

## Interview: James Lasdun

### on 'Peter Khan's Third Wife' [A Short Story]

**I enjoyed the way that jewellery was used as a potent metaphor within the story - sexually, as a symbol of change and as a display of status. What inspired you to use jewellery in this way?**

The story came out of a little moment I had in a jewellery shop, buying a gift of earrings for my wife. The assistant put them on so that I could see how they looked on her and the situation seemed suddenly full of potential dramatic interest. I guess the use of jewels followed from that (though I should also admit to an abiding fascination with jewels that might have drawn me to this situation in the first place). As well as the various ways you describe, I was using the jewels to try to get at an idea of the strange realm of existence in which these two characters connect (at least in Clare's mind): somewhere emotionally real but suspended outside their daily lives. Powerfully beguiling but in practical terms impenetrable, if that makes sense...

**Most of the relationships between men and women in the story are often fraught, erotically charged and violent. Can you tell us a bit more about this?**

The situation of a man returning repeatedly to a shop to buy jewels for his successive fiancées while having them modelled for him by the same substitute woman seemed to open up naturally into the territory you describe – the fraught and erotic part at least. The violence came because it seemed psychologically right that Clare, hating herself for becoming obsessed with a man whose continual recurrence in her life comes in the form of repeated proof of his unattainability, would take a perverse satisfaction in marrying someone despicable. A way of both keeping her feelings for Peter sacrosanct, and punishing herself for them. That's putting it all a bit schematically, and I certainly didn't know that was what I was aiming at when I started, but it seems to be more or less the direction things took.

**In *Peter Khan's Third Wife*, and some of your previous fiction, such as *Seven Lies* and *The Horned Man* has featured enigmatic and unusual men. What appeals to you about these kinds of characters?**

Certainly the men in those novels are a little unusual – one of them either a delusional paranoiac or a serial murderer; the other a plagiarising poet and Stasi informer. I'm not sure what drew me to those types. Lack of interest in conventionally noble or sympathetic heroes? Some sense of needing to locate the sources of human (or at least male) folly, destructiveness, evil, whatever, in the psyche of the narrator in order to write a narrative that gets to grip with those things? Maybe just a prolonged black mood... I think I've got that kind of narrator out of my system now anyway. I hope so.... Peter Khan is comparatively normal; even – I like to think – rather attractive (not that I personally find the other two *unattractive*, but I realise they might not be everyone's cup of tea). But yes, there's still something suspicious about a man who gets through wives and fiancées at the rate he does, even when we never quite know why. And then the fact that it's all told from the point of view of Clare, who's never in a position to know exactly what he's thinking or feeling, and has to read everything into a few small gestures and stray bits of information, no doubt makes him as enigmatic to the reader as he is (I think) to himself.

**The characters of both Peter Khan and Clare are compelling. Given the structure of the short story, do you find developing characters and keeping the plot taut is more difficult within this form?**

I'm glad you find them compelling. When things are going well I don't find I think very much about character at all – at least in a short story. The players usually come to mind as part of the basic situation, and then – ideally – they and the story develop more or less inseparably. But sometimes you take a wrong turn and the story grinds to a halt (sometimes for years). And always there's the peculiar, unremitting, formal requirement in a story for speed and simplicity, which is both its glory and (from the writer's point of view) its great difficulty, so that ideas that seem perfectly sound and that might work in a novel, turn out to be unusable. For instance an earlier version of this story had several more pages of material about Clare's marriage. In themselves they seemed okay, but every time I reached them when I was reading it through, I felt as though all the tension had gone out of the piece, so I had to find a way of scrapping them while still giving the essential flavour of that relationship. I still feel iffy about that element of the story.

**You wrote an introduction to a Penguin anthology of the short stories of Paul Bowles. What do you like about his work?**

Actually I prefer his novels to his stories, but I do admire these very much too. He writes beautiful, transparent prose, and his best stories take you into extreme regions of consciousness swiftly and effortlessly. He also manages to be both naturalistic and fable-like, which I enjoy and envy.

**I like to think that Peter Khan's third wife is Clare. Can you give a clue as to whether you think she is?**

Well, in her mind she certainly is, and there the story ends. But I hope there's enough about Kahn that seems dependably observed by Clare to suggest that she might be right – or at the very least that she isn't totally deluding herself. I do see it as a love story, and one with as happy an ending as a writer of my temperament could possibly supply! I think the reader should come away feeling that, in another universe if not this one, these two might end up together.

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