

# Spike

David Wheldon

The tall, middle-aged woman behind the reception counter looked at me steadily. The light was poor and her face was part in shadow. Her dark eyes were large and vigilant.

‘Have you a room for three nights?’ I asked.

She seemed a little surprised — raising her eyebrows — and then recovered herself immediately. Her face was very expressive. ‘Why, yes. Certainly, sir. We have one empty room. And breakfast?’ She put her hands together, the action neat.

‘Please,’ I said.

‘English or continental?’

‘What does continental comprise?’ I asked.

‘Fruit juice, fresh-pressed, croissant, butter, jam and coffee,’ she said. ‘Or tea. It may have to be toast. There’s been a change of staff at the baker’s and the croissants aren’t reliable.’ She was looking at me very closely.

‘I’ll take that.’ I smiled at her.

She smiled at me in return.

‘I’ll show you the room I have in mind,’ she said. ‘Follow me.’

She led the way upstairs. The red carpeting stopped at the turn of the stair: from then onwards the boards were bare. A very low wattage bulb with a fluted glass shade hung from the landing ceiling, casting shadows of the dark-varnished banisters and hand-rails across the wall of the stairwell. There was the remnant of an old gas-fitting at the head of the stairs; the fish-tail burner was still in place.

She opened a door towards the front of the house and turned on the light: the room was small and high-ceilinged with an old-fashioned patterned wall-paper. A single window looked out over the street. There was an iron-framed bed and a wash-basin, a Utility wardrobe and chest of drawers. There was a small bedside table with a lace cover.

‘Where’s the WC?’

‘Next door but one. You won’t be troubled here by the sound of flushes. Generally it’s quiet here at night. The road-traffic’s light after ten or so.’

‘How much?’ I asked.

‘12/6d a night. With continental breakfast.’ She suddenly smiled.

‘I’ll take it,’ I said.

She seemed pleased. Her smile broadened. ‘Good. Want a call and a cup of tea in the morning?’

‘Please. 7.30.’

‘Fine. It’ll be done.’

She handed me the keys.

We went back downstairs. The price was most reasonable. I had budgeted for twice that sum.

We stood either side of the reception counter: she passed over the registration book. I used my own fountain pen: I don’t like ball-points: they ruin handwriting. My fluent black writing stood out on the page.

‘What brings you here, Dr Alexander?’ She had watched me write my name. ‘I see you are from Oxford.’

‘Yes; I’m attending a conference here; it’s held at the Middle Temple.’

‘It would be too clever for me to understand, no doubt,’ she said, with a laugh. ‘But, anyway, enjoy your stay. If there’s anything you need, just ask. If I’m not around, ask for Spike. Spike’ll see to you.’ Still smiling, she opened the door behind her and left me alone in the

passage.

Well, I was in the narrow passage of an unassuming hotel in London. I'm a house physician in Oxford and poorly paid. I had searched for some time to find a bed for the night at a reasonable rate. Whereas most hotels put on a welcoming front, this one didn't; the sign was old and weather-worn. Obviously, from my point of view this strategy had worked. I had an inexpensive bed.

I went up to my room and ate a small slice of chicken pie I had bought in a corner-shop; I followed this by an apple. Dinner over. I drew the curtains and looked round the room. It reminded me of a setting for a Walter Sickert painting: perhaps *Mornington Crescent Nude*. The image hung before my mental vision. I shivered. Uncompromising realism which had the effect of removing all eroticism. Well, almost all. The raw, unfinished quality of his paint-work unsettles even now: in 1910 or thereabout it would have been disturbing indeed. The unconscious poses of the nudes make the viewer truly a voyeur: a feeling of prurience seeps over into your own eyes and mind as you look. I don't know what it is: perhaps the artist himself did not know. It is an impression not perhaps of human despair but of human futility. The subject — model — seems to possess an unconscious understanding of her brief, anonymous mortality. And the perspective of the viewpoint unsettles also; it is possibly the guilty, backward glance of a departing client, a man diminished. Is the image imbued with loveless post-coital melancholia? Ultimately these paintings are saddening. Without doubt prurience is a part of the human condition.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I have rather a thin face, eyes rather large. The mirror itself had lost a great deal of its silvering and it did not take much imagination to picture a naked woman lying on the bed behind me. A classic Sickert composition: a clothed male looks down at an unembarrassed nude woman whose face is in deep shadow. Here through the medium of a peeling mirror. Beauty departs. Desolation sets in. You wish you could do something to help, to lighten, to inform: you can't. You aren't informed yourself.

I found that I was very lonely. I dream of a home I never really had since early childhood, and then not recalled as idyllic.

When I feel lonely I have to make myself fall asleep. There's no other remedy I know.

So, being somewhat melancholy, I took two capsules of Seconal with a mouthful of whisky. I undressed myself and got between the cold sheets naked. I took another mouthful of whisky.

It's not so much that I have self-doubt: other people's confidence seems so ill-founded and misplaced. There's nothing in the human situation that warrants much in the way of confidence.

Seconal blurs self-doubt. It doesn't give you confidence: it doesn't disinhibit. There's not much positive about it, really, but it lets you sleep. In the short-term it lets you sleep.

I slept well.

I slept well except that there was a sense of continuous commotion in the hotel. People seemed to be coming and going: there were creaking susurrations on the stairs. The traffic outside was light.

I woke early, and watched the evolution of the dawn. I was feeling in better spirits.

At 7:30 there was a knock at the door. 'Dr Alexander, your morning call. And a cup of tea.' A pleasant voice, that of a young woman.

I sat up in bed. 'Come in,' I said.

The door opened and a young woman with long, dark hair entered; she was wearing a night-dress of royal purple, quite translucent and leaving nothing to the imagination; it came down to the middle of her thighs.

She yawned. 'Here.' She put a cup and saucer on the bedside cabinet. 'A couple of sugar-lumps in the saucer if you take the stuff. A good night?' She forthrightly ran her gaze over my body.

'Fine.'

'You're a doctor, aren't you?'

'I am.'

'We don't get many educated people here: well, not staying.'

'I wouldn't say I was educated,' I said.

'But you work in Oxford.' She looked round. I had the feeling of being scrutinized by a powerful and thorough mind.

'I went to a small-town grammar school,' I said. 'And Oxford isn't the place you might think it is when you're a junior doctor. Up all hours without pay.'

'Well, take it easy while you're here in the capital.'

She made herself at home and sat on the edge of the bed. She had good-looking legs and a slim waist: her skin was lucent. I could feel the indirect pressure of her buttocks against my thigh. Her natural body-smell was pleasing.

She saw the bottle of Seconal and picked it up. 'Use this stuff much?'

'No. Only when staying in a strange bed. I can't sleep in an unfamiliar place.'

'Best keep it that way. But you know that as a doctor. Keep discipline. I knew a girl who died of this.' She shook the bottle and the scarlet capsules rustled. 'Forgot she'd taken it, the coroner said, and when she was half-asleep she took some more. She was into it heavy. She was always doing things and then forgetting that she'd done them. The dose needed to make you sleep rises as you go on, but the fatal dose stays much the same, they say.' She looked at me candidly. 'I'm not learned. But this is common knowledge here. A lot of people use it to blunt the edge of life. Seconal and Tuinal. Please be careful. What's your first name?'

'Elgar.'

'Unusual. After the composer?'

'That's right. Malvern was my mother's most favourite place on earth.'

'Was?' There was a tone of solicitude in her voice.

'Yes. She's dead.'

'Oh. I'd say sorry but you know it must mean nothing.' She looked at me carefully.

'Look. I'd best vanish. Things to do. Ma Beeston doesn't get up til 11 at the earliest, so I do most of the morning work. It's offset against the rent. It's a good arrangement. Ma Beeston is the woman who let you in last night. She rents the place off Bygrove Estates.' She paused, and stood: she yawned. 'Nice conversation,' she said. 'I'd best go.' She walked towards the door. 'The name is Spike,' she said.

'Spike?'

'Yes. We all take liberties with our names here. I'm known as Spike Esileigh or sometimes Miss Esileigh. Or, by Ma Beeston, just Esileigh. I like Spike the best.'

I laughed.

'Take it easy, said Miss Esileigh,' she said, letting herself out and holding the door open. She had had nothing on her feet. Her feet were attractive, if you wish to know, with long toes and clear nails.

'How did you come by the name of Spike?'

'I can pierce people when I choose to do so,' said Spike. She smiled as she closed the door.

And so I had made the acquaintance of Spike.

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I washed and dressed quickly and went downstairs.

'Dining-room that-a-way,' said Spike, in her purple night-gown, a tray of toast racks in her hands. 'Baker's have forgotten the croissants again,' she said. 'Toast do?'

'Oh, certainly. Fine. Brown bread for preference.'

'You're easily pleased,' she said, with a smile.

I followed her into the dining-room, a high-ceilinged, airy place with a large table set with a white cotton cloth and breakfast crockery.

I looked round.

Five pairs of female eyes were looking at me: I was the only male in the room, and the only person to be dressed. The room was very warm, the women being in scant night-attire and the gas-stove fully on. There was a faint and not unpleasant smell of aggregated scent.

'This is Dr Elgar Alexander,' said Spike. She turned to me. 'I won't tell you the ladies'

names formally. Take a seat and I'll get your breakfast.' She addressed the others. 'I expect Ma Beeston dragged him in off the street last night.'

*[This is a preview. The complete story is approximately 5,000 words]*

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