



## LIE DREAM OF A CASINO SOUL

Nick Johnstone

### 1

Rachel wants to know how you weigh freedom. Is it impossibly heavy beyond our imaginations? she asks. Or light the way invisible things are light, like dreams memories sunshine? It's Tuesday evening, we're having dinner at a Lebanese place on Edgware Road. Conversation is rich, fluid. She's telling me about a political prisoner they're trying to set free. She works for a human rights organisation. She's assigned to Myanmar, former Burma. I say something about freedom being a child's dream of the world. Rachel eyes me intensely. My impressions of her are romantic, wide-screen. Picture a drop of the ocean inside a shell – that's Rachel. When the bill comes, my credit card is declined. Rachel pays.

### 2

I got a letter yesterday by recorded delivery from the bank telling me I've got fourteen days to clear the arrears on my mortgage payments in full or they're going to repossess my flat. I sat on the sofa, MTV blasting The Strokes, volume set to 22,

reading, re-reading that letter. At dinner, I didn't tell Rachel. We've only been going out a month. She doesn't even know about the shop. She thinks I worked for a firm of management consultants, that I was made redundant in October. It's January twelfth now and London is cold. I did tell her that last week I saw Mick Jones on Ladbroke Grove and Paul Simonon a day later on Aldridge Road Villas. Rachel thought I was making it up. Where she works, everyone was raised on The Clash. I had three estate agents out this morning. The second was the best. I'll be sad to leave here. But the thought of the bank taking my home. No, no, no. I've got thirteen days to secure a firm offer in writing or I lose my home. Rachel thinks I'm about to sell because I want a bigger place. She lives in a studio on Chesterton Road, four streets north of the Westway. Living over here, on Powis Gardens, deep in Notting Hill, she thinks I've got it made.

### 3

I couldn't sleep last night. So I sat on the sofa in the living room, a legal pad in my lap, a 2b pencil in hand, made a list of all my debts. Who I owe. How much. When I need to pay it back. Who can I borrow from. What's left to sell. Recently, I've sold almost everything. First to go were the antique hand-me-downs. My grandmother's French eighteenth century bureau. My great aunt's silverware. My great uncle's Dutch marquetry chairs. My other grandmother's art deco lamp. Auction, ebay: all gone. The money came in, went out again. Urgent circles of cash. I just keep spinning them. Barely leaving fingerprints. I passed the whole night like that. Until eventually, came the first glimmer of dim winter daylight. In my basement flat, windows criss-crossed with white security bars, it's never light, only dim, dingy, then dark.

### 4

Rachel is impressed that I've got a member of the Royal family living next door. Tom Hawksley-Richards. The only son of the sister of our future monarch. Lives at number seven. His coke dealer comes and goes all day, every day. I know it's his

coke dealer because I've scored from him myself. Everyone round here knows Phil. He deals out of a flat on Tavistock Road. Makes house calls to the needy and rich. I hear you run up a certain credit you can't pay back, he breaks a hand. Then the other. Next, your legs. And so on. Susan, my ex-girlfriend, her sister Sam said she knew of a concert pianist who got both his hands broken. He couldn't work for months. Went to rehab in the end. Rediscovered Chopin. Left Notting Hill for Paris. A new life. Rachel keeps up on Royal family gossip. Says it's like following a repressed elliptical soap opera – that there's always the possibility of getting a peek behind the mask. Since we started dating, she spends hours at the windows, wrapped in the curtains, saying, There he is. Third time today. How much is he putting up his nose for God's sake. She's never tried coke. Stayed up five days straight. Or had money problems. That's why I like her.

## 5

I had my own optician's business on Kensington Church Street. A small shop selling designer frames. Oliver Peoples. Jil Sander. Prada. Gucci. Miu Miu. Armani. LA Eyewear. I opened it a year after graduating from Oxford with a first in history. I drifted for six months, parties, pubs, clubs. Susan, who I met in my second year, had this incredible amount of money at her disposal. Her family was old money, she had a trust fund. I helped her dispose of it. One evening, her brother told me about a friend who'd opened a designer eyewear shop in Edinburgh, what a success it was, how he'd sold glasses to celebrities, aristocrats, dot com millionaires. Something clicked. Back in London, I did my homework, sized up the competition, trekked around shops taking notes. I borrowed the start-up costs from Susan (at the top of the list the other night: still owe Susan £35,000). She got her old school friend Tatiana Ranovich in to design the shop. I bought stock. Hired Daniel as optician. We opened. Word spread. We got write-ups in all the right magazines like The Evening Standard, everything went to plan. Money flowed, the business turned a profit, my salary rocketed. I drank champagne, did a little coke here, a little coke there. Then a lot of champagne, a lot of coke, everywhere. For

Susan's thirtieth, we flew Concorde to New York. Stayed at the Paramount. Room service, clubs, more coke. I charged the whole trip – a cool £7,000 - to a credit card. Soon I was charging everything to a credit card. Food, a courier at the shop, take-out pizza, the mortgage. I started turning up to work mid-morning. Then around noon. Then I'd call Daniel, ask him to run the shop. For a day. Then two days. Then a week. I took out loans. Maxed out one credit card, applied for another. Maxed that, applied for another. Susan and I got bored with each other. She went to Australia last summer for a two week holiday, stayed six months. Fell in love with the producer of a hit Australian reality TV show. And then, last autumn, a designer eyewear chain, Zara Levy Vision, expanding from the States, opened on Kensington Park Road and during the fanfare – six A-list Hollywood stars were at the opening - nobody bought any frames from us for a week. Then another week. By the third week, I threw a pre-Christmas sale. Still nothing. Panic set in. Daniel quit. Debt collectors started coming to the shop, then to my flat. I wrote cheques. The cheques bounced. I borrowed. Soon as I paid one lot off, another lot came banging on the door. Then came real trouble: court. They seized the shop. All the assets too. When Susan finally reappeared, she'd stopped using, said I looked like a scarecrow. She gave me a business card for a shrink. Bill Peterson.

## 6

Nine days to go and Rachel is by my side sleeping. It's half five in the morning. I'm lying in bed smoking. The windows are wet with condensation. A looming shadow through the window: the 'for sale' sign. It's on with an estate agent on Notting Hill Gate. They're slick, fast, professional. I told them my predicament. That we needed the hand with all the aces and yesterday. No problem, they said. Apparently it's on the market at a beyond competitive price. They've done seven viewings. No offers so far though. If my dad was still alive, he'd know what to do. My mother, last time I called, begging her to lend me another £500, she said: Don't call this number again until you straighten yourself out. That was four months ago. Since then, I've left message after message on her machine. But she never calls me

back. When this is over, I'll go and see her. Explain everything. Rachel sleeps so peacefully. I could sit here watching her sleep forever. Till they kick the door down. Take the keys. Throw me in the street. Cover me with leaves.

## 7

Matt, the estate agent doing the viewings, called this morning. He said he's bringing over a couple at eleven. Very keen buyers, their place is under offer. In a good position. Looking for a two-bed in Notting Hill. This put me in a great mood. I turned MTV up to 24, smoked cigarettes, wearing my best grey suit, my black Armani shades. I jumped around the flat when they played the new White Stripes video. Around nine thirty, I sent Rachel a text, telling her she's fun, I like her. She hasn't replied yet. It's ten ten now. Fifty minutes until the viewing. They're going to make an offer. I can feel it. This is where everything changes, change begins. I'll use the equity to clear the debts, start a new business. Maybe go to Bali or something to clear my head. Surf. Sleep. Swim. Fall in love. Walk the beaches as the sun comes up.

## 8

Rachel wants to know why I'm not looking at places to buy. She says she'd like to come along. See places with me. We're at Raoul's, eating brunch. My eggs are the wrong side of runny. And her toast looks better than mine. She may be hinting that she wants us to move in together but I'm not sure. Yesterday she said living alone and having her own place is important to her. I pretended that I've been around the block with this selling and buying game, that I'm not going to look at any flats until my place is under offer. I made it sound like everyone does this. She said, Oh. Bit into the last corner of her superior looking toast. When the bill came, I made a big theatre out of opening my wallet and acting surprised that I hadn't actually been to the cashpoint on the way to meet her, that subsequently I didn't have £40 cash on me as I thought. She wrote a cheque. She wrote the letter 'R' big and looping like a dragonfly's wings in flight or the infinity sign. Her hand caught the ink, smeared

the date. The rest of the afternoon, she randomly stroked my sleepy head with a palm stained blue.

## 9

Seven days to go and Matt just called to say the couple found it too dingy. They're after a top floor flat. Light, apparently, is top of their shopping list. I asked him why he brought them over. He said, You never know. I said, fine. Hung up. Paced the living room furious. Shouting at him. Out loud. My voice bouncing off the walls, now bare except my year of 1992 Oxford portrait and the John Lennon print Susan bought me for my twenty seventh. I called Matt back, told him he wasn't doing enough. That I wanted results and now. He suggested a major price drop. Let's price it to sell instantly, he said. I said, Okay, do it. Soon as I got off the phone, someone was knocking at the door. I had learned never to answer, otherwise you're legally giving debt collectors carte blanche to walk in, seize whatever they want. I checked at the curtains. A courier. Motorcycle leathers. Clipboard. An envelope. To be safe, I opened the window. He said it was recorded. I signed. Sat on the sofa. A notice from the bank telling me I now had seven days to clear the arrears on my mortgage payments or they were going to commence proceedings to repossess. I snatched at the Dunhill packet. Empty. I threw it at John Lennon's face. Struck him on the nose. Outside, the low murmur of a dub record. Outside, the screech of children having fun. I dialled my mother's number. She answered. I said, It's me please don't hang up. She did.

## 10

Great coke. I sold my suit, the Oxford portrait and the Lennon print to three different dealers on Golborne Road. Went to Tavistock Road, saw Phil. I mentioned that I saw him next door all the time and he told me to "mind my own fucking business". I walked down Leamington Villas smiling. A gram in one pocket. Forty Dunhills in the other. I put MTV on, turned the volume to 27. Jay-Z. '99 Problems.' All at once: music, coke, cigarette. The world dissolved. There was no letter on the

sofa from the bank. I was taking a day off. Tomorrow I'd be back at the shop, selling frames to beautiful people with weak eyes. Tomorrow I'd go out with Rachel, looking at flats. If the moment presented itself, I might ask her to move in with me. Everything would figure itself out. These obstacles will obliterate. This day is beautiful. I think I'm falling in love with Rachel.

## 11

Five days to go. Matt showed an investment banker round last night. He made an offer on the spot. But the offer was too low. It wouldn't even cover the outstanding mortgage loan. When I explained this, Matt sounded distracted, said he'd try and get the buyer to go up. Susan came by earlier, tried to persuade me to make an appointment to see Bill Peterson. I told her I didn't need a shrink, I needed money, heaps of money. She said she couldn't lend me any more, that I still owed her for the shop. I told her I didn't want her stupid money. She asked me if I was getting high. I told her no. I didn't do coke any more. She passed me the same business card she'd passed me six months ago, told me to call him. After she left, I made an inventory of everything in the flat. A sofa, a TV, a bed, a coffee machine, a shelf of books, a shelf of CDs, two suitcases and some basic cooking utensils. Matt called back. The buyer's offer was final. No other viewings were scheduled. I took a shower. Filled a Tesco bag with all the CDs and a Marks & Spencer bag with all the books, headed up to the Record & Tape Exchange on Notting Hill Gate. They gave me £38 cash for the CDs. Then I went to their used bookshop. They gave me £42 cash for the books. In the icy air, I felt positively rich. So I went to Phil's.

## 12

Three days to go and Rachel's at the window again, waiting for Phil to come out of next door. Can you imagine how much money you'd get if you called a tabloid with this story? I didn't quite register what she was saying at first. Then I thought about it. What kind of money would a person get for bringing a story like this to a tabloid? £10,000? £20,000? £50,000? I calculated everything I owed, based on the

list of last week, into these sums. This would do it. I know, I said. Finally, Phil left and Rachel was thrilled. There he is, she said, whispering, breathless. Then she sat down next to me, asked if all my furniture was really in storage.

### 13

Forty-eight hours until the repossession process begins and I meet a man at Fresh & Wild on Westbourne Grove. He's a reporter with The Globe. He says his name is Jim. He buys me a take-out coffee, says let's go somewhere more private. We end up sitting on a bench off Colville Square. Tell me everything you know, he says. Then he goes fifteen paces away, out of earshot, calls people on his mobile. Comes back, says: This is how we're going to do it. We'll have one of our investigative reporters follow this Phil guy and buy some coke off him. I tell him the reporter can go to Phil's place with me. I'll broker the deal. Even better, he says. I ask him what my fee will be, outline my situation. He goes out of earshot again, makes a call. Comes back, says there's £50,000 in it for me, if I set it all up for tonight. They'll pay tomorrow, in cash, if they get the story. I assure him they'll get the story. Two hours later, two plumbers arrive at my flat. Once inside, they take their overalls off, open their tool boxes. Cameras, lenses, film. We wait at the windows. I start to panic that Phil's not coming. Then, at 8:15, finally, Phil shows up. The photographers snap away. I later find out that another two are hidden across the street, snapping Hawksley-Richards as he opens the door to Phil. Phil leaves. Jim calls, tells me to head over to Phil's. On the corner of Westbourne Park Road and Aldridge Road Villas, their undercover man will be waiting for me. He'll give the code "crowning glory". I hurry round the corner. There's a man waiting. But he looks like RZA from the Wu Tang Clan so I assume it's not him. Then he says, 'crowning glory' and off we go to Phil's. Jim told me later there were photographers planted everywhere. The reporter was wearing a wire. Phil sold us ten grams. The reporter paid in cash. A hidden spy camera captured the whole thing. When I got home, Jim rang, said my £50,000 would be dropped off in cash at seven in the morning. I threw the suitcases on the bed. Packed. Sat in all the

emptiness, waiting. In my hand, my passport. Yes, my passport.

#### 14

It's now June and I'm sitting in an apartment in Paris. The way it went down in the end, the story was front page the same morning I got my money. The headline: Coke Shame Of Royal Son. They left my name out of it, but to those who knew, it was pretty obvious. Phil was arrested around dawn. We seized a large quantity of cocaine, boasted Scotland Yard. I went straight to my bank, paid off the mortgage arrears. Stayed there over an hour, moving money here there and everywhere until all the pending court cases were put to rest. Then I went to Waterloo, took the first Eurostar train to Paris. Just inside France, I called Rachel. Told her there were things I needed to explain.

#### 15

I want to know how you weigh freedom. Is it impossibly heavy beyond our imaginations? Or light the way invisible things are light, like dreams memories sunshine? It's Saturday evening, we're having dinner at a little bistro off Boulevard St Germain. Conversation is honest, real. Rachel says something about freedom being a child's dream of the world. I eye her intensely. Her impressions of me are romantic, wide-screen. Picture a drop of the ocean inside a shell – that's me. When the bill comes, my credit card is accepted. I pay.

First published by [Pulp Net](http://www.pulp.net)

<http://www.pulp.net/46/lie-dream-of-a-casino-soul.html>

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