Ceallaigh

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## *A Very Unsettled Summer*

It was a very unsettled summer. The hot weather had come and you tried in the day to walk in the shade and at night slept without even a sheet to cover you. But there were also far too many days of atmospheric disturbance – electricity in the sky and a strange metallic taste in the mouth – when it was oppressively humid and heavy clouds massed very slowly through the long afternoons. People complained of headaches. And as the night came the clouds made final sense and broke, and you felt you had been holding your breath all day and could breathe again, and you went out onto your balcony, if you had a view, and looked across the city at the spectacle of inundation, and you nearly wanted to laugh at the cat scuttling across the road, caught in the white lightning flash, the city lit up and trembling with thunder and wetness, the horizon crackling with electricity. It was quite beautiful.

Unfortunately, coming home one of those humid afternoons, his clothes a damp weight, wishing it would happen, whatever it was, he found a bulky brown envelope in the postbox. He got in the lift, pressed the button for his floor and opened the envelope. On the first of several typed pages was written, in very large letters:

### HOW I BECAME A WHORE

He read the first few lines. It was a story, it seemed. He looked at the envelope again and recognized the handwriting. They

had been together for several years and he had left her the previous summer. So, now she was writing stories. Well, many people did. And poems. To get their feelings down. He smiled. He did not expect much of the story. But at least it was short, and she had chosen a good title. There was no accompanying letter. Not even a note. The lift stopped.

He stuffed the pages back into their envelope and entered the apartment. He put the car keys and the envelope on the hall table, took off his tie, went to the bathroom and urinated. He splashed cold water on his face, took off his shoes and left them in the hall. He stripped and took a quick cool shower. He put on shorts and a t-shirt and padded barefoot to the kitchen and took a bottle of beer from the fridge. He uncapped it and immediately drank a third of the contents. Then he picked up the envelope, which he had not forgotten while he was freshening up, and took it to the living room.

He arranged the cushions on the sofa, put his feet up, took a pull of beer and read the story.

It went like this: It described, from the perspective of his ex-girlfriend, one of the several times they had split up and him saying a number of banal things over a bottle of wine in a bar. The girl in the story hides her feelings of anger and humiliation and does some quick thinking. She offers the man sex for money. She plays the whore. The narrator is at this point no longer his ex-girlfriend, strictly speaking. She has become a character in a story, as these things happen in dreams, where forms and identities are shifting and provisional. And, of course, he is no longer entirely himself either.

The female character has decided to gratify a fantasy the man has long had. Or she is pretending to do so. In any case, the man takes the bait. They play the game. He has to show her

the money in his wallet. They do the dialogue. He accompanies her to her place and admires it, saying business must not be bad.

He was reading eagerly towards the end, anticipating the sex scene, when things got slightly complicated.

They are in her kitchen (*'with all the knives'*) and she has offered him something to drink, and he is drinking the red wine, smoking and engaging in the foreplay of pre-sex talk, and the narrator – her – says:

*I once prepared a rabbit. I marinated it well in red wine and herbs, then cooked it slowly.*

*I looked at him and offered him another glass. He nodded readily and I poured. He was excited and edgy. Like a rabbit scared of being caught. On the wrong foot. He was all shiny-eyed, looking forward to fun.*

*It's coming, bunny. The fun is coming.*

The story ended there. He had no idea what was supposed to happen next.

He masturbated quickly. Afterwards, cleaning up, he was a little surprised at having reacted in such a way to words on a page. He resumed his seat and continued drinking the beer and wondered was it the strange weather that made him want to play a hard game of tennis, or break something. He went and got another beer and sat drinking that, still thinking about what he had read. It seemed a good story. Or possibly it was simply that in reading it he had imagined himself in it, and that was what made it good.

The ending was clever, certainly; the conflation of a sexual fantasy and a dance of revenge. He did not recall ever having any interest in the prostitute thing, but imagining playing the

game with her, the author, had aroused his interest. Pure sex. None of the personal and situational complications that compromised desire. And maybe this was her way of extending an invitation. Perhaps they would go on to meet weekly, playing the sex game. He checked inside the envelope, thinking he might have missed the note. No, there was no message. He looked out his window, which had a view, and the world looked interesting. The clouds suggested they were not prepared to procrastinate much longer. But they had been saying that for a very long time.

He considered phoning her, but suspected he was being toyed with, like the character in the story.

The humid air was congealing into high solid banks of raincloud.

He swigged the beer down and burped gently. His present girlfriend was coming over later and he did not want her to see the story. He arose and slid the pages under a pile of old magazines and decided he would get rid of it shortly. It would be wiser to forget it.

In the dream he sees her naked. He is unable to move, unable to reach out. She holds herself proudly, her physical beauty heightened because it is now hers to deny or bestow. Her skin glows. A proud strange smile as she turns and walks from the room, leaves him lying on the bed, not knowing if she will return. He does not know if the smile means that he is being mocked or promised his reward.

He awoke next to the naked sleeping body of his girlfriend. It was very early morning and there was little light. The long, slim body beside him was very beautiful, yet it was not the body he needed.

This is very awkward, he thought, lying on his back, aroused,

beside a gently sleeping girl, as the morning light began to grow in the room.

He was in the bar where they had first met. It was the day after the dream and he felt that he would meet her. He was not one for presentiments, because that meant feeling something would happen when there is no way to explain the feeling. Like believing in dreams, or horoscopes. But he was looking at the door when she walked through, and he was not surprised, and the division between dreams and waking reality was disturbed.

He tried to continue the conversation he had been having when she walked in but was distracted by her presence. Perhaps she was pretending not to have noticed him. He felt invisible, like a ghost, observing the scene.

He watched her speaking to men and wondered if she was sleeping with any of them.

The hooped beast of jealous panic rode through him. It told him to physically interpose himself. It told him to get off the ground and fight. It's because I'm drunk, and I had that dream, he told himself, that I am thinking like this. I should go home and sleep.

But he stayed and drank more and late at night they were sitting at a table together. It was civilized and they spoke of people they both knew and matters unrelated to her fictional life as a whore, and when finally they got on to the story they discussed it rationally, as a piece of workmanship. Workwomanship. He told her he thought it was effective, and she smiled the smile he had seen in the dream.

Speaking to her, in real life and not in dreams or stories, steadied him and he found he was able to leave. Probably I took it all wrong, he thought, walking home. He was not interested in being wrong-footed.

She was more attractive than he had remembered.

Unfortunately, he thought, that is how it goes. Relationships entailing obligation entirely kill the flavour of erotic sport. It is never so attractive when yours for the taking.

In the end it did not involve laying down money, as in the story. It happened as these things do, talking and drinking, and moving on to bed.

He had spoken to her on the phone, and then in the taxi to her place he felt sharp and high and energetic, like on the crest of certain drugs, the anticipation that the good news was about to be made flesh.

In the morning, he felt he had got her out of his system.

The second time that this sequence of events occurred he was also sure that he had resolved something. Walking home after the third time, he admitted to himself that it was not so simple.

Another evening, an electrical storm moving in from the west, he mentioned something to her about his girlfriend. She appeared unimpressed by the disclosure, but he was already drunk on her good red wine and had begun to tell her what was happening to him. 'It's not normal. It's like I have this intense physical pressure in my balls all the time, like when you are afraid or get an adrenalin rush and your scrotum tightens, like amphetamines kicking in, except it's all the time practically, and all I can think about is your body, the next time we'll meet, what way I'll give it to you. Like this massive pressure that just has to burst out.'

'Do you know,' she asked, 'Aristotle's definition of pleasure?'

He shook his head.

'Aristotle defined pleasure as the release from pain.'

She smiled – sweetly, he thought – and tapped her cigarette

in the ashtray. They were sitting on either side of a table.

‘Let me suck it out of you,’ she said. ‘I’ll drink it down and you’ll feel better.’

He groaned quietly and slid down in his chair. She arose, walked over to him, kneeled down and opened his trousers. She rubbed her face against his thumping erection and smiled at him and continued looking into his eyes for the duration of some playful licking, then took it in her mouth, unhurriedly, as if she had never had anything so tasty in her life, and sucked him off and, as she had indicated, drank it all down. Then she got back on her feet, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, drank a little water and lit a fresh cigarette. She returned to her place at the other side of the table.

He slouched, undone, like she had sucked the marrow from his backbone. He lit a cigarette too, with trembling hands. A delicious, dizzy cigarette.

‘Feel better?’ she asked, with that smile he was coming to know. He was starting to recognize that smile, and to distrust it.

‘I’m not sure. I think so.’

He thought of a rabbit, marinated in red wine.

‘So what’s it like?’ she asked. ‘Having fun with someone who’s not your girlfriend?’

The question was barbed, it seemed.

‘Less domestic.’

Good reply. He wasn’t losing his mind entirely. He inhaled the narcotic smoke deeply. The funny smile on her lips did not involve humour, however.

‘Better, you mean? More exciting?’

He nodded, exhaled. Now he felt the less said the better. Anything could and would be used against him.

‘Did you ever cheat on me, when I was your girlfriend?’

Now it was a scary smile.

‘Come on. History.’

‘Well, *did* you?’ she pressed.

‘Did *you*?’

Attack, the best defence.

‘I asked first.’

The fact that she had not said no tripped his curiosity. He found the thought that she had been unfaithful without him guessing vaguely painful, and also pleasant, as the deepening of addiction always is. After all, it was not impossible. She had been jealous, clinging, moralistic and endlessly demanding. She had shown all the signs of obsession and wounded pride. But this did not mean there was never a moment, when she was annoyed with him perhaps, when something could have happened.

‘Alright,’ he said. ‘I was not faithful.’

‘How many times?’

Not enough fingers. Or toes.

‘I answered. Your turn. Did you cheat on me?’

She nodded. ‘I felt really bad about it.’

There was a lamp on the table. For a moment he thought it had begun to shake slightly. A minor seismic event, four or five on the Richter, could produce such jiggles. But it was his heart. His head was rocking to the beat of his heart.

The details came a bit too fast for him to take in. There were extenuating circumstances. She was feeling this, she was feeling that. They had had a fight one time. Another time he was away hiking in the mountains, being the man of nature, and she felt abandoned. With that one she’d never meant it to go on. But with the other it was just the once, they hadn’t even talked on the phone afterwards, really just a quick thing, you know, over and done with. And that other time she was drunk, the time

her handbag had got stolen and she had no keys, and she went to his place, not planning to do anything and, well, if he hadn't kissed her it would have been fine but you know how one thing leads to another. Then there was her ex. Well, that didn't really count, she didn't feel like she'd cheated on him there; it was complicated, they had their own unresolved emotional business, nothing to do with him.

'But I felt kind of bad about that too.'

While he sat listening to her, with the storm moving in from the west, he just smoked and nodded, like he understood perfectly. Didn't do to look like you were being gutted. And, after all, it was all in the past.

He inquired about several details, then she yawned and said:

'History. Anyway, I have to get up early.'

'Can't I stay?'

Something in his voice that should not have been there had said, Can't I suck your titty, like a good baby?

She smiled a professional smile. 'Not tonight.'

The sky broke when he reached the street and he stood in the shelter of the doorway of her apartment building. Mentioning the girlfriend had been a big mistake. He considered going back up to borrow an umbrella. A taxi swished past in the rain, slowly, waiting for him to hail it, but he did not. An umbrella would be a good idea. But if he went back up there he would beg to be allowed to stay. Fine, he was going to beg. Then he remembered how unpleasant it was when women behaved that way with him and he set off quickly through the downpour. For a moment he saw himself from afar, cinematically, punished by the heavy rain, walking down the boulevard of broken dreams. Then he was just a wet man in bad weather, and he was glad when the next taxi stopped.

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In the days and weeks that followed he tried to compose, from what he remembered of her words, a plausible mental catalogue of her infidelities. It was an attempt to construct a complete picture. He recalled the visible part of their relationship – what they had been doing, how they had been acting at the time – and spliced in these new characters that had poked their way into the story. He ruthlessly reduced himself to one more character, turning up in the intervals between her erotic episodes.

Since setting such a complicated saga down on paper would be conclusive evidence of obsession, he tried to keep the calendar in his head, and was therefore always struggling to get purchase on his material. But he could not refrain from trying to get a grip, because he was terrified by the idea that the life he had lived as if real bore no relation to reality. His memories, he now realized, had been fiction.

He began, for the very first time, to understand her jealousy. It was not a measure of greater devotion. It was simply that she had used her imagination. He had failed to imagine.

So he drove himself crazy, trying to imagine his way back to reality.

It was during this period, when he had reduced himself to a character, that they played out his fantasies. These were for the most part variations on conventional themes. But he also found a number of ways to get the hit that had not previously occurred to him, and in addition she came up with a few of her own, which both excited and unnerved him, because he had been with her for a long time and had had no indication. It was a bit like watching your wife getting fucked by another man. The edge of pain was the edge of pleasure, because in such moments he was both himself *and* the other man.

This meant, however, that the jealousy never left him. The

only time his existence did not seem to be on shaky ground was when he was inside her. He kept having to return, to subdue the anxiety with his flesh, as if by having her beneath him he could fuck the wildness out of her. As if, by having her ride above him, and come again, he could finally satisfy her. It went on like that through the summer. There were very hot days, and electrical storms, and such insistent precipitation that rivers burst their banks and you could watch on television the houses of the country people being washed away in the floods. God had promised he would never drown the whole world again, but there were no guarantees that you were not going to get it on an individual or municipal level.

One evening, lying in a sweet fog of alcohol and the nearness of her skin and smell, he noticed it dangling from a hook on her bedroom wall. He had just asked her, 'Do you think we're perverts?' and she had said, 'Well, you are. I'm just being helpful.' He was surprised he had not previously paid closer attention. It was a very plain rag doll – too ugly to be a child's toy – sewn together from coarse sackcloth. It had two distinguishing features. It had a couple of funny rabbit ears. And it had a little cock and balls. More attention had gone into the latter equipment than anything else. The penis was a little red stick, in the erect position. The balls were out of scale, but gathered in anticipation.

'What,' he asked, pointing, 'is that?'

'That's my Bunny!'

She said it like Bunny was a special friend of hers.

'You're a bit big for stuffed animals.'

'A Bunny isn't for a little girl. Every girl gets a Bunny when she gets hair on her cunt.'

Bunny, she explained, had been brought to her by a friend

who had visited an island in Indonesia. As a joke. She could not remember the name of the island. There were a lot of islands in Indonesia and Indonesia was a lot of islands. The story was that the women of the tribe each had one of these rabbit-men, which they kept near their beds so as to keep their men in order. The genital equipment was to keep the male inexhaustibly virile, while the ears were to keep them docile and prevent straying. He asked her how the men kept the women under control and she said she did not think it was that kind of tribe. The men had everything they needed and the women resolved their differences in a sisterly fashion. He took a drink of red wine and lit one of her cigarettes.

She got out of bed and took Bunny off his hook and gave him a squeeze. He winced. That is, the man winced, not the rag doll, obviously. The red wine was getting to his guts. She gave Bunny's little wooden pecker a kiss and put him back on his hook. She got back in bed.

'They don't stick needles in it or anything?' he asked.

She laughed and reached out and gathered his balls and gave them a little squeeze.

'Silly!'

A giant crow was settled on his chest, ripping his heart with its beak, and he sat bolt upright and the bird flew away and dissolved in the ceiling and he saw the doll on the nail. He got up, remembering that Christ's path to crucifixion was called his Passion. The word passion meant suffering. That which must be passed through. Something was wrong with his guts. She was sleeping with just the hint of a snore, and in a dry flash of lightning her features, as she lay facing the open window, were silvery-white. He quietly pulled on his clothes and made it to the street. He walked for a little and in the coolness felt better, briefly. Far skies crackled and rumbled, as the storm pressed in

slowly from across the western plain beyond the city. A jet of puke exploded from him, neon-orange beneath a streetlight, as the turbulence shook the trees and the sheet of rain hit the street a distance away and accelerated towards him. In seconds he was drenched by warm water. The world went liquid. The sky was liquid and his insides were liquid, sloshing forth as he walked. He barely bothered to lean over, for it was instantly washed from him. He could not count the times he spewed as he pressed homewards through the deserted streets. He was weak and incredulous. He had not eaten or drunk so much in the past week. Impossible waterfalls of puke. Either it was an illusion caused by the rain or he was hallucinating. Finally, as he approached home, there was retching, groaning, heaving and what he supposed was bile. There was battery acid in his mouth, and the sky was shaking and crackling as the centre of the storm came closer. Fireworks were going off by the time he put the key in the door to his building. Lower, a sharp pain pressed his bowels. He got inside and made it to the toilet. More explosions of fluid. He was just a bag of shit and puke, at the mercy of corporeal spasms. He finally fell into bed, weak and fevered. He had very bad dreams involving giant rabbits and tiny men.

To help himself recover, he wrote a story. To be the author rather than a character. He had read something I had done called *Scenes from an Uzbek Bordello* and felt I would be a receptive reader, though he admitted he was disappointed with aspects of the result. The first pancake of the batch always sticks to the pan and must be scraped off, I told him, flicking through the pages. I read it as we drank vodka and grapefruit juice with big clanking ice cubes, sitting in my kitchen on a hot clear afternoon towards the end of summer, and when I had finished I told him

I thought I could use it, if he didn't mind. He told me to go ahead. I got up and fixed us another couple of drinks.

'You know,' I said, 'it reminds me of how Nabokov got the idea for *Lolita*. He heard about this monkey, or ape, in the zoo in Paris. I suppose it was Paris. They gave it a sheet of paper and a crayon, to see what it would come up with. You know the very first thing it drew?'

He shook his head.

'It drew the bars of its cage.'

'Really?' he asked, sitting up straight and taking interest. 'You think this is in the tradition of Nabokov?'

'No,' I said, shaking my head. 'I was thinking more of the monkey.'

His life with his girlfriend, after his period of instability, or fuck-frenzy, whatever you want to call it, returned to normal. They had good times. They liked each other very much and they had interests in common. They went to the cinema together, took walks in the park, cooked new dishes, talked about books and films and made love unhurriedly. The lovemaking was just one more of those good things they did, and was a connected and natural part of those other things, and left him feeling clean and whole. And he was glad he had ridden out the madness and left it behind.

It is the nature of addiction that the craving lies dormant in every cell. Sometimes he would see a woman in the street and the old drug would buzz in his blood and his vision get muddy and mean. Then he would remember Bunny, hanging from his hook. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that this brought him to his proper senses, it did at least give him pause.

The weather cleared. The electricity and precipitation moved

on to torment another part of the planet, and the section of sky he lived under enjoyed the clear sunny summer that had long been hoped for. People had their picnics and barbecues, their trips to the beach, their mountain views.

Everything seemed to be going well. Unfortunately, when he was in his car one day, at a set of lights, on his way to take care of one of those trivial matters that must be attended to unless life in an urban metropolis is to unravel, his phone rang. It was his girlfriend. Choking with tears, she demanded to know the truth. Just the truth. She had found something he had written, read it and reached a certain conclusion.

So that was the end of that story also, the walks in the park together, and all the rest of it.