

MEDUSA WINS

I've become a geisha with multiple husbands.

Sometimes I'm terrified one will drop dead beside me or on top of me – an embarrassing orgasmic fatality. What will I do if that happens?

'Fuck me, darling,' he moans. 'Talk to me. Tell me what I'm doing.'

But I don't like this chap much and I'm not in the mood for pornographic sound effects.

'You know what you're doing,' I tell him. 'There's no need for me to spell it out. Just do it. That's what we're here for.'

'What *am* I here for?' I ask myself. This man is just a bore. If he wouldn't know so much about property I wouldn't have him here in a fit. Still, he's rich enough to buy any twenty-year-old he likes, so I'm flattered by his wanting me.

I went out with Solly last night to some restaurant miles out in the suburbs. How low can anyone sink? 'You'll have to change your name,' I said. 'No one has a name like that.' This fellow is six inches shorter than me, wears horrible perfume and can't even read. But he brings me long-stemmed roses by the ton, calls for me by taxi, helps me on with my coat and says I'm beautiful. He makes me feel wanted. He promises the world – or at least all the Melbourne night clubs. So what am I to do?

He says he's coming on Tuesday for a sexual interlude. Thank God I managed to get him out last night without one. He keeps talking about bringing his masseuse along as well. I'd like her, he says.

Martin hasn't had his bypass yet. Every week the doctor tells him – I'll let you know in few days. Or that's what he tells me. So I keep ringing him and asking, 'Are you dead yet?'

'No,' he replies, 'I haven't seen my death notice in the papers and no one's sent me any condolences, so I suppose everything's okay.'

He usually terminates his conversation with: 'Can I ring you back? There's a client waiting on the other phone.' The story of my life.

He's living with a woman who is terminally ill. No one knows what's wrong with her exactly, but the mystique is very strong. She has terrible taste in clothes. I saw her down the street once wearing Reeboks with a gold lurex tracksuit. You can't get much crasser than that.

I don't dare ring Martin at home. He's got a silent number which he hasn't given me. I rang him once in the old flat; I found the number in his business brochure, and he was so caustic with me when I phoned him one evening after dinner – excuse me, I've got to go, I'm in a meeting – that I swore I'd never ring him at home again. So now I phone him at the office and wince every time I give my name to the girl at the desk, waiting for the inevitable, 'Can he ring you back?'

I suppose you could say I love him, but what good does it do me? I'm waiting for Miss Terminally Ill to terminally die. By then Martin will have had his bypass and be dead himself, I suppose. Anyway, she's not so sick that he couldn't take her to Honolulu for a month's holiday.

Once, he introduced me to her at the opera. I think it was during the first interval of *Turandot*, when we were queuing up in the foyer. I was with my son, Matthew, and we were both giggling to ourselves because Matthew knew about Martin and me, but Martin didn't know that Matthew knew, and of course the Terminally Ill knew nothing at all about anything. God – what an old bag she was. And to think he prefers her to me! I'm glad he was embarrassed.

I really liked Martin a lot, and everything was fine – until I found out he'd got married. He didn't even bother to tell me. I dropped in to see my friend Jodie in her shop in Chapel Street. Jodie keeps me posted with the gossip, because she and her husband love entertaining and they make it their business to know everything that goes on.

'How's Martin?' I asked.

'He's married,' she said. 'Didn't you know? He married Susie in Honolulu in July. They've moved into his flat in Avoca Street. She threatened to kill herself if he didn't marry her – she's already

completed one wrist-cutting job, quite thoroughly, so they tell me. It was either marriage or institutionalisation. No wonder he's got a bad heart, with the strain of it all.'

Three days later my front door bell rang, promptly at lunchtime, and sure enough, there was Martin – tanned, beaming, radiant with deceit.

'Rat,' I said. 'You've gone and got married. You could have told me.'

'Told you what? You know we've never discussed our private lives. I didn't think my marital affiliations were of any interest to you.'

'Pig,' I said. 'I tell you everything. I've hidden nothing from you. You asked me about my feelings and I was fool enough to tell you. A lot of good that did me.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'You tell me these things because you want to. I never ask any questions, so why are you complaining? Anyway – what's my being married got to do with anything? It never was an issue, and it isn't one now.'

I felt as though I had joined the ranks of tragic heroines – Manon, Madame Butterfly, Eliza spurned by Higgins. Now I was no longer a betrayed wife – I was also a betrayed mistress, eligible for the Hall of Fame award for victimised females. *La Dame aux Camélias* had made way for the Terminally Ill.

Throw him out, said my ego.

Can't, said my id. Grab him and succumb. So what was I to do? We went upstairs to my bedroom, my willpower having removed itself completely from the scene. Martin wasted no time on preliminaries; he took his glasses off and laid them on the bedside table, removed his Piaget watch and placed his clothes carefully on the chair near my bed. His hands sought my body and as he did so I forgot I was of this earth. I transcended the boundaries of flesh and became the substance of pure spirit, beyond mortality, distilled into an ecstasy that made everything else irrelevant.

'I'm not supposed to be doing this,' said Martin. 'I'm not supposed to have sexual activity. I could die here on top of you.'

'You may as well die happy,' I said. 'Just one question. Do you sleep in the same bed as Susie?'

‘I always sleep alone. And I refuse to answer any more questions. My marriage is my business – not yours.’

I’ve known a few single men, but the married ones are the most interesting as people, even if they’re often the worst lovers. The trouble is, they’re usually in a hurry, and they can’t take me out because they don’t want to be seen with me in public. They love giving me advice and feel quite threatened when I show signs of having my own ideas. They’re mostly businessmen and they thrive on materialism and profit making. They love buying and selling and making money, and they all agree that when I feel a bit down, I’m to surround myself with cars and people and noise and glare, go on a cruise, or paint my house purple – just as long as whatever I do involves spending money and showing off.

And when they feel like a bit of relaxation, these men turn to me, their compliant friend and confidante, because they know I’m always available and always in need, and don’t make any demands, because if I do, I risk losing their friendship, and their desire would find another outlet.

Our happiness, they say, bounding cheerfully through my front door, is contingent upon your being home when it suits us, rather than you. Then comes the sales pitch: you’ve so brave to manage as you do; we often wonder how on earth you cope without a man to care for. We really admire you, you know that. After all, no woman likes being on her own. And the final glory – you look so young; how do you do it? No one would ever know you’ve had children ...

Naturally, these men never want to put me to any trouble. Neither do they feel under any obligation to reward me for my hospitality. We don’t need to bring you flowers or chocolates or even a couple of Freddo frogs, they say, because it’s us you’ve got to be grateful to, not the other way round. After all, we’re doing you a favour, making this effort to come and spend an hour or so with you.

But if you did just happen to have something nice to eat, and perhaps a nice bottle of wine – make sure it’s cold, won’t you – we wouldn’t really say no. No milk in the coffee though – got to be careful since the bypass. Got to watch ourselves, you know. Can’t stay too

long – got an appointment at three. Yes, yes, we'll have lunch together one day. Which restaurant would you like to go to? Or maybe you'd prefer if we came here again. Aren't you glad we rang? Your house is so attractive, so convenient. Hard to find a parking spot though – had to walk all the way from Toorak Road. It's good that the children aren't living with you. Much better for them to be on their own. Children are far too spoilt these days.

How about if we go upstairs? We want to make love to you, feel your legs around us. You're so sexy, so young. What a superb body you have, like a young girl's. And your legs – you know you've got good legs, don't you? Come on, now – own up – you know they're good. So lovely. So nice being here with you – so warm, so relaxed. So beautiful.

Well, it might be beautiful for them, but it certainly isn't for me. Yet I keep on saying yes – why, God only knows. I can't understand why I'm so incapable of recovering on my own from the obscenity of divorce. Why do I have to descend to these depths of sexual degradation? I seem to have lost my sense of humour and my pride. In this house, stuck in the middle of Toorak, I have become a snail, a worm; an indefinable protoplasm, an incarcerated pulp – sandwiched between a brown-timbered ceiling and a salmon-carpeted floor, doomed to a life of grovelling and writhing and nibbling and kneeling and being squashed underfoot, or, you could say, under body. I feel as though I'm confined in a solitary cell of moral degeneracy, like Jean Genet – except that the door opens not to French gaolers but to the married men of Melbourne.

Once the phone rang in what seemed like the middle of the night. I sprang to it, thinking it was my husband, ringing to say he was sorry and that he loved me and please would I take him back. 'At the third stroke it will be seven fifty-five and ten seconds.' I fell asleep again and dreamed we had adjoining flats with adjoining balconies, like the one we had in Carlton before we were married. Somehow I was in his bed, part of his warmth and his longing and his perfume and his sweetness, and we lay close together, and he made me feel as no man before or after has ever made me feel. And nothing could hurt

us, because we loved each other; we were invincible and the whole world could have fallen into the sea, and to us it would not have made the slightest difference.

Then I awoke – alone, and knew that the firm beauty of what might have been had grown flaccid and impotent, and that, whether I liked it or not, I was on my own.

An hour later the phone rang again.

‘I’m coming over,’ said Joel. ‘Looking forward to seeing me?’

I pulled down the blinds and put on eye shadow and three layers of lipstick. When he arrived he didn’t even bother to kiss me.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No tea.’ He tried to look sexy. ‘I want you.’

Well, after an hour, I got sick of attempting to meet his demands. He was too old and all the call girls in the world couldn’t have achieved the result he wanted. Besides, my thighs were aching and my mouth was sore.

I sat up.

‘I’m not doing this anymore,’ I said. ‘I feel like a prostitute.’

Joel was shocked.

‘A prostitute?’ he cried. ‘I’m your friend, aren’t I? I’m spending a whole hour with you. Look,’ and he pulled a piece of paper out of his wallet to show me. ‘I’m going to a meeting. And I’m twenty minutes late already. That’s not friendship?’

What I’d really like to do is just become somebody else. Or write a book called *Dear Penis* or *Testicles I Have Known*. Perhaps I should design a course for TAFE, a course for betrayed wives seeking cures for shattered illusions and empty beds. Women left single, seeking a man to cook and shop and clean and deny themselves for, so that they need not face the dawn alone. *Successful Deception for Beginners*, I’ll call it. *Secrets of Sexual Betrayal*. *Principles of Extra-Marital Relationships*, Parts I, II and III.

But I won’t tell anyone I’m writing it. I don’t want to be thought of as a scribbler, writing inconsequential titbits down on scented monogrammed notepaper. ‘What’s she doing with herself?’

‘Oh, you know – writing. Everyone does it these days – everyone we

know has written a book. Memoirs are twopence a dozen. It's a wonder anyone has any life left to live, they're all so busy remembering.'

I told Martin I was going to write about him, and he laughed. We discussed the choice of pseudonyms: Martin Chapman, Aleck Pogorelski – what about John Smith? On reflection, I don't think I'll ask him to the book launch.

As for Joel – he really did turn to stone that day, when I said that despite his money and his Mercedes and the fact that he owned half of St Kilda Road, I never wanted to see him again, and that as far as I was concerned he was just a pain in the neck, and total celibacy was preferable to even one minute in his company.

'My God,' he said, as I showed him the door. 'You've turned into a veritable Medusa. I can understand now why your husband went off with that girl.'

'That's okay,' I said. 'At least Medusa had the guts to do what she wanted to do.'

I don't think I'll ask Joel to the book launch, either.