

Lady of the Night

Martha stepped into the middle of the group of travellers, who were waiting in the hotel lobby for their room keys, and introduced herself. An awkward hair lock fell continuously over her face and again she pushed it back behind her ear. She peered through her heavy rimmed glasses into the faces of the other travellers, as she shook their hands. Thirtynine names buzzed in her ears but she was too nervous to remember a single one.

Somewhat apart from the group she waited, next to her suitcase. The introductions were made and everybody was happily chatting about the forthcoming trip, until they were called for the room allocation. Martha didn't ask for an individual room, assuming there were other single women with whom she could share.

It was an interesting programme, with visits to all sorts of modern and historical architecture in Milan, Florence, Sienna, Pisa and Venice. She had been looking forward to this week in Italy with colleagues. A few guys she recognised from last year's symposium, but the majority of the group she didn't know. Some men had introduced their wives to her. Six girls talked together, they were probably architect like her, Martha thought. She had already asked two women if they wanted to share a room with her; one was of that group of six they'd signed in as a group and were sharing rooms. The other was married and shared the room with her husband.

Martha now found herself last in line with three other men and feared the worst. The two guys next to her were conferring the share of a room. She glanced shyly at the third man. He caught her eye and said in a very deep voice, 'it looks like we have to share a room, do you mind?' Martha wavered, then said bravely, 'why not, as long as they have single beds,' and lowered her eyes again. He took the keys of room 812 and Martha followed him into the elevator.

'Please to meet you, I'm Jim,' he said, when the doors closed.

'Martha. Are you an architect?' she asked, while shaking hands.

'Landscape,' he answered.

'Ah, interesting'.

'And you?'

'Architect. I am mainly doing renovation work; private homes, bathrooms, kitchens; that sort of thing,' Martha said with an apologetic giggle.

she secretly peeked at him, while he kept silent. Was there another question coming? He was no looker, not at all, must be about her age, though almost grey. His hair curled artistically around his, very lean and pockmarked face. When he wryly grimaced at her, Martha noticed irregular teeth, but lustrous green eyes.

In their room, he threw his suitcase on the bed, a double, Martha saw with panic. He unpacked and went into the shower. What to do now? Go to the lobby and ask for a single room?

Don't be silly, nothing will happen, besides the bed is rather big too, Martha said to herself. He came out of the bathroom with wet hair and a fresh shirt on.

'I'm going out for dinner with some chaps. Leave the keys in the lobby desk, if you go out, yes?' He said without one look in her direction, and left.

Martha went into the humid bathroom. All towels were wet. She wiped the mirror clear with one and looked into the face of an alien: pale, dim and plain. Again she stroked her lank greasy hair out of her face and said out loud, 'God, what a disaster.' She took off her glasses and stared back at her grey eyes, narrowed through constant wearing of specs. Then she said to her reflection, 'I hate you'. She turned on the tap and let cold water run over her throbbing wrists and splashed her face. The wet towels she hung out and collapsed onto the bed. Some while later she woke up and felt slightly better, even hungry. She fancied a pizza or a nice Italian spaghetti dish, a glass of wine, but where to go on her own?

Later she wandered through the vivid streets of Milan, while Italians on Vespas crisscrossed around her. Martha looked sadly at the brightly lit windows of luxurious shops, in which she saw the reflection of her lonely image. In one of the posh restaurants she recognised a few members of her group, happily eating and drinking wine; she didn't dare to join them. Finally, she found a snack bar and sat down to a chunk of pizza and a bottle of beer.

Around ten o'clock she went back to her room and tried to sleep. Jim came in after twelve. Martha heard him tiptoeing through the room, brushing his teeth and quietly slipping under the blankets on the other side of the bed. After ten minutes she thought he had fallen asleep and turned on her other side pulling her nightie tight around her. Two hours later she was still wide-awake. She listened to Jim, who sighed and turned over constantly, apparently not asleep either. Then she heard his voice in the dark, like a boy asking for mummy's help, 'I can't sleep.'

'Me neither,' Martha said. He turned on his side and faced her.

'Tell me, is there no Mr. Martha?'

She nodded a 'no' in the dark. They both remained silent for a while. Then she felt his big toe touching her calf. Up and down and up again. What was happening, alarm bells jangling in her head. She moved her leg away, and slid more to her edge of the bed. Jim grabbed her hand and put it on his chest, stroking her fingers. She resisted him, rather weakly though. He moved to the middle of the bed and she could feel the heat of his naked body spreading towards her under the sheets. His hands were under her nightie now; on her breasts; down to her thighs; in her underpants. She felt a sudden tension sting her groin. His tongue licked at her neck, 'Mm,' he murmured, 'soap and salt.' On to her cheek, her chin and finally it reached her lips. Martha didn't resist anymore, she moved towards him, her hands were on his body. He was on her. The nightie fell on the floor, her nickers hung on one ankle. Smoothly he glided into her, in and out. They kissed, bit, groaned, sighed and whispered into the endless dark Milanese night.

The next day the group visited several modern buildings interesting for their architecture - an urban development and a very green city park. However, Martha walked alone. She first

thought she had found a friend, but Jim ate breakfast on a table far from hers and never responded her glances. He disappeared all day between the other group members. She looked for him all the time, trying to talk to him, but once near him he completely ignored her. Drained by lack of sleep, that day past in a misty cloud. She was certain she had dreamt last night.

In the evening she hooked onto two other women to have dinner. But around ten o'clock she was back in the hotel and slept for a few hours. When Jim entered the bed, way past twelve, she immediately felt the wetting sensation between her thighs. Within minutes, they were eagerly kissing. After an hour or so, she pushed him away and said, 'I don't know you at all, what is happening here.'

'Nothing,' he said.

'Nothing, nothing, well is this nothing? For instance, are you married?'

'Does it matter?' he said.'

'Well, no, uh, yes,' she heard him smiling about her clumsiness and went on, 'we are not even using any contraception, this is so irresponsible.'

'And so delicious,' he said, pulling her onto his naked body to start all over again. After five o'clock, they finally slept for a few hours. When he woke up, he dragged her drowsy body under the shower. It was the first time they saw each other in the light, while their wet bodies melted together. The only thing she could say to him, before he left the room was, 'Don't ignore me all day.'

The voyage went on by coach to Florence. Martha slept most of the day and hardly saw Jim. He did not talk to her, only once he pulled a face in her direction from a distance. It was okay, Martha realised it was the body language at night she wanted. Her heart beat fast and her stomach contracted just by the thought of it. She now knew she didn't dream the last two nights and smiled inwardly about her secret.

After he left the room to have breakfast the following morning, she examined herself before the large mirror. She touched herself, where his hands had been the night before. I have beautiful breasts, firm and well formed. My bum is okay, not flat or flabby, but round and full, she thought, looking over her shoulder. My hair is incredibly daft and these foolish glasses, why did I never consider contact lenses. You are not worth it, dad had always told her. You'd better work, be independent, mum always said. Huh, 43 and I am still dependent on these pestering parents, Martha thought. She dressed before the mirror, cursing her plain jumper and shapeless trousers. She said aloud now. 'I want a man, I want sex, I want to live,'

The second day in Florence they had a free afternoon. Martha took her chance, she'd seen a hairdresser near the hotel, modern and very expensive. For three hours they worked on her, they dyed her hair and cut it short. They showed her how to use eyeliner to enlarge and enlighten her flat eyes behind her glasses. They tried different colours of lipstick on her hand to find a match with her skin type. After the treatment, Martha felt like someone else. In her hotel room, she examined herself in the mirror over and over. For the first time she gave herself a loving smile and saw she was actually pretty!

Down in the hotel lobby she was just in time to link up with some members of the group. They were going out to eat. At the dinner table, she impulsively joined in on a conversation between two famous, but terribly arrogant architects. She loudly disagreed with them and they stopped silent and listened to what she had to say. She paused, when one of them looked behind her. Martha followed his eyes, turned around and saw Jim standing behind her chair. He had overheard their discussion. Bowing over her he murmured in her ear, 'you are doing very well, my Lady of the Night.'

The rest of the week Martha enjoyed herself. She became less shy and dared to talk to the others. She found out she had something to say, the group listened to her and they seemed to like her. The nights were still exciting, though tiring, but his desire for her gave her such energy.

The goodbye at the airport was kind of weird. She hugged some of her new friends, shook hands with others, exchanged addresses, but Jim avoided her. She never said goodbye to him. When she waited for the bus, he passed in a car, driven by a beautiful blonde woman. He saw her too, with vacant eyes. But Martha didn't mind anymore, she now knew how to be a 'Lady of the Night'.

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