

# The Girlfriend

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Lucky Norman meets a girl who loves him like no one has ever loved him before. But when he discovers this female creature is not quite what she seems, he is already entangled in the terrifying labyrinth of desire.

Crude, brutal, yet poetic, *The Girlfriend*, is an archetype of love, loss and life.

In the story, the literary inheritance of the past is fused to an acute modernity of style. The pared-down simplicity of the prose, however, belies the multi-layered complexity of the story. The reader is lulled and seduced into a world in which the link between appearance and reality is broken: nothing is quite what it seems, and yet each and every detail is perfectly in place.

An absolute pearl of a story that only gives up its secret at the end.



Tim Kelly is Senior Lecturer on the English and Creative Writing degree at Coventry University. He has published poetry and written for the theatre and cinema. He has lived and worked in the UK, Europe and the Far East and taught at the universities of Lancaster, Sheffield, St Andrews, Warwick and Doshisha University in Japan.

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THE GIRLFRIEND

by

Tim Kelly



## The Girlfriend

*To JK – for all the pleasure*

“Not that way, this way.” She took my arm and steered me away from the town centre in the direction of the river. “My ex hangs out down there.”

“Oh,” I said, a mixture of fear and jealousy forming in my heart.

“He’s unstable. Violent.”

“Best avoided then,” I said, with a nervous little laugh.

She looked directly into my eyes and added firmly. “Best avoided. He wasn’t able to let me go. He still thinks I’m his girlfriend.”

Of course she was too beautiful for me: I knew that from the start. Zoe’s hair was auburn and glistened golden in the sunlight. Her eyes were deep, honey-brown and wild. And her lips! Pale rose to soft strawberry. Even now I shiver when I think of them.

“Don’t worry,” she said and smiled as we entered the riverside bar. “We’re going to have a good time.”

“Yes.”

“Mine’s a double vodka. I’ll be waiting outside.”

Zoe stepped onto the balcony that ran along the riverside and I went and bought the drinks. When I got outside she was sitting at a wooden bench with a few other people she evidently knew. There was a girl with dyed purple hair and an earring through her nose, a haggard-faced young man in a khaki jacket who was writing something in a little notebook and next to him a giant of a man with a cut off t-shirt, designed to reveal his enormous muscles. As I placed the drinks on the table I noticed that the word ‘Love’ was carved in bright red into the big man’s left bicep. Two lines curved down and met beneath it to form a heart shape. Along his inside forearm was tattooed ‘Pale warriors’.

“This is Norman. A friend,” Zoe said, introducing me. “This is John, also known as ‘The Prince’,” she continued, pointing at the sickly scribbler; “Lily,” waving at the nose ring; “and this is Big D, who likes to call himself ‘the King’.” She smiled sarcastically at Big D.

The man with the tattoos held out his right hand. “Gotcha, Norman,” he said. “Welcome to my manor.”

As he squeezed my hand Zoe added, “My ex.” My hand went limp. On his right

bicep there was a picture of a skull; beneath it, in black, was carved the word 'Death'.

I smiled a little too hard.

John put down his pencil, wiped the dew from his brow, and began rolling a joint, which he proceeded to place between his thin pale lips and light. After taking a few puffs he passed it to the girl. She took a drag and handed it on to Zoe who puffed away happily. A sweet smell filled the air. Then it went to Big D who drew on it deeply and blew the smoke out of his nose, his nostrils widening aggressively as he did so, raising the image of a bull in my mind: a big snorting bull, steam streaming from its snout, getting ready to charge...

Big D pulled hard on the spliff, which had now been reduced in size by three-quarters. A poisonous looking brown and yellow stain formed around its end which seemed to flow naturally into Big D's dirty nails and fingers. He passed the filthy butt to me, wet with saliva.

"No thanks, I don't..." I waved.

"Oh, he doesn't," Big D said looking at the others.

Big D thrust it forward again. "Come on, Norman: have a toke."

I felt I had no choice. I put the dirty thing between my lips and sucked in,

coughing involuntarily as the smoke filled the cavity of my mouth and lungs.

“Good on yer, Norman,” Big D said and laughed, giving me a huge heavy pat on the back, which made me cough some more and spill my drink.

“So we know what you don’t do,” Big D said. “What do you do?”

“Oh, I’m an accountant. A trainee, to be precise. I’m on the summer placement of my degree course. So a student, more accurately. Though I am doing the job of accountant at...”

“Impressive. Impressive.” Big D interrupted. He didn’t sound very impressed. John, who had already lit another joint, nodded as if in agreement, though his woe-begone expression and vacant stare suggested he was lost in some other world.

“And what do you do, Big D?” I asked politely.

“Anybody they pay me to,” he said loudly, snorting out a guffaw.

“Ah,” I responded nervously.

Zoe downed her vodka. “Drink up,” she said. I took a swig of my beer and placed the half-empty glass on the table. Zoe stood up. “Be seeing you,” she said, and bent down to give Lily a hug and a kiss.

“Going so soon?” Big D grabbed Zoe’s hand. She snatched it away and stared

aggressively at him. Big D jerked his thumb at me. "Nor..." there was a pause "...man hasn't finished his beer."

I waved as if it wasn't important. Zoe stepped in front of me, picked up my glass and downed it in one, all the time staring at Big D.

"Come on," she said and taking my hand pulled me away from the table.

We walked rapidly on down the side of the bar, past a couple of small moored boats and on towards where the river widens to form an estuary. We continued up the side of the hill until the sea appeared into view, the evening sun sparkling on the water. The climb was steep and I was breathing heavily. Just before we reached the top of the cliff, she pulled me into a little alcove.

And then she kissed me.

I wasn't ready for it. A kiss more hungry than passionate. Her lips were like the inside of ripe fruit, liquescent.

I pulled away momentarily and uttered "steady on."

She took no notice, caught up as she was in her own desire. She grabbed at my trouser belt, unbuckling it, and thrust her hand into my pants. I felt like stammering 'help' but was so excited I just leaned back against the tree roots that stuck out of the hillside.

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*I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried—"La belle dame sans merci  
Hath thee in thrall!"*

*La Belle Dame sans Merci (1819)  
John Keats*

ONE STORY AT A TIME

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