

# A VERY NICE GIRL

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B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G  
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‘That isn’t the way to talk,’ I said. And he said,  
‘Well, it’s true, isn’t it? You can get a very nice girl for five  
pounds, a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a  
very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it.’

*Voyage in the Dark*, Jean Rhys

# PART ONE

## ONE

Laurie was waiting tables that evening, not behind the bar, so she couldn't slip me something on the house. I was feeling rich, though, and I was thinking about buying myself another when the man sitting next to me turned and started to speak.

I saw you just now – he said. – Singing. That was you, wasn't it?

I nodded.

Yes.

I waited for him to say something else. They always wanted to say something else, the men who spoke to me. Normally something along the lines of how beautiful my singing, or I, was. Or sexy. They were normally split roughly down the middle on whether *beautiful* or *sexy* was more appropriate. Or something about how one of the songs I'd sung had brought them right back to a time when they'd done something-or-other or been somewhere-or-other, or else some story I couldn't usually follow about how my voice reminded them of their ex-girlfriend or their estranged first wife or their mother.

This man didn't say anything, though. He nodded too, and went back to studying his drink, sloshing the liquid around, looking into the bottom of his glass. I started to feel annoyed.

What did you think, then? – I asked.

Yeah – he said. – It was good, I guess.

Right.

Honestly? Not my kind of thing.

Oh.

He fell silent again.

Well, why are you here then? – I asked.

I was sitting on one of those bar stools that spin round, and he put a hand on the back of it and swivelled me so I was facing the window. I was about to ask him what the fuck he thought he was doing, but when I looked at him his face was so expressionless, so indifferent to my reaction, that I thought making a fuss would be embarrassing. Anyway, I don't think I minded, not really. I just knew I probably should.

He pointed.

You see that building?

The grey one?

Yes. Now count up to the fifth floor. Got it? See the furthest window on the left? Well, that's my window. That's where I work.

Oh right – I said. – Do you come here often then?

Did you really just ask me that?

You know what I mean.

He smiled a little smile.

I come here fairly often, yes. I think I've heard you sing before, in fact. Or maybe it was someone else.

Pretty interchangeable, are we?

He shrugged.

Like I said, I don't know much about it.

So, what is it you do over there? – I asked.

Know much about finance?

Practically nothing, no.

And look, you don't see me sulking, do you? Anyway, that's what I do, and today's been a late one. So, to answer your original question, I'm not really here for the music – he said, like he was explaining to a child that he was too busy for finger-painting. – Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it was lovely. I'm here because I needed a drink.

Fair enough.

But I'm sorry if I insulted you.

He smiled, and looked away.



It normally goes something like this. Someone tries to pick you up, and either they're so stupid you have to play down your intelligence, and you keep saying – *oh really!* – or – *how funny!* – and laughing like an idiot so you don't scare them off, while really all you can think about is throwing your drink in their face. Or else they're clever, they're clever and they want to make fun of you. They want to trip you up and laugh at you, lying there, sprawled out on the floor.

But this man wasn't like either type. Not quite. I couldn't work him out. For one, he didn't seem interested in getting close to me. He had one hand on his leg, one hand on his drink. He hadn't tried again to close the space between us. If anything, he'd moved further away, and I found myself leaning in close to hear what he was saying. And his words didn't seem to have any specific intention. He didn't seem bothered about how I reacted. He was throwing them out carelessly, like someone might chuck leftovers into a bowl for the dog, just to get rid of them, not staying to see if they're eaten.

I didn't realise you were expecting effusive praise – he said. – Forgive me.

That's ok. It's just, we artists are sensitive types, you see.

Oh?

Yes – I said. – So if my audience doesn't tell me straight away that they loved it, well, I assume they hated it.

And that's an issue for you?

Well, yes – I said. – Because then I think it was probably awful, and then, well, then things start to escalate very quickly in an artist's mind. Before we know where we are, we're choked by self-loathing, telling ourselves enough's enough, it's time to give in, accept defeat, we're no good and never will be and everyone else here knows it, feeling like we've been tipped head first into a pit and we're trying to crawl out up the sides, even as the earth's being shovelled back in. And all this because somebody's dared to begin the conversation with a comment about the weather or the number of people at the after-party, rather than diving straight into the

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important stuff – how marvellous we were, which is, to be honest, all we really want to talk about.

I gave a little laugh to show I was being ironic, but he didn't seem to notice.

That sounds very tiring – he said.

Believe me, it is.

Well, let me buy you a drink, and then we can start this whole thing again.

He pointed to my empty glass.

What are you drinking?

Oh, whatever you're having – I said.

He turned to get the barman's attention, and I looked at him as he talked. He was older than me – late thirties, early forties, maybe – and attractive. Beautiful, even, as there was something curiously feminine about him, though he was broad-shouldered and had a standard issue City-boy's haircut. His eyelashes, maybe. He had lovely long eyelashes, curly and pale, like a girl's. His was a cold sort of beauty, though. Hard to know what was going on behind.

The barman put two drinks in front of us.

What's this? – I asked. Mine was different from his.

Try it – he said. – You'll like it.

And he was right, I did. It was thick and syrupy. It made my throat warm.

Now, where were we?

We were going to start again.

Right. That's right. So—

He turned his chair round so he was facing me.

So – he said. – I saw you just now. Singing. That was you, wasn't it?

I nodded.

Yes.

I hope you don't think me intrusive – he said. – I mean, me talking to you like this, when you're sitting here alone. If you want me to stop, then say. I will.

I said nothing.





He carried on.

It's just I wanted to tell you how much I liked it. Your voice, I mean. How lovely it was. Really, I mean it, it was.

I laughed.

Well, thanks – I said. – That's sweet.

No really. Honestly. I mean it. Don't laugh. What's your name?

Anna.

Anna – he repeated. – I mean it, Anna. I'm not messing around. Look, do you want the truth? I've actually heard you here before. And yes, before you say anything, yes, I know what I said. But it was definitely you, I know it was. And, well, the truth is, I liked it.

He smiled and shrugged, his eyes empty and guileless.

It's not necessarily my thing, like I said. Not something I know much about. But, I don't know, there was something about it, something about you. I liked it.

At first, I thought he was making fun of me, and I tried to arrange my face in a way that showed I understood. That I was in on the joke. But he kept talking – *I've come back a few times now, nights I thought you'd be here. I wanted to see you again* – and he kept looking at me, his eyes looking right into my eyes, not flickering down to my lips or my breasts or my legs, and after a while I became less sure of what he was doing. I didn't know what to do with my face anymore. His voice went on and on, smooth and soothing, and I stopped thinking about anything except what it sounded like, and everything else started draining away, all the feelings, all the thoughts, draining out of my body, like a tide being sucked out to sea.

He started saying something about intensity, then. Something about intensity and atmosphere – *like a magnet* – he was saying, something about magnets anyway, and about my eyes, too, he was talking about my eyes.

There's just something – he said – I can't explain it, but there's something you need, isn't there, to do that sort of thing, and I don't know much about it, sure, but I know you've got it.

But then I saw that the corners of his mouth were a bit turned up, and there was a cold, hard light in his eyes, like a schoolboy whose

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prank was about to be unveiled, and he finished up with – *your voice, it just, it just, spoke to me* – and he grinned, and then I knew for sure he was laughing at me, and I wanted to crawl under the table.

I picked up my drink and looked away from him.

What? – he said. – What? I tried. Was that not better?

Much – I said. – Thanks.

Hey, I didn't mean to annoy you. Don't be upset.

I'm not upset. Well done, you're good at that.

Thank you.

I nearly believed you – I said.

Who said it wasn't true?

But his eyes were laughing still.

Then he started explaining to me what his job was all about and, while he talked, I picked at a bit of skin on my thumb. I felt stupid. He thought I was vain, precious, and he was right, I knew he was right, that's why it felt like he'd held a lit match under my fingernail. I'd never liked being teased, never known how to react to it. I was one of those sensitive children who went in tears to the teacher when someone said something mean, utterly convinced of the moral rightness of the universe, thinking that people who'd done something wrong would always be held accountable.

But the way he spoke to me felt perversely good, even though it hurt, like when you scratch a mosquito bite so hard it bleeds. Something about the way he teased and diminished me, explaining things to me and saying – *have you got your head around that, then?* – and yes, there I was, playing up to it, pouting and posturing like a little girl, sick at myself, thinking – *like me, like me, like me.*

So – he said, when he'd finished. – You're not very forthcoming, are you?

Am I not?

I was doing that thing my singing teacher got angry with me about, where my voice went up at the end of every sentence, punctuated by a nervous giggle. *On the breath* – she'd say. – *Commit to it. Don't apologise.*

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No. You've told me practically nothing. All I really know about you is that you're easily offended. Come on. Tell me about yourself.

I would, but there's nothing much to tell.

That defensive laugh again.

Try me.

I tried to think.

I imagined unpacking, laying out and arranging the strands of my little life in front of him, thinking – *what would he find pretty? What would he want to buy?*

No – none of it – he'd want none of it – I could tell that already. He'd find it shabby and cheap and not to his taste at all. The sort of life that's just four walls and no pictures allowed or you'll damage the paintwork and that ugly blonde furniture – that furniture that's bought only for temporary rooms by people who'll never live there. I wouldn't show him that. Finding Laurie's long hairs tangled up in my brush, and my clothes, missing, in her drawers, and only being able to spend so long in the bath before I heard our landlords, the Ps, whispering downstairs on the landing – and even when I stuck my head under, even when I ran the tap, still being able to hear them, like they were right there, like they'd crawled into the bath with me and were whispering in my ear. I imagined him rubbing the fabric of it all between finger and thumb, thinking – *no – too thin – cheap* – discarding it.

And the nights out with Laurie. I wouldn't show him them. Me and her, drifting round the butt-ends of London, cheap bars, other people's living rooms, their blonde furniture identical to ours – out of the same catalogue – all the places he'd never go. None of that. Not that sick feeling in my stomach when I was in bed and I heard the Ps moving around on the stairs in the dark. I'd hear them fingering their way around the walls – tap tap tap – like beetles in the woodwork – and not wanting to go to the loo in the night in case they were there and she'd say – *up again, are we?* That time I had cystitis and peed in my dirty coffee cup so I wouldn't have to hear her say it again – *up again, are we?* – for the fifteenth time, as she lay

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in wait at the bottom of the stairs like a giant snake – *can't sleep, hm?*  
No. None of that. I couldn't show him that.

But above all, not the ugliness of this sort of life. That wouldn't impress him. I couldn't display that to him proudly and ask him what he thought. The underwear with stains that won't wash out, the old make-up, lumpy, dried up, that won't sit flat on my skin, the heels that make a click-click sound because they need re-heeling and I'm walking on metal. And the boredom of it. The boredom of checking the money each month – *is it enough, is it not enough?* – The early mornings in the practice room singing the same note again and again – *it's not right, not yet, it's not perfect, it has to be perfect* – and walking out of there at night, how the grey streets were nothing then, because my head was filled with music, my body throbbing, humming to a rhythm of its own and everything rich with colour. He wouldn't understand that. Not the saying to myself, again and again – *this will be worth it, this bit of my life, this will be worth it, I'll laugh about this all one day* – I wouldn't show him that – not the telling myself that, over and over in that small blank room – cold, it's always cold in there – nor the sadness of the sirens moaning outside the window, the constant whine of traffic, petulant, like a child who can't get her way – no –

He was looking at me expectantly, so I told him the only part I thought sounded good.

I'm not really a jazz singer – I said. – I'm an opera singer.

It was late. The bar was emptying. Laurie's shift had finished, and she came over then and hit him with her best performance, loud and brash, flicking her hair and teasing him. I thought he'd start talking to her instead, and I felt something like relief, but he didn't seem interested. He listened while she talked, with a polite listening-face glued on – the sort that looks a little pained, like she was accidentally spitting in his face.

Then he said he had to go, and we all left the hotel together. Outside on the street, he handed me a card and said – *call me, we'll go for dinner* – and I said – *ok then* – and he said – *good* – and then he went. Not towards the Tube, the other way.





Laurie linked her arm through mine and we walked to the station. It was that bit of London with all the offices where no one really lives and, even though the buildings were all lit up, the streets were empty.

Well, he was a twat – Laurie said. – Did you like him?

I don't know. Not really.

But I couldn't get rid of his image, as if it had been etched onto the insides of my eyelids, and all the time Laurie was talking, I still had his voice in my head.

On the Tube, a big group of drunk men shouted loudly about nothing. A woman looked at her face in the screen of her phone, tugged at the skin under her eyes, trying to stretch it out.

I got my book out to tuck his card inside. Prévost's *Manon*. I was learning the role at the Conservatory, and wanted to see where the story had come from. Laurie looked at the cover.

She's a whore, isn't she? – she said. – Manon? I've read that, I think.

I don't know. I haven't started it yet.

Well, she is. Just look at the picture on the front. And anyway, men don't write books with a woman's name as the title if she's not some sort of whore, do they? Can you think of one?

Madame Bovary – I said. – She's not a prostitute.

Well, maybe not professionally, but she's definitely some sort of whore.

Anna Karenina.

Ditto.

Alice in Wonderland.

It's for children – she said. – Doesn't count.

I couldn't think of any more.

Laurie sighed.

So, Luke messaged me earlier – she said. – He wants to meet.

You won't though?

No.

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She started to talk about Luke. How he'd been trying to stifle her creativity. To make her get a job. To destroy her, in other words, she said. She realised he'd been trying to destroy her. She'd told me all this before. Laurie was a writer, and she liked to narrate large parts of her life over and over again. I could never tell her anything that surprised her, because something similar had always happened to her as well, and she'd tell me about that instead.

He never said the right thing about my writing – she said. – Or else he'd say totally the wrong thing. Patronising. Things like, *very nice baby, but well, I'm not quite sure about—*. So I started saying I wasn't writing even when I was, because I dreaded him asking to read it. How he'd finger the words on the page. Frown, then fake enthusiasm, like he was critiquing my sub-par arts and crafts project. It'd got to the stage where every sentence I wrote, I crossed it out, because I imagined him reading it and what he'd think about it and what he'd say. And sex always ended when he came, you know, even if I hadn't. He was one of those sorts of men. Like fuck I'm meeting him now.

She sounded hard and angry, but she looked sad, twisting the ends of her hair through her fingers. She was twenty-eight and very pretty, I thought – blonde and tall and slim – but she was worried about getting old. She'd make me stand next to her in front of the mirror so she could compare which parts of my face were smooth where hers was lined.

So, will you see that man then? – she asked.

Maybe. Should I?

I'd go for dinner. Why not? He'll take you somewhere nice. Men like that always do. He's got money – she said, putting a disdainful emphasis on the word, as if money were a sexually transmitted infection. – That much is clear.

Laurie had a proprietary interest in other people's money. She could always spot it and wheedle it out, like a pig rooting for truffles.

That – she said – was a very expensive suit. And the watch. Did you see the watch?

I shook my head. I hadn't.





I thought you said he was a twat? – I said.  
So what? It's not like you have to marry him. I'd imagine he's married already. They tend to be, in my experience.

What, men?

That sort of man.

What sort of man?

The sort of man that preys on girls in bars.

Would you call that preying? I wouldn't call that preying.

No – she said. – I can't imagine you would.

He wasn't really like that – I said. – Most men I talk to in there, they buy me a drink and then they treat it like their admissions ticket. Valid and ready for me to stamp. They don't come close to knowing anything about me. He wasn't like that. He – it was like he put his finger on me and pressed down on it until it hurt. Do you know what I mean?

I do. You want to fuck him because he's hot and kind of mean, and you're a masochist. That's fine, Anna. You don't need to be ashamed of that. There are worse things you could be. And God knows you need to fuck someone soon. I once didn't wear earrings for the amount of time you haven't had sex for, and my holes closed up.

Thanks for that image – I said.

Any time. It's tomorrow our rent's due, isn't it? – she asked.

First Friday of the month. Yeah.

You might have to lend me some. Not much. Fifty or so. I'm short.

Sure.

I had enough. I'd done a couple of extra sets that month, and I'd just been paid. The envelope in my bag was fat.

I can give it to you now – I said.

I got the money out, handed her the notes. I never minded lending to her. She didn't ever pay me back, but she was excessively generous when she was feeling rich, insisting on extravagance and paying for everything – drinks and dinners and taxis. That's why money trickled through her fingers like water, why she always needed it, and why she was so scathing of people who had it.

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She must have been worried about asking me, because she was happy then. We got off the Tube and laughed a lot about nothing the whole way down the Mitcham Road, where people clustered after dark, no matter the cold – congregating outside the grand old cinema turned bingo hall – shouting and kissing in the street – playing music from phones – queueing for the nail bar that, late at night, sold toast. Further up, though, it got quiet, and dummies stared out at us from unlit windows. Fully made-up heads in wig shops. Fabric stores, their child mannequins in satin party clothes. Laurie was getting me to sing bits of the jazz songs she liked, joining in when she knew the words – *suddenly I saw you there, and through foggy London town, the sun was shining everywhere* – and passersby stared. It was only when we turned onto our street that she became morose. She stopped saying anything and she sighed a few times and I felt this angry, sick, hopeless feeling in my stomach and I knew that she was feeling it too. She put her key in the door and she said – *this bloody fucking house, this bloody fucking life, why do we do this, Anna? I should get a proper job. I should. I will. I can't stand it anymore* – and then she turned it.