



CHARLES PINCH
PARTHIAN SHOT

Everybody was there. The crowd was submerged in music and noise. Staccatos of conversation. The light inside was damp and yellow like the streetlights outside. Beer glasses in a mystic circle set around the small table.

Someone said: "Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain."

Richy pointed at the mess and explained: "Our own Salisbury Plain."

"Richy, this is Lulu." Jimmy Pettigrew had his arm around her shoulder. She was fine-boned, like an ivory carving.

"I understand you need an assistant editor?"

"I need cash and an assistant editor."

"I like your magazine. I've read every issue."

"All three?"

She laughed.

"Was that you peering out of the bushes like some perv on the cover of the last issue? I mean, was that you in the picture?"

"That was me. I can't afford to hire pervs."

A girl whose name he didn't know sat down beside him and rubbed against his shoulder.

She asked: "What issue was that?"

"It was called 'Neighbourhood Watch'."

"Rich does *everything* himself. The copy, the layout, the ads, soliciting the ads. Did I leave anything out?"

"You mean you eat sleep and fuck the magazine ...?"

"Pretty much."

He turned to Lulu and addressed her in earnest, or with something as close to earnestness as he could muster in the noise and the light.

"I've just started."

"It's good."

"I do everything myself. Most of the photography. When there's time. There's never enough time."

"Who does it when you don't?"

"A couple of Ryerson kids with cameras. There's always a film student looking for a break."

"I could do some ..." she ventured.

"Do you know what a camera is?"

"Italian for *room*, I think."

"What else do you do?"

"I work in a law office."

"So you're a lawyer?"

"No. I clerk."

Jimmy placed his head upon her lithe, silk-wrapped shoulder and dreamed of her naked.

"My father's a lawyer."

"So you're rich!"

Richy sat up in his chair.

"Not all lawyers are rich. Like not all lawyers are assholes and sleaze bags."

"Sleaze buckets or puss bags is actually the correct terminology, if I'm not mistaken."

"Hey, Jim. That's insulting ..."

"To the puss bags, maybe ..."

The volume in the boom room was rising like swagger. People were communicating in sign language. Richy enjoyed watching her mouth moving and the silent words. It was like the sound was muted.

"What's your magazine about?"

He didn't know why his arm was around the girl who'd been rubbing up against his shoulder because she was a perfect stranger. Perfect cherry acid red hair. Perfect fire engine red nails. Everything she had on was yellow.

"It's about money."

"Oh, it's a financial magazine. Investments?"

"No. It's about the money I need to keep it going."

He had his other arm around Lulu.

"Who's your distributor?" she asked.

He moved in his seat, raised his leg and balanced his foot on the table.

"Here's one."

They went out into the evening. It was two o'clock so it was actually morning. The rank fumes of the city. Sewer steam rising from iron capped bogs. The streets were sulphur yellow and black. It had stopped raining. They walked past stores and over merchandise reflected on the sidewalk from store windows.

"This is Richy speaking. What is a magazine? A magazine is something more than the content between its covers. It's a living entity. A voice. Something with its own look and sound. 'Well, Richy,' you might object, 'a car has its own look and sound.' But a car doesn't hold a moral viewpoint; a car doesn't come out fighting from a certain philosophical corner.

"I started this enterprise on a shoe string. I mean it. It's not just a euphemism for starting out with a small lump of capital. Actually, I didn't even have enough to buy the shoes. I sacrificed everything. I worked six jobs doing shifts in different places at the same time. No, that's a joke. If I figure out how to do that, I'll have figured out the displacement of matter in time. I'll be rich.

"You have to believe you have an important angle to present to the reading public. The magazine must be stamped with someone's personality. Take *Cosmopolitan* back then, when *Cosmopolitan* was Helen Gurley Brown. Or imagine, in

a time before, *The New Yorker* without Brendan Gill. I've called our magazine *Piano Notes* because I live in, and it's born out of, a small section of Toronto known as Piano Village. I'm not exactly sure where the name came from. There's all different theories. Some people think it was because there was a piano factory in the area during the nineteenth century. There were factories. It was semi-industrial. But I don't know if one of them made pianos. Now it's becoming gentrified. It's a fashionable place to live and work and shop for young well-educated professionals. It runs along the lake and you have the beaches only a few steps away. So it's got everything. That's what I want to capture. The feel—the whole throb of life in this little cultural pocket.

"You have all kinds of villages in a city like Toronto. Little micro-settlements with their own stamps and cultures. Mirvish village, the gay village. The Annex. Places like 'Little India' or Dufferin and St. Claire. That's 'Little Italy'."

He lived in a converted warehouse. They rode a clattering box on pulleys up to the top floor.

"My place used to be where they kept the equipment for the building."

He unlocked the door and guided her inside with his hand on her elbow.

It was pretty much what she expected. A lot of things a person accumulates stacked in spaces and rising in elevations. CDs. Magazines and publications. Books. Bits of art on the wall. Two computers. A layout table. A printer. A copy machine. The cover of each issue was framed on the wall between two panels of plexi. She wouldn't be surprised if he pointed at them and quipped: "My family."

"You want a tour of the premises ...?"

Only his back was visible. He rooted inside the fridge.

"I thought I had a beer," he apologized.

"I've had enough beer. You've got a great view."

She stood at the window and looked out. It was like a photograph under glass. The black lake was noisy in the darkness. She stuck her head out and smelled the moving water. Lights twinkled along the shoreline like the edge of a landing strip.

"Never have time to look, which is a shame."

"You can look now. Come here and look at it."

He could smell her on the short walk into the studio. She smelled like she looked: not any particular scent or fragrance, just a quality smell.

"I had vodka." He handed her a glass.

Straight and tall. The broadest shoulders. He must have been a fighter in a former life. His face was plain and open and engagingly sober at all times. He wasn't magazine-handsome but he looked as good as she smelled. He had complicated, intelligent hands. She could tell he had good legs because she'd watched the line of his pants when he sat down earlier in the evening.

She stood with her back to the window and looked around his space again.

"You have a past," she accused.

"Somewhere." It came out sounding like an apology.

"This is Lulu speaking. We decide three months in advance how we're going to plan the next issue. We come up with a theme. It's exactly like you'd think. Sitting around a table tossing ideas about until something sounds right. Our next issue will be called something like 'Inner Values' or 'Integrity'."

Richy shouts from somewhere behind her: "*We're calling it the Integrity issue.*"

"I think what I admire most about Rich is his willingness to take it on from the ground up. He schleps his ass from one business to another, one store, one restaurant, one boutique to another along the main drag of Piano Town. At first I understood they were reluctant to place ads. It was originally conceived as just a paper, a sort of consumer info-journal, until the idea of a magazine kicked in. It sounded totally impossible and out of reach, which is why he leapt at it. Anyway he wheedled and cajoled and pulled at their trouser legs until they finally agreed to put an ad in. Rich did the ads himself and they're great. Rich is multi-talented. I've sort of made that clear, haven't I? I don't have to tell you that."

"*Tell me again!*"

"Shut up. This is *my* interview. And the thing was, it started to work. He distributed his magazine in the stores and restaurants and different places where they'd catch an eye and it started to work. We didn't charge for it, then. We don't actually now, either, because we want people to pick it up. But we have a subscription option on our website. Rich wants people to start subscribing. Rich did the web site, too.

"I moved in with him a month ago. It wasn't just about sex. It was just ... the demands of the job, and this is a part-time job for me, you understand. I do it in and around my nine to five. So it was easier. It had nothing to do with sex."

"*Why are you laughing?*"

"I'm laughing. No, but seriously. It takes a huge chunk out of your time. I mean, there's no way you can just introduce a compromise and say... well, today I'll spend two hours on the magazine, then I'll go shopping or see a movie or something. It's just eat, sleep the magazine. So I sleep here, now. Besides, it's just the *best* sex."

The city infiltrates your roots and puts down its own. Unless you were born in the city. Richy was born up north. It was a little town with a bleak main street, a sluggish river and a mine operation somewhere on the outskirts. According to Richy the mine never made any money. People sometimes ask him: "Will you ever go back?"

"No."

It's as firm and flat as that.

One night Lulu asked him why he left, because if he hadn't, he might've ended up a miner instead of a small magazine publisher.

Richy said: "My soul gave me an ultimatum." It sounded like Charlton Heston coming down the corny fake mountain with the two Styrofoam tablets God had given him.

That was why Richy loved the city. Loved dirty, sweltering, smothering Toronto. He loved everything about it. The sidewalks. The sound of the subway

when you walked over a grate in the sidewalk, the smell of fried foods coming off the grills of street vendor wagons. The smell of rain and exhaust—pavement smell that was asphalt rich as you walked up Yonge Street from the lake. Oh, and there was the lake. That was deeply in his heart. Some summer days it was blue and frosty with white triangles of sailboats out in the distance. Sometimes it was grey and linear. Water has its own smell. Just like it has colour and taste. The city was like a floozy, overstuffed heiress waving her cash around, throwing it at some, grinding others into the sidewalk with the rhinestone heel of her shoe.

"It's time you met my folks."

"What do I need to know about your Dad?"

"He collects Chinese porcelain. *Antique* Chinese porcelain."

"Should I wear a suit and tie?"

"Oh God, Rich. You're so funny. Anyway, not this weekend. After we've put the issue to bed."

"How much do you think he's good for?"

"Anything he puts his signature on."

"Imagine being that rich!"

"He's not rich. He just makes a lot."

"What's the difference?"

"The rich still have some at the end of the month."

"This is Rich again. It costs four thousand dollars a month to put out the magazine. The first issue cost two thousand. I lie awake every night and ask myself where it's going to come from. Most of the revenue, well, all of it basically, comes from money paid by advertisers. That's why I try and do a bang up job with the ads. I try to make each one as different as possible in the space permitted. I've got sixty-seven more ads in the upcoming issue than I had when I published the first issue. So that's growth I'm pleased with. You have to be pleased, right? The remainder ... if we're short and need a couple of extra hundred in cash, I put that in myself. I don't even know where I get it. I'll wait on tables in an emergency. One time I cut hair for a week. The Piano Village barber—it's actually an original barbershop with the red and blue and white pole outside, you hardly ever see those anymore. Mort is the barber's name. He was sick and I learned how to cut hair a long time ago, like you end up having all these things with you that you've learned how to do, or done, in your past. So I took over for a week. People loved it. I used to joke with the customers. I'd say things like: 'You want me to leave your neck on?' Stuff like that. Now Mort advertises in every issue. He tells me business is increasing. But I still lie awake at night. Four thousand dollars every month. You've got to worry, right?"

He sat at one of the tables in the Metro Reference Library. The books were themselves beautiful, worthy of the rare porcelains they illustrated. He read about Kangxi blue and white. He read about something called the *famille rose* group. This referred to porcelain in which some of the colour was pink. Pink flowers for example or a pink robe on a slender lady. It was all seventeenth and eighteenth century, the

best of it anyway. There were prices too and some of the bowls and vases cost as much as a house.

"Dad, Mom, this is Richy Kealing."

Lulu's mother, who gave the impression of being somehow involved in the theatre, embraced him.

"Lorelei's told us all about you."

Lulu's father shook Richy's hand.

"So you're the next William Randolph Hearst."

"In the flesh."

"It's like I know you from somewhere ..."

Lulu searched Richy's face.

"Have you met Dad before now?"

"I don't think so. No."

"I don't think so, either," her dad said.

Lulu's mother laced her arm through the strongman's and walked with him into the living room.

It was a kind of blow-away place.

There were French commodes and paintings of horses in gilded frames. The porcelain Lulu had talked about was well-displayed. Richy was satisfied that he had made the right choice and gone to the library. Here and there he recognized Kangxi blue and white. There were vases and bowls. Most of them were decorated with figure scenes but some had flowers. It was all late seventeenth century stuff from the look of it.

Her mother said: "Lorelei, you find yourself another man. I'm claiming Richy for myself."

A night later in bed, he turned to her and asked: "Why do they call you Lorelei?"

"That's my real name."

"I know. But why are you called Lulu?"

"I call myself Lulu. I like Lulu."

"Why?"

"I don't like Lorelei. I like Lulu."

He rolled back against the pillow.

"I like Lorelei. It sounds retro. Exotic."

"Don't you like Lulu?"

"I like Lulu too."

"I think it sounds metro-sexual." She sounded very pleased.

"Is that why you chose it?"

"No. I just liked the sound better than Lorelei."

"Come in, Richy."

It was just Richy and her Dad. Lulu's mother was out. Lulu begged off. "No, it's important that you see Dad alone. I think it makes a better impression. I'd

just be in the way."

It was his den. The walls were paneled in dark wood. The cabinets held more blue and white porcelain.

"This is a very nice room," Richy began.

"I spend a lot of time in here."

"I notice you have some very good examples of Kangxi porcelain."

"God, you know about that?"

"My grandfather collected it. It was his passion."

"A comrade in arms!"

He was looking Richy up and down.

"What line was he in?"

"Line?"

"I mean, what did he do? How did he make his money?"

"Mining."

"Yes. Well, there's money in that."

"What's your favourite piece?"

"This one." He pointed to a slender well-shaped vase. "It's a type called rouleau. That's how you describe the form. It depicts an archery contest. As you can see there are dignitaries gathered in an open-air pavilion. They are watching a man on a horse with a bow and arrow. The horse is galloping forward and the man is shooting at a target over his shoulder. It's a very difficult maneuver."

Richy said: "It's called the 'Parthian shot', is it not?"

"Yes, that's exactly what it's called!" He was looking Richy up and down again. Richy had eschewed suit and tie this time and dressed casually in slacks and a light cotton shirt. He'd had second thoughts before he rang the doorbell, that maybe he should have dressed more formally. But Lulu's father appeared not to mind.

He rubbed his hands together.

"Here's a question for you. I'll bet you don't know. Why's it called the 'Parthian Shot'?"

"Because it is a motif the Chinese lifted from Persian art. Ancient Persian art when it was called Parthia."

"Yes! Yes!" He stamped his feet in a gesture of jubilation. "It's a difficult maneuver, Richy. It requires skill and deliberation. It requires concentration. Essentially, it asks you to knock the enemy dead over your shoulder as you're moving forward. It's hard enough firing a bow and hitting your target. Try it this way. No thank you!" He rubbed his hands together. He was a round little sausage of a man. Lulu stole her height from her mother.

"Lulu tells me you need money."

"Yes, sir."

"How much, seriously, does this magazine mean to you?"

"It means everything."

"Even more than Lulu?"

"Yes."

Her father snorted.

"At least you're honest. I'm prepared to help you."

"Well, that's just great. That's excellent. Thank you!"

"Sit down, Richy. Don't be so formal."

He took a seat on a leather couch. Brass studs ran along the edges. It was the kind of couch that was half pillow. His body sank into it.

"You must've done a lot of things in your life," Lulu's father speculated.

"Yes, sir."

Her father picked up the remote control and turned on the screen.

"When I first met you I felt I knew you from somewhere."

"How could that be? Have we ever met before?"

"No. We haven't."

Music and images on the screen.

Lulu's father put his hand on Richy's pant leg.

"This is where I know you from."

Richy's expression had pulled tight.

"You remember making this ...?"

"It was a while ago. I needed the money."

"You made more than one. You've made several. I have them all."

He slid his hand up to Richy's crotch.

"Okay," Richy said. He cleared his throat.

"Do you want me to remove my hand, Richy?"

"I don't know." He cleared his throat again.

"How much did you need again?"

"Five thousand. I mean, that's what it costs every month."

"That's a lot of money."

"Tell me about it."

Lulu's father pulled Richy's shirt from out under his trousers.

"Oh boy. You've got nice abs. Do you work out, Richy?"

Richy felt the hand run across his smooth skin. The fingers stopped and flicked the hair around his navel.

"Sometimes. Not as much anymore. I don't have the time."

"I see. Well, still looks good. Take your shirt off, Richy. I want to see the rest."

Richy sat up and pulled the cotton shirt over his head.

He was all lightly tanned skin and ripples and hard bone.

"You're a good looking boy," Lulu's father told him.

"Thanks."

"Nice shirt, by the way."

He rubbed his hands all over the young man's torso. He tweaked one of Richy's nipples and felt it harden under his touch. He turned and looked intently at the screen for a moment. Richy was already naked in the movie. A man was fondling and squeezing his large penis.

Lulu's father turned to him and asked: "Did you buy the shirt on sale?"

"I can't remember. Probably."

"You buy a lot of things on sale?"

He unzipped Richy's fly and worked his hand inside. His fingers encircled

Richy's penis.

"Mostly. I mean, no money."

"Oh, right. You've got a big cock, Richy."

"Thanks."

Lulu's father turned to the screen again. The man in the film was about his own age. He had already engorged Richy penis in his mouth and was drooling and making sounds like a nursing baby.

"My wife buys things on sale sometimes. I like the blue and white stripes on your shirt. Are those your favourite colours?"

He pulled Richy's penis out and looked down at it for several seconds without speaking. He squeezed it and felt it throb and harden in his grasp.

Richy said: "I like blue and white. I like red too."

"Red's a good colour," Lulu's father told him.

He was stroking the large penis with one hand and undoing Richy's belt with the other.

"Can you take your pants off for me?"

Richy stood up and fully unzipped himself. He pulled his shoes off but left his socks on. He slipped his underwear down his legs. Then returned to where he was sitting on the couch. Lulu's father took his penis again and started tickling and brushing his fingernails against Richy's scrotum.

"Feel good?"

"Hmmm." It was a non-committal grunt.

"You going to cum for me?"

"I don't know."

"Did you get paid much for these? How much did you get paid?"

"Couple hundred each."

He heard the sound of his own voice on the screen. He was moaning and shouting. Then he cried: 'I'm going to cum! I'm going to cum!'

"That's my favourite part," Lulu's father confided. "What's your favorite scene?"

"A guy puts me in the bathtub and rubs me all over with soap. That was a different film."

"Soap? I like that! Does he jerk you off?"

"Oh yeah ..."

It was eight o'clock when he took his leave. He shook Lulu's father's hand. They had a drink together. Her father was genuinely interested in the magazine, which pleased him. Anyway, he didn't have to worry about money for the time being. Her father asked at one point: "Now that we more or less know each other, level with me. Do you plan to marry Lulu or toss her away?"

"I'd like to marry her if she'll have me."

"I'd like that, Richy. I'd like to have a sexy son-in-law around."

Things weren't any different. On Richy's troubled journey home, the lake still smelled like the lake. He got out of the streetcar and walked the last two blocks

and breathed the air deeply. The city still sweltered and smothered and seduced in its rhinestone glitter and promise of glory.

It wasn't even like you had to slough it off.

Lulu was dancing with somebody amid music and light. She was twirling around at the end of somebody's arm like a ballerina. Rich had his arm around a girl named Ellen. She came from up north, he'd discovered, not far from where he came from. The place was packed as usual. It was hard to hear yourself think, let alone talk.

Jim Pettigrew was playing a game at the table. He was moving beer glasses around in all kinds of configurations. Lulu pecked a kiss on his cheek and then disappeared into a knot of dancing bodies. Richy was laughing. The girl he had his arm around was laughing.

"So what is it this time?"

"What's what?" Richy shouted.

"What's the issue this time?"

Lulu managed to bob into his space again, gave Jim another kiss and winked at Richy.

"The 'Integrity Issue'." Richy was laughing. Hard.

"The what?"

"The *Integrity* Issue!"

It was hard to hear, of course, so this time it was like he almost screamed it.