

C G FEWSTON

The Girl on the River Kwai

I have memories of people I'll never see again, and one such person went by the name of Ann Gables, who lived in Manhattan but came from Ohio, or so she said.

I tried to save her but couldn't. I fought and I lost. Who was she? You ask.

Ann Gables was all she ever told me of her name; all, I believe, she ever told any of her clients. But I was more than a client to Ann; she was like a sister, and she was someone I could not pull back from the black pit which devours wasted lives like sweetmeats, and for as long as I knew Ann she playfully tiptoed, like a ballerina losing her mind in mid-performance—a *duente*—on the edge of a thing I cannot name, and it is not so because I do not wish it; I cannot name the thing that waits in the darkness for me to reach out and touch it and to be devoured whole as Ann must have been taken in her final moments.

Who was Ann Gables? You ask again.

Right. From what I recall of Ann Gables began as we finished a conversation in the hall of a hotel and with her touching the tip of my nose, and with one of her usual winks she had replied, as she must've done to all her

clients, 'That's the one: *Anne of Green Gables*. But without the "e" at the end.'

She had lightly slapped my cheek before adding, 'But I'm not that innocent.' A quizzical expression must've overtaken the corners around my eyes and mouth because she said one more thing before I followed her into the hotel room on Fifth Avenue and we locked the door behind us,

'Never let fear determine your morality,' she had said, and all I could smell between the sheets and over the sweat of our bodies was the petrichor hanging in the air and on the streets below.

(I lied just then. From now on I'll tell the truth.)

From what I first recall of Ann Gables—no, that was not her real name—began in a pool hall as a colleague and I shot 9-ball, a game I'm terrible at playing. Mike said something I don't now recall after I missed my called shot but I do remember laughing and leaning on my pool cue and turning, by happenstance or by habit—I'll let you be the judge of that—to the front doors, and it was then I met eyes with Ann Gables as she entered the pool hall, and I swear to you I saw a bright, white flash spark in her eyes as she looked me up and down and winked in my direction.

Ann's black hair, a wig I came to discover later, extended long and straight down her back to her waist. She slipped her hands in the backs of her jeans and found a path

around Mike and over to me. Not once did our eyes lose contact.

When we started talking, I compared the youthful image Ann portrayed as she first came through the doors—she had looked to be nineteen or twenty—with the creases of a forty-something hiding beneath a veneer of brio and the teases of a teenager.

Needless to say, Ann and I hit it off. She told me her phone number as easily as her hands had slid into the back pockets of her jeans as she turned to go. A few days later, we met in the lobby of the hotel I told you about.

But all through the first meeting and our first romp in the hotel room I could tell Ann played her part very well and how I lost myself in her charade, as a filmgoer might become lost in Leonardo's Oscar-winning performance in *The Revenant*.

I could also tell that beneath Ann's vibrant, jovial exterior a darker more subdued person lay within, and I had first seen her true self (if that's what you really want to call it) on that first night in the hotel.

Ann, much like that first night together, would make me wait. She'd pour me vodka from the minibar and seat me at the desk. She'd tease me with a lap dance, rubbing her knee ever-so gently over my inner thighs until she found what she was looking for. Then she'd turn and skip into the bathroom to draw a bath for herself. She liked to be clean, she told me afterwards. She liked to be clean like

the desert before she had to do what she needed to do. But with me she said it was what she had wanted ever since she first saw me (whether that's true or not I'll leave you to judge) and how her whole body tingled when our eyes met in the pool hall. That's how she knew she needed me.

When my glass became empty and I became bored looking over at the bed at Ann's fox-fur coat (a fake, I imagined) lying wet from the rain, I walked over and picked up the fur coat to hang inside the bathroom.

Ann didn't see me at first, what must've been a few seconds at most, standing in the doorway with that wet coat limp in my hands. But I saw such a sad look on her face, a look that made me think of my sister, another woman I failed to save.

Ann had been clutching her knees inside a hot bath and her face remained blank as she stared off into the corner of the bathroom where a small table and mirror waited for her to come and fix back the black wig she had removed and placed on a nearby hook.

Ann's hair, a burnt-golden hue, had been done up in two small knots on the backside of her head, and I could see droplets from either the sweat or bathwater on the backs of her neck and shoulders.

Then her neck shot around and the lost, dejected look vaporized in the steam as her cheerful pseudo-self emerged (perhaps that's who she wanted to be) and took

an arm away from her knees and pointed to the door beside me, 'You can put my coat on the back of the door. I'll be out in a minute.'

The sad look had confused me much more than the wig and I obeyed her instructions before I eased shut the door to the bathroom.

I waited for her to finish by pouring another vodka into my glass. I sat imagining her as I had found her in the bathroom: with her knees pulled to her chest, her shoulder blades arching outward from her back covered in freckles and water. I imagined her once again going flat and serene and lost to the world as she thought about something I was afraid I already knew, like imagining what scurries beneath your childhood bed late at night but are too afraid to lean down over the edge of the bed to see into the darkness.

And I imagined Ann Gables would be in that bath for another thirty minutes with the fur coat looming over her on the hook on the back of the door when that same door instantly snapped open and Ann came out with her arms extended above her naked body, her pubic hairs glistening from the bath, her six-pack as sharp as ever, while a gleeful look bounced in her eyes, and I thought it ironic when she shouted, 'Here I am! Here's all of me,' because she had chosen to continue the fantasy by placing the black wig back on her head, and all I could say in response was, 'Yes, here you are, and here I am.'

A few days later—a long three days for me to roll around in my head the memories of that night I told you about in the hotel—I met Ann Gables for coffee and croissants at The Fitzgerald so she could tell me she never wanted to see me again.

A fog hung low that day and I felt Ann and I sat at a table atop a mountain in the clouds. Inspired by the Polish painter Tamara de Lempicka, Ann wore over-the-knee boots, the color of caramel, with leather shorts and a gray shirt, short-sleeved and revealing her taut stomach I so adored; a trench coat hung on the back of her chair.

So we sit there talking over coffee at The Fitzgerald for nearly an hour and Ann tells me of how her life felt like an anchor—no, that's not right—like she was anchored to something or another—or was it (?) how her life was like an anchor dragging her down—and she told me of her early teen experiences with a girl on a church trip in a van and how she fingered Ann's wet panties beneath a pillow held firmly over her shorts, and how a few years later she experimented with phone sex with another girl her age and when Ann climaxed with the cucumber still inside, her friend asked her to describe what she was feeling but Ann couldn't or didn't want to and Ann lied, said her mother was home and had to go, and that was when Ann knew she wasn't like the other girls and boys her age and that sex didn't need to be all emotional. Sex was just sex.

Did I know what she meant?

‘Yes,’ I told her, ‘I know what you mean.’

And for half an hour more I patiently listened over my iced-hazelnut coffee, chewing on lemon-flavored tablets for heartburn that read ‘Magsil’ on one side and ‘Fortune’ on the other side, and as Ann gabbled on about her fetishes with web-camming I kept eating my fortune tablets and thinking the whole world a farce.

That was around the time I convinced myself I was having a heart attack every day, despite the three doctor’s opinions that my heart was fine, healthy, and perhaps the problem was of the mind. For obvious reasons, I declined to speak to anyone about that.

But those pseudo-heart attacks was what led me to see Ann in the first place; she helped ease the pain, as it were. Regardless of this I felt my heart thumping me a good one as Ann discussed how a few clients liked to role play where she tied them up and spanked them like the naughty girls they were, and as I was about to get up and leave to get a bit of fresh air, Ann begins telling me the story about the girl on the River Kwai and how that was what pushed Ann to the breaking point, snapping, going mental, until she found herself with me, sitting over coffee, babbling on and on. But Ann told me about the girl anyway, and for once I wanted to listen. It went something like this:

At exactly two thirty-five—and I should know since I happened to check my Montblanc watch at that precise moment—Ann told me how she had met Imogen in Paris

after a fling went bust and how the two women hit it off over crepes and croissants (very French, Ann said) and how Imogen suggested the two give up on society and head to Moscow then to Singapore. Imogen had a thing for the Oriental Express and she needed to check off a few bucket-list boxes.

The one train Imogen was just dying to take, ironically, intrigued Ann enough that over their mid-day meal Imogen and Ann had decided to take the Eastern and Oriental Express from Singapore to Bangkok, a trip which should take only a week. But by the end of the excursion which saw stops at Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Baan Huang Yang, Ann would never be the same and it was all that damn bridge's fault.

Ann gesticulated with her fork, a bit of croissant stabbed at the end, as she spoke to me of Imogen's wild fantasies of wanting to run bare breasted through gardens, and how once, Ann lowered her voice, Imogen said an older gentleman, one of her father's friends, had slipped his fingers along her spot on the very day of her fifteenth birthday.

I was shocked, I told Ann, but she shrugged me away and consumed the piece of croissant on the end of the fork. 'It happens all the time,' she said. Her smile grew broader. She continued, "Imogen was wild. A woman of the forests of old, and that, in part was what drew Ann to Imogen in the first place."

That day on the River Kwai—Ann spoke with her eyes lifted to the sky outside the windows of the café where the fog waited like a wall—the clouds hung so low you could reach out the window of the train’s carriage and touch them with your fingertips.

When the train stopped at the station nearest the bridge, Imogen hopped down from the train and darted through the crowd and into the fog with her yellow sundress flitting like a butterfly through a field of dead crops.

Ann caught up to Imogen as Imogen righted herself on the iron railing of the bridge crossing the River Kwai, and Imogen stepped slowly, as if walking down the aisle of her own wedding, up the rail rounded in the shape of an arch and into the fog. Ann called to Imogen from the center of the tracks but Imogen closed her eyes, spun on a toe like a ballerina would, Ann reached out and screamed, fearing her friend would fall, but Imogen spun four more times in tight circles on a single toe on top of the iron arch of the bridge and each time Imogen’s yellow sundress would lift above her waist and reveal her neatly trimmed pubic hairs. Imogen, you see, never wore undies.

At one point, Imogen’s toe nudged against one of the iron rivulets and Imogen lost her balance and began to falter, her hands waving about to regain control.

Ann, motionless, paralyzed, looked through the fog for someone to help and saw a Buddhist monk in an orange robe tattered with mud standing on the opposite end of

the tracks. The monk counted prayer beads in his left hand and watched Imogen as she fell flat on her stomach on the railing she had been dancing on earlier; she cracked open her upper lip and nose. Blood spurted out and down into the River Kwai. The monk then turned without a word and vanished into the fog. He must've gone on to Kanchanabun's Allied War Cemetery near the railway station to take alms.

Imogen felt the blood on her face with a tentative hand, the blood dotting her yellow sundress, and when she looked at her fingertips with that vivid color of red only blood can offer, Imogen and Ann began laughing, hysterically, like that was the damn funniest thing they had ever seen, and maybe for them it was.

Ann stopped talking, looked at me then at her watch, said she was late and had to rush off for another appointment.

I shook away the daydream I had been in and asked, 'Is that it? Is that all?'

'I'm afraid so,' she said. Ann stood with purse in hand and paused to add one final thought, 'But, you know, that was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You know? Imogen up there on that bridge dancing in the low fog as if she could dance forever on the River Kwai. That's something I'll never forget.'

CG Fewston is an American novelist who is a member of AWP, a member of Americans for the Arts, and a professional member and advocate of the PEN American Center, advocating for the freedom of expression around the world. *A Time to Love in Tehran*, his fourth book, won GOLD for Literary Classics' 2015 best book in the category under "Special Interest" for "Gender Specific - Female Audience."

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