



tranters

a short story in verse

by c. john holcombe



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Transters

All their famed lives they were drifters,
feckless from the start.

No rich man in the cherry stones, but choosing
the rough trades and the mart.

All was their brimming oyster which
they left in dawn-white heaps,
and women trashed in their bridal sheets
others had for keeps.

Poised to be irregulars,
pressed and abruptly gone:
down highways where always were soft voices falling
convivially and on.

The dark trees spread in their eyelids,
evening wraps the skin.
Lit windows to guide them from highways and byways,
and warm smiles let them in.

This little Transter went to Haymarket,
this one to the Scrubs,
and this one in laughter ran all the way home with his
takings from the pubs.

Now don't you ever be like them said
my strait-laced Auntie Jane.
You can make yourself a real life and a half
with brawn and tad of brain.

And so I did: no dunce in class
I went to the local tech,
and for every success at board and bed
the Council sent its cheque.

But who will find me a good goer,
and who a young bride?
Who will take me beyond the natter and tether,
the dreaming world aside?

The high-steppers dangled such darkness
of hair and glittering breasts:
and always such tempests and spangled tears as I
plumbed their treasure chests.

Peerless of Peckham, despair of Ruislip,
the pride of Kensal Rise,
and many and many a time the whole night long
I shut their fluttering eyes.

Abroad and home, five years and taken
finally alive
by Babs' bright look, her welcoming mouth and jack-
hammering new jive.

You can get to me on a Tuesday, or
any day you please:
we were married in June when even birds
fell out of the sad trees.

The Tranter family all turned up,
the whole south London crowd,
and large as life on the spot-lit turf they said,
Charlie's done us proud.

And so I had, a modern house,
a warm and caring wife,
and Tom said: even I might settle down,
son, for this sort of life.

But even then an undertow
of thoughts, I don't know why.
And sometimes I would talk to Babs under
the vague and drifting sky.

I asked where do the clouds go,
how do our wanderings start?
How sad the summer rain is when we hear
it falling through the heart.

I asked what is belonging, and why,
out of the Ark in pairs,
the Tranters came as much with others' claims
so muddled up with theirs?

For though I'm fond of Babs' blue eyes,
and the kid is a real treat,
all I see in the Sunday walk and back
is bricked-in street with street.

But who has such a family
as Babs in smart new slacks?
And I am smiling, pull a beer: come in,
be comfortable, relax.

In truth it wasn't easy when
my Tranters need the best:
the kid his bicycle, and Babs her clothes,
our holidays, the rest.

And up and down I've worked for that,
long periods I'm away
at weekend talks and conferences: all
the Works know what to say.

I'm not making apologies,
I'd sooner not tell lies.
But Babs can talk as though she knows or not
and they can't criticize.

Mr. Tranter of Spence and Riggs?
Ah, I've a note for you.
Oh, Mr. Tranter, if you have the time,
Kate was asking, Sue. . .

What are little girls made of,
but sugar after strife.
For me beneath the undone dress there comes
the very breath of life.

But then they all know what I'm at;
they probably swap notes,
Where did the chancer take you, do this time?
Usual misquotes.

So it's not for Babs that order book
with knit one, drop one, purl:
where it's all too easy if you cut one out
to pull another girl.

But Charlie works the hearts, and hearts
arrange the best rates.

*Don't know how you do it really, Tranter;
mates, I say, just mates.*

But who of these are my true ones
beyond the breath and tell?
And who can hear beneath the dropping skin
the penny through the well?

Live your life out in contentment,
sign future as a lease,
read again and again what the brochures say
if mortgage rates increase.

What is a little affection?
What is dallying and play,
when long, long afterwards a healthy glow
lights up the inner day?

My story. *Charles Tranter, please:
to Personnel.* I went,
and there was Spence, the old man, looking
mightily content.

*Ah Tranter, come in, yes, not easy
what with the move and that,
But about time that I thought we had, well, our
usual little chat.*

*Ah, the new appointments, I said as
the eyes shifted and looked tired:
you can rest assured, sir, that my salary. . .
Tranter, you are fired.*

*Well, just like that, I said, and thanks,
now turning at the door.
Tranter, there have been complaints: expenses,
harassment and more.*

So, the kipper-suited sixties
miserable old sod,
had done his sweet F. A. to warn me off
and dropped me on the nod.

That evening, with the car in service,
I waited for the bus —
which would just happen with a bloody strike
on, with Accounts and us.

And then, and then, I always chat
up threepences on legs,
not that of course Miss 'Aren't I Gorgeous?'
needed much pretext.

An eyebrow lifted for the answer,
and body pressing there:
Yes, she was a tease but beautiful, moving
like smoke upon the air.

Better, of course, I know that,
to have pleaded my excuse.
Better to have seen Miss Sophie Shields as
a tabby on the loose.

But there you are. Afterwards
I did try the squaw.
Overnighting at some colleague's place: there
was nothing, a faint roar.

And also in the morning, or meant to,
as soon as I got in,
but I was just a bit uneasy now
how I should begin.

And so perhaps I wasn't quite thinking
what the tannoy meant
Charles Tranter immediately to Personnel.
All right, hang on, I went.

And in the lift up I was supposing
old Spence had changed his mind —
found he couldn't do without me, some
contract we had signed.

So in I go whistling, smiling:
Right, morning, everyone!
All brewster dandy, but I overdid
the bantering, the fun.

A long, long silence followed.
Mr Tranter, please sit down.
And even then I was laughing and chattering.
Oh, you great big lumbering clown!

Now Tranter shut up, listen, would you,
nothing getting through,
a hard force pressing me and the tears spurting and
my hands now trembling too.

Afterwards, and almost tender:
Now, Tranter, you stay put.
Yes, of course you'll keep the job, of course:
it's only as we should.

Perhaps he had to: the TV carried
the 'Strike's Worst Casualty.'
The one hour traffic jam; the house, a photo of
a one time Babs and me.

And then there came the interviews with
some puppet, hardly me.
*No, no I didn't. Was out on business, just
this morning, actually.*

Worse than that was afterwards
going round the place
where everywhere the blackening fire
had left its smoky trace.

Here was Jason's broken cot
and Babs' big teddy bear,
and the shoes, the clothes, and oddly, Daddy's
untouched rocking chair.

Well done, well done, my Charlie boy,
off on the usual thing.
Of all the days you might have chosen, why
this for final fling?

How much they loved it: soon enough
came the centre-spread.
'Hubbie cheating as his house burns down:
wife and toddler dead.'

True professionals. But Spence
sent the severance on.
I phoned, continually, office, home:
Sophie also gone.

To be expected: our Charlie was
properly in the poo.
And even the chattering Tranters didn't quite
know what to say or do.

But Charlie? Charlie carried on,
smiling, a little shamed:
but chasing a new job in the old, old ways:
more careful, never tamed.

But the whole inside was trembling
with voices, which was weird.
Sometimes so close as to be whispering, then
the whole thing disappeared.

But most of all in the evening,
with Charlie tucked in bed,
pushing his hand out through the laundered sheets
to hotel care instead.

And nothing of Jason either in
the park or kiddies pen.
However much in walking up and down I saw
him toddling up again.

No Jason to take the swing with me
or ride the water chute,
no Jason to toss and catch, his hair fluffed up,
a bulky parachute.

Worst of all came the funeral,
with every Tranter there,
and Uncle Tom shambling up on prompting
us to say a prayer.

And that's the straw that did for me,
I couldn't see for tears:
a blur, as were the hymns, and the long walk round
to the lined-up beers.

It was a month before the work came back,
a rep's job at best.
Who cares? I was busy, earning, pleased to be
back to the usual quest.

But now not singles but flotillas;
they sure had heard of me.
*What is it you travel in, Charlie? They say
it's 'Peerless Lingerie'.*

*So, Kate, I'm quite bowled over:
fantastic derriere,
I wouldn't think, Hermione, you needed
one stitch of underwear.*

Up and down the south coast, almost
daily by the clock,
and Charlie afterwards is thanking them
with something out of stock.

Dozens, I cannot remember how many
Margarets and Sues,
nor the many cars, woods, loos
or changing rooms we'd use.

A vast unclothing industry
was turning out for me,
in what for other bods and hubbies was
one grand larceny.

You can hear the factory hooters
drift across the sky
when Charlie and his van of 'Peerless Dreams'
goes toot and tootling by.

Hard breath and the held breath
prefigure the long fall
back to Methuselah no doubt and still
the family doctors call.

Oh, many and many a morning
as I got into the car
and the engine hummed and was comforting I
saw the cocktail bar.

So I said or tried to, standing
old Tom a pint one day:
*You're getting on, my son: what are you now —
thirty? Doesn't stay.*

*Sure, you can hoof it with the swingers
but young chicks take their toll,
which means most days we watch the telly, that's
Tom and current moll.*

But something which we don't speak of
to women, some urgent hope
when they would say, *You know, my pet, you're lucky:
the rest of us just cope.*

Perhaps they did, for all I knew;
but looking on I saw
the great battalions of the world march by:
the church, the trades, the law.

What came was not immediate.
New girls in every port
were just as gamesome, just as reckless but
somehow not the sport.

*What's happened then, my Charlie boy?
You didn't seem in touch.
Wasn't I? my blue-eyed darlin', but then
I like you just as much.*

At times I did but continually
more stopped and stirred my drink,
and for long hours on my own in cafes or bars
moodily tried to think.

And then an odd thing, I must mention here:
I bought a book or two.
Action, spy books, cheap romances, things
to while the odd hour through.

And then more leisurely, I'd stop
in lay-bys and wouldn't drive.
And it was all there, the dreams, the fantasies,
places brilliantly alive.

A whole new world was out there waiting,
I couldn't have enough.
For two whole years I dropped near everything:
women, all that stuff.

What a joke was 'Peerless Dreams:
Our Luxury For You',
but still I used that tinkling tinker's tongue
in house and interview.

Yet now the recipients seemed different:
kinder, another sort.
And more of them said, *Find yourself a good girl,*
Charlie, you must have thought.

It all came back: the scenes I loved,
those books of Jack and Jill.
And what had happened to the child of then,
the hours he used to fill?

Charlie, I remembered, was
to scale the icy peaks
and traipsing across Sahara sands to be
delirious for weeks.

Charlie then the dancer, a brilliant-
sequined skating ace,
spinning around him the applause would rise as
Charlie slowed to place.

And Charlie the great detective,
Chicago's bureau chief.
Not mobster shoot-out or a moll could make
him give up on his brief.

And so those lives in reading
were looking for escape,
when all at once my immediate life took on
another, clearer shape.

No clothes to pack, but take the boat-train out
as the flickering newsreels show.
With a smart companion as the carriage jolts
and hoot and signals go.

She's buttoned up and most becoming
in a little faux cloche hat,
sat beside me, smiling, very charming as
some well-bred pussy cat.

The train will stop and out we'll get
to dine in the best hotels:
champagne and oysters, frosted caviar and
bubbling muscatels.

And all the while, and with laboured puffs,
we climb the long incline:
the mountains rear, the forests darken, the waiters
grow more saturnine.

Restocked, refreshed, the train will stop,
the porter doff his cap.
But he'll cross himself as he sees us off in that
rickety horse and trap.

At last we shall come to the castle,
half merged with forest gloom,
and a wizened servant with a trailing candle
will take us to our room.

Who can have enough of kisses
sharp as new year's wine?
Who can be the more abstemious with
long murmurings 'be mine'?

The clock can stop on an instant and
its spinster tickings cease,
and stiff and impartial as hands moved round comes
afterwards a peace.

Daylight fills the mirror and
the groom is neatly shaved.
Erect the bottles in their long battalions
well stoppered and behaved.

In a moment by the doorway,
with ball gowns passing there,
it's two by two the couples pause and step
down that winding stair.

In hour to hour there is no rest
from dancing in a throng,
when round we went, from breast to breast, each pair
beholden to the song.

And I was one, and one with her
with bow and curtsy paid.
We waltzed, we turned; for all the partners met
a couple so we stayed.

Then in a moment thunderstruck,
I felt the fall of tears:
for all eternity indifferent to
the whirligig of years.

At once they vanished: room and castle,
the dancing as we ought:
mere phantoms of my make-belief, they all
were gone to idle thought.

Who am I? You have heard me, calling
a thousand times your name.
And soft in falling as the summer rain
is first love, last, the same.

Tears, you know not how the tears come,
as sudden as the dew,
nor long through congress and contentment
arms have passed me through

In fey lands and fell lands, whenever
the winds abuse my name,
as constant as the scudding clouds, my days
have purposes the same.

Abroad in heart and body, but
the bright hair blowing free:
always there were strong legs walking as
the long day walked with me.

Across the lawns and council parks,
in shopping malls and cars,
Charlie had the most assiduous and charming
chat-up line in bars.

On breakfast counters, in country clubs,
where women gather or alone
count out the ticking hours that come with
email, fax or phone.

Long days spent on pavements till
the Bobbies moved me on.
Long days in wine bars and still smiling as
each hand was touched and gone.

For I could make a cat laugh, the
bereaved forget their cares,
and have a ladder to the stocking top
return and say its prayers.

They looked at me and wondered as
I told them what they knew.
They looked at me astonished as I spoke
the heart's true billet-doux.

But here I was with the women, both
the soft-eyed and the hawk.
There were many, many more, and men as well
who dropped by at my talk.

There was never a clear programme,
and how it worked at all
I do not know, and didn't ask, but went
from chair to lecture hall.

With always their donations, more
on evenings camped around
some unassuming place with these well dressed folk
sat flat upon the ground.

But there they were, and silent, mostly,
as embers burned away:
into the heart of life they stared, and moodily
time stole quiet away.

*And if you had your life again,
I'd ask, how would you change?
Or would be some lawyer, doctor, actor?
No, but it's been strange.*

Reach out to them, be companionable
in one another's trust:
take hands, both, and do, naturally,
as the body must.

I don't know how it was or why
but spoke of second sight.
And all had taken that slow sleeper out
some long and flickering night.

The castle, drawbridge, turret room:
bewildered, all had stayed
at that one room, and dressed and danced whole days
astonished but not afraid.

They too had sensed a someone there
in dusk or driving rain.
They too had heard a voice speak on and sadly
in that old refrain.

Always we journey, I told them,
and more than we understand
to a place of quietness and acceptance that
for each is promised land.

We are the Lord's own fashioned garment
who is the turning earth,
and are His own living, fading and returning
to another birth.

To that end I opened a foundation
whose funding still astounds
and was questioned, continually, on moral
or whatever grounds.

By which they will get me for flouting
the Trades Description Acts.
Which is to be expected, and was expected, and I
don't quarrel with the facts.

I come before the courts next week
for embezzlement and theft
of men's souls and telling afterwards that
little else is left.

I shall go down a long time to
where Hades already is
to meet a congregation of great sinners
who know not theirs from his.

So give me a company donation or
a tanner if you can,
and Charlie will bless you and keep you, poor
Charlie, the travelling man.