

## The lion ; 2390 words

The Lion was a student pub, not to say that other people didn't go there, of course they did or it would have gone bust years ago, students don't have money; but a large proportion of those who packed the bar each night, even if not of those that bought the drinks, were students. They appreciated the bare decor, the loud acoustics, the densely packed bar, the rowdy company, and, when they did have some money, the reasonable prices. But mostly they appreciated the two barmaids Rosie and Nan.

Den, the licensee, was an insignificant man. Locally he was not known as Mr. Den, or The Guvnor, or even The Landlord. He was rarely referred to at all and if he was merely as Den, the person the licence had been issued to. Left to his own devices he would quickly have reduced the clientel to the old man in the corner, and his dog. Den spent most of his time in the corner, with the old man, and his dog. The old man and Den communicated non-verbally and called the dog 'Oi!'. It responded to both Den and the old man, and was walked and fed by both; it was uncertain which he belonged to. Den plays even less part in this story than he did in the running of the pub. The two barmaids, Nan and Rosie, were the driving force behind the pub, and behind this story. Alike in that they both took charge when it was their shift, and that they both had reasons for enjoying a pub full of students, otherwise they differed.

Rosie was large, blonde, and expansive. She had fond memories of her student days and loved seeing others experiencing the freedom of being adult for the first time, heady on the intoxicating brew of ideas and culture suddenly available. Without imposing herself she joined in, revelling in the company, it was like a drug to her. Chatting, suggesting, and breathing life back at the students, she found fulfilment.

Rosie had no wish to be a student again, too much angst and poverty for a start, but she loved having them round her. There were those who said of her "It's about time she settled down" or, "... started acting her age" or, "... got a steady job with some prospects". But Rosie took no notice of that sort of nonsense, 'You only get one life' she said, and indulged herself. There was no harm done, and the place ran smoothly. She had the presence and influence that could almost always remind a rowdy boy how to behave, and if he didn't want to listen his mates would back her up.

Nan was small and dark and fierce. When she was behind the bar she controlled the place, no one disputed it, or was needed to back her up. Not that Rosie needed the backing if push came to shove, but where she accepted it gratefully Nan resented it. She resented everything, including time, the time things took, the time she found herself living in, the time spent on shopping trips and coffee cups, the time that had taken her youth, where she had wanted to live eternally. She knew she couldn't relive it, she was too intelligent to fool herself like that, but she could not reconcile herself to its loss. Instead she ruled the youth of others, and ordered it while it was in her pub. She was obsessed with the illusion of exercising control.

Knowledge is power, Nan knew the ins and outs of every brief relationship, unsuitable one night stand, indiscretion, and over indulgence. She encouraged them, preaching the doctrine of 'freedom' and 'Not being tied down'. Such ideas were non-specific enough to be popular with most of a clientele, who lacked experience of the genuine evils of a world outside screens. Those who recognised her for what she was were very wary of her, and very few.

Formless resentment ate at her. Nan would have liked to have given it form, wreaked destruction, ruined relationships, destroyed lives, as she felt hers had been destroyed and lost, but having power was more important than losing it. She did not lash out, she quietly watched, and waited, and hated, and sometimes, just sometimes, there fell in her lap the chance of what she saw as 'a delicious little piece' of pure evil that she thought she could get away with, she was cautious enough that she usually did.

Rosie and Nan are two of the main characters in this little tale, and as you may imagine there was very little love lost between them. It is amazing that established society could view two such different persons as similarly slightly amoral and outrageous, when they were so wildly different. The third character was different again.

The Boy had been 'educated otherwise'; which in his case meant that in some things he had not been educated at all. This had come about through the intervention of his mother, who, like the law which demands an education 'In school or otherwise', was a well intentioned ass. Her own education, had taken place at a minor girl's public school which had somehow managed to survive the first half of the twentieth century. There young ladies were taught the necessary rules of deportment and conduct required to trap an appropriate member of the male sex into matrimony. She was practiced in walking across a room carrying several books on her head, or getting in and out of a sports car modestly in a short skirt; accomplishments she had not had cause to use in the eighteen plus years since falling pregnant with The Boy. 'Apart from that', as Mr. Noel Coward once put it, 'Her education, lacked co-ordination'. Within its limited aims it had worked, she had taken possession of an indulgent husband, and had not been required to engage her brain since. 'Ordinary life' was completely alien to her and she did not understand the advantages, or even the nature, of a normal education.

Then, at a dinner party, sandwiched between two gentlemen who were keen on rugby, she had been subjected to an enthusiastic conversation concerning the coming grand final, conducted through her mouse like presence for the duration of the meal. Since losing her figure to The Boy she had become used to being ignored, but they made it sound so thrilling she sat down the following afternoon to watch the game on a large screen television. Horrified, she did not see handsome young heroes battling it out in a grand sporting event, but a wild bunch of untamed hooligans, covered in mud and blood, assaulting each other in an unrestrained manner. There was no way her Boy was going to have to endure that.

Consequently The Boy had been educated by private tutors, not the sort who are resident in great houses, they no longer exist, but the sort who advertise in the local paper. The

appropriate subjects had been covered adequately enough for the law as it is applied to the well spoken middle classes, but by those whose profession was cramming for exams, rather than providing an all round education. As he was an intelligent lad this had been sufficient for him to acquire all the academic qualifications needed to progress to higher education, but he was severely lacking in social qualifications. A bright boy he spent much of his time reading, which had given him some clues, but the fantasies of writers are not always convergent with reality, and he held some strange beliefs regarding the nature of his fellow humans, untempered by experience except of those who cared for him.

He had barely dropped his suitcase at his digs or met his tutors before popping in to The Lion for a swift half with his new fellows, and coming under the influence of Nan. He was just what she was looking for, his mother had taught him obedience, and within the week he was her devoted slave.

Nan and Rosie avoided each other. Each recognised the other, neither approved of the other, equally both recognised the futility of conflict, and neither needed the aggravation. It was not difficult, they worked opposite shifts, and when they did meet they were brief and business like by common consent. Because of this it was some time before Rosie heard about the Boy's obsession, by then Nan's treatment of him was nearing abusive. She no longer came out from behind the bar, he collected glasses, wiped tables and did all the other little chores that needed doing customer side, his greatest reward was to accompany Nan on her weekly Saturday shopping expedition and carry her bags, he was expected at opening time and dismissed at closing time. Between times he fetched and carried and she fussed; she dominated almost all his waking hours.

Rosie was livid, a bright boy who had been held back by the ignorance and stupidity of his mother was now being exploited for the vicious amusement of her antithetical opposite number. Far from having the chance to make up lost ground and find himself he was likely to flunk his end of term exams and lose his place. She steeled herself for warfare, and devised a plan.

First she had to detach him from the clutches of the witch, only free of her influence could other influences be brought to bear. The poor lad did not stand a chance, eager for company Rosie's young friends easily persuaded him to visit The Lion during her shift, and then she went about taking possession for herself. Actually 'poor' Nan didn't stand much chance either; she had been too demanding, and totally un-giving. Moreover, Rosie had a cleavage fit for a barmaid, and a décolletage, where Nan wore polo necks, and didn't really need a bra.

Between tantalising glimpses, and being treated like a decent human being instead of being scorned and put down, Rosie had him captured within the week. It took about another week for him to feel relaxed enough that he made the suggestion that he would never have dared to make to Nan; not that she would have given him the opportunity Rosie did. She had taken him shopping on a Saturday afternoon, partly, it must be admitted, because she was sure that Nan would see them. A victory is only complete when the opponent knows the extent of their

defeat, on the other hand she spared him, and avoided a meeting. It was not hard, Nan preferred to avoid the humiliation of a confrontation than enjoy his discomfort.

After they had completed the shop and returned to Rosie's flat instead of simply relieving him of the shopping and disappearing behind the closed door as Nan would have she brought him in and sat him down in the kitchen with a cup of tea and a cake. Although he remained unaware of it the shopping and seating had been carefully planned, most did not require putting away until later, it could stay in the bags. Rosie took off her coat and hung it on the door in the way that only a sensuous and deliberate woman can, every movement suggesting further disrobement, yet totally respectable. Those things that did go away went in the bottom of the fridge and the freeze opposite his chair, she bent to place them in the emptied bottom drawers before turning and seating herself opposite across the very small kitchen table and folding her arms beneath her ample bosom.

He was almost prepared, the finishing touch was the swoop forward, the kiss on the forehead, and the thanks for his assistance, then he made the suggestion, half serious, half unsurely joking. He was put out when she asked if he had not made promises when he left home. Indeed he had, they had been extracted from him as promises are extracted from children by adults, but that was when he was a boy, now he was a man. Such childish things must be put behind him, a man could not remain beholden to his mother all his life.

Rosie made it clear that the main difference between man and boy was that the former kept his promises, and the fact of giving birth to someone and nurturing them for almost two decades to the best of their ability was deserving of respect, rather than scorn. She did not state this in the bald terms that I have given, but rather elaborated and illustrated her points in a vigorous and detailed way.

Then came the coup de gras, what made him think a liaison across the years could possibly be suitable, how old did he consider her to be? She laughed mockingly at his cautious estimate and, spoke bald truth where so many lie, then continued, "I am the second eldest in the pub, Den, the license holder, is the youngest, only Nan is older than me" she said, "Enjoy what you are, being young, and others will enjoy you. Join in, live a little, learn a lot, behave decently and have some fun, these things are not mutually exclusive; and you are a long time dead. One day you will find a girl who is not a barmaid, as good as you, who you can take home to meet your family."

It was a shock for the boy, though he had the presence and decency to assert her goodness and equality with vigorous honesty, that same honesty could see his family might not feel the same about a barmaid of his mother's generation.

Mixing with his peers was not easy at first, but he now understood some things where previously he had merely blundered through life. He lost some awkwardness, and applied himself to understanding more, both socially and academically. Within a year he met the girl he would later marry, though that was some time later. She made a decent man of him, as I said he was intelligent and took his lessons well, and most decent men are made by women. Rosie

no doubt will continue to shock, be judged by those with little qualification, and make little effort to be acceptable to 'society', but, excellent woman that she is, she saved The Boy.