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The Girl in the Polka-dot Dress

Written by Beryl Bainbridge

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LITTLE BROWN

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Little, Brown

ONE

Earlier that morning, on the eighteenth of May, Washington Harold had fled abreast of a mob hurling cans, sticks and stones at the windows lining the boulevard. It wasn't personal, simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time; he shouldn't have stalked Artie Brune's cat.

Now, at three thirty in the afternoon, he was sitting inside the cabin of his newly bought secondhand camper, waiting for Wheeler's woman from England. Not a speck of dirt on the dashboard, every last streak removed with a square of cloth, clean even behind the miniature clock with the face of Abe Lincoln stamped beneath the numerals. Pity about the rain throwing up squirts of mud against the paintwork; protected by the coat of polish given before the weather turned bad, it should wipe off. Wheeler's girl would be knocked out by the whole thing – the icebox, the basin with the running water, the little snazzy curtains. They'd get to know each other real well

and sunset time, wearing her polka-dot dress, she would toss the salad while he fixed drinks and made the fire; later, dark time, he'd stab his fingers at the heavens and list the names of the stars.

If they really hit it off he might even take her into his confidence as regards Wheeler. Not everything of course. From what he remembered of her, he doubted if she would understand much of what he intended. Though not unintelligent she was far from educated. Some things, ordinary things like the workings of Wall Street and the aims of political groups, were foreign to her, which made it all the more puzzling that Wheeler had become attached to her. But then, Wheeler was a womaniser, while he, Harold Grasse, was considered shy. A shy kid and an unapproachable adult. Not exactly that, more that he was cautious, choosy.

He leaned back and tried to fit all of his face into the oval mirror but saw only his forehead, balding and still tanned from an earlier vacation in Florida. A touch of the Willie Shakespeares about that brow, domed, intellectual, though it had to be admitted his grades at college hadn't been great.

He peered through the wash of rain that obliterated the airport buildings and the concrete rectangle of parking lot. Deeper into Maryland and the weather would be just fine. He'd put on his shorts and maybe her hand would sink onto his leg, and she'd stroke the skin with her fingers. Judging by the tone of their correspondence, she was a hell of a friendly girl, if somewhat hysterical. That time he'd walked her home

in England, she'd gripped his hand on the excuse that the street was dangerous. Death under the streetlamps, she intimated, could strike at any time.

Smoothing out the crumpled paper on his lap he read again the letter from the woman he was waiting to meet.

Harold dear,

All in a rush and feeling maybe I should not be doing this. People have been so nice, you have no idea. My friend in the room below has lent me a pair of slacks and Polly two jumpers and a skirt. Arn't people kind? Also I cashed in my dividends due from the Co-op, £6 and 15 shillings in all, which has let me buy some sun oil and a new dress with polka-dots all over. The frock is an extravagance but not the oil as my skin is very sensitive due to my mother suffering from pernicious anemia before I was born and having been subjected to gold treatment, an old fashioned medicine now considered dangerous. A district nurse came every day and injected her with a kind of hypodermic reserved for sick horses. About money – I have only managed to gather together about the equivalent of 47 dollars. I thought I better tell you this in advance as I am so embarrassed at the meagerness of my contribution when compared with your generosity. Polly would have given me money, but I didn't like to ask. As our letters will cross I wonder if you have heard anything yet of the whereabouts of Dr Wheeler. The whole business is very exciting and I can't help thinking

*that fate has drawn us together. Dr Wheeler may be dead ...
I'm prepared for that. I read somewhere that life should be
regarded as a dream, and death as an awakening, though I
don't really know what that means, unless it's religious.
Enough ... kisses ... Rose.*

*p.s. I don't doubt that when we catch up with Dr Wheeler he
will reimburse you for what I have received.*

p.p.s. Scuse spelling.

It was useful, he thought, that she appeared to be labouring under an obligation. It would make her more compliant when the time came.



Rose hadn't liked the sound the aircraft made as it tore through the sky, and it must have made her breathe heavily because the man in the next seat kept urging her to relax and take hold of his hand. All her life people had been telling her what to do, even strangers, which was curious. He was quite a nice man, in spite of him confiding that his wife had bad breath, so she did as he suggested. It didn't help.

It was a mistake to refuse the umbrella offered at the door of the plane. She ran with bent head towards the arrival building and entered with hair flattened and stockings splattered. Waiting damply for her suitcase to be cleared, she strained to

glimpse Washington Harold through the glass doors. Where was the constant sunshine, the brightness of high summer?

The arrival lounge was half empty and she picked him out at once, leaning against a wall with his hands in his pockets. His beard, though he had written of it, was a surprise. The colour of dying daffodils, it was thick and wide, as though he was a sea captain.

He said, 'Well, I guess you made it.'

She said, 'Yes . . . isn't this rain dreadful.'

'It's been bad for some days,' he assured her, leading the way through the doors into the deluge.

She saw nothing save a grey landscape blotted with cars and swept by water. He halted and pointed with obvious pleasure at a large vehicle at the edge of the parking lot.

'Isn't she something,' he crowed.

She said, 'Oh, yes . . . lovely.' Water was running down her face now and seeping beneath the collar of her coat. She stood on one leg and clenched her teeth to stop them from chattering.

'You cold, Rose?'

'Not really. I'm tired, I think . . . after the flight. The time thing, I expect.'

She was relieved that he'd used her name. It made her feel less of a stranger. All the same, she was embarrassed at the meeting and suddenly appalled at arriving.

At last he was opening the doors of the van and shoving her case inside. She could see cupboards and a sort of cooker, and what appeared to be a rolled-up mattress. 'It's very nice,' she said.

Opening the side door, he warned that the step was high up, but he didn't offer a helping hand when she hauled herself into the passenger seat. The woodwork was yellow, highly polished, the seats covered in plastic. She watched his blurred figure move past the window and wished she was back home in Kentish Town. Once inside, he made no effort to start the engine, just sat there holding the shiny wheel.

'It's a lovely van,' she enthused, thinking he needed encouragement. 'It must have cost a fortune.'

'It's not a van,' he corrected, 'it's a camper. There's an icebox, hanging space for clothes, a folding table, and the seating comes down to make a bed. Know what I mean?'

She was thinking what he really meant was that they weren't going to spend nights in boarding houses as she'd supposed. Surely he didn't expect her to lie beside him? They'd been writing to each other for over a year, planning the details, but there had never been the slightest hint, not the slightest suggestion . . .

'The only thing missing,' he said, 'is a luggage rack for the roof. I thought we might go look for one on our way back to the apartment. That all right with you?'

'Of course,' she said. 'I'm all yours.' He started the engine and drove out of the airport, the great rubber tyres throwing up spray.

She looked out of the window to see something strange in her surroundings, something to prove home was far away. There was little out there save other cars, bigger than usual but

not really so different, not if you went to the pictures a lot. She thought Harold must be loaded with money, bothering about a luggage rack when there was all that space behind. 'So many cars,' she murmured.

'Oldsmobile, Chevrolet, Ford, Lincoln, Mustang, Plymouth, Dodge,' he recited, as though remembering a poem.

'The plane was marvellous,' she gushed. 'So much food they give you . . . all that drink. A gentleman who spoke candidly of his wife treated me to champagne . . . wasn't that kind of him? He'd been away on business, first in Tokyo, then in Ireland.' Only the bit about the business trips was true; she hadn't been bought champagne.

Harold mumbled a reply, something about the rain. He drove with one hand, the other tugging at his beard.

'I'm sorry you had to send all those particulars to the American Embassy,' she said.

'Say, what gave there? What was the idea?' He was giving her his attention now.

'When I applied for the visa I had to say how much money I was taking with me. And the reason for the visit. I couldn't really explain that. I mean, I couldn't say I was looking for Dr Wheeler when I didn't really know where he was.'

She stopped, worried that he might take that the wrong way. She hadn't meant it as a criticism, just that the Embassy had gone on about her possibly becoming a public charge or whatever. She'd had to declare that she was only taking fourteen pounds with her. Bernard said they simply wanted to

make sure they weren't going to have to fork out for the flight home. Polly said they were within their rights to make enquiries, and that it was odd of Harold not to enclose a return ticket. As a seasoned traveller he should have been aware of the rules.

She said, 'When we find Dr Wheeler, he'll pay you back . . . I know he will.' Harold didn't reply, just kept pulling at his captain's beard. Perhaps he was so rich he wasn't bothered.

They drove down an avenue of cars for sale, neon advertisements cutting gold dollars through the wet sky. 'This stretch,' he said, 'fully illustrates a free society enjoying the privileges of free enterprise.'

She said, 'I see,' though she didn't.

'Just look at that goddamned monstrosity,' he shouted, pointing a finger at a Disney castle bright lemon in colour and festooned with fairy lights. 'Have you ever seen anything like it?'

'We've got Blackpool,' she said. He sounded quite fanatical.

They turned left into another grey square and drove towards a concrete building with glass panels. There was a flag dripping from a pole in the middle of the parking lot.

'Sears Roebuck,' Harold announced. 'Greatest store in the world . . . for quantity, not quality. Everything from a pair of socks to a Buick. Take your pick.'

She would have preferred to stay where she was and straighten her stockings, but he had jumped out and was waiting for her to follow. Already his brown suede boots were darkening under the rain. Bedraggled, she trailed behind him

into the store, shoes slapping over the tiles, eyes glittery from the glare of lights splashing across chrome and steel.

He drew her attention to the clocks with illuminated dials, and asked, 'Do you have this sort of thing in England?'

'I expect we do. I don't really know about cars.'

'The automobile industry,' he said, 'is catering more and more for women. It's who they aim for now.' His tone was contemptuous.

Everything was available, mirrors to go on the dashboard, heaters, tartan rugs, mountains of scatter cushions covered in plastic, mottled to resemble animal hide, lines of mascots with dangling limbs and eyes that turned jungle red as they spun.

'Didn't Wheeler own a car?' Harold asked.

'I don't think so. He was always on foot when we met.'

'Doesn't sound like the Wheeler I knew. He was strictly an automobile man.'

He seemed undecided what to do. There were several salesmen hovering about, yet he just stood there, shoulders bowed.

She had to sit down. That morning she had worked four hours behind the reception desk at Mr McCready's dental practice in Cavendish Square, travelled on a coach to Heathrow, spent countless hours shuddering though the heavens, only to find that time had stood still and the day had scarcely moved on.

Harold ambled away and studied fire extinguishers. She hadn't remembered he had a stoop and bleached eyelashes. Polly had met him at some conference to do with the lasting

damage done to children whose mothers had been deserted by their spouses. She'd said he was remarkably prejudiced against fleeing fathers – for an American, that is. Rose had nodded approval, out of politeness. To her way of thinking, absent dads were something to be encouraged.

There were no seats as such, so she perched herself on an upright heater and was confronted by a pyramid of lit headlamps under bulging glass; it was like being in an operating theatre. Out of the walls came the sound of a piano, notes pattering upon the silver machinery. She closed her eyes, and Dr Wheeler came through the darkness, the brim of his trilby hat rocking in the sea breeze.

They sat on separate tombstones for a while, not speaking, listening to the wind sighing through the pine trees. He wore a blue muffler tucked into the top of his duffle coat and knitted gloves. Once he leaned forward and shoved her hand away from her mouth, woolly fingers scratchy against her chin. Then he began to lecture her on Napoleon, in particular about the French soldiers who had perished trying to conquer Russia. She said it must be awful to be responsible for thousands of deaths, and he said numbers didn't matter, that to be the cause of even one death was reprehensible. He didn't look at her, but then he never did, not directly, not eye to eye. Perhaps, she countered, Napoleon had been bullied as a child . . . by his father. He remained silent, staring upwards at the clouds scudding above the swaying trees.

Someone was shaking her shoulder, thrusting her backwards and forwards. 'You passing out on me?' Harold demanded.