Salome

by  C H A R L E S  L .  M E E

I had a friend:
when she first met her husband
he was preoccupied with young girls.
All the time.
Paul. His name was Paul.
Looking at pictures of them.
Looking at them on the street.
To her it seemed strange.
And, then, the first time she helped him get a young girl into the car
to take her home,
she was,
my friend was,
well,
quivering,
a knot in her stomach,
that sick excited sensation.

After that it was easy.
I don't mean she doesn't still get excited,
but it was never again like the first time.
The first time is always different, with everything.
I mean,
obviously.

You might say
I'd never do such a thing
how do you know?
you say: because that’s not the kind of person I am
But you don’t know.
Because one day you will do something
and then you will find out what sort of person you are.

[she smiles]

You see a woman when she is grown up
you see how she has turned out
and you think then you could say, oh, right
this was inevitable
the way she grew up
you could tell how she would turn out
this is the person she would be
because Freud bla bla bla
and the social dynamics
her background bla bla
hindsight is so good
all the theories of hindsight are foolproof
but you don’t know
you never know-
she could be a hundred people
before she’s through with her life
that’s how it is these days

As a child
I thought about numbers a lot.
First there was the question
could a woman have several husbands all at the same time
or only one after the other?
And then, as the years went by,
I thought about how many children a woman might have.
And then,
a few weeks after I lost my virginity
I had group sex.
There were five of us altogether,
three boys and two girls.
[she stops and smiles-
We were finishing our lunch in a garden on a hill above Lyon. It was in June or July; it was hot and somebody suggested that we take off all our clothes and jump into the pond. I could hear Andre saying his girlfriend would be with us in just a minute but his voice sounded a little muffled because I already had my T-shirt over my head and then, in the end, no one went in the water.

Andre fucked me first quite slowly and calmly which was his way. And then Ringo came and took his place on top of me. Ringo's body was different from Andre's and I liked it better. Ringo was taller, wiry, he was one of those men who can isolate the action of his pelvis from the rest of his body, so that he could thrust without smothering a woman, supporting his torso with his arms.

you look at history not to know how things are going to be and not for the rules of how things have to be but to tell you that the way things are is not the way they always have been or the only way they can be

and now looking back whatever there has been it's all available to us now to pick and choose
have one of these and one of those
and make a life of that

I won't say how many shoes I've got
but I have no regrets about any of them.
In fact, there are some shoes I love so much
that I'll go out and buy double colors.
Because if it's like a great red shoe that's fabulous for the summer
and I love it
and it's the right color red
then I've got to have two-
because I know I'll live in the shoe
and it will get destroyed
and I'll need a new one.
And men don't understand this.
My husband used to say
darling what have you done?
It looks like you've been to a fire sale!"
And I would think, "honey, you wish!"

How a human will turn out
well
they just turn out how they do
and then you know
but you don't know before
and then, later on, maybe they change their minds
and they turn out another way
and then they turn out another way yet again
and you never knew
because the human creature is a surprising, fluid event

oh, you can say, bla bla bla

but I don't think so
you didn't know how Elizabeth Taylor was going to turn out
you didn't know how Simone de Beauvoir was going to turn out
you didn't know how Celine Dion was going to turn out
neither did her mother
because, if you did, you would have been able to predict feminism
which you didn't
or Brigitte Bardot or Saddam Hussein
which you didn't
because you didn't know

This guy said to me one time
I can't pin you down
like a butterfly, you mean?
I don't know he said
well, I said,
I don't think I want to be pinned down.

[she smiles]

One time I was offered to my masters
I was going to be whipped in that humiliating position-
arms and legs spread-
and I was perspiring
my body was taut with the pain
but pain turning into pleasure
and then when Pierre began to put the pincers on my breasts
well that always makes me suffer a great deal
and I thought I couldn’t endure it
but when I was suspended by the handcuffs
and I felt the pain in my thighs
and I couldn't turn my head to see anyone in the room
and Fiona put something on me
I don’t know what it was
an electric drill and miniaspirator of some kind
while she was touching me with such a soft hand
and the sugar-sweet smell of her perfume filled my nostrils
so that it was very sweet and unbearable at the same time
this dizzying shiver shot through me
and I was afraid I was going to piss myself with pleasure
like a stark beginner
my thighs were trembling
I was soaked
I was soaked
so that I thought for a moment that the juices ran as far as my thighs

There was a time I thought after the first time
never again
OK
never again.
What you have done once is not your fate
not something you have to do over and over again
and so you say
never again

but then you do it again

But, first of all
the dance of the seven veils
no one ever did that.
There is no such thing.
I mean there is the belly dance
and there is the strip tease
but the dance of the seven veils
this is the pure invention of later literary people
and of, you know, finally,
a lot of dancers at the end of the nineteenth century
people who invented the striptease
and it was all the rage in London and Paris
but, before that, there was no such thing.

I mean, if I had been reincarnated 100 times
never once in all those times
would I have ever done the dance of the seven veils.

I have danced.
I have danced a lot.
I still dance.
I will go on dancing.
[a long pause to let this sink in,  
and then she smiles]

But there is no such thing as the dance of the seven veils  
You can look all through dance history  
and you won't find it.  
Scholars have done this  
they have looked for it,  
and it doesn't exist  
that is the first point.  
It may be that other dances have been done  
I am not commenting on that.  
That would be a whole separate thing.  
And what dances I may or may not have done in the past  
well,  
I'm leaving that alone.

The second point is  
as for the other part of the story:  
if a person faces a life or death situation  
the choice on behalf of survival is justified.

Let's say  
for a woman  
there are all these possibilities  
and they can all inhabit one body  
and she can choose anything  
and why she chooses one or the other  
remains a total mystery  
and how it can switch in a moment  
this remains a total mystery  
and you don't need to choose only one  
you can never tell  
when she will choose some alternate possibility within herself.  
This is how it is to be a woman

she can go from monogamous  
to polygamous  
without feeling it violates her nature
My favorite summer activity is getting in touch with sides of my personality that don't find expression in the bustle of the city. I'll rent a cottage in the Wye Wye Valley in Wales- a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and woods, untouched by civilization. I'll pack pens and paper and a copy of Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

these are the possibilities and where they come from when they will well up is a complete mystery you never know

So let us say someone comes along and says oh, what you are saying is you want to play with fire this can lead to anything yes, well, there have been times I wished I had boundaries but, you know, not everyone has boundaries and I know that can be dreadful as we have seen in the history of our times but what I am saying is yes I am playing with fire because you have to play with fire or else you do not plunge into life and the anti life people are death trippers

Lust will show you the dark truth about nature. Lust is the animal reality that will never be tamed by love. Lust is elemental, aggressive, unfettered, asocial. This is where we live in the lush, disorderly fullness of the flesh.
this is not just my power as a woman
it is my power as a human being
it is my power of life
and when someone threatens
to destroy the life force itself
the place from which all life comes
this is life or death

And so this guy wants to snuff you out
let's say he has his way of snuffing you out
maybe he doesn't come at you with a knife
but his intent is to snuff you out
as surely as if he did
then you can snuff him out
you are entitled to it
that's all there is to it
I have no regrets
and I would do it again
and I have done it again
and I will do it again
I will do it again and again and again
and then I will do it again
because I will not roll over
and let my life be snuffed out
and I make no apologies for it.

SHE SITS AT THE PIANO
PLAYS A CURRENT POP LOVE SONG AND
SINGS
AND THEN:

At one of the clubs
my usual place was in one of the back rooms
lying on a table
which was one of the most comfortable positions I know
my cunt on a level with the man's genitals
as he stands facing the table
my vulva well opened
and the man in exactly the right place to thrust straight ahead
and deeply
and not having to stop
it makes for a very precise fuck
and very vigorous
and other guys standing around the table
a lot of hands running over my body
and me reaching out and taking hold of cocks
on all sides
turning my head from left to right to suck
while other cocks rammed into me,
twenty guys could take turns during an evening
and sometimes they were so violent
I had to hold on to the ends of the table with both hands
and for a long time I had the scar of a little gash
above my coccyx
where the base of my spine had rubbed against the rough wood.

[a moment's pause]

Society has looked down on stripping
as the refuge for dumb beauties for many years.
But let's look at that:
being born genuinely stupid is no one's fault
any more than being born crippled or deformed.
Stripping is one of the very few ways
that these women can truly empower themselves
and command that kind of income,
and there's nothing they can do about that.
Does that mean that they should simply resign themselves to their fate
and live in some sort of caste system
in which those born with less advantage
may not transcend their station in life?
Just because some women dance because
they have no other skills
doesn't mean that they hate being there.
Women want to be strippers
for the same reason people take any job.
When you meet a telemarketer,
even though it takes very little talent or education
it’s very rare to assume that she has that job because
she’s not able to get another one,
to wonder what she does in her spare time,
or to assume that telemarketing is a lifestyle instead of a job.
Strippers do it because they like the money -
who doesn't want to be paid well?
Some strippers do it because they like the attention -
is that bad?
Humans are social creatures
who learn through praise and validation.
Wanting and enjoying attention isn't necessarily unhealthy.

The blue-collar worker is the backbone of our society,
Society needs the services and products they provide, whether the workers
themselves dream of something better or not. Many of them love their jobs, too -
that doesn’t change that quite a few of them
aren't qualified to do much else.
There's no shame in that.

Not that this is why I did it.
Not that I am saying that.
Luckily, that was never my reason.
I was not forced into it in that way.
It was my choice.

[she picks up a magazine,
turns some pages to the back of the magazine
and reads]

Very Pretty, Stylish, Gay White Female-40-something
seeking pretty, white, sweet, intelligent,
feminine wife, 35-45
I am a hopeless romantic
very fit, socially outgoing,
yet shy at other times.
I am mentally strong
yet emotionally tender.
I wear dresses/high heels by day
and jeans/sneakers at night.
I love excitement and spontaneity
yet balance and security.
I am financially stable and I do not look gay—
neither should you.
I am looking for a woman capable of emotional intimacy
and committed to a partnership—and not just after 5 PM.
I have flexible working hours
and believe weekdays were made for play, not just work.
If you have worked on your relationship skills
and you are what I am looking for,
be prepared to meet a woman
with a generous heart, quick mind, good sense of humor
and lots of integrity.

[she looks up from the magazine,
thinks for a moment
and then says]

I could do that.

[she returns to the magazine
and reads]

Distinguished-Looking, Successful Man-
Company president, grey hair, tall,
sense of humor.
Two residences. Variety of interests
including music, horses, sailing, etc.
and just "hanging out."
Interested in meeting woman in her 30s or early 40s,
to share good times and friendship.
[she looks up from the magazine, thinks for a moment and then says]

I could do that.

[she returns to the magazine and reads]

Warm, Loving, Happy
Accomplished Professional-
very youthful, active, 55
fit, fun, full of life and love
bright, kind, sensitive,
communicative and involved,
seeks fine-valued, accomplished soul mate
to share love, laughter, family, and friends.

[she looks up from the magazine, thinks for a moment and then says]

I could do that.

I lost my virginity at seventeen and I thought, "this is great, everyone should know about this. How come nothing is being done about this?"

I think that losing my virginity was one of the happiest days of my life up to that point.
A year later I moved into prostitution and that was another really happy transition for me.
When I discovered sex, I thought, "I've got to learn more about this, this is the greatest thing."
And that's really been my focus in life.
I was always told
there were ten ways to know
if he really liked you.
Like:
— when he talked about the future
he casually included you in his plans
— he still had the ticket stub in his wallet
from the movie you saw on your first date
— he doesn't just respect your opinions,
he quotes them directly
— he invites you to "meet the parents"
because they want to know the person
their son can't stop raving about,
and he wants them to know you too!
— if you call him,
he always gets off the other line,
no matter who he's on the phone with
— he admits he replays your voicemail messages
just to hear your voice
— he loves a corny ballad,
which totally doesn't fit in with the rest of his music collection,
because it reminds him of you
— he doesn't hesitate to hold your hand in public
even if front of his best friends
— he remembers odd details
about things you just mentioned in passing conversation
— when his friends call him "whipped"
he just smiles,
as if to say,
one day maybe you'll be lucky enough to fall in love, too.

So Paul.
Paul was so wild in bed.
A person would do anything to keep his love.
Which is how a person might go along with it
when he wanted to sleep with her sister.
And if that person, let us say, worked in a veterinary clinic
and had some knowledge of sedatives for animals
it would be really easy to figure out how to put Tammy to sleep
for long enough that Paul could have sex with her
and so halothane
the drug was halothane
which animals inhale before surgery
and it wasn't anyone's fault that Tammy just never woke up
because they felt they knew what they were doing
so it wasn't what anyone meant to do at all.
Although the step from that to picking up young girls
along the highway
and taking them home
the woman luring them into the car
and the two of them taking the girls home
and Paul having sex with them
it wasn't somehow such a big step
because, as I was saying,
the hard part is the first time
usually
but after the first time
it's never quite as hard again.

Then there was this girl
call her Leslie
who was really,
let's face it,
a troubled teenager
with a very independent personality
ignoring her curfews,
engaging in promiscuous sex,
skipping school
shoplifting.
So one night she went out for the evening
and came home way after her curfew
and her parents had just locked her out of the house
so what was she to do?
And then it so happened
that, when she was wandering around the neighborhood
she just, like, saw the lights on in Paul's house
and so he took her in
and he videotaped her
naked and blindfolded
and then Karla woke up
and he told her to make love to Leslie, too,
and he videotaped them together
and then he did some rough things
while Karla held the camera
these things happen all the time.

And so this young girl Jane
just idolized Paul's wife
I will call her Paul's wife
so that
when Paul's wife invited Jane over to dinner
Jane was thrilled
and Paul's wife gave her lots of sweet drinks
laced with Halcion
and when Paul came home
and found this gift waiting for him
he was just very pleased
and so they undressed Jane
and Paul videotaped his wife
as she made love to the sleeping girl
and then Paul had sex with her
a sort of brutal kind of anal sex
but Jane never worke up
because of the Halcion
and then Paul's wife was left to clean the blood off the girl
and put her to bed for the night
but anyway the next morning
Jane who was really sick to her stomach
and really sore
still she had no idea what had happened to her.

Well,
I think it's normal.
There's this pendulum of freedom and repression
that goes back and forth in relation to sex
as well as to many other things.
But sex is not going away.
Sex cannot be repressed.
And there is a lot of great stuff happening in terms of sex these days.
You have more freedom to be gay and lesbian
than you ever did before.
You go to high school and there are all these little
baby dykes everywhere.

The Taoists would have orgasms in their womb
or their heart.
Wherever they needed healing
they could actually have an orgasm there.

I was in Tijuanna teaching a workshop.
This woman came to me who had a pounding headache,
she had a horrible migraine.
I got the vibrator and I sat her in a room.
She put the vibrator on her clit and relaxed
and breathed the sexual energy up to her head.
She had this orgasm and let it shoot out the top of her head
and it cleared the headache out.
So this woman came to take a workshop on sex
and she learned how to cure her migraine!
In scientific tests, you know,
it was proven that just thinking about sex
creates disease-fighting neuro-peptides.

Not everyone can be a prostitute.
You do need a special talent.
It’s definitely a hell of a hard, fucking job.
You need enormous amounts of patience,
enormous amounts of compassion.
You have to put up with a lot of shit.
It’s like being in a war -
you're in a war zone.
You’re in a society which is misogynistic and full of sexual guilt,
and you take that shit on.
It can get to you.
I compare it a lot to being a nurse.
For me,
about one in four was pretty lousy,
one in a hundred sucked
and maybe five in a thousand were a nightmare.
But hundreds were wonderful, mutually beneficial experiences.
I liked the sex.
Even the lousy sex I liked a lot.
I was lucky,
I don't claim that all prostitutes are like me at all.
Most of them absolutely hate it,
and I think that they love that they hate it.

I had a transsexual, hermaphroditic lover for a while—
a female to male, transsexual,
surgically made hermaphrodite.
A new option for people.
That's one of the great things about living these days.
My new lover is totally androgynous.
I think it's beautiful.

These days, you see men dressing as women wearing monkey boots,
and women dressing as men but with false eyelashes.
Now, everything's getting mixed together
which I really like.
And strap-on dildos, of course,
are really being used a lot to play with gender.
Women are getting these big dicks -
it's great.
And they really know how to use them.
It's so real.
And of course it never gets soft.

My friend Trish is really good at thrusting.
Women aren't generally as good at thrusting,
but she has really got it down.
Her dick is totally real to her
and I suck it like it's real
and I feel like she feels everything that I do.
It's just beautiful.
The technology has vastly improved.  
When I first got into porno movies  
they were tied on with pieces of elastic  
and were really flimsy.  
These were invented by men,  
but now women are designing these fabulously beautiful  
leather strap-on things.

But this is all in the past  
all this.  
We live in the suburbs now.  
Usually  
now  
I go from day to day  
thinking of what I do  
of the clothes I wear  
of where I am living  
whether I want to live in the city or the country  
thinking of my friends  
and when we will see each other  
what plans we might make to get together  
the bookshop I want to go to  
the book I want to pick up there  
and of the little basket I might buy to keep ribbon in  
I think of a room in a little hotel in Provence  
where I once stayed  
with its faded yellow walls  
and the shutters opening out onto the interior courtyard  
the white arum lilies, purple irises,  
a hundred little tulips with pointed cups,  
and pittosporums whose scent paralyzes the will  
this is why the world exists  
so that we might enjoy it  
and these men drift in and out of this world  
and sometimes one of them seems a natural part of my life

When my mother brought me a glass of rose  
in the garden at Malrome  
and we sat in the shade of the lemon trees
where it was cool
and I could lean back in the reclining chair
surrounded by things that sought a resting place in the soil
and were not expected to move
the trees, the potted flowers
the stone walls and footpaths
things that could sink to the ground
and stay there
in their rightful place
and I sat back
and listened to the light voice of my mother
in the summer breeze
telling me of my grandmother
of my uncle Odon, Uncle Bebert and aunt O.
and all those who had never felt the need
to make the trip to the city
but had stayed at home in the country
carried along from year to year by the familiarities of daily life
and taken to the grave by their neighbors
as easily as any other of the quotidian events of their lives.

SHE SITS AND LISTENS TO
THE ENTIRETY OF BEETHOVEN’S MOONLIGHT SONANA

OR SOME SWEET, MELANCHOLY PIANO SOLO

OR SHE DANCES TO IT

OR SHE DANCES TO A SELECTION FROM STRAUSS’S
TANZ DER SIEBEN SCHLEIER FROM HIS OPERA SALOME:
NOT THE OPENING BOMBASTIC SECTIONS OF THE MUSIC
BUT JUST THE SLOWER, SWEETER SECTIONS.
AND SHE DOES NOT DO A STRIPTEASE
OR ANY SORT OF DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS,
BUT JUST HER OWN DANCE.
Home

its cove of green sea
its complicated rocks
the little woods
old and new trees
the warm terrace
the rosebushes
my yellow room
and the beach to which the tides bring treasures
mauve coral, polished shells
and sometimes casks of whale oil or benzine
from far off shipwrecks
and I have a rocky perch
between the sky and the sea
this was the world of my childhood
long gone, long, long gone

what wild orchids
almost a meter high, deep purple
growing in the meadows
and roses and medlar trees in blossom
the white rose vine covering the front of the chateau
so white with flowers
that at night it seemed to trace the milky way
and the nightingales
that didn't have time to eat or drink
they sang from four in the afternoon
to seven in the morning
and from four in the morning
to four in the afternoon
so that I have to wonder
when do they have time to make love?

And now I know:
this is who I am.
A NOTE ON THE TEXT:
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