

excerpt from *The Gayety*

a novel by Chris Cefalu

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Ron thought of himself as a good trick.

He had no illusions about the girls he picked up on the street. None of that romantic bullshit about the hooker with the heart of gold - the one who was out there standing on some street corner somewhere, waiting to be rescued from the life, ready to clean up and walk the line for the right man... There were johns everywhere who really believed that shit. Either that or they were romantic the other way: they saw the girls only as personifications of society's malaise, or some such thing. To these guys a working girl was nothing but a receptacle for their own darkest impulses - a woman you could do anything you wanted to. Ron thought of these guys as sickos, and he felt a genuine respect for the guts these girls had to have in order to face the sickos night after night and ply their treacherous trade. Not to mention all the other hazards: pimps, the cops, etc. It was a tough gig all right. However, Ron wasn't starry-eyed about his respect, either. He knew that most of the girls were strung out and that the lifespan for a street hooker was often lightning quick. He also knew that most of them weren't any too bright. It was mean to say it like that but it was true. They seemed to lack the imagination necessary to envision themselves in any other situation. And if there was one thing Ron knew about, it was how a healthy imagination was an absolute necessity if you wanted to make it through the day.

It took imagination to convert the scenario into something compelling, beautiful even. Because the plain facts were pretty grim. He was a forty-six-year-old man paying a not particularly attractive black girl who was young enough to be his daughter forty bucks for a blow job in the front seat of his car, which was parked behind a closed liquor store. Some got off on the sordidness of the whole affair, even seemed to revel in it with a kind of masochistic glee. These were the ones who liked to "probe their dark side". Sickos.

Ron knew about these other men, the other johns, because the girls told him about them. The girls usually talked to him, and Ron prided himself on that. Not that what they had to say was always exactly fascinating. In fact Ron was often stunned by the depth of the average streetwalker's ignorance. At one time, he had a habit of casually quizzing his girl of the night on current affairs, conducting a kind of informal survey. Wondering if the fact that fewer than one out of ten prostitutes could name the current President of the United States could possibly be construed as an interesting bit of sociological data. In the end, though, he decided he was simply being cruel and so he cut it out and just let them steer the talk.

And they mostly talked about other tricks. Told their war stories and laughed about them while he shook his head admiringly, a polite audience. He knew that they didn't talk to everyone like that, that he was special. Ron made it a point to always treat them with courtesy. He always offered at least ten dollars more than he could have gotten away with because he disliked haggling, which struck him as degrading

for both parties. He never abused the girls physically or verbally, and he often made a point of thanking them and wishing them a good night.

He didn't see any reason why the experience couldn't be a perfectly pleasant one. After all, the whole business was as old as time itself. Ron himself had discovered whores during the wilderness of his early twenties, when the balance between his interest in women and theirs in him was, for a time, pretty far out of whack. He knew there were girls for sale over on East Cherry, and one night he sucked up his courage and picked one up and took her home to his apartment for a couple hours. It was such a tremendously satisfying experience all around that he got a little carried away with it for awhile. Ron was then the youngest foreman with his construction company, and he would find himself tapping his clipboard and checking his watch impatiently by 2 p.m. He could scarcely wait for the day at the site to be over with so he could get home and go cruising for girls. It was like suddenly being given the keys to a candy store that he had spent years locked out of, his nose pressed up against the glass, watching and waiting.

But that was when he was just a kid. He didn't know his ass from his elbow in those days. Just running around crazy. Eventually, he figured out a few things about women. For one thing, as he got older he began to regain some kind of advantage. His hair had a streak of gray on the left side that he thought made him look slightly distinguished, and he had fine, slightly ruddy features, with a good square jaw, merry eyes with the beginnings of crows-feet, and a thick brush of a mustache. The job kept his body in shape and he

knew if he dyed the gray streak out he could probably pass for mid-thirties. But he was fine with his age and he left the streak in. Women seemed to like it. They always commented on how it was only on one side.

The main thing with women was to never act desperate. Since the divorce, Ron had been hitting the bars pretty regularly and he was continually amazed at how ineffectual most of the barroom Lotharios were. It was really pretty funny. A woman would walk in and sit at the bar alone and right away two or three guys would be buying her drinks, chatting her up, leaning in all hopeful and smiling. A single woman in the Seattle bar scene was guaranteed to be practically bum-rushed the minute she walked in the door. It was pathetic. Ron guessed that for many women it was an easy ego boost, a pick-me-up for when they were down in the dumps about something. Go out, get a couple drinks (never pay for them of course), banter a bit with the barflies, and head on home feeling much more pleased with themselves.

Ron would wait patiently, sipping his drink and reading the paper, not looking like a barfly. More like someone stopping in for a few minutes on his way somewhere else. Never look like you *live* there. That was crucial. Don't drink too much early on. Don't offer to buy her a drink. Don't pay any attention at all. Let the eager-beavers run their plays. Then, at some point, glance up at her. Maybe catch her eye in the bar mirror, as if by accident, and give her a little smile. Don't leer, and don't hold eye contact too long. Just a smile with some amusement in it. A touch conspiratorial. *Can you believe we're both sitting here in this*

crummy joint with these jerks? That was the message. Then just wait.

Yes, women were fairly easy to land. It amazed him now how much the whole process had baffled him when he was younger. But that wasn't all there was to it of course. The tough part was later. He never used to worry about later, was only interested in the conquest, the *getting*. But later was always trouble. Most immediately, there would be the matter of the *exit*, the departing of her house (he tried to discourage their ending up at his place) - sometimes the next morning, but frequently later that night - and Ron disliked slinking out of some woman's place, tip-toeing around in the unfamiliar dark so as not to wake her. It made him feel as if he was doing something to be ashamed of, and he didn't consider that to be the case.

Then, still later there would be the phone calls and the expectations, and invariably, the tears. There would often be a period of time where he was reluctant to pick up the phone, waiting for her to get the hint and either disappear or leave the final message. Those final messages were difficult to listen to – and yet impossible *not* to listen to. They were full of rage and sorrow and wounded pride and bitterness and they worked: they made Ron feel heartless, guilty, *bad*. It wasn't that hard to do. He did have feelings, after all. He just rarely had *their* feelings.

It would of course have been easier and more honest to be straight with them up front. *I should mention before we start dear, that my interest doesn't extend much beyond the event of this, our first (and probably, only) sweaty fuck and I*

would really appreciate it much if you could just go ahead and forget all about me after tonight...

Not likely.

So, he didn't enjoy the deception, but he had always considered it a sad necessity. More and more lately, however, he felt more wearied than excited by the prospect of starting in motion yet another affair or one-night-stand that promised a disproportionate ratio of reward to expenditure. He still hit the bars, especially Jerry's, which was a comfortable sports bar on University Avenue. But he often spent the time relaxing at a table, contentedly watching the game on one of the big TVs and scarcely aware of the activity around the bar, where the single women tended to sit. Often he would find himself staring thoughtfully out the open door of Jerry's for hours, watching lights flashing on the wet streets, hearing the bubbling laughter of the coeds, and remembering funny things from his past. Like his first wife. He had no idea what had become of her. They had married too young and parted after a couple of years of what now seemed to Ron like playing at marriage. She had a nice laugh, and they had some fun together, and he supposed he had loved her at one time, or so it seemed then. He was just a kid, anyway. But now he found himself wondering about her. Rhonda was her name. She would be his age now, of course. She was probably married to someone else, had a home somewhere, maybe with kids and everything. And that thought made him feel almost sad, though he wasn't really sure why.

He was drinking more now too - he was aware of that, and he figured he ought to keep an eye on it, but it

didn't seem to matter so much. He felt like all his life he had been so worried about staying in control and it was nice to let it go a little bit. He still worked out every morning and stayed away from carb-heavy foods, so as to keep the pot belly at bay. But he was enjoying a fourth and fifth drink nowadays, sometimes more, and not really worrying about it. He wasn't a sloppy drunk and he liked the reflective, slightly melancholy moods that the whiskey brought on. Maybe his game these days wasn't sharp enough to reel in the really prime broads, but they were a lot of work anyway, those prime broads. It was more pleasant to get mildly toasted with a friendly, low-maintenance, middle-aged divorcee, and maybe later toddle on down to her warm bed for a round or two. And then again, maybe not. It was no big deal either way.

Truthfully, there were many nights where he just wasn't up to the rigmarole necessary for even a one-night stand, and a jaunt down East Cherry Street had become a semi-frequent conclusion to his evenings out. Several of the girls there knew his car by sight and he had a small circle of them he saw regularly, usually for brief interludes in his car - he never took them to his house anymore. But picking up whores wasn't the same as it used to be either. Maybe I'm just getting old, he thought. But it wasn't that. He didn't have less *desire*, exactly. It was just that the ways he had always satisfied that desire were growing tired, ritualized. Predictable. The way his last marriage had eventually gone, the way *all* his relationships with women had eventually gone. Maybe that was just the way things went and there was nothing to do about it.

Yet he didn't seem to be able to break free of it. He would leave Jerry's glowing with whiskey and he would stand at his car, fumbling for the keys, and he would feel the first familiar flickering deep in his stomach. It was the ghost of the old anticipatory rush, the giddiness of letting his desires run away with him. Letting them *carry* him along. And suddenly it was unthinkable that he continue on home and just call it a night. The urgency was there, the idea glowing like an ember in his brain, and once it was started there was no way to turn it off or tell it no. It was like that: like being a passenger.

He would glide through the empty streets, his hand tapping the wheel absently, and he would feel the pleasant sense of purpose, of direction. All his senses would be fixed on the streets, his eyes searching out the shadowed places, watching for the glint of a spangled dress or a bright red boot. He would turn smoothly down the blocks where he knew they could be found, driving aimlessly, methodically, criss-crossing the area, covering the ground.

But it was always over much too quickly, and there were times when he was unable to fit himself to the moment, to attenuate his imagination to the correct wavelength. Once he was parked with a rather sullen black girl in an alley between some apartment buildings, and as he leaned back and unbuckled his pants for her, he glanced up at the row of apartment windows and saw a woman there. A silhouette of a woman, really, but clearly a woman, with long straight hair and a slender figure. It was impossible to see her face, to see how old she was or where she was looking. Ron kept his eyes on her, ready to zip up his pants and start the car if it

looked like she was calling the police. But if she saw what was happening in the car below her apartment, she gave no sign. She just stood in the window with what looked like a glass in her hand, swaying back and forth slightly as if she was listening to some soft music all alone up there.

As the girl worked between his legs, Ron looked up at the shape in the window and felt a strangely disembodied feeling, as if he was both totally exposed and also invisible, a very small figure floating in some in-between place where life had simply stopped. A piercing loneliness filled him and it was only by imagining that the woman in the window was watching him, that she could *see* him and what was being done to him, that he was able, finally, to come.