

TLC Showcase

JANE CORBETT

Introduction to the novel	2
Extract: In The Castle Of Love	3
About the Writer	9

Introduction to In The Castle Of Love

A chance discovery led me to letters Baladine Klossowska wrote to her lover, the poet Rilke, passionate love letters describing the longings and hardships of her nomadic life with her two sons, stateless refugees during and immediately after the Great War. Her younger son became the painter Balthus, whose mysterious, dreamy, and sometimes violent, paintings have long fascinated me. My ambition was to tell their story in a way that both brought it to life and highlighted Baladine's struggle to balance the demands of her children, her lover and her work as an artist.

The problem was to find a form that would allow the reader to be swept up in this powerful story and at the same time obtain some critical distance from it. This I eventually found by creating a parallel story, dealing with similar issues but from a more contemporary perspective. But having done so, what I needed was serious critical feedback. I no longer had an agent, since mine, Tessa Sayle, had sadly died some years ago, and friends weren't likely to have the time or detachment for what I needed. I know from my experience as a scriptwriter how many drafts a work has to go through before it finds its real essence and its best form. The Literary Consultancy proved exactly what I was looking for and the detailed, insightful criticism I received was worth every penny. Without the encouragement and guidance of my reader's tough comments my novel would not have become what it is now, something I feel at last works well and that I can be proud of.

In The Castle Of Love, by Jane Corbett

PARIS

January 1st 1924

MERLINE

Head down, Merline strode the left bank of the river, seeing and hearing nothing. When she reached the Pont d'Austerlitz, she crossed the bridge to the other side and resumed her walk along the opposite bank in the direction she had come. Her journey had one purpose, to annihilate through the numbing rhythm of her footsteps all thoughts of the day to come. Rilke, the love of her life, was dead. Tomorrow, the second of January, he would be buried in Switzerland and she was not invited.

For five years, the most precious of her life, they had loved one another in the time left over from the exigencies of his work. He had loved many women but she knew herself to be the greatest object of his passion, even if truth forced her to acknowledge that what they'd shared existed more in the imagined than the real world. It was she who'd found his haven, the Chateau Muzot, in which he'd spent his last, most settled years, with the peace so necessary for his great work. She had made it habitable with her own hands, labour that made her proud, though in the eyes of his rich and powerful friends merely confirmed her menial status.

For years they had done their best to deny her existence, and in the end they'd triumphed. Only her son, Balthus, the young acolyte who showed such remarkable promise as a painter, had been invited to the funeral. Such acknowledgement from those who would become the future patrons of his work made her proud but did little to soften the bitterness of her own exclusion. And that was as nothing to her grief.

BERLIN 1993

ELI

On July 13th Eli delivered her first commissioned article to the magazine 'Art Today'. This time the copy would go out under her own name. The pay cheque coincided with her thirtieth birthday and to celebrate she decided to visit her friend Bill in Berlin. They'd been students together at the Courtauld Institute and he was currently

working as an architect on one of the projects transforming an isolated bohemian backwater into the modern capital of a united Germany. As this was her first time in Berlin, Bill took her on a tour of the city.

The place was unlike anywhere else she'd been and hugely exciting. Busy streets ran alongside patches of wasteland, and fragments of road, untouched since 1940's bombings, suddenly petered out, leading nowhere. The earth heaved under a myriad excavations and, above, cranes criss-crossed the horizon like parts of a giant meccano set. Amid such uprooting anything seemed possible.

As they moved on from the New National Gallery, Bill pointed out a couple of old embassies on the far side of the street, derelict for fifty years because, he explained, the countries they belonged to had ceased to exist. Their walls were still pockmarked with bullet holes and in a garden where once elegantly dressed people took tea on the lawn, a herd of goats grazed peacefully on tall heads of thistles.

Further on they came to a huge empty space, once one of the city's busiest squares. Bulldozers were clearing away scrub and rubble untouched for half a century. As they left the viewing platform showing the layout of the projected development, Eli stumbled on a newly exposed grating half-buried in the earth, the entrance to an old U-Bahn station. A flight of steps disappeared into the ground, where an empty cigarette packet lay in the dust. The faded writing on the packet said 'Capstan Full Strength', and time concertinaed itself in a rush. A young man in uniform tossed away the empty pack as he hurried down the steps to catch the last train that would ever leave that platform before the bomb fell that annihilated it.

The city threw up many such images, moments in which the past jerked suddenly to life like the hands of some crazy clock lurching senselessly back and forth. One never knew what twisted relic or perfectly intact fragment might present itself in all its incongruity, such as the elegant nineteenth century house that stood alone in the flattened desert of Potsdamer Platz, waiting to be entombed within the steel and glass to come like a fly in amber.

A few days after her arrival they were invited to meet some friends at a small restaurant in Schöneberg, and it was here she met Gunter and fell in love. They sat next to each other at the end of a long table. At first, amid all the lively talk, he paid her little attention. Bill had pointed him out as a celebrated filmmaker and not wanting to seem too impressed, her manner towards him was deliberately cool. Half way

through the meal he laughed at a remark he overheard her make to her neighbour on the other side, and after that they fell into conversation. They were still talking when the party broke up around midnight.

The following day he called her at Bill's to ask if she'd like supper at his flat.

'Why his place and not a restaurant?'

Bill laughed.

'Why're you so suspicious? You should be flattered.'

She blushed like a schoolgirl.

'He's at least ten years older than me.'

'He's in his prime. Anyway, I thought women liked mature men.'

Kreuzberg where Gunter lived was a poor, largely Turkish neighbourhood that until recently had cowered in the shadow of the Wall. A few dusty trees lined a wide street but no flowers or bushes to brighten up the central reservation. A row of shops sold shoddy goods, beside a seedy strip club and a slot-machine arcade where listless youths, mainly Turkish, had taken up residence. From the doorway of a small supermarket a group of punks, with their dogs and cans of lager, shouted abuse at passers-by.

Eli turned into a side street that ran along the canal and the scene transformed. A busy Turkish market sold everything from clothes to exotic foods and, further on, a couple of cafes were packed with lively people.

Gunter lived on the top floor of an old apartment house that had survived the blitz, overlooking the canal. It had a square, protruding bay running the height of the building, and was built around an inner courtyard with a large sycamore tree. She pressed the bell and was buzzed in. There was no lift so she took the staircase that smelt pleasantly of beeswax and old wood, pausing for breath a couple of times before she reached the fourth floor.

Gunter was waiting and welcomed her into the flat. The large living room had a high ceiling and big windows. An Afghan rug and a few items of stylish modern furniture created a pleasantly uncluttered feel. At the far end there was a desk piled high with papers and a wall of bookshelves. Photographs had been blue-tacked to the adjacent

wall, mostly of cities by night, and a saxophone stood in one corner.

Gunter poured them both a glass of wine.

'D'you play?' she asked, pointing at the sax.

'I used to. Not any more. I leave it there to remind myself there's more to life than making films.'

He handed her a glass.

'I hope you're hungry.'

He led the way to the kitchen. A window looked out into the courtyard, and there was space for a large table and six chairs. He gestured her to take a seat, whilst he finished the cooking. She tried to think of some easy remark to break the ice. She hadn't felt this self-conscious since adolescence.

'So, how d'you find Berlin? It's your first time, I believe.'

He spoke without turning round, which was a relief. She didn't want him to look at her till she'd regained some self-possession.

'Yes. The city seems to be changing before one's very eyes. It's an extraordinary experience!'

'Like most Berliners, I find it rather depressing. Before it belonged to artists and old people. Now it's being turned into just another temple of capitalism.

Rents go up, Starbucks and fancy restaurants replace the old clubs and bars. Soon only politicians and tourists will want to live here.'

'To a stranger it seems full of life.'

He took a bowl of squid that had been marinating out of the frig and tossed them into a frying pan.

'You're right. I'm just an old cynic!'

They changed to English and the conversation grew easier. It frustrated her that Germans were always so fluent in English, making her efforts to speak their language more laborious than ever.

The squid was delicious and she downed the glass of Chablis he poured her too fast.

'You obviously like to cook.'

'When I have someone to cook for.'

'I admire anyone who does. I live mostly off cottage cheese and takeaways.'

'Then we're a perfect match!'

He cleared the plates away for the next course and asked casually, 'What about Bill?'

'What about him?'

He placed a dish of black pasta with fragments of red pepper and chilli, and a bowl of salad onto the table.

'You mean is he domesticated? Not as far as I've noticed. Like most Englishmen.'

'No. I meant how long have you known him?'

He helped them both to pasta. If she was not mistaken, he was asking whether she and Bill were an item.

'We did our MAs together at the Courtauld in London. When I heard he was working in Berlin I got in touch and asked if he had a spare bed.'

The delicious food and the wine were loosening her tongue. Despite their differences in age and experience Gunter proved easy to talk to, as though they shared a natural kinship. He spoke about his struggle to raise money for the film he was planning, then turned the subject to her.

'You're a journalist, I believe?'

'I work for a magazine called 'Art Today'. The editor hired me after reading my dissertation on the painter Balthus. I'm still more or less on trial.'

'So who are the current British artists that interest you?'

She thought for a moment.

'There are a few, relatively unknown. Art in Britain right now is too much in thrall to fashion and the market, especially America. Here things seem freer.'

'Yes and no. Pretentiousness can easily be mistaken for seriousness. But German artists have a genuine desire to experiment.'

He paused to refill her glass.

'With film we're more conventional or no one will pay to watch it. At least, that's my excuse.'

She asked about life in Berlin before the fall of the Wall and he told her how in the 1970's when he first came there to avoid being drafted into the army, living was so cheap money had little importance.

'Half the refugees of Europe found haven here. Russians touted their war medals and old watches on street corners for pfennigs. Now they're opening smart galleries selling icons for thousands of dollars under the auspices of a well-organised mafia. In those days we got whatever we needed to furnish our communal flat from what people put out on the pavement one Sunday a month for passers-by to help themselves.'

When at length Eli looked at her watch, it was almost midnight.

'I must go. I know you have work tomorrow.'

'I feel a lot less tired than before you arrived.'

'Thank you!'

'It's a way of asking if you'll stay a little longer?'

'What about the U-Bahn? When does that stop?'

'If it closes I'll drive you.'

She wasn't in the habit of jumping into bed on a first date. But she had the impression his invitation wasn't merely routine and if she refused was unlikely to be repeated. There was no point in being coy.

'I'll give Bill a call.'

'Good!' he said, and poured them both another glass of wine.

About the Writer

Jane Corbett has published a novel and several short fictions and written award-winning screenplays for film and TV over the past twenty years. She has also worked on an adaptation for the theatre and contributed pieces on film and literature to BFI Publications and various Times Newspapers. Her latest completed film, 'Julie's Spirit', written in collaboration with the director, Bettina Wilhelm, won Best Picture at the 35th Worldfest Houston. She was educated at Cambridge University, with a postgraduate diploma in Film and TV from Middlesex Polytechnic where her graduation film won a prize at the Chicago International Film Festival. She ran her own successful film making course for many years and currently in addition to her own work, does some professional script-editing and teaches at the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield.

