

## Ad Girl

As I walk from the underground to Charlotte Street, dusk falls like a chiffon scarf. Inside, the bar is heaving and smells of Acqua di Parma and money. I order vodka & tonic, find a newly vacated table near the entrance, and I wait. I do not allow myself to be distracted by the gaggle of pretty office girls to my right, nor by the couple bickering in hushed tones to my left. Instead I stare ahead, my eyes fixed on the revolving door, so that I can drink in Christina's entrance – allowing myself the luxury of seeing her, before she sees me.

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When I met Christina, she weighed 115 pounds. I was skin and bone then, too. For several months our hips, knees and elbows ground together - how we didn't start a fire, I'll never know.

She made a big deal about how much she liked to eat - and sometimes when I stayed over, I'd see her, shovelling in cereal and chocolate cake and cheese toasties - always made in the Breville – but in the morning I'd hear her get up early to go running, even in the rain. Then she'd shower, stand sideways in front of the mirror, her hip bones jutting and ask me the same question; 'Do you think I look bigger, Marcus?'

Christina was thin before it was the law – all the ad girls were. In 1987 Soho was haunted by vibrant-coloured stick insects; birds of paradise in a mechanical parade that jerked down Wardour and Old Compton Streets every week day.

I thought Christina was beautiful then. Maybe she was, or perhaps she was just of her time, with greenish vampire eyes that turned up at the corners, and chestnut hair that was sometimes crispy with lacquer. Her legs were her trademark – lean and strong, with well-defined calves from striding around town in four inch heels.

I told her I loved her, but I don't remember how it felt.

She was damaged when I found her, living alone in a two room flat in Kilburn. Newly single, she wore the relief on her face. She'd escaped a man almost twice her age, Richie, who'd suffocated her – and tried to own her, slapping her around when she wouldn't do what he wanted, which she said was most of the time, because she just didn't love him.

I asked her why she'd stayed so long, and all she said was that he looked after her. So she took it, and she took it – and then one day she walked. Out of their Chelsea flat and into a tiny rental in Queens Park; it was a cheap dive then, inhabited by transients and the dispossessed. A masked rapist was on the loose that year and was always in the news but Christina wasn't afraid – said she'd endured worse.

When we met I was on a three month work placement to Armitage Allen where she was a secretary. Fresh out of art school, my brief career in advertising was the perfect way to find out what I *didn't* want to do; I'd never seen so many egotistical arseholes under one roof. Later, when I moved to a design studio in Covent Garden, I asked Christina out. We had no money so we mostly stayed in, which suited us just fine.

'I'm so lucky to have found you, Marcus.' Christina said after a sticky afternoon spent dragging each other around her bed until our lips were cracked and we stank like horses.

When I asked her why, she laughed: 'You're nothing like Richie for one thing. You're a puppy. You want everyone to be happy - everything is easy with you.' Then we'd showered and taken a bus to Little Venice, drinking cheap white wine until the pubs closed.

Wherever we went, Christina attracted a certain kind of attention. She was catnip to wankers. They'd watch her, with her slightly wonky walk, and the dreamy half-smile she always wore – but if she even noticed, she did not show it. Once, when we were in a Thai restaurant in Maida Vale, I saw a domestic break out after a guy in a black linen suit spent his entire main course looking over his wife's shoulder to gawp at Christina. After a hissy exchange, the woman had walked out.

Amused, I told Christina what had happened, but it annoyed her and she told me not to talk crap. The next time we met, she was wearing a shapeless dress and tortoiseshell glasses with plain lenses.

We were together all summer long, and it felt like our dust-and-sweat-streaked affair would never end, until in October, she met a photographer at work who said she could be a model. Overnight I was consigned to her past.

We collided once in our mid-thirties, in a bar in St Martin's lane. Christina was power-suited up, with a sharp blonde bob that made her look strangely ethereal. She was married to an estate agent, Eddie, who shook my hand overly hard. I was with my mouse-wife, Heather - we were

almost over by then. We swapped news and small talk – even ate dinner together and when it was time to leave, she whispered that they were trying for a baby. It was hard to picture Christina as a mother but I saw the light in her eyes and could see that she wanted it badly.

Another time, I saw her sitting alone in the window of an Italian coffee shop in Earl's Court. Her eyes were red and her hair was dirty - she looked unreachable, bereft. I pulled my collar up and walked by because anything else would have been intrusive.

Several times I looked for her online, until one day she appeared like a hologram on my screen. She looked the same – but softer somehow. So I'd emailed her – kept it light; asked if she'd like to meet up for a drink. And now I'm wondering what the hell I've done.

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I remember Christina being punctual to the point of obsession - she used to have a fit if I were even five minutes late.

'Do you know what it means when you keep someone waiting?' she'd rage, 'It's so disrespectful! I'd never keep *anyone* waiting. If I don't show, you'll know I'm dead.' I'd laughed at that, which had riled her even more. It didn't seem funny now because looking at my watch for the umpteenth time, I realise she is twenty five minutes late.

The partially obscured mirror opposite reminds me that my hair is no longer the nut brown it once was. Most of my friends have grey hair – salt and pepper they call it, but mine is properly, wholly white. And then it dawns on me. Christina is not late; she has looked inside, seen my fifty-four year old weathered face and blurred jowls, and left.

So I ask myself; what was I hoping for? We are too old to rekindle desire in a hotel room on the Charing Cross Road, or go back to one of our respective flats for wine and urgent sex. With relief and some sadness, I realise that my hope now is for friendship – and perhaps affection.

'Marcus?'

A woman has stolen up on me; one with Christina's eyes and height, but someone else's coarse grey hair and feathered lips. She smiles.

'I thought it was you. Thank Christ. Glad you waited...you know I hate being late...the tube was shut and we were all locked in, caged like beasts. I thought I was going to be sick...'

I laugh. Hearing her voice, ever the drama queen, emotion wells in me and I want to hug her, but I can tell she feels sullied by her ordeal so instead we order drinks and she goes in search of the ladies' room, anxious to tidy herself up.

I watch her go away from me, with that same wonky walk, and I marvel at how slender she still is. How many lives has she lived since ours? Has hers been as fucked up as mine? With two failed marriages, a son who hates me, fired three times, a brush with cancer and the loss of both parents?

When she returns, her eyes sparkle and thirty years just drop away. 'I like your hair,' she says kindly 'very distinguished. My god, Marcus, where to begin? How are you?'

'Happy,' I say; 'Life has been kind...'

**The End**