

The Midland Commission 2018

Posh

Linda Grant

Linda Grant was appointed Writer in Residence at The Midland hotel in Spring 2018, and was commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story inspired by her stay. The resulting story, *Posh*, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event in The Midland's Lancaster Suite on Thursday 11th October 2018, as part of the 2018 Manchester Literature Festival.

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'I think you're going to like this place,' he said 'it's posh.'

And I laughed, because actually it was a good, if obvious joke and I liked him for making it and no, I didn't think he was making fun of me. It was sweet.

It was when we were walking through the lobby to the bar that he said this and I caught sight of my reflection in a mirror, laughing, and I thought - do I look a bit demented? Because this wasn't a laugh, it was more of a grimace. I wish I could master a closed-mouth smile, one of those serene mysterious smiles, but I smile like a chipmunk. Bloody awful. That was twenty years ago and since then I have made all kinds of claims and jokes about why I don't smile, that fashion stole my smile, implying that I'd adopted the catwalk pout to advance my career, but really it was the sight of myself in that hotel in Manchester with David ushering me to a quiet table at the back of the bar for our first date. Teeth were starting to be a big thing back then, everyone was having their's done, veneers, crowns, whitening. But whatever you did to my teeth smiling still made me look like I'd cracked my face in half. It wasn't nice. It was horrible. I was a wild animal.

'This is the Octagon bar,' he said. 'It's nice, isn't it?'

'It is. Do you take all your dates here?'

'No, just you, because you're Posh.'

And I stopped myself from laughing with a severe wrench.

I saw that the barman didn't just recognise him, they knew each other and exchanged friendly, familiar greetings. I half-expected him to say, 'Back again sir?' But I suppose he was being discreet, which is what you expect in top hotels. David lined up the bar menu and straightened it, so it was centred on the table.

'I like things just right,' he said.

I said, 'Well wouldn't anyone?'

We'd met at a charity football match he was playing in. He'd seen my picture and asked if I could be invited. I put it about that I wasn't interested in football and didn't know who he was, but I knew who he was. Of course I did.

So here we were. This was where he had brought me.

'I liked your joke,' I said, 'it was funny, but remember all we ever see when we're touring is the inside of hotel suites and mostly they're the same. Seen one, you've seen them all.'

Me and the other girls at that time, we just spent an awful lot of time in hotel suites. They were nothing special. I mean, this was before Harvey Weinstein. When we first started to go to luxury hotels, Geri said, did we notice the women? Because it wasn't all businessmen in suits. Self-made women, ex-wives, trophy wives, it's easy to tell them apart. The ex-wives have afternoon tea with other wives, they are in groups. The trophy wives are hanging on their husband's arms like Rolex watches. It was the self-made women who came in alone and always with expensive luggage. Geri admired them, but none of us wanted to be fifty and having to go down to dinner on your own or order up room service eating a meal in your complimentary bath robe in front of the telly and a couple of miniatures from the mini bar.

He asked if we shared or each of us had our own suite. I told him that in the beginning we bunked up together but as we grew more famous we had to have our own space. And this could be a problem because honestly, there aren't that many suites in most hotels, which is why posh hotels were part of the everyday bread and butter of our lives, the posher the better. Though there was always a suite bigger than all the others, usually called the Presidential or something like that, and we all knew who thought that that was hers.

'So there's a pecking order?' he said.

'Too right.'

'Well, that's ridiculous because everyone knows you're the best looking.'

'Do you think so?'

'Of course. You've got class.'

'Thank you David. Just don't call me by that name, you won't will you?'

'I won't. Does anyone ever call you Vicky?'

'No. And don't you start.' For although having a name with four syllables is a bit of a mouthful, I was named after a queen and that's important to me.

The barman came over with our drinks. David had a martini, I think he was trying to impress, but I'd just ordered a diet coke. The ceiling above us was very far away, it was yes, a really grand yet sort of secret place he had brought me to. The hotel was vast. It stood in the middle of the city like it owned the place, and he said, noticing me looking round, 'Did you know this is supposed to be where Mr Rolls met Mrs Royce? I mean, you don't get posher than that, do you? Well, not outside London.'

I said, 'Do you miss it? London I mean. Because that's where you're from isn't it?'

And this was what we talked about for ages. He grew up in Hackney, I was born in Essex, I'm technically an Essex girl, but we moved to Hertfordshire. He asked if I was actually posh, and I said, 'Well maybe more than the others. By comparison, you know.' And tried not to smile, again.

The bar was filling up and people were looking at us, we were recognised.

'You see, this is why when we're on tour we just stay up in our suites and order room service and have fights with each other.'

'Pillow fights? Like in girls' schools?' He laughed now, a high giggle.

'No,' I said, seriously. 'Mostly we argue about business finances, you know.'

Of course, I didn't expect him to understand, because when you're a footballer you're on salary, aren't you? You're bought and paid for. You don't know about the whole world us young girls were having to manage and make decisions about, you've got someone who's supposed to be looking after you, looking after everything, but can you trust them? Some people I can think of are relaxed about others looking after their money and some of us think that every day they're trying to shaft us. That's nothing to smile about, is it?

But both of us were starting to relax, and I was thinking that I quite liked him, that he was really a lovely boy and that he was trying so hard to impress, bringing me here, so that when he tried to persuade me to have a proper drink I wavered then decided to lash out and go for what he suggested, a negroni. He said I wouldn't be disappointed.

'Colour of rubies,' he said. 'I hope you like it.'

'Who doesn't like rubies?' I said right back. I wasn't hinting, I can buy my own jewels.

He called over the barman and gave him the order and then under the table he took my hand. His finger curled in to my palm. It was a lovely gesture. It was sweet, it was gentle and god knows, I've had my share of being lunged at by TV hosts and promoters.

Later I felt that there was the potential for each of us to enhance the other. Do you know what they said about that old ballroom dancing couple, not from Strictly, way before that? Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. My mum told me. 'He gives her class, she gives him sex appeal.' I think that was us, but the other way round. Separately, David and I were both famous, and together we could become a brand.

And that is what happened but it wasn't what I was thinking when he said, after I'd finished the negroni, 'Funny thing is, there's a suite waiting for us, upstairs.'

'Oh, really? Just in case you're too wasted to drive home or find a taxi?'

'I was just thinking it would be more private.'

'Of course, you were. Of course.'

And I did want to laugh, I really wanted to laugh but I managed to stop myself, because you know, looking like a hyena or a chipmunk.

So we got up and walked across the bar with lots of eyes on us, thinking, is this Posh and Becks on their first date? Well it was.

'Here's a funny thing,' he said in the lift. 'The manager told me that beneath us there's like - another hotel, all underground. It's where the kitchens and laundry and all that stuff are, and it's the same miles of corridor as us up here, but full of waiters and chambermaids rushing about.'

That's the world, isn't it? Some of us in a suite, some of us in the kitchen. We were suite people.

The lift reached our floor and we walked around for ages, that was the size of the place. Outside Manchester stretched in all directions. He hadn't asked how I was getting back to London or where I was staying or anything. There was a flight from the airport and I had a ticket but I hadn't decided anything. It was just a first date, that was all. When we got to the suite it was exactly what I expected, with a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket and an open box of chocolates and a platter of cheese and biscuits, (like I ever ate sugar or carbs). We went on talking, we asked each other about our lives and how we felt about being famous, which is a conversation you can only have with someone who is also famous, because what we call civilians will never get it. They think it's all adulation and autographs.

And maybe something he said made me laugh, I couldn't help myself, he had got under my skin, and that hyena face didn't put him off, not at all. I'm not going into how I ended up deciding to stay, but after that, whenever we were on tour and playing Manchester I'd say, 'Well, girls, we've got to stay at the Midland,' and I'd sneak him up. It was our special place, our happy place. The staff were very accommodating, they took him through those miles of underground tunnels to reach me because we VIPs are always having to come in and go out through back entrances and the idea now of having a drink in the bar of hotel is just impossible.

I wonder if that night of our first date was the last time I laughed in public. Or if I went on laughing for a while but it became more and more self-conscious. I don't mean I don't laugh in private, at home with David and the kids. I'm not that up myself, but it seemed to me, when I was falling in love with him, that the wattage of the media's attention was going to be far greater than when I was just a Spice. I know the power of brands, I can't remember not being part of one, and so I can't risk it, laughing.

At the moment we have two lovely homes and everything has to be perfect, I'm a brand ambassador for my own clothing line which is a little bit Halston, a little bit Chanel. I know that it's really me and David, not me as a self-made woman who has created all this, that we forged something out of two celebrity parts. There's so much in my life to smile about, and I do smile, really I do. But I do it in the house. It's what you do behind closed doors. And if you really knew me, you'd understand that inside I'm just one huge smile.