

A. Colin Wright

Only Fair

When Bob left for Europe, he put his favourite photo of Marie in his wallet. He was determined that no matter what other girls he met it would stay there, and he would tell them who she was when they asked him. It was only fair. To have a good time with them if the opportunity presented itself was one thing, but to deny that there was a girl waiting for him in Canada, whom he would probably marry on his return—well, that would be spiritual treachery.

As the ship passed the Gaspé Peninsula—where, somewhere, Marie would be standing at a window—he told himself there were many reasons why he loved her. He waved at the shore-line, conscious of a couple of French tourists nearby speaking in the clear, precise language of Paris which seemed to him the epitomé of elegance after the harsh, nasal tones of the Gaspésie. He was not sorry now that Marie couldn't have come with him. To see European life as he wished, he needed his freedom. Marie would resent Europe, not understand its greater social liberty. And they couldn't have travelled together anyway: her father, with his hostility towards all English Canadians and towards Bob in particular, would have seen to that. "Marriage first, then you can travel . . ."

Bob glanced round at some of the girls already stretched out on the sun deck in their bikinis. In the past he had not been without his successes, even if few of his conquests had been really exciting. But Marie was devoted to him, she would make him a good wife. And he loved her; that was the difference. He would have liked to have slept with her beforehand, of course, but there was no reason to suppose that as a wife she would not give him all that he needed. So when in the first couple of days he failed to get very far with a girl from Ontario who should have been easy, he put it down to his lack of enthusiasm and told himself there would be Marie when he got back.

"You see," he told the barman when he was alone "I love her, honest to God I do. But you know what it's like: I'll be in Europe a

whole year. How can I be faithful all that time? Look at all the new experiences I might be missing."

The barman only laughed, and told him how he managed very nicely with a wife in Montreal and a mistress in Southampton.

"Yes," Bob interrupted him, "but I believe in sincerity, and so does she. It's only fair. It's just that she wouldn't understand my going with anyone else. If I wrote and told her, there'd be no hope of marrying her. So I'll have to keep quiet about it. But I'll tell her about it when I get back. There'd never be any trust between us if I didn't."

The barman remarked sensibly that until Bob had actually been unfaithful to her there was no point in worrying about it.

Europe lived up to Bob's expectations. He had left in the middle of summer, so he could have a month's touring before term started at London University, where he was to do a year's graduate work in physics at the expense of his Montreal firm. He visited Germany, Italy and Spain, and in his letters was able to say with perfect sincerity that he was missing Marie and that there was no one else. He sent her post-cards too, from every town he stayed in, hoping to interest her more in travel. "Wonderful to see all those places," she wrote back to him in London. "They'll surely make you appreciate your home here even more when you return."

Life in London was not the one long orgy Bob had imagined it to be, but he found nevertheless it had many advantages over Quebec. The theatres were good and comparatively cheap, and there was always something to do. There was a feeling of a broad culture quite different from the narrow local one he was used to. And in other moods he could always go to a club in Soho, where the girls stripped quite naked and performed far more suggestively than in Montreal or Toronto. After such occasions he would go back to his apartment and imagine making love to Marie, although since she had never aroused him in quite the same way he usually found he was substituting one of these other girls in his mind. He would often show his friends her photo, though, and they expressed their admiration.

It was not until November that he was actually unfaithful to her, in a minor way. The girl, Jill, saw the photo of course, and he told her who it was when she asked him.

"And will you tell her about us?"

"Yes," he said. "Afterwards. It's only fair, don't you think?"

She looked at him strangely.

"Perhaps I won't tell her," he said, considering.

It almost seemed too trivial for him to make an issue of it. When Jill, three weeks later, left London to go north he soon forgot her. He just hoped that Marie wouldn't notice that recently his letters had been getting shorter and less frequent—while she wrote that she was missing him dreadfully and that her father was getting suspicious of the letters she was receiving from England. "But don't write any the less for that. It's worth it just to hear from you and know you are still thinking of me and loving me."

"Bob," he said to himself as he read that, "you're a louse." And he went to phone and tell the date he had got himself for that evening that he was sick and couldn't make it.

Fortunately there was no answer, for the date proved to be one of the hottest little pieces he had ever met and kept him occupied almost until morning—when to his surprise she told him she couldn't see him again because her fiancé was returning from abroad. He sat down during the day to reply to Marie's letter, aware that spiritually she meant everything to him, for he loved her, whereas the girl he had been with meant nothing. But he was tired, and his mental image of Marie paled somewhat before the memories of the night he had spent. He took out her photo to remind himself of her, smiling at the seriousness in her eyes, and kissed it gently to ask her forgiveness.

For a while after that he didn't seem to meet any girls he wanted to take out, and he thought lovingly of this girl he had left in Canada. He began to imagine the comforts of married life, with a wife's devotion and a home of their own substituting for this insatiable desire of his to travel and seek new experiences. He was aware that it was time for him to settle down, and if he could hardly imagine a life of passion with Marie he knew that such ideas became less important after marriage. On a couple of occasions when he felt in need of relief from his books he went to the strip club again, sitting with the respectable businessmen dropping in to pay furtive homage to the animal principle on their way home from the office.

By the beginning of May he realized that his year in Europe was almost over. Term ended in June, after which he was to spend four weeks in France, and depart directly from Le Havre for Quebec City—whence he would travel up to the Gaspé to see Marie before returning to Montreal. Decide for sure whether to marry her, and have it out with her father. These few months were all that remained for him in which to lead a relatively carefree existence.

Perhaps it was this thought that initially caused him to be attracted to Patsy. He had known her for a long time—she was a chemistry undergraduate, renowned chiefly for the fact that her experiments invariably went wrong. If there was the remotest possibility of an explosion in the lab, it would be Patsy who caused it; if she broke a test-tube (as happened almost daily) more often than not it contained some corrosive material which she would shower over someone else's books—or her own, for she was quite indiscriminate. Indeed, she would have been quite pretty, only her forehead was marred from an acid burn she had acquired once through getting two bottles muddled. But Bob had never really taken much notice of her until the night after his party.

She didn't turn up at the party, but the next evening he had just got out his books when he heard a knocking at the door, and there was Patsy. "Im' awfully sorry for being so late," she burst out breathlessly. "I would have been here an hour ago, I really would, but I was half way here and I fell off my bicycle, I know it was a silly thing to do but I'm like that, and it was so muddy I just couldn't come in that dress, and I grazed my knee, so I had to go home and change and wash . . ." She paused, panting. "But where is everybody?"

"The party was last night."

Her mouth fell open. "Oh no! I'm always doing things like that. Hell! Oh . . . I'm sorry."

Laughing, he invited her in.

She came in, apologizing all the way up to his room, while her coat dripped water and smeared mud on the walls.

"Here, have some coffee."

"Oh look, let *me* get it, while you get on with your work," she insisted. Bob had never thought it possible for anyone to ruin instant coffee, but Patsy managed it, and he started looking at her with new eyes.

In herself she was not in the least sexy. Life was just crazy and exciting because when you were with her you never knew what she was going to do next. If it was amusing, it could also be annoying, because she would never remember where they were to meet. Or she'd get on the wrong bus and arrive twenty miles away without any money to get back. When they finally started sleeping together nothing could have been less romantic: it was one glorious romp which would have driven the textbook writers to celibacy, for everything was done wrong. Bed-clothes became tied in knots, they'd find themselves in all possible positions except the recommended one and spend most of the night in

skrieks of laughter. They never once achieved a climax at the same time, and it was marvelous.

Patsy of course knew about Marie and was jealous. And although he wrote as dutifully as ever, repeating words of love which he knew, basically, were true, he thought very little now of Marie. He was too involved in his enthusiasm for this other girl.

"Do you love me, Bob?"

"Yes, madly!"—said as in joke, but with truth in it.

"Oh, that's super!"

"Darling Bob. I can't wait for your return to Canada. I shall be looking out for the ship as it passes our Gaspé Peninsula on its way to Quebec. Will you be on deck as it goes by? . . ."

"Darling Marie. Thank you for your last letter. I too am looking forward to seeing you again. I am writing this in haste, as I'm just going out, so I'll try and answer your questions very quickly. The ship arrives in Quebec early morning, so it will pass the Gaspé sometime the previous evening . . ."

"How can you say you feel for me when you're going to marry *her*?"

"It's true"—a quick little kiss—"I can't explain."

"I hate her!"—said in fun, with no malice—"hate her, hate her!"

When Bob had to say goodbye to Patsy to go to France, he knew how much he would miss her. And yet there was a kind of fatalism about it which made it easier. They were unlikely to meet again. There was at least one consolation: after departing from Le Havre his ship was to stay for twenty-four hours in Southampton before heading out into the Atlantic, and Patsy promised to come down from London for a last day and night together.

Bob had intended to travel in France, but he ended up spending most of his time in Paris. Here at last was a kind of culture which surpassed even that of London. For the Gallic temperament gave the city a vivacity, a charm, which he now saw his own adopted city of Montreal was striving towards without ever being able to attain: he felt that he too had been wanting this all his life without realizing it. For Paris was elegant, quaint, romantic all in one; it was the proud centre of Europe, yet modest compared with the garishness of American cities. He wrote a couple of enthusiastic letters about it to Marie, who in her replies talked only of her ecstatic happiness at their coming reunion.

While he was there, away from Patsy, he was able to reflect more on the significance of their affair. It would remain a pleasant memory, no more. Still, he was looking forward to seeing her again in

Southampton. But now there was a growing feeling of uneasiness as to how he'd be able to tell Marie about it. It seemed to add to their difficulties. True, it was Marie he loved, and when he saw her again he would forget this absurd enthusiasm for Patsy. But there would be an awkward period before everything was back to normal. Here in Paris at least he could rest his emotions: then one glorious day with Patsy, followed by seven whole days on the ship in which to forget her and prepare his mind for loving Marie again. Not much time, but enough.

So when he went on board at Le Havre he made no attempt to meet any of the girls among the passengers: the first part of the voyage belonged to Patsy, the second, longer, part to Marie. The only girls he spoke to were the three at his table—all French, one about his age and two younger ones. With them he was polite but reserved.

As they steamed into Southampton next morning, he was one of the first on deck, waiting to catch a glimpse of Patsy among the waving crowds on the dockside. She wasn't there. No messages, nothing. Only then did he realize that he hadn't even her address or phone number in London, since with the end of term she had given up her previous apartment. He spent part of the day on the dockside, the rest on board ship in case she should turn up. Futile, of course. He felt helpless and upset, even though he didn't love her and her not coming made no difference to the ultimate situation. But this final meeting which didn't take place had, for him, the essence of tragedy.

Still no sign of her when the ship pulled out of Southampton the next morning. The voyage now would be empty, seven days of boredom until they reached Quebec. "Damn," he said to himself in anger, "why should I make myself miserable over it? Haven't I the *right* to enjoy myself after this?" He went down to breakfast and, finding himself alone with the oldest of the French girls, immediately started a conversation.

Her name was Catherine, and until then he had known only that she was from Paris. Now she told him that she was going for a month to New York in order to arrange for an exhibition of French paintings, but was travelling via Montreal so she could visit a friend there first.

"You're travelling alone?"

She looked surprised. "Yes. I'm used to travel." She hesitated. "I work for the Ministry of Culture, in the Fine Arts section. Organizing exhibitions and exchanges."

He looked at her with respect. "Where else have you been?"

"Oh, most of Europe. I've never been to America before, though. It will be new for me."

Marie had only once been outside Quebec, after a great deal of persuasion. Catherine smiled as she saw him staring at her, and asked him about himself. He answered briefly, and then encouraged her to tell him more. Not, he reflected, what he would have called beautiful. Indeed when he had noticed her before her face had seemed a little severe, as though she were constantly judging what she saw. An intelligent face, though, with eyes which seemed both full of life and infinitely sad.

"You must be an artist yourself," he interrupted her.

"No," she said seriously. "I paint a little for fun, that's all. I just love everything connected with art."

They were joined by the other girls, who were in a gay mood, discussing a couple of men they had met the night before. Catherine joined in with them, teasing them and showing she could be quite as lively as they, and yet in some way remaining aloof from them as though she had problems of her own. Bob frankly admired her, noticing how she made an almost imperceptible effort to adapt to others and show interest in them. She must have been a little older than himself, for she was very self-assured. Yet she had one nervous habit of patting her long dark hair occasionally, where it fell around her shoulders. A person who would be difficult to get to know well. Nevertheless he spent much of the morning sun-bathing with her on the deck, and enjoyed her conversation, although he was aware of a certain reserve on her part, which made the idea of conquest at once more attractive and infinitely remote.

As lunch was finishing he was informed that there was a telegram for him, and he left her after arranging to meet her in the lounge for coffee. It was from Southampton:

"TERRIBLY SORRY THOUGHT YESTERDAY WAS TUESDAY NO MONEY EVERYTHING AWFUL LOVE YOU PATSY"

He smiled as he read it, felt a moment's sadness, and then joined Catherine in the lounge.

"Anything wrong?"

He didn't know why he told her about Patsy, but he found it very easy. He told her about Marie too, showing her the photo, and confessed how he was dreading the thought of telling her he had been unfaithful.

"You seem to have had quite a time in this past year," she said thoughtfully. He wondered if she were being critical, but then she went on "These things are difficult. You can't always think of others in such situations. You have to accept your fate and be responsible for it."

"Fate?"

"Accept life and act, without regret, that's what I mean."

She was an unusual girl, intelligent, sympathetic, and attractive now that he had observed her more closely. She told him about her own life as well, how she had suffered through love, through loneliness, through her own demands on life. "I put everything I've got into living," she said at one point, "and all I get out of it is suffering." Then she corrected herself: "No, I have had wonderful times too, while they lasted."

He looked at her with a certain fear, realizing he had been wrong and that there were tremendous possibilities for comprehension.

For the days at sea they were together most of the time. Bob found that they were able to talk and understand each other in a way that made old friends of them. She spoke of her problems, brought about by her independent mind, of her love of travel, which conflicted with her desire for marriage and a family. "But by the time I'm willing to give up my independence and settle down men probably won't find me interesting any more."

Her frankness surprised him. "I'd like to travel too," he said, "to see the world, to—to *live*, if you understand me."

"You can travel with Marie."

"I suppose so."

She spoke of Paris too, the only place, she claimed, she could ever live permanently. "I'm a product of Paris, I suppose. And because Paris is the world, almost life itself, there's no contradiction in my travelling and being away from it for long periods."

She liked him, Bob knew. He was surprised, for the notion that she was out of his reach persisted. She had travelled, and was part of the cultured life of Europe—all that he wanted to be and was not. And yet she listened to him, took notice of his opinions. As though it would never occur to her to consider him a provincial from Quebec who had only just seen the first of the outside world. Here on the ship she was sought after by other men as well and she would flirt with them with open enjoyment; but if Bob didn't join her she would come to look for him, reproach him for leaving her. On one occasion, when she had some ironing to do, he asked her jokingly if she would like to do some

shirts for him, and she took him seriously and ironed them. He was aware of a type of femininity in her which he couldn't define: conscious of being a woman while intellectually equal with men, she guarded her femininity by holding herself in check. The only thing she had in common with Marie was a deep desire for love and affection. "But I doubt if I'll ever really achieve it," she said. "I've got too few illusions, I suppose."

It was on the fifth night after leaving Southampton that he tried to kiss her, when they were on the deck by themselves. She laughed and dodged out of his way, and when he persisted said that she didn't play with romance. So they went back to the ball-room and danced. Afterwards they played a game of checkers with the agreement that he should kiss her if he won. And so he kissed her, and he knew in that moment that she was everything he could ever want in a woman. He also realized that she had lost the game deliberately. The next night they kissed more freely, and she was gay, frivolous, as though to contradict her words of the night before. But there was no contradiction. She became more serious when he suggested they go down to his cabin, and asked to dance instead. They danced close to each other, and Bob noticed the knowing eyes of the two girls from their table upon them. But I don't love her, he thought.

That day had been the last on the open sea, for earlier in the evening they had gone through the Strait of Belle Isle into the broad expanse of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Another day, much of it spent passing Anticosti Island, and they would be into the river. It was then that Bob was to be on deck, knowing that Marie would be looking out for the ship from her home on the Gaspé. The next morning he dutifully sent her a telegram to tell her they would be passing at approximately 10:30 that evening; and then he went to join Catherine on the sun-deck. There was a rough sea in the Gulf—they were almost out of sight of land again—so that she was feeling sick, and he spent much of the time trying to comfort her. But by afternoon, once they had reached Anticosti, it became calmer, and she was a little better. They said very little, just lying face down on the deck, shoulder to shoulder, in the sun. When he started to caress her with his nearer hand, unobserved by other passengers, she let him; and as his fingers were running along the top of her bathing costume she lifted herself up slightly so he could slip them inside and take her breast. She gave a little sigh of contentment and closed her eyes.

In the late afternoon they had tea together. "So tomorrow you'll be leaving," she teased him. "And tomorrow at this time you'll be with Marie."

He joked about it with her, but was embarrassed. The sight of land on either side did nothing to cheer him.

He knew then that she would come to the cabin that night with him. That she accepted he was going to marry someone else and would make no demands on him.

That evening she accompanied him in his vigil on deck, among the other passengers looking nostalgically at the lights on the Canadian shore. It was about eleven o'clock before they came to the Gaspé, for the sea had delayed them, and then they stood for a long time watching the glittering lights of the houses on the peninsula. Bob imagined Marie there somewhere in the darkness—it was impossible to tell where for the villages all looked the same—Marie loving him, looking anxiously for the ship, thinking of the next day. He had his arm round Catherine, who said nothing, understanding and respecting his silence. He was sad, knowing that he would confess to Marie about Patsy, but that he would never be able to tell her about this last night.

They went down to the cabin. He had expected her only to lie down with him and let him caress her a little, but in the darkness she allowed him to undress her and helped him with his own clothes. When they made love her hair hung round her shoulders and across her breasts; and Bob found the woman he had been seeking in countless others for so many years. "Men have always liked me," she said sadly. "I've known what it is to love. But there's always been something wrong."

He begged her to stay with him for the whole night, but she refused. "You've got to sleep, prepare yourself for Marie tomorrow."

The next morning they said goodbye while still on the ship, moored now under the cliffs below the Plains of Abraham. For the first time they had nothing to say to each other. Nothing that could be said in a few minutes full of distractions before parting. That evening he would be in the Gaspé, Catherine would be arriving in Montreal, and he did not love her yet.

On the train he looked at the photo of Marie, which he had kept faithfully in his wallet for a year. He told himself that he still loved her. It would be all right once he saw her again, heard her voice with that quaint Gaspésian accent. He must allow time for their love to develop again, he must give it a fair chance. But if it happened to go wrong, would it be in time for him to find Catherine in New York?