

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Rudy Ravindra
The Reluctant Harlot

She was attractive, tall and voluptuous, but the discerning felt that if she wasn't careful with the fried snacks and *pendas*, she might gain weight in a hurry, fat in all the wrong places. But for now, she was young, healthy and sensual, and men in the Bangalore University campus went crazy when she glided by. She excelled at calculus, chemistry, and computers, active in the university debating society, and theater group. She met a handsome chap at the theater group, they worked together in a play, studied their parts, and rehearsed the intimate scenes—fake kisses and seemingly passionate hugs. Somewhere along the way the kisses and hugs became real, one thing led to another, and pretty soon they really became intimate. While such genuine passion between the lead actors helped the play, it got rave reviews, but for her, the fun turned to nightmare when she got pregnant.

When she missed her first period she didn't think much of it. But when she missed the next one, she was worried, got one of those kits from a drug store and when the color turned blue, she was devastated. She thought it was the end of her life as she knew it. No point informing the boyfriend about the bothersome bun in the oven, he was a penniless student without access to the kind of money needed for an abortion. Seeking her parents' help was absolutely out of the question. While they gave her a lot of freedom, they expected discretion and chastity, not a blot on the family name. If they came to know about her shameful situation, she would become a *persona non grata*, not only lose all her privileges, the designer clothes, the nice car, but also be banished to the boonies, some faraway town to have the baby, put him or her up for adoption. For almost a year she would miss the big city, the parties, the fashion shows, the bar scene, the concerts, and her studies. She made up her mind sometime back that once she got her degree, she would go to America for graduate studies.

She was desperate to get rid of it before she started to show. Her close friend recommended a man who might help. When she first met him at a café on Brigade Road he leered at her. So, madam, you want a little operation, ha?

She felt it was better to play the dumb, demure girl routine. Yes, sir. She kept her head down.

He guffawed. Come on, let me look at you. He gently lifted her chin. Yes, yes, that's better, you are hot, those big, big eyes, just my type, you know. And ran his hand on her silky hair which tumbled down to her shoulders. You know, you could be a model for Pantene shampoo, yes, yes.

So, are you going to help? She asked.

Oh, I see, madam's impatient, want to get on with business, ha, ha, ha, no small talk, eh. Okay, okay. You know the operation's not cheap. You got to pay for it. I know, I know, you don't have the money. Not to worry, not to worry. Simply be at Hotel Ashok at 10 AM tomorrow. A man will meet

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you, go with him to his room, do what he says, no fuss, no nonsense. You need to meet five different men in the next couple of weeks. I will text you the hotel name the day before your appointment. Be on time, these are busy men, rich men. They won't hurt you, they are just lonely, in need of some company.

Her delicate nostrils flaring, she said, you mean, they, they'll, they'll...

He laughed loudly, other customers looked at them. He hissed. Madam, I'm not high class like you, don't insult me, and drop that holier than thou attitude. You bloody well know what I mean. How else can you pay for the procedure, ha?

He got up, tossed a couple of hundred rupee bills on the table, to pay for the coffee. Don't be late. And pack some nice lingerie, and high-heeled sandals.

She spent a sleepless night, tossing and turning, disgusted at this indecent proposal. Sleeping with a boyfriend was quite different from sex with a total stranger. But, her prospects would vanish into thin air if her situation became public knowledge. Who would want damaged goods, which man would be ready to marry a fallen woman, however beautiful and accomplished? She had only one option, submit to the boor's demands, get it over with, and move on.

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Surprisingly, he kept his word, took her to a decent clinic. The dilation and curettage procedure was performed by an experienced doctor. She recovered rapidly, back to her routine.

He called to ask her to meet him. She didn't.

He called again. Madam, I'm giving you another chance, you better meet me.

She asked, why should I, didn't I pay my dues?

He chuckled. No, you still owe me.

For how long, she asked.

As long as I want.

You can't make me.

Madam, don't play with me. I got pictures of your activities, with every one of the men. Would you like to see them on internet? So, come to your bloody senses.

She said, you are bluffing, there are no pictures, I didn't see a camera anywhere.

He said, haven't you heard of hidden camera? Hang on a minute, let me send you a few samples, just wait a few minutes, you'll see.

With trembling hands, she held her iPhone, waiting for the pictures. First a small clip, she in a red thong, her bare boobs bouncing, dancing to a tune, and then a few pictures of her nude body, her mouth, her hands, engaged in different acts with different men, so crude, so disgusting, she

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couldn't believe that she did all those shocking things. She consoled herself, she really didn't have much choice, did she? She was under the gun, wasn't she?

The man called back. So, you believe me now?

She pleaded. Please leave me alone, I don't deserve this. She sobbed.

Madam, there's no point crying. You can't deny it, you had fun. I know it, you had fun, but pretended you are performing reluctantly. I know all about human psychology, I have a degree in that subject, but couldn't find a job. But that's another story, some other time. Madam, please come, meet me at that café on Brigade Road.

She parked on a side street, walked to the café.

The man smiled. Madam, thank you, thank you for coming. Come, please sit, let's have some coffee.

She looked at him impatiently.

He again smiled broadly, revealing his tobacco-stained teeth. Madam, you are a big hit. The men like you, some of them are willing to pay double, even triple. So, you see we can make some good money, very easy. Now, now, don't look like that, all haughty and angry. Just listen. Last time all the income went towards your operation. This time it will be fifty-fifty. We will split it evenly, just you and me. Let me see. He took out a calculator, punched a few numbers. Yes, yes, he nodded to himself. Madam here you go, you meet a few men for ten times only. Only ten times per month, okay? We will net five lakhs, a cool five lakhs, you will get half of it. You know I am an honest man, I took you to a good doctor, didn't I, didn't I keep my word, didn't I? You are healthy, no problems in that department, no?

She sat, staring at him in utter disbelief. She whispered. You want to make me a bloody whore?

He had a painful expression. Madam, that's such a horrible word. No, no, no. That's what low class women do. You are different, You are high class, you are simply providing some entertainment for rich men. I know for a fact that you dance very well. I also know, one of our, our, our, I mean, customers, didn't even touch you, am I right?

She pursed her lips. I don't care for money. I don't need the money. It will be only a matter of time, people will know I am selling my body.

He grimaced. Madam, you underestimate yours truly. I screen my clients very carefully. They all are out-of-towners, no chance of anyone knowing you. So, you are safe.

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For the next few months she reluctantly acquiesced, did what she was told. But it was stressful, she had to keep the men happy and at the same time study for her finals. Her grades fell by the way side, her dreams of studies in America died a premature death, just like the fetus she carried in her womb.

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Just when she thought her whole life was imploding, a prospective groom—a software engineer from Dallas appeared on the scene. Although he was some ten years her senior, short and chubby, she accepted his proposal with an alacrity that surprised her family and friends. And she flew to America with her husband, far away from it all, from lonely old men, from married men who craved a bit of variety, from men who simply wanted to talk, from men who wanted to be reassured that they still had it. Poor, rich men.