

Michael Cartmell

Red Lights

I was well on my way to getting wasted. There was nothing remotely American or sporty about the bar I was in, despite the bold claim of the neon sign outside. Its only saving grace was that the beer it served – local, not American – was actually quite good, improving to damn good after the third or fourth pint.

The television at the end of the bar was showing an extremely tedious boxing match between two guys I'd never heard of. I watched a full round of them circling each other timidly before giving up on it. None of the other punters were watching it either. Instead, the three guys and the barman had their attention focused firmly on the pool table, where the bar's sole female customer was playing a shot in a deliberately revealing manner. She'd clearly had far too much to drink, and missed the ball she was aiming for by a spectacular margin. I thought of my hotel and the suite I was staying in. Everything was cheap here. "Will there be two of you staying in the room?" the receptionist had asked politely, offering me the second key. "No, just me" I replied, forcing a smile. *As usual, I thought, You seem nice though. Do you want to come up when you're finished?*

It was meant to be different though, this time.

"Cheer up eh? You want another one?" the barman asked, nodding towards my glass. I hadn't noticed it was empty.

"Yeah. Same again." I replied, pushing my glass towards him as he pulled another pint. There were other bars I'd meant to try that night, but they were further from my hotel, it was raining and I couldn't be arsed. I still had the rest of the week to explore, I told myself, as I wondered how many nights I'd spend in the same place. At least the beer was good. Damn good.

There was a raucous cheer from the other side of the bar. The girl now lay sprawled across the pool table, half-naked and barely conscious, pushing the balls around with her hands in delirium. I wasn't quite sure how she ended up on top of the table, or what happened to her clothes, but in any case it looked like the game was well over as a contest. One of the more sober men hooked her arm around his head, presumably about to carry her home, or into a taxi. From the barman's indifferent smile, I figured it was a regular occurrence.

With the bar empty and the barman looking increasingly uncomfortable, I decided it was time to make a move. I was unsure of the etiquette and hadn't properly learnt how to recognise the currency, so I stealth-tipped a couple of random notes on the bar and went for the door. I might have heard a shout as I left, but I had already chosen to ignore it.

The frosty air outside felt its way against my skin as it swept through my clothes. I buttoned up my coat and looked up to the street ahead. The red lights illuminated the otherwise monochrome scene ahead in patches, like a burning rash had formed on the darkness. It was as much a warning, I realised, as it was seductive. At night, the two worked in harmony, luring passers-by, exploiting their desire, drawing them towards the light. *There is danger here. But you like danger, don't you?*

It was the same street I had walked down at the start of the evening, transformed and repurposed for the activities of the night. Just thinking about that gave me a wicked buzz of excitement. The lights had always fascinated me. I had no intention of actually taking part in the

proceedings, of course, but I saw no harm in being a passive observer. And I had to get back to my hotel somehow.

As I approached, I could make out silhouettes in the distance; people-shaped holes cut into the red fog. There were so many of them, bustling about each other, that it almost seemed like some sort of dark carnival was taking place. I kept my head down as I passed a tall hooded figure on the pavement. He muttered something inconspicuously, no doubt attempting to sell me some mind-screwing drugs. I pretended not to notice, and he left me alone.

I was unnerved by the eerie silence of the place. The shadows I had seen from a distance still seemed like shadows from close-up, faceless and forlorn. Men skulked around the darkness with hands in their pockets, cold and disconnected from the scene they were in. I wondered where they were going, and if they even knew themselves. If it mattered to them.

Further down the street, girls in various states of undress were passing between the crowds, advertising various establishments or perhaps offering their own services; it was hard to tell. It seemed like their efforts were mostly going unnoticed, unable to catch the attention of the drifting souls.

I glanced down an alleyway, where a skeletal blonde was being screwed haphazardly by a grungy-looking kid. They had attracted a sparse group of heavily-clothed onlookers, who stood still and expressionless at a deliberate distance, ignoring each other. They all looked like they were about to freeze; perhaps they already had. The kid let out a sharp whimper of relief which echoed and carried in the wind. I wondered who was next in the improvised queue, as I returned to the main street.

The girls on window display might have been appealing, but I couldn't get past the the appallingly unflattering way they'd been drenched in red light. Like a cross between the models on a ghost train and someone frozen in carbonite. The more I saw, the more tired I grew with the place. I guess it's one of those things that are best observed from a distance, or left as fantasies. Close up, it's just like a crap zoo, without the kids.

Disinterested and cold, I continued down the path back to my hotel. I thought of the warmth and luxury of the bed. *Jenny...*

I startled. I could sense someone watching me, *staring*. I spun and caught a glimpse of a pale face pressed against a low window to my right but in the instant I did so, it vanished. The window was frosted up, and I wiped it with my gloves for a closer look. On the window sill sat a small doll, smiling weirdly. Was that what had seen me? God, I was getting paranoid.

I looked through and saw a large, unlit room with wooden floorboards and old-fashioned wallpaper. It seemed almost completely empty, apart from the shelves which bordered it. I could see more of the dolls on them. There must have been hundreds, and they all looked identical, each with black hair and that same creepy smile. It must be a museum, I thought, and was suddenly intrigued by the idea. I felt a strange connection with the place, as though I had uncovered a secret hideout.

Amazingly, the nearby door was ajar. The place was open, and open late. There was no sign, though, or any indication as to whether or not it would be trespassing if I let myself in. I glanced nervously around. Nobody in sight. Perhaps I'd walked further than I'd realised. I carefully edged around the door, pulling it open with my fingertips, just wide enough for me to side-step through.

Behind the door, a dusty, unlit staircase descended to the room. Each step I took registered with a creak, as if objecting to me. If it really was a museum, why was it so dark?

I stepped into the room and immediately felt a powerful warmth, embracing my body. I instinctively spread my arms, wanting to bask in it and allow it to purge the frost from my clothes. I could see that the golden oak floorboards now shone and sparkled with an elegance that I could not have imagined from outside. A splendidorous glow filled the whole room and I felt a fool for not appreciating it before. How wrong and undeserving I was! The rows of dolls from every wall were facing me, their eyes and faces alert with anticipation. It was as if I had stepped onto a grand stage, and I was their master of ceremonies. The atmosphere was incredible. Confidence flowed through my body. I had never felt so proud to be anywhere.

"What are you doing here?" asked a soft female voice from within the room. I opened my eyes. The spell had been tragically broken. The glistening gold of the room had been cruelly drained out to a dull wooden brown, revealing dust, cobwebs and cracks in the mundane floorboards. The room looked positively antique, as if it had been abandoned and left to collect dust for many years. In the darkness, I could barely make out the shelves against the walls. They were flimsy and damaged, with several shelves broken or missing. The dolls, lifeless and ordinary, were facing in no particular direction. Not watching me. Not watching anything.

"I'm Annette. Are you a visitor? I don't get many visitors."

I noticed her then, sat on a tiny wooden stool in the corner furthest from the door, illuminated softly from the light of a streetlamp through the window above. Her auburn hair was scruffy and unkempt, with a shocking furniture-like dustiness that stood out against her youthful ghost-white skin. Her feet were bare. But she wore an elegant, *flawless* red dress that would be fit for a ball. It suited her slender figure perfectly. She looked up at me and smiled brightly. I felt immediate admiration for her, and slight regret that she had been allowed to be left in this room. Then I remembered where I was. I stepped back shamefully and cursed myself.

"I didn't realise you were... I thought this was a museum." *Oh smooth, you twat.*

"Are you here to let me free?" Annette asked playfully, ignoring my comment. She pushed herself up from her chair and walked towards me. Her words had harpooned me, and her green eyes were mesmerising. I couldn't decide what to do, so I just stood casually, trying to act indifferent. She was taller than I was, and stood up to me, wrapping her arms around my neck as she leant towards my ear. She whispered lightly. "Please... say you're going to take me out of here.... I've been here for *far* too long..."

Her voice was slow and distant, as though she was dreaming. Her facial features were contradictory; her skin looked weary and tired, but her eyes sparkled. There was something not quite right about her. I wondered what she meant.

"Been where too long? In this city?"

"No... I mean here.... this place..."

"You live in this room?" I didn't remember seeing another door than the one I entered through, and I glanced around again to make sure.

"I can't leave by myself."

I was about to contest that, but her frown told me that she was being serious.

I felt her warm breath on my neck and let her words sink in. I knew what she was trying to say, but I didn't want to think about it. In some ways it made sense. The connection between her and the dolls, the transformation of the room as I entered it. The thought made me shiver.

I held her close against me, my hand against her hair, and then I knew I couldn't leave her. She was crazy, no doubt, but she was my kind of crazy.

"I'll help you" I said. I meant it. I wanted to help her.

I offered Annette my arm, preparing to lead her out of the room, and she hesitantly accepted, her face shifting from concern to nervous excitement as she gripped me tightly. I didn't think about where we'd be going. It could have been an act, I realised, but I didn't care. After stumbling upon the place, coming this far, I felt a certain duty towards her. Leading her up some stairs was the least I could do, if that's what she really wanted.

"We can leave right now." I told her. "Nothing's going to happen to you."

She didn't reply, and I took her silence as a sign that she trusted me. As we went to leave the room, Annette flung her head backwards for one last glance. She scanned the shelves and the idle dolls, seeming to reassure herself as she did so. I felt an irrational surge of apprehension as I led her through the door, then an anticlimax; nothing happened. My heroic act of saving her from the room was not. Anyone could have done it.

As we climbed the stairs, I started to ask her about the room, how she came to be there, and whether it was actually a museum or something else. But before I could finish, she had started to run, and her slender pale figure was quickly vanishing into the night.

I could have gone after her, but I didn't. It's not as if I held any responsibility over her. Christ, people must have wondered in on her before. Did she always act like that?

She said she didn't get many visitors. Maybe I was the first.

Still, I felt a stab of guilt as the death-cold wind bit my face. She was wearing *nothing*.

I shook my head. Wherever she was, it wasn't my problem.

I resumed the walk back to my hotel room. The ground was starting to ice up, and my drunken feet skidded beneath me a couple of times. I adjusted my stride. As cold as it was, I wasn't in a hurry, and I'd always had a bit of a phobia of slipping on ice.

Before I'd gone much further, a cry rang out from a nearby street. But there wasn't a hint of ecstasy in it this time; more desperation and terror. And I could already recognise Annette's voice.

Ignoring my earlier resolution, I sprinted and slid towards the voice as best as I could, grabbing onto street lamps and parts of cars for balance. I realised I'd not gone far at all, and was coming up to an alleyway about two blocks from the museum. The screams continued as Annette cried out for someone to help her. I shouldn't have let her go in the first place. I owed it to her to help her now.

I entered the alleyway and saw her cornered against the wall, writhing in anguish with her arms flailing and eyes shut, crying out through clenched teeth. But absent from the scene were her attackers. There was nobody there but her.

She could still almost have been acting, but the terror in her voice was unmistakable. It went through me like a shot.

"Annette?" I asked, trying to get her attention. She glanced towards me lucidly but continued to struggle and shout. It was then that I noticed the crowd of dolls at her feet, small and menacing in the icy-orange lamplight.

Then I saw the blood. Pouring from a gash in her leg where the dolls climbed and bit into her. The faces and clothes of the ones nearest her were stained deep red with blood, dripping onto the

icy floor. The ones further away shuffled and watched; some glanced at me, gloating and taunting with evil grins.

I couldn't take it any longer.

Filled with rage, I surged towards Annette and launched a fierce kick at the crowd of dolls, scattering dozens of the bastard things and sending one flying into the wall, where it hit with a sickening crack as it fell to the ground, dead and bloodied. Immediately this distracted them, the idle crowds turning their attention to me and making vicious leaps for my legs. Swiftly, I hopped backwards on one leg and kicked out with the other, defending their initial attack. I stepped back and as I did so, I felt my heel crush one of their heads. An unfortunate accident, but one that inspired the strategy I employed for the remainder of the fight. Kicking groups of them seemed to be the most efficient way to floor them, and stomping on their prone bodies seemed to finish them off nicely. The ground quickly became a bloody killing field of dolls; broken limbs, debris and squashed pieces of brains. At least, that's what I assumed they were.

With my attackers defeated, I turned to Annette where one of the dolls were still clinging to her leg. She was starting to look faint. I grabbed it with both of my hands and prised it free, as it tore a chunk of her flesh off with it. I held it up to my face as it wriggled helplessly to get free, spitting and cursing in an alien tongue. I turned and pitched it mightily against the wall. It smashed on impact very satisfactorily, and its pieces rained down on the others.

I stood over the wrecked bodies of my fallen foes, observing the gory scene.

"Shit."

"What the hell were those things?" I asked Annette

"They're my dolls" she answered solemnly.

"*Your* dolls? That one was biting your fucking leg off. Shit, you're bleeding all over."

"They don't like to be left alone. I thought maybe it would be ok if -"

"Why did you run away from me then?"

"I was scared of them. I'm sorry."

Annette started to sob.

I took off my sweater and tied it around the wound on her leg. It soon started to soak with blood.

"I need to go back" she said, her arm on my shoulder.

"To those things? Are you crazy?"

She looked around, distressed, not knowing what to do.

"Look, you can stay with me. Let's get out of here."

I took her arm in mine. Once again, I felt a connection with Annette that I couldn't fully explain. I felt like I had to protect her, but quite what I had to protect her from was still very unclear.

We turned and headed back out of the alleyway. Annette limped on her damaged leg but she seemed to be coping well. Maybe it looked worse than it was. She was definitely in a hurry; the torment on her face was not through physical pain.

She quickened her pace, but this time I wouldn't let her go. I matched her as she started to run, with uncannily good balance on the slippery roads. I could hear sirens in the distance, but there still didn't seem to be anybody around. I wondered if somebody had heard her screams, and what it'd look like if anyone saw me with a barely dressed - but what a dress - girl losing blood from her leg. Not good, I suspected.

Then, over the noise of the sirens, I heard faint music, singing. It was an eerie, horrible drone that echoed from all around. There were words, encapsulated within the noise, but none that I was able to make out. And not exactly human either. I felt trapped; although the roads looked clear, the noise just kept getting louder. My ears were being assaulted and I didn't know which way to turn.

We kept running, but I was exhausted and hurt. I didn't know where she meant to run to. I was determined to stay with her.

The slow, funeral drone of the music followed us effortlessly. As fast as we were running, I felt like it was keeping up with us, toying with us as we tried to evade its reach. As I gasped for breath, the voices didn't falter. I had to face it.

"Wait" I told Annette as I grabbed her wrist. She looked frightened, but did stop as she turned to me. Her hair in the bitter cold looked ruffled and cute, hiding the dust well, and her faint skin appeared to gain a slight translucence against the icy air. Her eyes went wide as her gaze passed me, and I looked around and saw, disbelieving, the source of the unearthly music.

A procession of dolls was approaching us, creeping purposefully like a thick cloud. The dolls that led the march wore identical black veils, obscuring all but their ivory-white faces and alien green eyes which illuminated the frosty air. Their mouths opened and closed in unison as they repeated their ghostly chorus. But yet more terrible was the giant, looming doll that was being carried behind the chanters on an exotic chariot. It was identical to the others from Annette's room, only hundreds of times larger, dressed in magnificent sapphire robes and wearing an exquisitely-jewelled crown on its oversized head. Its expression was solemn, its mouth frog-like.

I felt a sudden inertia, accompanied with a headache that pulsed rhythmically with the peaks in the doll's song. I knew instantly that I wouldn't be able to fight them off this time. I could only imagine what dark magic their king was capable of, and didn't want to be around when it was unleashed.

"We have to run" Annette stated, and I couldn't have agreed more.

I struggled to free myself from the song's unseen grasp; every note like an extra barrier to tear through. "Come on!" Annette said, prising me away from the music. Strangely, she seemed less affected by the procession than I was. I thought again about her strange affinity with the dolls in that room, and what kind of power they held over her. Or her over them.

Eventually we were able to turn away from them and begin our race away. The song still echoed through the streets, lingering in my ears like a mutant strain of tinnitus, but gradually it faded and I glanced back to see that they were receding in the distance. They seemed content not to change their current speed, as though conscious of the fact they were stalking inferior pray. To my relief, I could see my hotel not far ahead. It looked like we'd escaped.

As we turned the final corner, there was silence once again. I wasn't sure if they'd seen which way we had gone, or even if they cared enough to follow. Annette's body language was calmer. She'd lost my sweater from her leg, but the gaping wound that earlier occupied her leg was barely visible now. It had closed miraculously well.

"My hero..." she said as we stood in the entrance to my hotel. Its many lights shone down on us like spotlights, as if we had just entered the stage for the evening's finale. Her arms grasped my neck as they had done so earlier, and she kissed my ear as we held each other. I failed to take in all that had happened. In her presence, all I could think of was her ever-present radiance, those dazzling emerald eyes, her enchanting smile. I hadn't looked at a girl in this way since Jenny. No,

not even her. I wanted to lose myself in Annette, and knew that I could. I stroked her arm and looked deep into her eyes.

We didn't speak as I led her to my suite, turned on the lights and went through to the bedroom. I shrugged my coat off onto the floor. As she kissed me, I was already helpless to resist her; a passenger to my own emotions.

The sensation was unlike anything before. Her touch was heavenly as she put her hands on the centre of my chest; a Goddess' caress. I wanted to give her everything.

She pushed me onto the bed with her palms, asserted a mount and began to unbutton my shirt. I exhaled a deep breath, submitting to her grace, allowing her to take control. She removed my shirt and began on my jeans. I was totally in awe of her. How could nobody else have noticed her incredible beauty? Why had nobody taken her from the room before now? She pulled off my pants, then my socks as I lay prone, fully naked. Strange, it occurred to me then, that she was still fully clothed herself. I never was assertive enough, I knew. Attempting to rectify that, I reached out for her, but couldn't. My arm was dead. I hoped it was just the cold. I tried again but still found myself incapacitated. Tried lifting my neck off the pillow - shit. Nothing worked.

Annette ran her hands over my chest and arms, then down to my crotch, but I felt nothing. Something was deeply wrong. I tried to tell her, but even my mouth wouldn't open. I was completely paralysed. She would surely do something if she had noticed. Had she even noticed?

Annette was feeling every part of me, exploring in full every inch of my body with obsessive deliberation. It took a while to complete the ritual. When she had finished, she finally spoke.

"Relax. Don't try to fight it. You know this is what you've always wanted."

As she said that, I realised it was true. I knew she was right; I'd do anything for her. Even this.

She reached into her coat pocket, smiling sweetly, and gave me a wink that was reassuring. When she produced the knitting needle, that's when I knew I was entirely hers. It was inevitable. She stabbed the needle into my thigh, punching right through and out the other side. Blood spurted from the new hole like a fountain. Then she lifted my leg and pushed the needle back upwards, in a slow stitching motion. I watched as she repeated the process, as the first strands of thread went into my leg. Then I drifted into unconsciousness.

The room is in almost total darkness. We sit in our shelves in anticipation, willing someone to come to our sweet Annette. She looks especially lonely today, yet graceful as ever. We know she deserves to be happy. She's done so much for us.

We hear footsteps on the stairs. At last, a visitor! We can barely contain ourselves. As the doorhandle turns, we are overcome with elation. We prepare to welcome our new guest with a glorious reception, the one he surely longs for. The room becomes his stage, the golden light transforming it, a breath of life. He looks up at us, awestruck. Annette looks more beautiful than ever, and begins to play her part.