

Heartsick · *Douglas Glover*

“MY EIGHTH HUSBAND, PUTZI, HATED . . .”

Constanza Heboyan, millionairess and one-time owner of The Ever-Ready, a brothel in Tonopah, Nevada, tried to remember what Putzi had hated. Nothing came to mind. Now that she thought of it, she wasn't even sure she had married Putzi.

Constanza was sitting alone on a stone bench at the foot of the garden where the River Ulm cut the property of the Karl-Gustav Institute for the Elderly Insane into two pieces. Beyond the river was a park (there was a stone footbridge), but no one ever went there. No one Constanza knew could walk that far. Past the institute wall there rose a large tree-covered hill which the Germans called Kaiserstuhl. Constanza rendered this loosely as “King Shit” but no one else got the joke because no one else spoke English. And she knew they weren't German; they were really Austrian.

She remembered now that she hadn't married Putzi. If she had, her name would have been Respighi instead of Heboyan. Heboyan was the nice Armenian shipowner who used to pout when she refused to get out of bed to look at his little boats. The money was Heboyan's. Putzi came later, when she had to pay to get laid.

She sighed and clutched the pit of her belly (rubbing dry sticks to make a fire) and imagined riding around the room on Putzi's cock. Biting his cheeks til the blood came. His prosthetic boot going CLOMP-clomp in unison with his hard-on. She shouting: *Ho Hephaestos! Ha Vulcan, my crippled god! Fuck me, you ninny!*

(He had lost a foot in the war; Hephaestos—because he was poet laureate of the Communist Metal Workers League in Perugia. There are reasons for everything.)

CLOMP-clomp. CLOMP-clomp.

That Putzi!

. . .

In the papers that morning she had read of a girl made pregnant in a terrible rape. The girl had taken a knife and stabbed herself through the stomach to kill the baby in her womb.

Sometimes strong measures are necessary . . .

I knew you would understand, Putzi.

She had confronted Gar Osten as he returned from his daily constitutional (from the institute door to the edge of the patio and back, supporting himself on a four-footed walker).

"It is generally recognized," she said, "that orgasm probably doesn't increase the heart rate more than climbing two flights of stairs."

He gazed at her uncomprehendingly (all brawn and no brain . . . a real mensch), a string of drool running from his chin to his collar. (Got to make him while he's still alive. Fucking dead men doesn't count.)

"You see, darling, you have nothing to fear. It's perfectly safe."

He cocked his head like a dog in an effort to understand.

"Are you deaf?"

Gar Osten grinned enthusiastically and began to manoeuvre his walker between Constanza and the doorjamb. At the same moment she let go one of her canes and made a grab for his trouser front (piss-stained, prostate the size of a baseball).

"I hope you don't think I'm one of those aggressive women . . ."

Gar Osten twisted frantically in his walker, his eyes rolling with fear. (Did you see his hips move? she thought. The man is still capable!) She missed his crotch and went crashing to the flagstones with a concussion that knocked her false teeth out of her mouth.

". . . but I feel we have so little time."

She raised her head and straightened her glasses in time to see all six legs of him scuttling crablike towards the married patients wing, his breath coming in grunts (HUNH-hunh, HUNH-hunh), his tall thin (that's not skin; God spray-painted his bones) body bent like a bow over the walker as he fled. (So distinguished, she thought. So Nordic. Even if he is incontinent.) At the far door, Berte, his wife, waiting to meet him, looking anxiously over his shoulder at . . .

. . .

Connie, what are you in here for?

Oh, Putzi, I'm ashamed. I exposed myself in front of a busload of tourists bound for the Salzburger Festival. I am told I ruined their holiday.

And the doctors? What do they call it?

Exhibitionism, nymphomania, senile dementia, despair. "The appetitive compo-

nent of the patient's eroto-genital function shows marked development for a woman of eighty-three." Don't look at me, Putzi. My cunt's in good nick, but my implants have slipped.

Like grapes that wither for want of pressing.

Caro mio, you were a bad poet. I suffer from old loves.

. . .

Constanza had intercepted the couple following their 11 a.m. consultation with Dr. Goedelfinger.

"My dear Gar Osten," she began. "I understand that, despite the recent revolution in sexual mores, some men remain fastidious in matters relating to conjugation. I perceive that the unfortunate incident this morning has given you an incorrect impression . . ."

His head tossing, eyes sliding wildly from side to side, nostrils flaring steed-like, Berte tugging at his elbow, Gar Osten jerked and rolled his walker past Constanza and down the corridor.

"Madame!" she shouted. (She had always been able to attract attention to herself when it was necessary.) "Release that man at once. Don't you think he's a trifle old for sporting events?"

The Ostens stopped and blinked at Constanza over their shoulders.

"Thank you. As I was saying, I am in perfect concord with the Pope on the doctrine of the spiritual regeneration of the hymen. (When she was younger, every time was the first time.) You see before you a chaste widow (technically true, she thought, since all her husbands were dead. Divorce no longer binds us after we pass the gate), seeking fraternal association with . . ."

"*Was? Was?* What is she saying?" asked Berte in German.

" . . . with a mature . . ."

Constanza faltered. (What the fuck!) Abruptly, she turned and hobbled to the patio to smell the chrysanthemums. All the flowers were suspended in haloes of light (cataracts, she decided) and reminded her of Berte Osten's moist bespectacled eyes.

. . .

Putzi, why do you seem so wistful?

I am dead.

What an absurd man! Everything on the grand scale! When you took a crap, you acted as though you'd created the world; when you had a cold, it was lung cancer; when you wrote a poem, you were Homer for a day; and when we made love, you acted as though you'd had a religious experience. Now you tell me you're dead.

Nevertheless, it's true.

Perhaps you're right. I may have forgotten. Since I underwent electro-shock therapy, my memory has been somewhat selective.

We are all yesterdays who haunt each other's lives like ghosts.

The doctors stopped when they found I attained sexual arousal during the treatment.

. . . .

The River Ulm pulsed hypnotically a few feet from where Constanza sat. It was evening. She imagined trout hiding in hollows, waiting for the stars to come out.

“My eighth husband, Putzi, hated . . .”

It was on the tip of her tongue. It frustrated her that she could not remember. Her spirit (or was it her heart?) fluttered vainly against the bars of her (rib)cage, and it seemed to Constanza that remembering was somehow the key to the . . .

Putzi, what was it you hated so much?

You already know it.

(Which, of course, wasn't an answer, she thought.)

She did recall meeting Putzi in the *rioni*, in a political bar below street level in the Via delle Volte della Pace by the Etruscan wall. The car had thrown a rod on the highway to Rimini; her chauffeur was assisting a local mechanic. She had wandered into the Galleria Nazionale, admired Perugino's *Dead Christ*, His livid flesh against a black background, and rushed out (as usual) needing a man.

He stood on a table, smoking a Russian cigarette, sipping claret, declaiming his municipal epic *Maleteste Baglione* to a crowd of comrades hiding out from their wives. And she quietly stunned them all, dealing ten \$100-bills at his feet like Tarot cards and looking deep into his eyes while he spoke.

Putzi stared at the money, then at Constanza (her intensity, her

strange once-beauty, is still prophetic), then at the money, then at . . . (A tremor palpitates her breast. Is it of desire, of fear?)

It was like peering into a whirlpool, I had to jump.

I took out my teeth and blew you behind a wine cask.

And when we returned, the workers cheered you like Gramsci, like Garibaldi!

After you were dead, Putzi, I loved you.

. . .

She had waited until Berte left him to visit the W.C. (in such wise doth matter ever betray the spirit, she thought) then approached Gar Osten in a mood of philosophical detachment.

“How sick I am of civilized relationships,” she said with a sigh.

He was seated beside a window, his walker out of reach. He could not rise. He was looking at a dead bird on the lawn.

“I *long* for passion, for love with a little blood in it!”

Gar Osten yawned nervously, a spike of drool launched itself from his lower lip.

“Oh darling, wives are such vestigial affairs,” she went on. “Each day is a carbon copy of the last; a marriage gets fainter and fainter . . .”

“Roor!” said Gar Osten, hoarsely. He pointed one feeble skeletal finger.

“It’s a dead bird,” Constanza observed dryly.

His breath bellowed in stertorous drafts. HUNH-hunh. HUNH-hunh. (And she thought, What a great heart! The more soul, the more suffering. If only he weren’t so . . . so . . . oblivious.)

She tried once more: “Please, Gar, listen to me. If we are not to enslave others with our love, there must be a limit to the claims of attachment.” She took his chin in her hand and turned it so that she could peer into his face. (He looked better when she held his mouth closed.) “In this world, *Liebling*, we must commit love like a crime as a litmus of its truth.”

Gar Osten caught sight of Berte marching towards them, her fists pumping like pistons in an attempt to increase her pace. His eyes began to oscillate from woman to woman. His body shook in spasms.

“What do you want? What do you do with my husband?” demanded the wife in breathless German.

“Only a little love, darling. A little love, or any reasonable facsimile.”
(English)

“What does she say? What does she say?” (German)

HUNH-hunh. HUNH-hunh. (?)

“It’s a dead bird,” said Constanza, wearily, and she moved slowly away, nodding like an ibis feeding in shallow water.

. . .

She sighed. Her heart tugged. Memory tapped an old vein. She recalled a moment when the shadow touched him so. In the ogive, framed, backlit by a harsh Mediterranean sun, Putzi hovered uncertainly, still and separate, caught in the tension and sadness of incomplete gesture. *My eighth husband . . . (like a dancer in a photograph) hated. . .* And the scene had stamped itself on the stubborn fabric of her consciousness, beautiful and enigmatic, like some flower whose name she had forgotten.

. . .

Restless, at lunch she had ignored the clear soup and pâté to deliver a lecture (for staff and ambulatory patients) on the proper maintenance of interment facilities for the beloved departed. At her 1 p.m. consultation she informed Dr. Goedelfinger that in English a *pen* is a *penis*. She told him a joke about a reincarnated psychologist who sang, as his soul drifted back to earth: “I’m glad I’m not Jung anymore.” And then she tried to explain for him the significance of Maleteste (Bad Balls, she had translated; Putzi nearly splitting his forehead on a tabletop, laughing.) Baglione, the warrior who handled his cannon ineptly and sounded the retreat on the point of victory.

Old Maleteste (she must have said), old Bad Balls, old scamp, old scalliwag, scapegrace, turncoat, rakehell, old *ame-de-boue*, old *passe-partout*, old rip, old fallen angel. Old white-livered poltroon. Old pessimist. Old shadow-shuffler. Old passion pit, old lust pot, old leader of men and molester of young horses. A man, in short, of incalculable zeal and confused purposes. A man, in short . . .

(Constanza was aware that Dr. Goedelfinger had fallen asleep thus rendering himself, if possible, less pervious than usual to her tangential soliloquies.)

And Putzi's strange ironic poem about the betrayal of the Florentines. When Maleteste brought unreasonable demands to cloak his treachery, and the men of Florence gave in, even sending a messenger to confirm the bargain while Bad Balls did bum-play with a Siennese *castrato*. The old sinner slew the herald himself with Toledo steel and turned his guns on his allies' city. Writing new chapters of infamy.

Yet, on the day of his triumph, when he measured the streets of Perugia leading twin lion cubs, a Pope's reward for his connivance, Maleteste's people cheered and wept. And, for the five nights preceding his death by syphilis a year later, a meteor blazed over Monte Malbe, and the long last day he spoke in prophecies.

. . . .

Oh, Putzi, I've got the panics. I can't fuck, I can't sleep, I can't eat. I cannot even lie down in the dark without thinking of it. (What?) They give me pills for my heart, pills for my liver, pills to breathe and pills to piss. I haven't had a decent crap in three weeks. I sweat like a pig in my sheets as soon as the lights go out. I need a pill to make me young again and all they give me are anti-depressants. If I can't feel anything, I might as well be dead. Once I was beautiful; now I am . . .

Like a rose crushed too often in the book of life.

Exactly. But you always knew me best. Why did you go out that day (in the archway, framed)? Why did you leave me? I could have saved you even then. But no, you had to act like you were in some damned opera. Oh, Putzi, I am unwell. I feel all inside out and empty.

. . . .

What a past, she thought. I have survived. And furthermore I am horny and vindictive. Does the fire never die?

She had stolen old Kuiper's wheelchair while he lay helpless in four inches of lukewarm bathwater and locked herself in the service elevator with a half dozen hampers of soiled linen and a carton of Picayunes shipped specially from New Orleans by a zealous beneficiary. (She made water on the seat without noticing, her spindly shanks propped on Kuiper's footrests.) For an hour she had meditated, flicking her butts into the laundry with cynical precision.

The Sybil of Cumae in her Grotto.

Putzi, you're just like all the rest of the men I screwed.

How's that?

You're dead and not a damn bit of use!

Smashing an alarm box with her cane, she had sent the smouldering car to the basement and made her way through the ensuing evacuation to the married patients' wing, rolling the wheelchair before her like a barrow. ("This is too much," she thought. "Someone must put a stop to it.")

She whistled nervously (*Fidelio*); her chest pounded (We always run faster when we have lost our way.). She found the Osten's door ajar, but the old couple had made no attempt to escape. Berte was seated. Gar had fallen to his knees with his face pressed between her slack breasts like a frightened boy (pathetic couple).

"Run for your life," cried Constanza. "I'll save old spaghetti legs."

"Was?" whispered Berte, her wide eyes like blossoms, her arms twined round her husband's head.

"Run!" cried Constanza. (What a girl has to go through to get fucked, she thought.)

A tear fell from Berte's nose as she slowly shook her head from side to side (like a turtle). And her fat white hand reached to caress Gar's hair (his scalp crimson and flaky as a knuckle) and press him closer to her heart.

Constanza hesitated. "Why don't you run away?" she asked. She watched the pale squat fingers combing the old unwise hair of the man and felt a sly nothingness plucking at her elbow.

What do you suppose it was? she asked.

The foetus of doubt.

Love, love, she thought.

It seemed to Constanza that she saw Berte for the first time. Those tender eyes did not reproach her. Those arms did not exclude her. What she saw revealed in the charm and beauty of gesture was a world of love, pity, forgiveness and charity. ("This is too much," the voices said.)

Sadly, she turned and left the room. The smoke was already beginning to clear. Forgetting her infirmity, she walked all the way to the patio before collapsing in a heap on the flagstones.

. . .

The first stars appeared in Ursus and Orion. From time to time, Constanza caught sight of Dr. Goedelfinger's anxious face like a pale blue balloon in the garden window. He was watching (for all he knew the Heboyan endowment hung in the balance), just as the trout were watching from the water, just as Putzi was watching, just as Connie was watching herself.

"My eighth husband, Putzi, hated . . . dying."

And she remembered him now: one of those gentle mystic Umbrian souls with a cock like a Clydesdale and a price on his head. That night she had taken a room in the Albergo Deneau off the Corso Vanucci. She had promised to publish his poems in deluxe editions. And for a week she kept him there, feasting on his Italian sausage.

Outside, he had told her, they waited for him, hooded and armed. They were angry, he said. "Art opposes systems," he said. "Irony deforms ideology." She begged him to let her help. (The chauffeur waited in the alley with the engine running.) On the last day, Connie knew. It was in the air, and in his eyes, a sad heaviness there, a wistfulness. He had performed (as usual) like a stallion, had made her come over and over, until she lay dazed and trembling, boneless and lazy. Then, dressing, he had gone out (in an archway, framed).

. . .

There was a bomb in your moped.

It took my best parts.

At first I thought, "This can't be real. It's just another prank. All that blood. No one has that much blood." You didn't really think they'd do it, did you?

I admit I misjudged them.

And it wasn't the Red Brigades or the CIA. It was a man you owed money to.

I never said I was perfect.

I was prevented from attending your funeral because it turned out you had a wife and nine children, all of whom I have supported from that moment to this. They curse Heboyan. Though perhaps it was natural not to understand what was between us. Putzi, you were the best, even if I had to pay.

In life we always lose more than we plunder. And, as the French say, even a beautiful woman cannot give more than she has.

That's enough, darling. Don't try my patience.

I am waiting, Connie. I am waiting.

. . . .

She trailed her fingers lightly across the tips of her breasts, saw the stars, the trout and the Kaiserstuhl, smelled the flowers in the garden behind her, remembered husbands and lovers long gone, and sighed a little in a way that was neither happy nor unhappy. Putzi was right, she knew. It was time to say that was that, to make distinctions, to put a nail in the lid of the coffin of her past, into which she was falling continually from the present. But nothing seemed urgent anymore. Briefly, she had a vision. Old Kuiper lying naked in his bath. A troop of angels landing in a field like butterflies. And Berte Osten's eyes.

Tomorrow, or the next day, Constanza thought, she would walk over the stone bridge and see what lay hidden amongst the trees beyond the river.