

From Afar

By Paul Lister

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It was because Darie loved his wife and kids that he needed to visit a prostitute.

Liebo was shaking his head opposite him. The loose skin of his face moving out of time with the jewellery swinging around his neck, earrings penduluming back and forth. Gold and silver that Darie's singing career had bought. Fifteen percent of it anyway. His manager tutted, the action making his beaky face look even more pointy than usual. The man hated a missed opportunity.

"I know, I know, but we could have taken one of the open topped cars. Just passing through the city would have got you recognised by Mawms that you would have got the love from and a few of the old albums would have shifted on download."

Mawms was Liebo's way of saying the acronym for Darie's dwindling fan base.

M.W.W.M, menopausal women with money, probably the last real group that appreciated the crap he had sung when he was younger. They sure as hell didn't like the new stuff.

And that was Darie's problem. He loved it.

"Doesn't it ever bother you?" he asked.

"The old sales being shit? Been like that for a while compadre." Liebo replied, fiddling with the phone that seemed to be glued to his left hand, probably dealing with the other eggs that weren't in this particular basket.

"No. Running out."

Liebo laughed.

"I've been married four times, I've had eight kids. Shit, I run out in nineteen eighty-seven mate. Anyway, it's good for business. Keeps you frosty."

With which Liebo put the phone to one of his jangling ears and said 'go for Lies' and angry babbling poured out of the speaker.

Darie supposed his manager was right, not feeling that way about his clients kept him objective, kept the bank account full. It seemed to have worked for Liebo and his families had moved on long ago. Darie didn't want that to happen to him. He wasn't willing to make that choice.

He didn't want to be all out of love.

Darie had met Rida just after auditioning for the boy band. They were called Tikes back then but a couple of focus groups and about six weeks in the gym and the name was changed to Flex.

She had worked in the studio as an intern and it wasn't long before he was looking forward to seeing her more than he looked forward to rehearsing with the other lads. They were married in three months despite Liebo's griping about the fact that Darie would no longer be 'available' in the fans heads.

Darie didn't care. In those first few years they loved each other so much that they were topping each other up all the time.

Then Rida fell pregnant. Everyone knew the score with kids. A parent's love quota was always directed toward the child. It was easy for the love to get used up on them and have nothing left for each other. A lot of couples opted for long distance relationships. That way one parent would dote on the kid and the estranged one would adore from afar, losing less love. Some tried to control it and stay together but that was bullshit. It never worked and normally ended in divorce, nine times out of ten, with one of the couple ending up loveless. Luckily for them Flex had become popular enough that Darie's love levels were constantly topped up from afar by obsessed fans. Rida could pour all her love into little Eric and they would live happily ever after.

Until she wanted more.

Until he wanted less.

#

The taxi pulled over into a garage before they travelled any farther south of London and arrived in Flintholme proper.

"Petrol?" said Liebo.

"No sir, that's as far as I can take you," the driver replied.

"We paid to go to the address indicated," said Darie trying to interrupt before Liebo started.

"Sorry, no sir. None of our cabs go into the Cold towns."

It's what people called them now, the places where people congregated because they didn't feel love anymore. They were normally satellite towns outside cities. So close to being something but not quite there.

"Look Sonny Jim, if it's a matter of the money then I've got a hundred my wallet. Don't fuck around, just take us into the centre and we'll make our way from there."

"No sir, sorry sir," said the driver to Liebo's less than polite request. Darie could see that the man was looking down at a photo stuck to his dashboard. A woman as olive skinned as the driver holding a child of the same tone, stared back at him.

Lips curled as Liebo lifted a threatening finger but before his outburst could begin Darie gently put his own hand on his manager's pistolling digit.

"We understand driver. Thank you," Darie said, indicating to his manager that he should leave the car. Liebo raised his eyes to a godless heaven and muttered some Anglo-Saxon words under his breath before exiting. Darie climbed out of the car but tried to avoid Liebo's scowl under the harsh neon of the garage forecourt, the bread knife shaped shadows of his gaunt cheeks made darker by the intense light.

"You can wait Lieb, if you want," Darie said, his words measured and careful.

"Would I leave my wallet in that bastard's taxi?"

"I'm guessing not."

"Then why the fuck would I let any of my money out of my sight," Liebo snarled.

They walked in silence past sepia toned restaurants and cheap take-aways from which blank unfeeling faces stared out, eating equally bland looking mystery meats.

"Sorry," said Liebo quietly as they walked under a railway bridge toward a pedestrian precinct. Darie let a few more steps bed the calm in before replying.

"How do you do it, how do you stop from losing your temper?" he asked. Most of the loveless ended up banishing themselves to Cold towns. They got in too much trouble anywhere else.

Liebo fished a packet of tobacco out of his pocket and started to roll a cigarette. He lit it before answering.

"One of the few benefits of running out of love boss. I don't really care enough to get the hump," he said between puffs.

And then added quietly, "most of the time."

#

They reached the town centre, which wasn't the smartest of ideas. But if they didn't cut through the middle of town then they would miss the appointment that Liebo had set up.

There were little concrete plinths scattered around to sit on in the pedestrian precinct. Darie could see the metal legs of benches that had been there before but had probably been destroyed by the Cold in random fits of rage. A group of girls stood shivering, eyeing them from the door way of a shop that had long been closed.

They had a dress code of sorts. Two had long flowing dresses on, flowery, covering everything but the ankles. They had contacts in, making their irises dark and their pupils large. The hairdos would look more suitable on some heroine from a Bronte sister's novel. They looked over at Darie and Liebo with questioning eyes trying to work out whether they were worth approaching.

Most of them had written off Liebo straight away, somehow using that sixth sense that the Cold had for recognising each other. But some were eyeing Darie and then whispering to each other. The alcohol and fags had made them look older than their years, but Darie knew that he still looked older than them. But these girls would not care what he looked like or even if he was once famous.

He had heard of their kind. The tabloids called them Banshees.

One walked away from the group, holding an unlit roll up. Walking carefully so that it looked like her skirt glided across the concrete. She made it to within five feet before Liebo told her to fuck off.

"Rude," she said but didn't retreat, "and anyway I was going to talk to this gentleman."

But there was already an edge to her voice, a restrained tension. Darie had never met a Banshee before. In fact, his contact with the Cold was pretty much limited to Liebo.

She let an idle finger twiddle with her hair while maintaining eye contact with Darie, deliberately turning her back to Liebo.

"I'm so sorry to bother you but I was just telling my friends that you look just like an uncle of mine," she said.

"Oh, really," replied Darie, not sure how he should react, his eyes flicking between the girl and Liebo.

"For fucks sake," said his manager despairingly, who took a big pull on the roll up and looked over at some boys wearing hoodies near a newsagent. Most of the shop's glass had been smashed and the holes were covered with damp cardboard sheets hanging pathetically at skewed angles. Liebo pulled open his jacket, showing the boys the police baton he had secured to the lining with Velcro. They said sentences with small tight syllables under their breaths and wandered off with a rude boy stagger. They occasionally looked back to stare at Liebo, trying to regain a tiny little bit of the face they had just lost.

The girl used the distraction to her advantage and touched Darie on the arm.

"Yes, really, he was always so nice to me. Really looked after me. Really." The last word was punctuated with a long lingering look, her fingers slowly caressing the material of his jacket.

Darie looked down at the hand still unsure how to react. For a moment he thought she had a complicated abstract tattoo on her wrist, but in the neon of the streetlight he could see that it was just a myriad of tiny, angry looking, dots.

She made a noise in her throat like a tiny hurt animal and covered her eyes. When she took the hand away her eyes were filled with tears.

"Are you okay?" he asked, the crying had raised the paternal instinct in him.

"Yes, it's just that I was so close to my Uncle after Daddy died and now he's dead too. I just have no one like him to talk to. No one like you."

She gave him a sad smile and for a moment he wanted to hug her, tell her that everything was going to be okay.

But then Liebo stepped in and grabbed her wrist. Hard. Holding it up so the dot scars were more obvious.

"Couldn't hack it as a Rose eh? Rode that Ferry a bit too hard, did we? Give it a rest love."

The facade fell. Her face scrunched up so hard that Darie could see the wrinkles through her foundation and watched little flakes of the thick powder drift down from her skin.

"Don't fucking touch me, you Paedo," she barked, the fake softness gone.

"Paedo? Bitch you're so old that even if you were abused back in the day you probably can't remember it now. This 'fuck me Daddy' routine went out with the ark. Be a good girl and piss off now."

She screamed, and varnish cracked nails swiped at Liebo's face. Darie stumbled back and saw the other girls move toward them. There was no pretence in the way they ran, the period drama walks replaced with a vicious determination. Liebo easily avoided the attack and with frightening ease, pulled and flicked open the baton from his jacket in a single fluid motion. A second set of talons swung forward only to receive a controlled impact from the weapon. The girl moved away,

shrieking as much in anger as from pain. The Banshees stopped and for a moment gave each other nervous looks. Then they started to hurl abuse with the identical high-pitched voices. The girl who had originally approached held her injured hand and staggered back to the relative safety of the pack.

She spat the word 'cunts' over and over spasmodically. The tirade more a staccato of the same syllable, the word almost lost in the hate. Liebo lowered the baton but Darie could see his hand was shaking, anger fuelled adrenalin burning its way through his veins.

A police car circled a roundabout next to the pedestrian precinct, slowing to watch the scene. The driver looked over with vague contempt whilst the officer in the passenger seat could not even be bothered to look up from his phone. Liebo stared back but the car just accelerated away, the police seemingly uninterested in getting involved. Acting as if it would sort itself out and if it didn't then nothing of worth would be lost.

Liebo put the baton back in his coat and spat on the floor.

"Let's just get on with what we came here for," he said. Darie followed him as he walked away, leaving the girls final salvo of shop door insults in their wake.

Darie had been the only real musician in Flex. Most of the rest of the group were all singers of varying degrees of skill. One was just a dancer who could barely hold a tune. And as with all such groups they had a very short shelf life. It was a relief when they eventually split up, citing that they wanted to follow their own artistic projects. This normally meant one token album and then obscurity. But for Darie it was finally a chance to get back to his first real love. Writing and playing real music.

The problem was that his second first real love wanted another child. Rida had mentioned it a few times but at the time he always seemed to be on tour or doing promotional stuff. And whilst this would have been ideal if they had already had the child, he could not expect her to go through the pregnancy alone.

But now the timing was ideal. He could work in his home studio and still be around to help Rida when she needed it.

And then Ross was born.

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The housing estate was only about another five minute's walk away from Flintholme's town centre. They saw more Cold hanging around, mostly kids looking for something to kick. But at that point Darie was more nervous of his manager than he was of the local yobs. Liebo had spent the first few minutes

mumbling under his breath and occasionally twitching. It wasn't until they got off of the beaten track that he felt safe enough to make conversation.

"That girl used to be a Rose?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you're taking me to see a Rose?"

"Yes."

"But if--"

"For Christ sake," Liebo barked, stopping in his tracks. His breathing became heavy, laboured, as he tried to get the words out.

"This is my world. Mine. You had it so easy with your loving wife and your loving kids and the world thinking the sun shines out of your arse. I know what I'm doing, I know what I'm fucking doing."

Darie backed away expecting the baton to suddenly appear again. They had only walked for a few minutes, but the town was riddled with small streets and alleyways. He wasn't sure he could make it back to the town centre alone. But it might be worth the risk based on the state that Liebo was in.

Liebo stood and took deep breaths, staring up at a street sign that had been tagged so much that the original name was completely obscured.

"Sorry," he said a few moments later, the word small when it came from his lips.

"It's okay," said Darie, relieved that Liebo had come back from wherever he had gone. He rolled yet another cigarette and gave a smile with a familiar eye roll that told Darie everything was okay again.

"Being a Rose is a hard profession. Cold come to them to get love but the only way Rose's can give it to them is if they love them. Most of the time that's impossible, you can't just pretend to love someone."

"So how do they do it?"

"Ferry. No one knows what's in it. Amphetamines and some hormones, other shit. But it makes you think you really love someone. Whatever that means. At least enough that whatever love is inside them is transferred to someone else. But it takes it out of you. You love, but the hate hangover is a mother fucker. Believe me."

"I do," said Darie, still a little nervous of Liebo's reaction, but still had a question he had to ask.

"So is that what the Rose I'm seeing going to be doing. This Ferry stuff."

Darie flinched as his manager threw an arm around his shoulders but if Liebo noticed he didn't show it.

"I've known you for fifteen years, I know you would hate that shit. I didn't pick a Rose doing Ferry, I found a Rose who fucking loved you. Some menopausal cow who is still obsessed with Flex. She'll be all over you like a rash. Whatever love she's got in her is all for you, old son."

Eventually they reached an old Victorian building. If it wasn't a Cold town then it would have been worth close to half a million but here it had probably been sold cheap and easy.

"Wait a minute. If this woman is a fan of mine, then why don't I already get her love?" asked Darie.

"Christ, I don't know, talk to an Erologist. Maybe when somebody's loved en-masse then it has an effect. A little piece each or something. I don't know, but clearly you aren't anymore so crack on."

"Are you coming in?"

"Nope, it's bound to affect things. I'll hang around here like a wrong 'un. Do what you have to do mate," said Liebo.

#

Sometimes you love different things. Not necessarily mutually exclusive things but things that your partner just doesn't.

Rida doted on Ross and Eric, poured her love into them like the well had no bottom. Darie did what he could to love her and he didn't have too try hard. Nothing had really changed between them. But he had found a bit on the side. His music.

The new album was coming together, and he would spend hours in his basement studio. For so long he had just been a

singer but now he rediscovered the guitar, the piano, even the drums became more complex than he ever thought they could.

And the sheer joy of writing again. Taking a few finite notes and finding new beautiful ways to arrange and re-arrange and re-arrange again. He spent less time with his family and even though he loved the boys he found that he was thinking of the baseline of a new song when he was holding them, or whether he should put an orchestral break in a new composition. Rida could see it and though she said she loved him just as much he could feel that she didn't. He had to get more love so that he could spend it on both his passion and his responsibility. Because those two things were rarely the same thing in this Cold world.

And he was beginning to feel a little chilly.

#

The front garden was night shaded by two large oak trees shutting out the light pollution from the street. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust and find the buzzer on the front door. He pressed it and a warm, enthusiastic voice said. "Come right in, living room is on the first floor."

Darie walked into a hallway and a light switched on above him. The corridor and stairwell were painted gloss white. There was a little table with a beautifully embroidered cloth and vase with a posy of flowers. Darie hadn't expected it to

look so nice, so normal. He always thought of any kind of prostitute as being a grimy profession with their environs in a similar state.

As he walked up the stairs he caught a whiff of an odd odour. Not one he could put his finger on but certainly one that the lizard part of his brain was telling him that he didn't want to be anywhere near. There was a door on the ground floor, but it looked disused. It was unmarked and didn't even have a handle. For a moment Darie thought he heard a sound behind it.

Was it a trap?

No. Liebo knew his thing; he wouldn't let him walk into something like that. Darie was still worth too much money to him. Even now.

A door on the first-floor landing opened, distracting him from the noises below. A woman stood there. The first thing he noticed was his twenty-year-old face gurning out from the cotton of the t-shirt she was wearing. It was customised so that it was hanging low on one shoulder. She was probably a few years younger than him and had accentuated the fact by wearing hardly any makeup. Darie looked at her ripped jeans that seemed to be covered in an inky scrawl, but he couldn't read it from where he was standing.

"Dare Duke, in my house. I can barely believe it, come in, come in please" she gushed, gesturing for him to enter the room with a twirling of glossed nails. He hadn't heard that

name in a long time. Liebo had never liked the name Darie. Said it sounded like 'Dairy' and that no one got wet over cheese or milk. So he christened him Dare, which meant that he was the member of Flex who had to learn bloody backflips.

God, was he ever that young?

After seeing the Rose's clothes Darie half expected the room to be decorated 'chez stalker' but it was surprisingly tasteful. William Morris wallpaper complimented Laura Ashley curtains. In the centre of the room was a polished wooden dining table with two dinner plates covered by those metal domes that he didn't know the name of. In the corner was an equally stylish couch under a large bay window facing a wide television behind which Darie could see a badly hidden Karaoke machine.

He turned back to see the woman bent over in front of him pointing at her left buttock.

"Remember this?" she asked. Darie blushed. He had never been one for groupies and was the only one of the band who was married so he wasn't sure what she was getting at. Until his eyes focussed on the his own signature Sharpied on the denim.

"Wembley nineteen ninety-seven. I waited for three hours just to catch you leaving so you could sign me, remember?"

Now he understood what the rest of the dark designs on the jeans were. Darie didn't remember signing them but he knew what the right answer was. He couldn't make her love him, but he could help.

"Yeah, ninety-seven, I do. What was your name again?"

She waggled a finger at him.

"I'd love to but let's just stick to Rose, it's for the best."

She crossed to the table and gestured to the seat adjacent to it. Darie sat down.

"Now according to NME, Smash Hits and Melody Maker, I have made-"she whipped off a dome to reveal scrambled egg on toast with a fish finger on top, "-your perfect three course meal. Starting with this."

He couldn't help but smile.

She had got it right.

#

It took an hour or so to get through the dinner but Darie couldn't complain. Rose had done her research, or just plain knew. Every time Rose's eyes sparkled when he smiled he felt a lot better, a lot warmer. When she finally dragged out the karaoke, loaded with all the Flex hits, he actually felt like singing them. Darie had doubted Liebo's judgement on this visit but the old bastard had been right. It was working. After murdering all three albums on the Karaoke they walked over to the couch. She picked up a duvet from beside the sofa and waved it at him.

"Oh, I thought that the sex thing was, well you see....,"Darie said stumbling. Rose laughed.

"You look even cuter when you're embarrassed. You've forgotten, haven't you?"

For moment he thought that this was like the jeans thing, He couldn't remember signing that and now there was something else that he must have said to this woman in his boy band past. She pretended to look hurt and then laughed.

"Two thousand and five, Radio One live lounge on Valentines day. The DJ asked you what your perfect date was. Don't you remember what you said about how you would like it to end?"

This time he did recall what she was talking about. Only because the DJ in question was a middle aged blonde woman who was directing any questions about Valentines to him and not the other members of Flex. The DJ was a bit of a M.I.L.L but he was happily married.

"Duvet, couch and East Side Story," he said, surprised at his own recall.

Rose clapped her hands and squealed. For a moment Darie was taken aback at how child-like she looked.

Then there was a crash.

It sounded like it came from downstairs. Darie looked at Rose but she didn't look the slightest bit concerned at the noise and just crossed to the television, turning it on. Another button press and the DVD started. Trailers began to play, loudly as she thumbed the volume up.

"Have you seen the original?" she said, herding him toward the couch.

"The original?" he asked, still listening for more strange noises below.

"You know, the Shakespeare film, Romeo and Rosaline. In that they're the star designed lovers who have to beat off the attentions of that banshee Juliet. God when Romeo finds Rosaline murdered and kills himself. It breaks my heart every time. East side is just the modern version."

There again, another sound, like splintering.

"And as for sex, well that's up to you but I wouldn't say no," Rose said pecking him on the cheek and then playfully pushing him so that he had to sit down.

"Didn't you hear that noise?" he said.

"Oh, it's probably neighbourhood kids mucking about. I'll have a look," she said, throwing the duvet at him.

"Tell me what I miss," Rose said as she walked out of the living room, closing the door behind her.

Darie watched as the opening credits begin to roll. It wasn't neighbourhood kids. Liebo wouldn't let them anywhere near the door.

It was something else.

Darie got up and followed Rose. He opened the door as quietly as he could and then trod carefully so that his footfalls were silent on the wooden stairwell floor. He looked down at her tussling with something. At first sight he thought

it was a bag of refuse with hair sticking out of the top. But then his brain made sense of the terrible thing his eyes had seen.

It was a little boy, maybe two or three years of age. He was wearing plastic shopping bags as clothes and his hair was long, lank and greasy with large tufts pulled out.

The door had been broken open, that much was clear from the shards of wood beneath the child's feet. He was wrestling with Rose as she tried to push him back into the room beyond. Using one hand she held the door to stop it from opening any wider and with the other she tried to stop the unfortunate child escaping.

Rose turned to see Darie and a look of shame replaced the night's smiles. Her mouth opened and closed but the lies and excuses just didn't make their way out.

"What's going on, what are you doing?" he asked walking down to the ground floor. Her mouth flapped fish-like as she fought to find the right words.

"It's. Well my neighbour's children they, well--"

She stopped as the boy made a noise.

"Mmmnmmumnnn"

It took Darie a moment to realise that he was trying to say 'mum'.

"Oh god," Rose said, finally letting the boy go. He dashed up the stairs past Darie, the gait animalistic, chimp

like. Rose fell back deflated, giving up on holding the broken door closed.

A smaller child, a naked girl, toddled out of the room past her. She was holding a dead thing, cuddling it like it was a toy. Darie wasn't sure what it was. Maybe once it had been a small rabbit or a rodent. Rose moved back against a wall, hiding her face from the object of her infatuation as he moved to the broken door.

"Please don't," she whispered through caged fingers.

He pushed it open and looked in.

A series of images assaulted his brain that he struggled to rationalise. Another tiny child, little more than a baby, moved slug like toward a dog bowl containing brown meat of some kind. The smell that assaulted Darie's nose as the full horror hit him made him want to run. But he was transfixed by what was within. Tiny grey and black bodies lay inert, barely recognisable now as children, as rats and insects feasted on that which they once were. He could barely feel the tears running down his face as he vomited.

"You don't understand how hard it is for me," Rose said curled into a ball on the floor, "I need the money and I'm only good at loving. It's the only way I could get it. I needed to have them for the love. I needed them."

Darie staggered away from the room.

Unconditional love. It was the only way the Rose could make enough for her clients. The woman was mumbling more justifications as he pitched through the front door.

"It's alright for you people in your ivory fucking towers, you might not have the love you want but you still get to live the way you want to. You don't understand the choices we have to make. You don't understand."

Liebo saw him and instantly reached inside his coat but Darie managed to wave him down.

"What the fuck's going on?" Liebo said, grabbing hold of his charge as much to steady him as to check him for wounds.

Darie wanted to tell him to call the police, to help the children that the Rose had made and discarded just to keep her in clientele. But he knew that if he did that then she would hate him and whatever love she had left for him would be lost.

And he needed it. Because he was never going to do this again.

"Just get me out of here," Darie said to Liebo. He straightened up and swallowed down the rest of the vomit which was trying to force its way out of him.

Darie knew then that he would never have enough love for his wife, never have enough for his children. But he could live with that.

Rose was right. He didn't understand the choices that she had had to make. But he understood the choices that he had. He

couldn't love his family enough, but he could still look after them.

"You okay," asked Liebo.

The cold man was taken aback as Darie threw his arms around him and hugged him as hard as he could.

"Er, what are you doing?" said Liebo.

"Whatever I can," said Darie.

And the lights in Rose's house went out one by one.

End