

Patricia Duncker

Betrayal

(ENGLAND)

Hélène held a dinner party to which she invited all her ex-lovers. Her most recent ex-lovers. I was the only person there who hadn't been to bed with her. Unfortunately, I was late. Thus, when I arrived, there were three faces shimmering with jealousy, arranged around the table. The post of Hélène's lover, usually occupied by at least two women who were never allowed to meet, theoretically out of respect for both but in fact to avoid broken crockery and nasty scenes, was currently held on short-term renewable contract by a ravishingly beautiful ballet dancer with supple encircling arms and a back like a concrete curtain wall. She was hindering Hélène's cooking by administering torrents of kisses. The three other women watched, furious.

"Hello everyone," I cried, realizing that the only lover I knew was the ballet dancer.

I tried to create an amiable diversion. I was the only person not close to an outburst of hysterical murderousness. I unloaded my box. I was carrying alcohol, oranges and eggs. All the different colours looked charming on the table. Everyone smiled and clapped. The tension ebbed.

"Do you know Louise?" accused one of the jealous faces as the ballet dancer coiled herself around me.

"Oh yes, we've met," I said cautiously.

"Today is my birthday. I can do anything," cried Louise and involved herself sexually with casseroles and cooling pots.

I sat down to look at the row of ex-lovers. One was very fat, one was very thin and one was very small. I decided that I was under an obligation to become an ex-lover as I am very tall, in order to complete the row. They were all creative, interesting women, their faces twisted with jealousy. Louise made love to the herrings, then we got two each, bristling with butter and parsley. Hélène enjoyed every moment of our discomfort.

"And how is Anna?" asked one of the ex-lovers, suddenly turning very nasty as we melted our square sugars in tiny cups. Anna is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Anna is Hélène's other lover. Anna has tenure in the post.

"Ah . . . ça va," said Hélène uneasily. Louise numbled like Etna. All the ex-

lovers looked pleased. Hélène and I looked at each other shiftily, like suspected conspirators.

The ex-lovers pushed off at midnight. I discovered that they were all staying together like the three musketeers. Louise was dancing in front of the mirror in the bathroom. Hélène and I smoked at the bottom of the garden. Her city seems unlighted in the night; the only spotlight monument is the cathedral, a massive red-brick fortress in which the local Protestants were massacred. It is full of famous fifteenth-century sculptures attributed to an Italian master of Giotto's school. All the women look shifty, with ambiguous eyes. The Magdalens cover their pots, the Virgins pull their robes around them, Judith is no better than she ought to be. Hélène loves the cathedral. This is entirely suitable.

We watched the red turrets burning in the warm night. It was my serve.

"Hélène, I know that this is going to sound silly as you obviously had a scenario of some kind in mind. But why on earth did you invite them all on the same evening?"

She stared at me resentfully, like a child being bullied. "Chantal did that to me. Invited all her ex-lovers. And they were all friends. Friends! Can you imagine? They got on. And I was the only woman there who was a cauldron of jealousy. I thought I'd explode."

I looked at her. I was about to say something patronizing and brutal about petty vendettas and revenges that ruined good dinners. But I thought better of it and smiled wearily. "Let's have a beer," I said.

I have never been in love with Hélène, but I am very fond of her.

Do heterosexual people permit themselves the luxury of breaking up, then hating each other for ever—with impunity? Do they just vanish into that great safe sea of other heterosexuals and never see one another again? Martin tells me that gay men sometimes never know who it is that they have just sucked off. I said that it must be odd to kiss only cocks, not faces. He said that he liked the mystery and that cocks were often more honest than faces. And then again, I do know gay men, Martin among them, who have devastating love affairs, every bit as horrendous as our own, and storm out of rooms, smashing glasses against potted plants. I have seen poets pinned against radiators, facing accusations of infamy which revealed the Tolstoyan dimensions of the accuser's imagination. Or perhaps the astonishing sexual talents of the accused. Jealousy magnifies, distorts, like a fairground mirror. It turns the lover and the beloved into monsters.

With us it is not possible to run away from the past. Your ex-lover is your present lover's ex-lover but one, which is when she was with you. And if you try to escape the enchanted castle by advertisements in another area you'll find that the woman who replies was lovers with your first lover after she was married and before she came out for real this time and hasn't she changed? The silk twist that binds us is unbreakable, invisible, eternal. It is like God's love: theoretical, ever-present and stifling. We meet what is actually just one of

the facts of life in small communities with a barrage of ideologies—lesbian ethics, significant friendship and political continuity. Sometimes this works. As it did with Chantal's ex-lovers who all but formed a collective. More often it is simply a veil for resentment, insecurity, violence and hypocrisy. Real feeling, brutal but honest, is channelled into decent behaviour in a fashion worthy of an English village church flower committee. Mind you, I'm not an enemy of decent behaviour and when I lived in an English village one of those nice tight-curling, blue-rinsed old ladies drove one of the others on the flower rota to a nervous breakdown. I told my mother all about it. "Oh yes," she said, "they're all lesbians."

Well, Hélène and Louise got up and went off to work the next morning. Not particularly early. I heard them making love in a welter of shrieks and cries. It sounded fun. I stroked the cat. She's an interesting cat. Multicoloured, and she dreams. God knows what about. Sometimes in the night she turns circles at the bottom of the bed, spitting and growling. Hélène told me that one rare night when she was sleeping alone she took the harlequin cat to bed with her. In the grip of a nightmare the cat bit her ear and she had to have an anti-tetanus injection. "How did you do that?" asked the doctor. "My cat bit me in her dreams," said Hélène and the doctor went away shaking his head. "You could put an earring through it," I suggested.

I walked round the town. It was quiet, sunny and free of tourists. The British and the Dutch arrive in July. By the time they get this far south they've already caught the sun. The British have become pink shrimps with densely packed freckles. The Dutch are a magnificent toasted brown. The British have thermos flasks and are carrying melted plastic sacs of freezing fluid in their picnic boxes. The Dutch wear anti-nuclear T-shirts and new trainers. I watch them going into their hotels. This time of year the terrace under the cathedral is empty. So I sat down with a coffee, my blue note book and a sense of well-being. I was still writing when Hélène's Mercedes cruised round the corner.

Hélène is not rich. She inherited a bit of money last year, but she spent that on a laser photocopier and a new computer. She's always had the Mercedes. It's one of those 1968 models with fins, leather seats and a walnut dashboard. She loves it so much that I always say it's her other lover. The third lover, who is never in danger of becoming her ex-lover. She's put in seat belts, even at the back, and she has a mechanic who loves it as much as she does. Early in the spring she got all the rust done and gave it a respray. It's the original colour now—luxurious, strokeable cream.

"Get in quick," said Hélène, "we'll pick up Louise."

"Where are we going?"

"The Conquistadora. You wanted to see everyone, didn't you?"

"Hélène. Do you know what you're doing?"

"Of course I do. It's all arranged."

Anna runs the Conquistadora. With her ex-lover. The one before Hélène. Mine not to reason why. I felt like declaring that she could certainly do as she liked, but that I was just an ordinary person who poured acid on her verrucas every morning.

So we drove away across hills, past fields rampant with poppies, banks overflowing with wild daisies. The corn was rising fast in the May days. I cheered up as the Mercedes cruised over the hills like Aladdin's carpet. Sunk in leather and cushions, my feet on wool mats, it was like driving along in a private club. The sun laid little warm kisses all along my arm. Louise was doing the same thing to Hélène. Nobody had premonitions of disaster.

It's always exciting arriving in cities. Even the obligatory ten kilometres of horror, half-made roads, dank canals and pink-brick high-rise blocks were interesting. I looked around, enjoying the mixture of flash investment and decrepitude. The Conquistadora is a discreet private club in a back street. It's surprisingly light inside. They don't have a licence to sell hard liquor, but they do beer, coffee and cocktails. They serve food. The cook is Spanish and she's called Maria. Her food is worth fighting for and so is she. Anna says that Maria is courted with flowers every evening, by the woman she had chatted to the night before. She's employed to be nice to everyone. So everyone is in love with her. I once asked for her photograph. She gave me one from a stash she keeps under the bar. We were early. So only Maria and Anna's ex-lover were there. Both of them were cleaning glasses and smiling at each other.

I bought everyone a drink. Anna and her ex-lover are on Weight Watchers, so they only drink Vittel. Nobody here believes in learning to love their natural body weight. The dominant ideology, as seen on TV, says that we all have to be as thin as pencils; so we are. And if you aren't, you join Weight Watchers and diet. We were all pleasantly relaxed and the bar began to fill up at dusk. Then Anna walked in.

A woman who is brazen enough to hold an exclusively ex-lovers dinner party should not flinch when her two current lovers, both of whom are quite aware of the situation and who the other one is, actually, finally, eventually meet. Anna knew it wasn't me, so it had to be the other one. The tall one with the back like an engineering construction and the arms like fluid tentacles. Anna kissed me. Hélène slunk into a corner. Louise looked into her drink.

Anna is very, very beautiful. You'd think she's older than she is. She has black hair, cut like an Italian page boy, and wonderful brown eyes. She's the sort of woman who poisons your wine if you don't make love well, but covers you in roses if you do. She's tireless, dynamic, organized. Other women grow in her soil as if she were pure fertilizer. She stays close friends with all her ex-lovers.

"Well," she said, smiling at Hélène, "aren't you going to introduce me?"

Hélène hid guiltily under a table. And so it was I who introduced Anna to Louise. They kissed each other very cautiously, three times, one cheek after the other. Then they stepped back. Anna smiled. I told you, didn't I. Anna is the most beautiful woman I know. Louise thought so too. I could tell that she did. They liked each other. That was dreadful, it really was adding irony to injury. And so the evening began.

In some ways it went well. Maria's food was spicy and peculiar. Anna's ex-lover was pleased with the situation, played soft music and was charming to her customers. All our friends came up to join us. We sat at a large table,

argued about politics, the war, books, moaned about money and unemployment, gossiped about the past. We ordered more wine. Christelle came in at around ten o'clock. I abandoned my self-appointed post as amiable distraction to talk to her, just us, at another table.

"How's it going?" I asked her.

"Oh, fine. Really fine. I'm just starting my third year at the hospital and I'm off on a *stage* next Monday. Paediatrics. A hospital in the Pyrénées. Just three weeks. I'm looking forward to it. *Ça va me changer mes idées*. I've had a bit of a problem. No, not with Isabelle. She's not a lesbian, you know. She's straight. But she's still my best friend. Well yes, at the beginning she had all the usual prejudices. She actually said that she couldn't stand lesbians. So I said, well, do you like me, *parce que moi, je suis comme ça*. I know it's taking a risk. But it worked. She was really shaken. She realized that she was quite wrong about women like us. And she didn't drop me. She started asking questions. We came here once. She really liked it. She liked the way that the women were all dressed up. And that we chatted about ordinary things. Funny, isn't it, the ideas people have. She did have a boyfriend, but it wasn't going too well with him. He wanted it all his own way, so she packed it in and told him to push off. Then suddenly, when I was round at her house, her parents—it was her mother at first—started in on me. Really nasty. Saying how I wasn't welcome there as I wasn't the kind of person they wanted to have around. But nothing explicit. Well, I went away at once and I wouldn't go into the house again. I just sound the horn at the gate and Isabelle comes out. I asked her what on earth had gone wrong as her parents had always been so sweet to me before. God, they've known me since the *sixième*. I've always been her best friend. And she said that she'd tackled her dad and he'd said that he wasn't born yesterday and he could see that I was *comme ça* and he didn't want his daughter being led astray by women like that. Is it written all over my face? Or my clothes? Do I look like a lesbian? What does a lesbian look like? We all look different, don't we? Was it that I didn't talk about boyfriends? Or bring one round? *Merde*, I had to tell Isabelle straight out. She's my very best friend and she hadn't noticed. So what's so special about her parents? My parents know. They accept it. But I wouldn't want my mother to hear people criticizing me in the street. Or getting phone calls. It's all caused problems for Isabelle. She won't drop me. She's too loyal. I know, I thought that too. And it's because of that honesty and courage that she's still my best friend. Even if she is straight. But she's quarrelled with her parents and she's very upset."

"Did her boyfriend know that you were a lesbian?" I asked.

She look astonished.

"Yes, he did. He must have done. I think Isabelle told him."

"Look no further than the ex-lover," I said.

Sometimes we betray each other unforgivably, giving away kingdoms, selling the pass to the enemy for a lot less than thirty pieces of silver. But sometimes we betray each other in tiny ways. Over very ordinary things.

All was not well within the eternal triangle. Anna had noticed something

which she did not like. It was eleven o'clock and the room was full of smoke. The meal was over and tempers were bottoming out. The bar was overlaid with women, leaning inwards like chickens over their millet dispenser. Someone chose very loud music. Louise got up to go to the loo and Anna immediately asked Hélène to step outside. A deadly hush, worthy of the moment when the saloon door swings open and the gunslinger walks in, descended over our table. But some little part of us was excited and delighted. We all turned white as daisies. Louise came out of the loo and saw at once that Anna, who had been looking dangerous, had gone. Nor was there any sign of Hélène.

"Let's dance," cried Louise, seizing my arm with her double-jointed tentacle. That was the signal, I suppose. The room suddenly erupted with pure joy. We waltzed, we tangoed, we smooched. We even did a Russian dance, bobbing about on our buttocks, flinging our legs out with maniacal enthusiasm. We menaced the floor-boards, thumping out splintering rhythms. The entire café-restaurant joined us. Someone starting taking photographs. Someone mean bought two rounds of drinks and paid for them with a 500 franc note. Anna's ex-lover sellotaped it to the bar mirror as a trophy. We yelled for more wine. I must have given myself a hernia. Louise danced with every woman in the house, bewitching them all with her strength and grace. We clapped. We cheered. We wanted more. We were all young and in love. We didn't notice when Anna came back into the bar, her face silent and blank.

Exuberance subsided into stupor at about two o'clock. Louise and I waltzed down the street and stumbled into the glistening creamy Mercedes. Hélène was weeping over the steering wheel. Huge heart-rending sobs pouring over the upholstery.

We put the car into the *lavage* at Intermarché late next morning to wash away the trauma of the night. I stood beside Hélène watching the rainbow dervishes glitter and whirl. We were hollow-eyed, hung over and depressed. It was not a moment to bother with tact.

"So you didn't tell her you were still sleeping with Louise?" I said bluntly.

"How could I?"

"Well, you told her that you were still sleeping with that other woman last year, didn't you?"

"Of course. We have no secrets. It's very important to be utterly honest."

"I see."

"I would have told her."

"But she noticed before you had the chance to do so."

Hélène shrugged remorsefully. "I'm in a dreadful state," she said.

We stood watching her 1968 Mercedes becoming gradually whiter with foam.

A week later Hélène rang me up and said "Hello" in a very shaky voice.

"I've finished with Louise."

"Oh God, was it awful?"

"She shouted and cried and made a scene in the street."

"Did she come round to see you at the house?"

"Yes. Once. And Anna was there."

"Oh my God."

"Anna sat at the bottom of the garden while Louise blacked my eye. It's still yellow round the edges."

"Oh no," I groaned weakly, "she actually hit you."

"And then she came round the next morning to apologize and that was much worse. She sat on my lap for three hours and we both cried ourselves into hysterics. Then Chantal came past on her way to her judo lesson and she started crying too."

"Listen," I said, "don't go anywhere. I'm coming down to see you."

But Hélène's eye recovered its usual sensuous lustre and our community re-established its equilibrium. Louise still wasn't speaking to Hélène; and so we all waited patiently for Louise to get over it and come round. Wounded feelings are a luxury most of us are unable to afford. Pride is never a cheerful longterm companion. You get lonely after a while. But Louise didn't come round. Hélène sent her a little note. Louise sent it back. I sent her a card. Louise rang me up and said that she didn't feel like dancing any more. It's very hard being someone's ex-lover. We all are. But that doesn't make it any easier.

The days were getting colder when I pulled in at the petrol pump by the *lavage*. The boy on the pump looked at me hard, then lit up with instant recognition.

"It was you, wasn't it? Who put the car into the *lavage*. And left all the windows open."

"No. Not me."

But someone with a really nice old Mercedes had done it. Paid for a forty franc wash and had the *mousse* foaming all over the leather seats, hand-stitched cushions and into the shopping bags. She had stood there screaming as the water poured in every pore, into the body of the car. Screaming, but powerless to stop the dancing rainbow whirls.

Only one person in town drove an elderly Mercedes. I walked thoughtfully down the cat food section, peering at cans of Gourmet and Sheba. Suddenly a woman's arm snaked around my waist and I abandoned my trolley in a waltz. Louise took the lead, guiding my steps, her eyes glittering like fencing rapiers. I hugged her and she laughed.

"You did it."

"I never did."

"You're dancing."

She smiled.

From Patricia Dunker's website

About The Author

PATRICIA DUNCKER was born and grew up in Jamaica, an island that still haunts her imagination, and to which she never returned after she was sent to boarding school in England. She spent a year working in Germany before she went up to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English. She went on to do graduate work at St Hugh's College, Oxford, and completed her doctorate on aspects of English and German Romanticism. She has spent a good part of her life travelling and has lived and worked in Germany and in France, where she still spends part of the year. She taught writing and 19th and 20th century literature in the Department of English at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales from 1991 until 2002, when she was appointed Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. She taught the MA in Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) alongside fellow novelists Andrew Cowan, Paul Magrs and Michèle Roberts. From 2007-2015 she worked as Professor of Contemporary Literature in the Department of English, American Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. She is now Professor Emeritus in her former Department. Her first novel, *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), won the Dillons First Fiction Award and the McKitterick Prize, and was shortlisted for the Mind Book of the Year Award, the IMPAC award and has been translated into fourteen languages. She is the author of four further novels, *James Miranda Barry* (1999), *The Deadly Space Between* (2002) *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006) shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2007. Her fifth novel, *The Strange Case of the Composer and his Judge* (Bloomsbury, 2010), was shortlisted for the CWA Golden Dagger award for the Best Crime Novel of the Year 2010. She has also written two collections of short fiction, *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees* (1997), shortlisted for the Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and a sequence of sinister tales, *Seven Tales of Sex and*

Death (2003). Her critical work includes *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Blackwell, 1992) and a collection of essays on writing and contemporary literature, *Writing on the Wall* (Rivers Oram and Pandora, 2002). She has published many literary essays and scholarly articles and co-edited several collections of short fiction for Honno, the Welsh Women's Press, the most recent of which is *Safe World Gone* (Honno, 2007).