

## A Short Story

### We Sleep Apart

We sleep apart. Not that she wants it that way, but people wouldn't understand. Tongues would wag. Not that she cares. She couldn't care less what people say – she's above all that. Sadly I'm not. The opinion of my fellow men has always mattered to me, and the decision not to sleep together is, I must confess, entirely my own.

So we sleep apart. But her door is always open to me. I visit her whenever I'm in the mood, and she gives herself to me without reserve. She never denies me, and I take advantage of her gentle consent, going to her constantly, never tiring of admiring her noble body, caressing her curves, even fingering – I'm ashamed to say – her small parts that I adore, before delicately opening and gently entering her.

Once I'm inside her everything changes. It is as though, fleeing the storm, I find myself right in its eye, in the stillness of its sheltering heart. Her body, which was an object of desire a moment before, becomes part of me. I no longer see it objectively but existentially, from the inside. I espouse its forms, which become mine, and I soak up its scent, which transports me to a world that is no more.

At such times I don't care that she's no longer in the first flush of youth, or that she's far from perfect. I've had my share of perfectly formed young things. They all came from the same mould and swayed on the same chassis, they all looked the same and sounded the same. There were so many of them, so many variations on a theme, with only their names to mark them out. Today, they all merge into a blur in my memory.

Who would have thought that I would fall for a love well in her fifties, and for an Anglo-Italian at that? Not my type at all. I was drawn to prim and proper English roses emerging from the bud – a Lady Salisbury, perhaps, or a Wollerton Old Hall. Yet in the end, I was swept off my feet by an exotic flower, still raring to go beneath her placid exterior.

The first time I saw her, I was sure she was English to the core. Not for one second did I suspect her of not being so through and through. Nor did it occur to me that it was precisely this incongruous mix of Englishness and foreignness that had so attracted me to her.

I have no illusions of course. I know perfectly well that, were I not fairly comfortably off, she would not be by my side. Yes, I'm well aware that, were things different, she wouldn't stay. Because she's quite demanding! And with every passing year, she requires more from me.

None of this bothers me, though. Nor am I annoyed by her passivity, to which I have become accustomed. I can devour her with my eyes, breathe in her smell, sniff her, caress her, stroke her, fiddle with her, and still she retains her equanimity. Even when I slip inside her she does not move, and I say to myself that, despite her Italian looks and Latin finery, deep down, she remains very insular, and that although she was moulded in Milan, her genes are firmly rooted in Gloucestershire.

And I rather like this. There is something sensual about her coolness and aloofness that appeals to me and reminds me of a poem by Charles Baudelaire which I learned by heart in my teens - in a spirit of pure contrariness, because the Jesuit priests who were then striving to fashion me had ruled this French poet far too unholy for inclusion in the school curriculum. Every time I go to her, then, I catch myself murmuring:

“I am as fair, O mortals, as a dream carved in stone,  
And my bosom, where each in turn is bruised,  
Inspires in all poets a love  
As eternal as matter, and as silent too.

Enthroned in the sky like an unfathomable sphinx,  
My heart of snow combines with the whiteness of swans;  
I hate movement, for it displaces all lines,  
And never do I weep, and never do I laugh.”

And it is true that she never weeps nor laughs. Ever wary of the slightest movement that might disturb her lines, she remains cold as marble to my touch. Yet she haunts my mortal sleep like a dream carved in stone and reigns over my heart like an unfathomable sphinx. I own her, yes, but I do not really possess her. She possesses me, rather, and I am hers body and soul.

But still I play the game. I play it knowing that I hold the secret key to her hidden treasures. When, having carried the eroticism of restraint to its climax, I finally ditch Charles Baudelaire for John Lennon and feel my finger on her trigger she quivers at my caress and awakens. I leave her G-spot to take her in both hands, and she starts to purr. I apply a teasing pressure with my foot, and she lets go. Her eight cylinders howling, her big stainless steel exhaust spitting fire at the garage wall, at last she crawls forward, bridling, her two hundred and fifty horsepower churning the gravel of the drive like a cavalry battalion on parade.

My Bristol 407 Zagato bears witness to the profound love men once had for beautiful cars. She recalls the blissful days, before the unfortunately named Herr Professor Doktor Wunibald Kamm ruined everything by irrefutably proving that aerodynamics was not a matter of long graceful shapes. She evokes a carefree time, before the Herr Professor Doktor's docked rear (the Kammback) literally clipped the wings of the Talbot-Lagos, the Delages and the Delahayes, and stopped them taking flight. She carries me back to the days of cars with bodies like endless teardrops, to those blessed days when aerodynamics was a matter of visual perception rather than drag coefficient, to the happy times when the Caprons, the Franays, the Figonis and the Falaschis created cars the way haute couture designers create a dress, to the age of innocence when cars were works of unbridled imagination and bold design, rather than a lame compromise between scientific efficiency and bureaucratic absurdity.

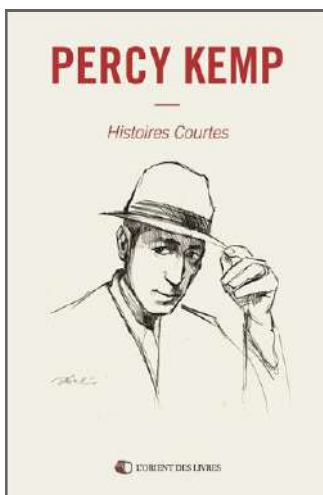
As a legacy of 1930s extravagance, my Bristol 407 Zagato has no kinship with the four-wheeled clones of today, unholy fruit of the unnatural pairing of a computer program with a wind tunnel, and offspring of a marriage of convenience struck between the accountants who run our car industry and the grey men who run our governments.



Bristol 407 Zagato

More than her bulges and protrusions which so clearly distinguish her from today's flying saucers designed by fashionable streamlining experts going with the flow, more than her roaring grill which cares nothing for political correctness, more than her crazed woodwork and old leather seats on the verge of bursting, more than her all-pervasive scent that no home fragrance could ever rival, more than her chrome, shinier than a warrior's armour, more than her old-fashioned suspension, unsullied by any electronic gimmickry, more, even, than her four-barrel analogue carburettor, untarnished by digital injection, what I love most about her is the majestic helm with which I steer her – a slender, uncluttered, black bakelite wheel, so different from the big, fat steering wheels bulging with the overpriced leather and spuriously precious woods beneath which today's car manufacturers conceal the heaps of sumptuously decorated silicone that they peddle to monied consumers in search of half-baked individuality.

Yes, of all her particularities, it is undoubtedly this graceful steering wheel that I find the most irresistible. A snob I may well be. But being a hopeless snob, I can't help hoping that one day, a true creator, at once coachbuilder and artist, will design a car that is neither exceptionally fast nor exceptionally luxurious, neither markedly eco-friendly nor markedly impervious, neither singularly thrifty nor singularly spacious, but that is, quite simply, sublime.



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