

THE EXCHANGE-RATE
BETWEEN LOVE AND MONEY

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Between Love and
Money

Thomas Leveritt



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For Mom and Dad,
the two best people

THE GIRL IN THE GINGERBREAD BLIZZARD

PRETTY WELL THE first thing Bannerman did after moving to Sarajevo was fall in love with his best friend's girlfriend. No, worse: his only friend's only girlfriend. Bannerman had always been clumsy, but this was a pratfall many, many pots & pans more impressive.

His best friend was Frito, a big surly mother with a ton of money, Disinhibited Personality Disorder and a knack for girls — none of whom, perhaps as a result, had ever interested him long-term. But he'd been looking for the one that would. Thoroughly. He'd heard about this amazing thing love, had been trying to score some for years now, — he'd painted a target on every girl he met and shot himself out of a cannon at them, but none ever withstood the impact.

Until that autumn of 2002. Frito was down in Sarajevo on business when he finally met someone. He kept it quiet for a few months, behaving a bit odd admittedly, commuting back and forth across Europe to see her, until one bleak afternoon back in London, in the dregs of that year, he finally faced up to the responsibilities that true love demanded. He dug Bannerman out of the back room at The Rottweiler and told him they both needed to move to Sarajevo, on account of the substantial killings to be made in that city.

'Zat so?'

'*Substantial*, I'm telling you, Bannerman,' which, with his on-off New Zealand accent, he pronounces to rhyme with cinnamon. Frito explained it all. The dotcom boom hadn't died, it had gone to live in Reconstruction. Guilt Money was raining out of the Dayton Peace Plan in lumps the size of a fist. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) was going nuts with grants and loans, desperate attempts to get the Bosnian

economy breathing. Likewise with the World Bank and the IMF. Western Governments would match your investment like for like. Then there were the UN refugee and resettlement programs, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Office of the High Representative (OHR), the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), plus the entire captive market of NATO's Stabilisation Force (SFOR), with all of the sub-contracting opportunities they represented, and a whole slew of lesser acronyms rattling along in their wake like Just Married tins, and all of *those* needing to sub-contract . . . tins on tins. . . and meanwhile 50% unemployment in Bosnia, highly educated workforce, and no import tariffs with the EU. 'Mate, we can't make money out there? we deserve to go into *banking*.'

'Maybe we do deserve that,' said Bannerman, nuzzling tenderly at his pint.

But Frito, with his shaky understanding of personal space, just sat there, inches off Bannerman's left cheek, nodding eagerly. Bannerman made a face to register how impressed he was by this barrage of datapoints. 'Does sound amazing,' Bannerman agreed.

'Yep.' Frito stood up, but frowned at Bannerman's inaction. 'Come on then.'

'Come on what?' — 'Come on, let's go.' — 'To Sarajevo?' — 'Right.' — 'What, now?' — 'Better now than later.' — 'I don't think that's how the saying goes, Frito.' — 'But we need to go now.' — 'What are they, after us?'

'No, they're before us, Bannerman!' suddenly too loud, drinkers turning to look, 'there are substantial killings out there Bannerman, and they're being swallowed up by those before us!'

'Killings.'

'Beyond your wildest dreams!' his hands in starbursts.

What was Bannerman going to do? He didn't have wild dreams. He didn't even dream, much, mostly he just lay there. On recent form Bannerman couldn't consult his way out of a paper bag, whereas Frito had made several killings in various sectors over the years. Bannerman had made zero in the whole

thirty sorry years, and he'd kind of planned on catching half of Frito's next one.

Plus Frito was in love. He hadn't said as much, but Bannerman knew it. He'd wheedled out of him that there was some girl Frito had met, a Swiss girl no less, based out in Sarajevo, named Clare Leischman. Seemed she did something or other for the UN in the High Representative's office, and, from what Bannerman could gather, something or other for Frito in her own office. Hard to say what. Frito was cagey about such things. So Frito wanted to pursue something with a girl finally, for the first time ever. Why would Bannerman not do this for his best friend in the world?

Bannerman looked around The Rottweiler, with its outsize plastic snowflakes stuck to window-panes, the fruit machines, the institutional burgundy carpet that looked like someone had opened a pig on it. With a sigh he swallowed his London Pride, wiped the scum from his face, and stood up. 'Frito pal, let's do it.'

There have been a number of such jinks. Originally both computer programmers, Frito and Bannerman realised early and hard that there was no money in doing it yourself, and for the last few years they've pursued various wild schemes, mostly in Frito's case successful, and mostly in Bannerman's case eliciting sympathetic wincings. Ethical business consultancy has abruptly given way to online pet food, then to pharmaceutical B2B schemes, then online realtors, computer peripherals, back to pharmaceuticals. . . New York to San Mateo, back to New York, London. . . it's not easy scraping a living outside the mainstream of corporate protection; co-option and moral release have built-in gyms, health plans, pensions. At the other end of their twenties and in the incipient dotcom hysteria it seemed such an obvious choice though, to drop out of the Sleepwalkers' Parade and go find themselves a fortune. Assume ten killings to the fortune, and Frito's halfway there. Bannerman's still

looking for the ignition. Now in his thirties and still looking for it, well — still — he’s just about holding onto that rising balloon. The boys are brave and, let’s face it, not old. But Frito’s had to come back in and merge their companies, forming F&B Consulting Ltd, to stiffen Bannerman’s resolve. Because the nerve comes and goes, as does the height at which he’s been aiming: the warehouse in Barking, East London, has been crammed near solid with remaindered crap of a wildly varying assortment lately, soaking up much of Bannerman’s life, and all of it governed by one of the great eBay-era laws: there is no product so mean as to be without value, in or out of its wrapper, though crazily more so if its clear polymer hymen is still intact. Hence, Bannerman’s trusty laminating machine.

No shortage of explanations for the lack of killings. Excuses include 9/11, obviously, the dotcom crash, and that there was a worldwide services-industry recession on. Well sure. It had been slow even at The Painted Lady, their local café, which was strange because even in a recession Londoners still needed to eat badly. But despite Bannerman’s sincere attempt to help, Fatima, The Lady’s manager, refused to cut her prices in order to capture market share. There was no consulting some people.

Yes, business is slow. In November this happened: Bannerman spent three whole weeks doing an Ethical Consult for some pissy little outfit, just a couple of guys in Shoreditch doing nothing in particular — still it was work — when they, the crappy guys, served him, Bannerman, with an invoice, for *their* three weeks’ consulting.

‘No, see, it’s you two, ethically consulting *us*,’ Bannerman assured them. ‘Honestly.’

‘Exactly,’ goes guy 1. ‘And we expect to be paid for that service.’

Bannerman was like ‘yeah well,’ and there followed a lengthy and unbusinesslike exploration of one another’s shortcomings.

How could this have happened? Bannerman wanted to know, in a pub session afterwards. The guys sighed that they didn’t know either, that they arranged it all very thoroughly with

Bannerman's partner, the big Kiwi bloke, what was his name again, Frodo or something.

'Guys,' Bannerman had said, clapping them both on the shoulders, 'I understand completely.'

But how could he complain? Frito wasn't so much about the hassular paperwork side of things, he was more into the hunter-gatherer fundamentals of Trade. He'd taken to moving alcohol around the Eurozone, arbitraging his way around the excise situation. In August he had a breakthrough at a sushi bar: idly peeling the label from his bottle of beer, he discovered that the UK version of premier Japanese lager 'Asahi' is actually brewed in the Czech Republic. A revelation. This told him that:

Cheap as international shipping was, East European beer was cheaper.

'And it's the best in the world, Bannerman!' So in September, rummaging around Eastern Europe for options, Frito came across a more than usually cheap beer: Sarajevo Pivo, a golden Czech-style pilsner brewed from its own mineral water, which he started selling at a horrendous profit in Hackney that next week. 'Sarajevo' having exactly the right branding for your arty East London crowd: heroic, grime-stained, kind of FTW, hints of Trade for Aid about it, and buyable at £0.12/33cl bottle, cases of 20, half-container shipments, EXW Sarajevska Pivara, dd., 15 Franjevačka, Sarajevo 71000, Bosna i Hercegovina.

Declare for excise in Calais, bring the shipments across in unmarked vans, to be distributed by Reza their hollow-eyed delivery guy. Frito's been getting a markup of 35p a bottle. Sweet as. Though that was only possible as long as the authorities didn't look into all these private weddings Frito's been having, which wasn't a worry, except that Frito had started drinking again, — which interferes with his antipsychotics, and the old Disinhibited Personality Disorder started playing up around customs officials. 'Gentlemen,' Frito wagging Sarajevo empties at them, 'I have of late, wherefore I know not, foregone all Customs & Excise. . .'

Bannerman was aghast. 'You taunted the *authorities*?'

'Don't get your knickers in a knot,' Frito waving a hand through

it, ‘Customs are used to that kind of thing. They enjoy it.’ With something like 50% of all London alcohol smuggled in on reduced excise, Frito’s contribution is — they told him so, shaking their heads at his presumption — ‘small beer, mate.’

Well. Bannerman knew all along that something else was up. Between September and Christmas Frito made maybe a dozen trips down to Sarajevo, with only Reza’s limited conversational palette for company. Supposedly there were exclusive distribution deals to negotiate, marketing splits, labeling issues, organic accreditation, etc. Which shouldn’t in the normal run of things be enough to interest Frito — he’s a high-stimulus guy — but he was *very* interested by something down there. He was drinking again, sure, getting blasted nights down The Rottweiler, but on Sarajevo Pivo no less, buying back at retail the wonderbeer he’d sold them wholesale. Very alien behavior. Diagnostically, it was hard to separate psychotic disinhibition, from love. Bannerman confronted him about it, tapping at Frito’s chest, ‘think someone might have a cru-ush?’

‘Right enough bugalugs — Hilmo Selimović!’ The owner of the Sarajevo brewery.

Frito claimed, defensively, that Sarajevo Pivo did golden things for his ‘mana’ — he wears his Maori mysticism pretty heavily — and generally affected the delicate state of his psyche so joyously and deeply that eventually how could he not get to thinking it maybe had some kind of narcotic content, ‘like early Coca-Cola, mate!’ sidelong leer at Bannerman, nodding, ‘you know what I’m saying?’

Bannerman knows where to file all this. When you’re on antipsychotics for Dishinhibited Personality Disorder, a lot of things affect the delicate state of your psyche. Drugs that wreak major changes on a *persona*, this is not a small thing. With a corresponding swathe of side-effects that some see merely as side-effects, and nothing more sinister, poor fools. But Frito was educated better than that. The old Maori cosmology had a lot

to it that was quaint, vagina-spelunking myths and so on but some deeper truths had found their mark in him, and Frito's wise to the spiritual dimension that Western medicine refuses to acknowledge — knows that mind-altering drugs will necessarily change a man's relationship to his god (whatever that is) and to himself (if that's a different thing) and that the side-effects of antipsychotics are in some way penalties exacted for having to purchase, and not achieve, state of mind. On his own terms, he's a failure.

Bannerman has needled him what the relationship is between the facts that Frito's on antipsychotics, and that he sees it this way. Frito wriggles against it but okay, if Bannerman wants it that way, fine. Anything to force his major point through. Conservation of Emotion:

His assumption is there's a whole Mephistophelean exchange-rate out there, administered if you like by spirit-world *atua*, sprites, for the whole or part-sale of souls. Frito's is out on leasehold. Take antipsychotics like Zyprexa, for stability, and the price includes reduced cognitive speed. Hypersensitivity to the sun's another one, also white bloodcell loss, plus amusing brain effects like uncontrollable pattern recognition, diminished concept of body-safety and indifference to the emotions of others. . . Frito's got all those. Bundle them up behind a face looks like it could hammer in nails and a voice like an idling lorry, and the girls go down like skittles. Not that he *minds*, — sex is great stuff, he's just bemused at how readily they throw themselves under the wheels of a boy's indifference. Ego. A need to perturb. Still, he doesn't feel abnormal, but accepts that if the rest of the world says he is then, OK, by definition, — so he'll take his normal pills, and wonder, often aloud, how he managed to get born into a species of herd-animals.

'Admit it. You are in love, aren't you,' Bannerman says once they're on the road. Around Augsburg, Germany. It's a two-day drive in the Transit van, grey-green in all the windows, F&B cap

jammed solid in the back, and a little Christmas tree dancing from the rearview.

‘I . . . *am* feeling things I’ve never felt before,’ Frito confesses. ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s so pure, I can’t tell you. And it feels *wetter* than everything else, if that makes sense, actually *wet* on the inside. . . I suppose that’s because it’s made from its own mineral water, y’know? that has percolated down through the rugged beauty of the Dinaric Alps to an underground lake, whence it is drawn by the brewery’s three artesian wells, which may draw water at a rate of 100 litres per second.’

Bannerman scratches his head testily. ‘Not sure you need that figure in there.’

‘But what a brand! Sarajevo — the reluctant hero, the cosmopolitan warrior, the hedonist, an intoxicating whiff of dissent. . .’

‘Intoxicating Whiff?’ Bannerman frowns. A new addition to the basic template Frito used to use on bar managers back in London, trolling his wares round the trendy drinkeries of Shoreditch and Hoxton.

‘. . . what about “plucky underdog”, Bannerman? You think that works?’

‘Dude, why are you still doing this? You planning on selling it back to the Bosnians?’

But Frito doesn’t reply. Only the hum of tires on the German road and the rain on the hood, very uterine.

‘Sorry,’ tension flowing at last from his body. ‘It’s just, there’s something funny going on. I keep getting these shivers, mate. Started in the autumn, when I’d go through the sales pitch. It was no use saying parts of it. I had to do the whole thing, like the Nicene Creed, and at the end I’d get this whole— bellyful of— fantastical feelings inside my mana. It was the order of the words. A magic spell I guess. A poem.’

‘Fantastical feelings?’

Frito rubs fat fingers through his sandpaper jaw. ‘Take this plucky underdog thing.’

‘It works.’

‘Yeah maybe. . .’ shaking his head.

‘Sure it does. Bar managers love it, right? The British anyway, rooting for the underdog, Dunkirk and all that?’

‘Forget that. Think of it for a second not as a sales pitch, but — let’s say — an explanation. Can’t help wondering, Bannerman: how *did* Sarajevo survive?’

‘Them underdogs had pluck.’

‘Seriously.’

‘Uh,’ Bannerman narrows his eyes at Frito, thinks he may have missed the tone here. ‘Is this a quest?’

‘Sarajevo *couldn’t* survive, Bannerman! I just don’t think it could have. Listen to this. On the one hand, right, you’ve got this vulnerable little town, see? two or three hundred thousand people, a *small* town the size of like Chichester, surrounded by high ground on all sides. And they had no defences, army, no weapons, nothing. Minding their own business. So this undefended little town is attacked, right, out of the blue, by this enormous army of homicidal rednecks, all of em ideologically motivated, veterans and armed to the teeth. Tanks, artillery, planes, everything. And the Yugoslav Army just *emptied* itself on them. They let em have it, right, for four years — they besiege Sarajevo for four *years*, Bannerman, — and they still can’t capture it.’ Frito pauses. ‘So my question to you, Bannerman,’ throwing an index finger at him, ‘is what the fuck?’

An expectant pause. Bannerman knows his cues. Frito will wait for him to begin speaking before cutting him off. ‘Probably—’

‘It *isn’t* possible. Sarajevo was *surrounded*. They had no access to weapons, food, ammunition, diesel, water — the Serbs were poisoning the river, — and they held out for longer than anything in the Second World War.’

Bannerman doesn’t really know about these things. ‘Maybe they—’

‘It’s not possible, Bannerman. I’m telling you.’

‘Personally I put it down to their remarkable pluck.’

‘And every time I gave that little speech, to every bar manager in town, I’d get to that point and see it begin to work on them,

and they'd be like: oh yeah, that *is* good going, good old Sarajevo — except — every time I said it, it was also working on *me*.' Frito listens briefly to the echo of his own words. 'Some flip paradox I been peddling around, that now *I* have to solve. The biter bit. I'm like, *hang* about: how *did* they? Longest siege for 400 years?'

'Th—'

'It isn't possible. I'm telling you. They had more *men* sure, I mean, they were living there, right? But no weapons. There was the arms embargo, they couldn't get any, I just don't see how they could of held out.' Banging a fist in a palm. 'There's something we're missing, Bannerman. It just isn't possible.'

Which has a note of finality, but Bannerman's not fooled. Frito has form here. 'Impossible?'

'Not explainable by *science*, anyway.'

Bannerman nods knowingly.

'And sure, you nod your scrawny little nod all you like mate, but saying something's not explainable by science doesn't mean it's *supernatural*. Necessarily. Might mean it's just explainable by like, history or geography or something. Latin.'

'Sorry wait, you think it's *not* supernatural?'

'Well just — hang about a minute. Let's not even pre-judge that whole issue, alright? Let's just call it something "Other" for now. So there had to've been some kind of "Other" thing that kept the city protected. Am I right?'

'Wasn't that the UN?'

'So—' Frito pauses to look at Bannerman doubtfully, decides to ignore this egregious lapse of taste, 'so I was thinking, I wonder what that "Other" thing might be. If someone were to find out? what that thing was? maybe harness that power? well, that'd really be something, wouldn't it. If only someone knew what it was, Bannerman.' And Frito, holding a Sarajevo Pivo with its label pointing at Bannerman, drinks meaningfully.

Bannerman drives on, chin on chest, lets the noise of the wind outside have a whole minute to itself, then two, but Frito's getting impatient, okay better get this over with:

‘Frito,’ looking up, ‘do *you* have any idea what—’

‘As a matter of fact I do. — Because, and I found this out only the other day, that during that entire time, for that entire siege, you had men and boys going to the front line with like single rounds in their rifles, and guns made of bloody *plumbing* Bannerman, and during that entire time, — listen to this — during that entire time, half the city was already captured by the Serbs, and during that *entire* time, you listening mate?’ — Frito seems to require more attention than Bannerman can singlehandedly provide—

‘During that entire time, the brewery never stopped producing beer.’

‘Who doesn’t like beer?’

‘They barely had any *water!*’

‘So they must have been thirsty. Nothing like a beer when you’re thi—’

‘No! It takes like five litres of water to make one of beer. They were using their precious water to make beer with, Bannerman! What’s that tell you?’

‘They like beer?’

‘Tells *me* that it was incredibly important. More important than can be accounted for by just being, you know, “beer”. . . ? fatly pinching his lips, ‘that it must have had some “Other” significance. . . and when you put that next to this indomitable little town, inexplicably holding out against the invaders. . . ’

‘Holy shit,’ Bannerman suddenly getting fantastical feelings of his own, featuring physical harm to his business partner, ‘tell me you’re not thinking like, magic potion?’

Frito spreads his hands. ‘I don’t want to be the one to say it—’

‘Jesus god.’ Bannerman heating up fast. ‘At least tell me this is not why we’re moving to Sarajevo fucking Bosnia? Tell me at least it’s because you’re in love with some girl? Or boy— christ, even a boy would do at this point?’

There’s a pause while Frito maybe weighs up the admissable answers here, eyes looking for a resting-place, before his shoulders

drop and he mumbles, like a child who knows he's done wrong, 'substantial killings.'

'That's more like it.'

And the rest of the roadtrip passes without incident, through Austria and out of the Schengen Area, down the Croatian coast, into Bosnia-Herzegovina and up the Neretva Valley, motoring past Mostar and Konjic and up into the snowline and soon a darkening watercolor east, cloudbank high above the mountains still lit pink by a western radiance that flashes from the wing-mirrors, the indigo shadow of their own vehicle four or five lengths ahead and swinging away across the brown-iced road. And singing along to the Breeders' *Drivin' on 9* which has never sounded so good, pulling on Sarajevo Pivos, and approaching the idea that this strange feeling might be happiness. Bannerman's going somewhere new, with all the corresponding illusions of progress, might just be what the AA — that's drinkers not drivers — calls a geographical cure, but he's ambitious and optimistic and alone with his best friend in the world, with a new life opening in front of them, and possibilities in every direction.

* * * * *

'Clare,' they both say, shaking hands.

'At last, the great Bannerman,' she says, 'Frito's told me so much about—'

But Bannerman's only half there and unable to deal with what he's seeing, there's something different-species here about the intensity of freckles, all over her forehead and ears and *on her lips*, skin-colored lips of a beauty not thought possible, not by anyone, not until now — a girl short and minty and highly evolved for camouflage in brown sugar, save for those intense black-lined eyes and those lips, soft brown-dotted lips, which incidentally might as well be talking Bosnian for all he can register what they're saying—

Almost two weeks in and this is the first time he's been allowed to meet her. After the bleak numbness of London he's suddenly drastically alive, and through all the Sarajevo Pivo he knows a Class A girl when he sees one. An instant dependency. He knows; he's had enough first hits by now. She's amazing. Dragging a hand down his face, suddenly he absolutely must have the one girl in the world who is out of bounds. A strangled hunchback moan leaks out of his mouth, a slow mournful noise that starts with a 'cr' and heads lugubriously towards a 'p'.

'Excuse me?' Clare's eyebrows are all ears.

'Sorry, just a — quick, moan of pain, there.'

'You're in pain?'

'Yeah no sorry, I just — remembered something, about — ethnic cleansing. Anyway, you were saying?'

Clare smiles sweetly. 'I was saying don't you hate it when people moan while you're talking.'

New Year's Eve in Sarajevo. People are promenading in their hundreds up and down the wedding-cake splendor of Ferhadija Street, just seeing and being seen, from the Eternal Flame past all the lingerie shops and bars, along the low medieval bazaars of Sarači Street to Pigeon Square, and back again. Clockwise. It's a Sarajevo thing. They're all fleece hats and pink noses and sexy glances, a goodlooking town, done up tonight in exotic party kit: transparent moonboots, feather boa hats, spray-on jeans and stained-glass handbags, an entire gentleman's suit made of a fabric that says Sretna Nova Godina in pink on black, — and all of it something else for Bannerman to feel too old for, being only a slight formalization of the situation he'd been facing back in London, where the teenagers also speak a different language. Enormous music pulses in everyone's ankles. Smoking is absolutely compulsory.

And Bannerman has remembered it all. This freckled girl has crashed down on him like old toys from a forgotten closet, unopened for twenty years. . . there are memories in his head he didn't even know were there, about *this exact girl*. And here, now, having leapfrogged the smalltalk in one easy bound,

International American accent, a sarcastic eyebrow expectant as a microphone, *this is her*.

‘No, I like it when people moan,’ says Bannerman, quick riposte, ‘frankly any way I can get someone to moan’s fine by me.’

‘Sexual double entendres, okay,’ Clare nodding, ‘I can see how you might want to, throw out a few of those, to — let everyone know what kind of person you are.’

‘Yeah, they are great,’ Bannerman bares his front teeth thoughtfully, ‘and when I can’t think of one? I could drop *sack* on a dude’s ass.’

Clare blinks. ‘This phrase has not come to Switzerland yet. But I think I can visualize—’

‘Violence,’ hurriedly, ‘that one was a violent entendre. Not sexual. Really.’

But she’s looking doubtful.

‘Plus it was a single entendre! “On someone’s ass” is a preposition of violence see, not like *affection*, you’re not *balancing* something on, you know, the Cheeks, — and “sack” is — well. No-one really knows what sack is.’

‘I think I do.’

‘No you don’t.’

‘And I think you do too.’

‘No no no it’s violence. I’m American see, it’s *always* violence.’

‘So, say. . .’ searching the crowd for a suitably handsome man, ‘if *that* guy told me he wanted to drop his sack on my ass, that would mean. . .?’

‘Just “sack”, not “his” sack.’

‘Okay fine whatever,’ shrugging it away, ‘clearly it’s none of my business, it’s between you and your therapist.’

‘I’m not in therapy!’

‘Evidently.’

She sparkles. Bannerman winds up for a thumping comeback but she’s not letting him off the back foot: ‘A therapist might suggest you confuse sex and violence—’

‘I’m pretty clear on the difference.’

‘—which of course you’re in denial about, but nevertheless

you tell a girl you've just met that you like to beat people up?'

'Well but hey that's just a standard hip-hop type—'

'A girl you are attracted to, no?'

Bannerman goldfishes. 'What, you?'

'When you say you like to beat people up, you're advertising your sexual suitability, I think?'

'No! It's just an ironic whiteboy sort of—'

'Meaning you'd like to have sex (I have to assume), with *me*, correct?'

'Whoa now Doktor Fräulein, enough with the—! *Crazy* wide of the—. I mean you're cute and all but—. Let's move on.'

'You don't get turned on by violence, Bannerman? Guns?'

'Guns a device for Sticking It In from a distance, sure.'

'Fights?' leaning closer, '*Beatings?*'

'Is this like the Am I A War Criminal questionnaire?'

'Nationality test. Real Americans are turned on by violence.'

'How am I doing?'

'You tell me,' frowning, 'you tell me if you wouldn't like,' eyes all sarcastic childlike innocence, 'to come round to my apartment, middle of the day some time,' finger trailing down her neck, 'and beat *me* up?'

Bannerman freezes. — Caught in the highbeam of those eyes burning with an impotent rage, stuck for answers, and wondering what do you do when the girl of your dreams turns out to be a man-hater?

Finally: 'inflamed rotator cuff,' regretfully massaging his shoulder.

Clare collapses into a smile. Her sudden bitterness cleared with a single line. 'Poor thing,' tilting her head the other way.

'Yeah. No strength at all. I haven't successfully pulled a Christmas cracker all winter.'

'Have you pulled anything all winter?'

'I see Frito's briefed you.'

Shaking her head, 'Feminine intuition.'

But she has a glittering smile for him anyway. He's passed some sort of test. 'Bannerman listen, great to meet you and all

this, but how about we get to know each other while we look for Himself in front of the band . . . ?’ and leading him by the hand through the street parties, the burek stalls, the goldfish vendors trying to keep their stock defrosted, and up the decibel contours towards where The Seams are playing in front of the Catholic cathedral.

Jesus. He’s heard, this is how it is with stage hypnosis. Nominally you’re in your brain, perfectly alert — just dragged along in a slipstream of charisma, without the energy to disengage the grip of that white wrist, too thin, too fine, an epidemic of freckles and a long straight vein up the bone. . . disappearing into a fitted gray skjacket, the reflector patches down front and back observing the curves of her body. . . a mind as agile and defenseless as deer, an articulacy of soul wasted on a coarse world, her breath colder than ordinary air, and with a touch more oxygen, and his own togetherness beginning to flow easier, rather than the strangled hunchback moans that normally crawl dead from his lips. . .

‘Cool kind of, *fiesta nevada*, they got here!’ Bannerman calls out to some passing Spanish soldiers. The garrison in town is Spanish, this year.

‘Well maybe tonight you’ll get lucky,’ Clare turning round at him, ‘you can’t hook up on New Year’s Eve, you’re in all kinds of trouble.’

‘Not sure I’ve ever hooked up on New Year’s Eve.’

‘Good idea,’ considering him, ‘a sympathy play probably is your best bet.’

‘Specially at this sort of, “fiesta nevada”, here.’

‘Yes *okay*. Snowy party, the only two words of Spanish you know, clever.’

‘So acknowledge it then!’

‘What, you need people to acknowledge what let’s call, for the sake of argument, your jokes?’

‘I like obsequious laughter as much as the next guy.’

Clare does what will turn out to be her standard sly smile, with lazy eyes following a moment behind. ‘Alright,’ accusatory finger on his chest, ‘only I have this bee in my bonnet about

girls doing all the giggling. I'd like to see equality of laughter, you know? Basically what I'm saying is: you can take it, but can you dish it out?'

Bannerman has a stab at a tinkling little laugh.

'Amateur.' She does hers, and Bannerman's head explodes. The blast directed upwards into the starry sky, his headless body with singed neck tumbling slowly into the snow. . .

'Co-ed boarding-school,' and Clare launches into a no doubt familiar tirade about gender-roles, and submission through giggling. When she's finished: 'all right, you can stop your fake, little — tittering now.'

'That's my real laugh,' says Bannerman.

And Clare stops plowing through the crowd, and turns to look at him again. A re-evaluation, searching from eye to eye, for whatever's real, in there under all the clown . . . until it slides off at last, crumbling into amusement again, not without sarcasm and in a high register: 'dick,' she says, with a chuckle and a shake of the head. . .

And twenty yards of crowd away are The Seams, playing the first bars of their eponymous break-out track, These Are The Seams Along Which You Will One Day Rip: and here are girls in FKŽeljo tops bodysurfing on the crowd, here are barbecue embers fluttering like tracer rounds into a starry sky, and here is Clare Leischman smiling out of fat dotted lips, clean against a jostling world, with confetti butterflies fluttering around . . . and here now an electric-green lens flare from the stage lights, sliding out of the night sky and down between their faces. . .

Five minutes in and this is the best girl he has ever met.

But how can he avoid seeing in hallucinogenically vivid detail the thing, the one unavoidable thing here: the thing involving Frito's shimmering Polynesian buttocks, eyes rolled back into their sockets, swinging strands of saliva hanging from a depraved German Shepherd leer, small feminine whimpers beneath him?

Bannerman lets out a strangled hunchback moan.

'Genocide this time?'

'Listen, Clare,' conspiratorial, 'can you bear with me a second?'

‘Sure,’ expectantly, little smile, perfect gums candypink above whitewhite teeth.

The call-centre brushoff. Bannerman nods her thankyou and turns, drifts vaguely away, on undirected feet though the subzero boozing, and disappears into the crowd.

‘Oh there you are Leischman,’ says Frito, rocking up with his hands full of the wonderbeer, ‘what have you done with my friend?’

And so the crowdian motion carries Bannerman off into the Great Sarajevan Promenade, past hat stalls, happening bars, čevapi shops and frizerski salons, a girl in fur chaps and holsters dispensing slivovic, some kind of graffiti-off down an alley, paramedics freeing the frozen lamp-post kissers. But his eyes are all inside, sadly reading the writing. The message couldn’t be clearer: the less time he spends with that girl, the happier he’ll be in the long run.

Because the unopened closet, the one he didn’t even know was there, has told him everything. *She* is the girl who has made love to him, and who never said anything. When Bannerman has lain back over the years, eyes screwed shut and wanking onto his stomach, an array of different women will have passed through all possible and impossible positions in his mind, not just fantasy women but also women that existed — and of all these pure & applied impersonations astride him, looking around at him over perfect rumps, undoing incandescent white uniforms, leaning with palms flat on his chest, on their backs gasping in a horror of pleasure at the splendid carnage he’s making of them, looking down flat stomachs, shaking out cascades of hair, crisp slick-backs, angular 80s’ buzzcuts, gloss red mouths, plump bloodless heroin-colored lips, cracked dried lips, lovebites on jugulars, runs of icewhite hair up the golden spines of California girls, the white-magenta mottling of inner thighs, sharp conical tits, tits with perfect spherical undersides, swinging tits as big as a head, beautiful faces gone ugly with orgasm. . . his mind sifting fast

through this whole fantasy rolodex for the one that's going to work tonight—

There will have been phases when he kept settling on:

A slight, bright girl. Maybe a little awkward. Painted in very high-definition skin, so bright it's flirting with hospital-scrub green, threadcount beyond anything he's felt before and absolutely *dipped* in freckles: tiny and beige on the forehead, maturing to bold sienna summers on her nose and cheeks, a fall of brown inkblots on angular shoulders; with sleek lateral panels, under her arms, less freckled. Sometimes freckles is *all* she was — all of her gone except a wireframe shell of freckles that bucked and writhed against him. . .

In these fantasies their ages have been variable. Often he was fourteen again, back in his mom's house in St Paul, Minnesota, and she was a friend of his sister's, eighteen, leaning in his door-jamb, popping gum and full of amused contempt. Sometimes *she* was the kid, a little sassmouth playing at womanliness but with nothing to say but a giant O when she wriggled down onto his haggard 29-year-old cock.

Mostly they were both older, lean undergraduates in someone's four-poster, or later on yuppies in a white duvet awakening somewhere on the rainblown shores of a gray sea, weather smeared up against all the windows, and she would screw him leaning back on her elbows, facing him, the outside curves of breasts dancing in break-beat syncopation with her hips, sinews defining the corners of her neck, the slack lassitude of a gorging hedonist but doubt always about her, even when she came, which she did silently, eyeballs fluttering behind closed lids, her chin set to 'imperious', and a vague smile on her mouth. Though rarely of admiration.

He absolutely recognized her. This being from the perfect dimensions, transposed into the crummy phenomenal world. Everything in him wants to reach out and protect her, save the winter-fresh optimism inside her from every kind of shittiness, protected as she is only by the thinnest of cynicisms, an ill-fitting persona worn just to get by. He knows exactly who she is already.

— But he didn't know that she would come out Swiss, — yes that was a surprise.

Oh, crud. The one Frito finally falls for, is his. An imperfect situation. He wanders, muddled in the snowy alleys and the Sarajevo Pivo, tries to eat a čevapi, the local sausage-sandwich, but even shitfaced his mouth won't allow it and it crawls out of his mouth and into a bin. Instead he sits at the water-fountain in Sebilj Square, frozen for the winter, and smokes wistfully, and considers how to handle this, — but it's not long before he finds his thoughts turning to the correlation between alfresco wistfulness and warm weather, and he has nowhere else to go but back.

'Colorscheme of Hazardsigns' is, as advertised, a nightclub in black and yellow, where the tables and booths revolve — a lovely u.s.p., but more importantly it's too expensive for the locals. Instead it's a lazy ebbing and flowing of Westerners, catapulted into Society-grade wealth by dint of exchange-rate. Everything is cheap. Not least, consequently, jokes about the host culture ('You ate čevapi? Darling, you'd have to be near starvation and insanity, simultaneously, to eat one of them'). But these are well-meaning people who didn't even go home for New Year, who are out here helping this country and just trying to have a good time, like anyone. 'Polako' is the name of the game, which literally means 'slowly', but which translates somewhere between 'mañana' and 'non preoccuparti', and that's how life is taken by this rump contingent of embassy staff, lawyers, soldiers, engineers, Irish girls in pointy shoes who press their cheeks together at regular intervals for the benefit of a camera, auditors, guidebook writers with a bad case of Bosnia Is A State Of Mind, some slick new MBAs, quiet Frenchmen in yellow sweaters and boat shoes, Swedes and Australians swapping bloodthirstiest warcrime stories. . . each with their place in the vast system of Dayton Money, and all smoking as though they've got Serbs for lungs.

'Nice place,' shouts Bannerman.

'If you like this kind of thing,' shouts Frito.

But that's alright. In the main room, there's little scope for talking anyway. Bannerman has to scream in some Portuguese girl's ear to offer her a drink, and she says yes, and the dull lust in her eyes is keeping him motivated all the way to the bar and back, though he has to fight through a dreamscape of pounding bass, writhing limbs, soulful rock songs from a few years back, and people screaming, though from exuberance or what, it's not clear. In this room there's any number of twentysome-things dry- or actually wet-humping on the dancefloor. Fighting back through the throng, holding his drinks above the crowd, Bannerman's easy prey, and disembodied hands rake up and down his back, his face, one down the front of his trousers, another through his wallet, by the time he's back to the Portuguese girl his jeans are around his knees and both glasses are empty. Oh well. Portuguese girl is then grabbed by some guy with cheekbones like he's got a weapons cache in there, who starts grinding himself against her pelvic floor. Her eyes slide shut, her head lolls back, and they disappear into the crowd.

'What's not to like!' shouts Bannerman.

'Hey— where'd you get to!' shouts Clare.

He leans down to speak into her ear, nose brushing her cold hair, 'I had to go take care of this thing!'

'I didn't think so!'

Bannerman smiles lopsidedly.

'Come on then, start over!' she says. — 'What?' — 'Start over!' — 'At what!' — 'Impressing me!'

Bannerman steps back to frown at her. Her eyes challenge him to deny it. So he leads her by the wrist through an obstacle course of dancers, scrimmages, revolving tables and waitresses to a quieter bar at the back, still crammed as full with people, though not with sound. 'So— what?' he says, 'you're offering me a second chance at first impressions?' — 'Why not?'

'Well uh,' Bannerman frowning at this weirdness, 'is that yours to offer?'

'In this town, you don't have to have something to sell it.'

Nodding, 'Sounds like Frito's rubbing off on you.'

‘We did that the first night.’

‘Classy.’ But he felt it all right, and throws back some more slivovic to neutralize. ‘I don’t know about this meeting each other again thing. . . wasn’t so bad the first time?’

She’s like ‘speak for yourself,’ with large comic eyes.

He shines. Already with the affectionate abuse. ‘So how do you like Sarajevo?’

‘Fantastic! Love it!’

Bannerman takes another look at her. ‘Didn’t think so.’

Clare clinks her glass against his. ‘Alright, I admit, sometimes it gets a bit. . .’ wagging her head.

‘Sure.’

‘There’s only so much raping a girl can take.’

An old line around her office. Where the humor is for obvious reasons very gallows. Turns out she’s with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)’s Office of The Prosecutor (OTP), specializing in violence against women. But Bannerman doesn’t rise, just nods thoughtfully, wise enough to the thin ice here to know that while she can make wisecracks about such things, he can’t. Such wisdom suddenly. Just her presence makes him competent, and somehow he knows not to doubt the taste of such comments, no not even with his eyes.

‘The usual stuff about coping mechanisms,’ with a wave of her hand. ‘Come on, let’s do this right. Buy me a drink.’

‘I totally would love to?’ peering into his wallet, mysteriously empty of Bosnian Konvertible Marks (KM), ‘you ever get the feeling your wallet metabolizes cash straight into receipts, without any human intervention?’

‘Got a good metabolism, your wallet?’

‘One of those metabolisms girls like to pretend they’ve got.’

‘Oh, that’s so annoying,’ Clare puts on an annoyer’s voice: ‘I eat like a horse, me, and never put on *any* weight. Haven’t a clue *where* it goes!’

‘Right,’ agrees Bannerman, ‘straight down the toilet.’

Clare pauses, a little movement of the head, squints at Bannerman. ‘Isn’t that where it’s supposed to. . . ?’

‘Straight *back* down the toilet, I mean.’ — ‘*Back?*’ — ‘Not, back as in: having come from there — I mean, they don’t pass it *through* their digestive systems, it’s just visiting, in and out, toe-in-the-water— fuck,’ deep breath, start again: ‘I suspect many girls of recreational bulimia.’

‘Recreational?’ — ‘Sure. It’s fun, in then out again.’ — ‘Fun though?’ — ‘Course. Don’t you like putting food in you?’ — ‘Are you referring to eating?’ — ‘Actually that’s not a bad business model,’ Bannerman’s jaw set to one side, ‘so the contraceptive pill gave women sex without consequences, if you could come up with something to give people *eating* without consequences. . . double the target market for starters. . .’

‘Olestra?’

‘I was thinking more some kind of throat-condom. Or femidom, I suppose. What drug mules do. You go along for a nice dinner party, you’d have to get all the alcohol in first — then everyone would fit their throat-femidoms, awkward, bit of retching, then you throw back all this food, and at the end, everyone pulls theirs out, like a colostomy bag see, and all you compare how much you managed to keep down.’

‘Appealing image.’

‘I’m an appealing guy.’

Clare blinks slowly. ‘You are, somewhat.’

Bannerman smiles, and she smiles back, and the room is filled with stars. Oh man. He has to get out of there, and tells her so.

‘You’re ending our conversation?’ — ‘I am.’ — ‘Why? I thought it’s going okay.’ — ‘It is.’ — ‘Why then?’

Bannerman tries to wriggle out from under this one.

‘Because I’m Frito’s?’ — ‘That’ll do.’ — ‘What, you’re not even *interested* in speaking to me if I’m not sexually available?’ — ‘That’s not it.’ — ‘You can always go home with Victoria, the French one, you know.’ — ‘That’s good to know.’ — ‘It’ll only take ten minutes at the end of the night. She’s into you.’ — ‘That’s great.’ — ‘No? What then?’ — ‘Bye bye, Clare.’ — ‘Tell me!’ — Bannerman rubs his hair, frustrated. ‘Just — let me speak to someone else.’ — ‘I’m boring you?’ — ‘So not.’ —

‘You think it’s not a good idea?’ — ‘Roughly.’ — ‘Not a good idea, like throat-femdoms are not a good idea?’ — ‘They are an excellent idea.’ — ‘Not a good idea, like you’re *wary*?’ — ‘I am a naturally wary person.’ — ‘You’re wary of your best friend finding out you were *speaking* to me?’ shrugging at an invisible jury. Bannerman smiles and shakes his head. Clare arches an eyebrow. ‘*Wary of the intensity of your feelings?*’

Bannerman can’t keep a smile down. ‘Take it easy, you.’

Clare shines at him. ‘The Prosecution rests.’

But he can’t tear himself away. ‘Where’s it resting tonight?’ real casual.

Clare smiles and screws him in the eyes for maybe five seconds straight. ‘With Frito,’ she says at last. ‘Your best friend.’

‘Oh yeah,’ and he gives himself a mock slap upside the chops.

Clare reaches up to massage his shoulder. ‘At least your rotator cuff is better.’

And that’s pretty much how the expat scene plays for Bannerman: at cocktail parties, dinners, gigs, farewell bashes at CityPub, Embassy receptions of one flavor or another — always in permutations drawn from a pool of maybe fifty simpatico First-Worlders, of whom Clare Leischman is overwhelmingly his favorite. A slow underwater grace takes them both; he anyway feels like an elite conversationalist, the jokes are effortless and lighthearted, and always pressing up against the walls of what’s acceptable. . .

It’s a welcoming scene. Memory and judgment smudged by all the excellent and cheap alcohol, everyone living in the same acre of city and not disinclined to physical companionship, life in Sarajevo quickly becomes a motion-blur of people hanging onto decades-long adolescences. Relationships form and dissolve with college intensity. Couples go up to Park Prinčeva restaurant for sundowners over the city, and wave at the couples at the neighboring two tables, all six having been there before in a different combination. It’s a campus, and that’s family enough. All stiffened by high daytime ideals and a weirdness that never

really goes beyond the eccentric. Like this Danish character Joren, from the Office of the High Representative (OHR), who's decided Bannerman's going to be the recipient this year, all year, of his observations on women. 'See this girl here!' dragging him away, 'I think she is an Aviation Blonde, yes! You know what this is! Yellow hair, black box! Ha, ha! Yes, you think so!' elbowing him keenly.

'Colorscheme of hazardsigns,' says Bannerman.

And for a few weeks reluctantly fending off Clare Leischman, mornings at the literally byzantine apartment he now shares with Frito above the Turkish quarter, Clare comes into the breakfast room all shower-fresh hair and a grin that lets you know it's been freshly fucked. 'Sleep well?' she says, knowing full well that Bannerman has lain awake all night watching the lightbulbs swing.

'Morning Ban-O,' Frito sweeping through with a hunk of toast in his mouth, peeling off some 100 KM notes for Clare, 'mate, would you mind driving Clare to work? Got to go see a man about a dog. . .' and out the door again, leaving him alone with her eyes.

And little respite outside in the city. Because there seem to be three or four Clare Leischmans now, at least one at every party he goes to and all speaking different languages, brief floodlit moments of mascara and killer smile before glancing away again, dissolving into chitchat. . . nothing more than torturing him, and not only because she can. Seems to be a genuine pleasure for her, stretching in front of him first thing in the morning, holding her hair up so he can clasp necklaces before parties, making sure she is seen again and again in improbable places, glowing from within her constellation of freckles, fingertips like butterflies across Bannerman's back as she insinuates herself into his conversational circle, some quickfire exchange of sass between them before Bannerman can move out of range and try to disinflect his heart with alcohol, but she's already somewhere else when he arrives, gloss lips wide open and laughing at another man's joke.

Aw c'mon. Frito's his *best friend*. Bannerman makes listless

attempts to console himself with other girls that collapse with spectacular damage to everyone's ego. But it always comes back to Clare, she's the golden thread, every evening his eyes scan for freckles in the promenade. He cannot stop from doing it, and his heart lurches before he even knows what he's seeing — oh just a Bosnian girl, freckles, hijab on, seventeen tops. When the real Clare's lashes flick up with a clang he is twice as alive, twice the data between them, in her every hint of eyebrow semaphore which he implicitly understands, and which she understands that he understands.

And so in not too many days, after a going-away party at which he watched Frito treat her with an indifference bordering on scorn, he'll sit up all night in the window-room of their apartment over Bašćaršija, smoking and watching the city-valley and its galaxy of streetlights fade to nothing under the dawn's maybe three inches of snow. Muezzins will call the morning in, hatch-backs and trams will clang along Marshal Tito Street, and he'll contemplate his monochrome world: dead black trees on the white slopes, white carapaces on a chaos of Ottoman brickwork, grades of cast-iron and steel, a nobility of minarets and towerblocks undulating into the hazy western distance, and the roof of every building blessed with snow in the night, transfigured by the white of peace.

Or ceasefire, anyway. Fuck it. Reckoning his odds at 40%, and even though just the attempt will end his friendship with Frito, he'll finally give up not trying to get her. He's going to move in on his best friend's girlfriend. Contemplating this most taboo of betrayals with that special equanimity given by the last cigarette in the pack, smoked at dawn, — which soon he'll stub out and head to bed, and wake up after lunch, stretching like a dog, and feeling absolutely awesome.