

Dave Margoshes

The Same Thing

The man in the pink bathrobe went directly up to the girl who was sunning herself on the beach. She was slim and muscular, a tennis player, deeply tanned, with blond hair that rolled off her head in all directions like a lion's mane.

"Excuse me, may I speak to you?" he asked. He had a deep, hushed voice like her father used in the library when men came to visit, and he was about her father's age. His eyes, though, were startlingly blue; she couldn't recall the color of her father's eyes.

"Of course, what a silly thing to say." She raised her head, blinking into the sun.

"This will sound like a sillier thing," he said. He squatted down beside her and looked directly into her face. She was pretty because she was young. She looked seventeen but probably was nineteen, he thought. In fact, she was twenty. In a few years, she would be an attractive woman and a man in love with her would call her lovely, but she wouldn't really be that. Her nose was a bit too big, her jaw too slack.

"I'd like to, uh, have sex with you."

The girl laughed, very cleanly, clearly, with real amusement, as if someone had said something funny.

"I didn't mean it to be funny," the man said. "I'm very serious."

He sounded serious, the girl thought. She looked at him more closely, wondering if she should be frightened. There were people on the beach within shouting distance, so she decided not to be. He was a nice looking man, with a face like a shoe, worn and comfortable, and sandy hair that was in need of cutting. He wore black framed glasses that made him look like a college professor or a bank clerk. Behind the thin lenses, the blue eyes were clear and unblinking.

"Well, I'm very flattered," she said, looking away. "That's very nice to hear."

The man smiled. "I see. I didn't intend the remark merely as a compliment. I would really like to." He looked away briefly, as if out of shyness.

The girl forced a smile. It didn't seem funny anymore. "I don't sleep with strangers," she said. She tried not to sound hostile.

"Sleep," he said. "That's such a strange way of putting it. At any rate, of course not. I didn't expect that you did. This is different, however. I'll pay you."

"I'm not a prostitute," the girl said sharply.

"Of course not. I didn't mean to imply that I thought you were." He smiled now, openly and warmly, as if the difficult part were over. "But everyone" — he paused, and sighed deeply, as if in pain — "has their price, as they say."

The girl made a face and lowered her head for a moment. When she raised it, she realized the man was gazing over her head at her backside. She felt naked suddenly. "I don't think I have a price," she said slowly.

"I see, of course." He made a little laugh, then straightened his face. "Would five thousand be enough?"

"Five thousand? Dollars?"

"Of course."

"Excuse me, mister." The girl got up and began to gather in her towel, sunglasses and book. It was a paperback *Gatsby*.

"Don't go. I'm not crazy, nor am I kidding. I'm quite serious." He told her his name. "Does that mean anything to you?"

She regarded him with her head cocked to the side, studying his worn face, brushing absently at flecks of sand on the bottom of her bikini. "Oil or railroads or something," she said finally.

"Yes. Or something. Many somethings." He stood up and pushed his face closer to hers. "I'm sure you've seen this in the paper. I don't mean that to be boastful, but it does get in quite often."

"Last week," the girl said hesitantly.

"Yes, yes, last week." He seemed tired of the game she was forcing him to play. He looked at her admiringly. Her legs were long and supple. Her breasts were small but well shaped, like spring avocados, and didn't sag. Her mouth, in relation to her nose, was too small, and he noticed for the first time the remarkable evenness of her teeth. As a girl, she had worn braces for years.

"The money means nothing to me," he said. "Absolutely nothing. I make that much or more in an hour, any hour, so spending that sum in an hour means nothing."

"You can write it off as a business expense," the girl said with some bitterness. She had had an argument about that with her father once.

"Yes, yes," he waved his hand impatiently. "I don't bother with such things. What do you say?"

The girl hesitated. She was thinking hard.

"Why me?"

"I like your looks."

"Do you usually do it this way? I mean, just go up to a girl and..." her voice trailed off.

"Yes. Sometimes one of my assistants makes the arrangements, sometimes I do it myself if I'm alone. Let me be clear. I am very rich. I can have anything I want. I don't like to deprive myself. I like your looks. I want to have sex with you. What could be simpler?" He looked away, out to sea. A boy on a surfboard was coming crashing in, tumbling like an eel. Above him, a white gull reeled like the hand of an orchestra conductor. "And, yes, of course, I will pay you five thousand dollars. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes," the girl said quietly.

"It will take a very short time," the man said, brightening. He smiled, pointing up the slope. "I've rented the villa there, just over the ridge. Can you come there now?"

"I suppose," the girl said.

"It won't be as unpleasant as you think," he said. "I won't paw you or slaver over you. I'll make no demands of you, actually, or make any attempt to satisfy you, for that matter. I just want to watch you, look at your body, then use it." He looked away. "Very quickly."

They walked across the sand and the girl felt cold. "Do you mind if we talk?" she asked.

"Of course not." His blue eyes peered at her intently through his glasses. "This isn't something so horrible, I'm not a monster." He stopped. "You don't think of me as a monster, do you?"

The girl shivered, trying to hold her shoulders steady. She saw that he saw them shake. "No." Then: "Brrr, it's getting kind of chilly."

"We'll be there in a minute." They walked on.

"You do this often?" the girl asked.

The man shrugged. "Now and then. No, more than that, I suppose. Yes. Once a week, something like that."

The girl whistled.

He smiled. "It's not as extraordinary as you think. How often do you have a Coke, or a Pepsi?"

"You mean me?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't know, once a day, maybe twice. Some days not at all."

"Whenever you feel like it, in other words."

"I guess so."

"And how much does it cost you?"

"A quarter, thirty cents, something like that."

"I see. You can afford to spend a quarter or two a day, I suppose."

The girl laughed. "Not always. But, yeah, I suppose I can."

"Yes. And do you really need to buy a Coke? Couldn't you just as well drink water?"

"I see what you mean," the girl said. It seemed like a stretched analogy, though. People were different from soft drinks, weren't they?

"I know what you're thinking," the man said. "It's not the same thing. But it is, my dear. Think about it some more. It is the same thing."

They came to the house and went in. It was a long, L-shaped house that she knew, had passed by often on the beach. It was on a ridge, apart from the other beach houses, and it looked out at the sea from a height that made the horizon stretch just a little bit farther than it appeared from the beach. She could see fluttering white sails in the distance, like folded handkerchiefs floating above the water.

"What's your name?" the man asked. He took off the pink bathrobe. He was wearing tan beach shorts, knee-length, and a white web tee shirt. His arms were pale, hairless.

"Charlotte."

"Charlotte. That's an old fashioned sort of name." He smiled, so as not to offend her. "You don't hear it very often. It's nice."

"It's after some movie star," Charlotte said. "From the forties."

"I see. Would you like a drink?" He went to the bar at the far end of the livingroom, near the picture window. "I'm going to have something."

"No, thank you," Charlotte said.

"A Coke? Pepsi?" He smiled and she thought he must be mocking her.

"I don't want one just now," she said icily, thinking she was proving something. But then she thought: no, that's just restraint, it doesn't mean you want to do without. Or can.

"Well, I'm having something," he said. He clinked bottles. "I'll just be a minute or two."

"Take your time," the girl said. She wandered around the large room, stared into the cold fireplace, gazed at a Matisse on the white, finely textured wall. She had thought, as they approached the house, that if he was a fake he would show it then, would grab her, try to rape her in the bushes growing densely out of the sand, but she would be too quick for him, would slip out of his hands, run, shrieking, exhilarated. But now they were inside. He had opened the door with a key.

"Are you really Stanley?" she asked abruptly.

He looked up from his glass, his worn face perplexed. "Would you like to see my ID? Like at a bar? You must be asked for proof of age often enough. You are over 18, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And not a virgin, I trust."

"No. Would you have preferred I were?"

"Not especially. No, not at all."

"I thought men like virgins, that it turned them on to be the first."

He observed her in silence for a moment, sipping from a highball glass. "Some men do, perhaps. Personally, I find it too much of a chore. The conversation is about to become vulgar, don't you think?"

Charlotte laughed. "Are you prudish?"

His face darkened for a second. "Not prudish, no, but I don't like to be vulgar."

"I'm sorry." She sat down on the edge of a long white sofa. "But you *are* Stanley?"

The man sighed. "Yes." He went through a door into another room without another word. The girl wondered if she was supposed to follow, but she waited. The air conditioning wasn't on and it was hot in the house. She was sorry she had refused a drink. She was thinking of going to the bar and finding something for herself when he came back and handed her a magazine, folded open. His picture was on the page, the blue eyes glittering through glasses at the camera with interest. She read a few paragraphs.

"Very impressive."

"It's only money." He shrugged. "That's a cliché, I know, but it happens to be true. It's pieces of paper you fold and put in your pocket and people will cut your throat to get it so they can put it in *their* pockets. By itself, it doesn't mean a thing."

"Then why do you pursue it?" Charlotte asked.

He smiled, blowing air through his nose. "Why do you drink a Coke when you're thirsty?"

"It's the same thing? Now you are stretching," she said. She took a cigarette from a silver tray on the marble coffee table and lit it with a gold lighter shaped like a teardrop.

"Perhaps. At any rate, I hope you're satisfied that I am who I said I am." He took the magazine from her, closed it and tossed it onto the sofa lightly. "And that I'm not going to murder you or rape you. And that I can afford to buy a few moments of your time."

"My time," Charlotte said bitterly.

"I see. All right, your body. Your cunt, do you prefer that? I'm buying your cunt so I can stick my cock into it and come in it. Is that

vulgar enough?" His face was dark and his voice had a sharp edge to it, like ruffled sheets of paper.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said. She lowered her head, studying her bare feet. There was sand between her toes and she leaned down to flick some of the grains onto the deep blue rug. She could hear the clinking of ice as he finished his drink. She still had time to change her mind, she thought.

"I didn't mean to raise my voice," the man said presently.

"That's all right. I'm sorry I was...vulgar." She swallowed.

"Shall we get on with it?" He took off his shirt, pulling it over his head. His chest was spindly, with a cleft in the middle and reddish hairs around the nipples.

The girl felt, suddenly, nauseous. "I could blackmail you, couldn't I? Has that ever happened?"

The man looked coldly, his lips squeezed together as if he were kissing the air. He was still holding the shirt in his hands. He walked stiffly to the hallway and opened the door.

"Good day, young lady. I'm sorry we were not able to conduct ourselves more reasonably."

"I didn't say I was going to blackmail you," Charlotte called after him. She didn't give up. "I was just asking."

He stood rigidly beside the open door, glaring at her.

"I wouldn't do a thing like that." She made her voice sound as if she was hurt.

"I didn't expect you would." The man closed the door softly and came back into the livingroom. "It would be foolish to try such a thing. But I don't like you even thinking of it. I'm not a pathetic weakling who can be twisted around the finger of a woman. I'm not a pervert. I'm not sick." His voice didn't rise but he was clearly angry. "There isn't really anything you could blackmail me over. That I had sex with you? So what. That I paid you for it? So what. But I don't like the implication. I don't like what you're thinking. It isn't true. I'm buying something I happen to want, with money that I can easily afford to spend, and no one is being hurt by it. You only think it's odd because you could never afford to do the same thing, except that you do, of course, all the time, in different ways." He paused, the anger expelled, and smiled wanly. "By the way, what will you do with the money?"

"Go away," Charlotte said.

"Just that?"

"Just that."

"I see." He looked down at his hands, folded the shirt neatly in half and lay it on the sofa next to the magazine. "Perhaps you should get ready."

The girl stood up. She looked very pretty, clean, straight, sexy. Her skin had a soft, healthy glow. The tiny hairs covering her skin like a fur of gauze were brown from the sun, almost gold. "I'm ready," she said.

"The bathroom is through the hall," the man said, raising his chin.

The girl looked at him stupidly.

"Hadn't you better do something?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He hesitated, reluctant to speak. "I appreciate that I'm not exciting to you. Hadn't you better..." — he paused, looking away through the window at the sea and the shimmering blue sky — "manipulate yourself, do something to make yourself open and... wet." He stumbled over the last word. "I don't want to hurt you. Or myself." He smiled apologetically. "This is supposed to be pleasurable for me."

"Of course," the girl said.

"There's a jar of Vaseline in the bathroom," the man said. "If you want it."

She went through the hallway to the bathroom, where she was sick.

"Please come back with your bathing suit still on," the man called from the hallway.

He had drawn the drapes and turned on the lights. The livingroom seemed different now, smaller, airless. He was lighting the fire, adjusting the gas tap. "I thought you might still be chilly." He smiled up at her, trying to make her feel more comfortable. He could see how tense she was.

The girl shivered. She felt hot and cold at the same time. The Vaseline felt cold on her thighs.

"In here?" she asked.

"Yes, on the rug."

"Wouldn't the bed be more comfortable?"

"For you, perhaps," he said shortly. "I prefer the rug. You won't be on it long enough for it to matter."

The girl stood in the middle of the room, her mouth dry. The man had taken off his shorts and was naked. He sat down on the sofa, so that she was standing between him and the fire. His penis hung limply against his thigh, lifeless, larger than she would have thought. She knew that made no difference. She tried to avert her eyes but found she couldn't.

"Take off your top," he said. "Slowly."

She started toward him.

"No, stay there. Stay where you are."

The girl stared at him. She hooked her arms behind her and undid the catch. She tried to remember the way the girl at the bar on the boardwalk did it. She brought her right hand up to her breasts and

took hold of the bra, then brought up her left hand. She cupped her breasts. The man's penis jerked and began to crawl along his thigh, thickening, like a live thing. She watched it in fascination, trying not to think. She dropped her hands.

"Turn around," the man said. His voice had thickened slightly. "Take off your bottom. Don't unhook it, just slide it down. Slowly."

The girl put her hand on her hips and slid the cloth down.

"Stop."

She could hear his breathing.

"Let them drop down now."

She gave the panties a little push, then let them slide down her legs. She felt, suddenly, ashamed.

"Put your hand in front of you, there, and turn around," the man said. "Slowly."

She turned, stepping out of the panties. She closed her eyes.

"That's all right," he said. "You don't have to look"

The girl swallowed hard. She felt the warmth of the fire on her buttocks and she took a small step backwards.

"Move your hand away," the man said. "Spread your legs a little." His breath was loud, rasping, like he had a cold. "You can lie down now."

Charlotte turned her back so she wouldn't have to see him and lay down on the rug. It was deep and soft, like the sea.

"Don't look so terrified," the man said. "You've done this before. It's the same. Spread your arms and legs. Raise your knees." She could hear him get up from the sofa and come toward her. Her head was close to the fire and her hair felt warm. "And smile, for God's sake. That's the least you can do."

"The least," she said. She had to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Yes," the man said. He crawled between her legs, touched her once with a finger and entered her. "Oh, God," he said.

There were tears in the girl's eyes. Over his shoulder, she could see the drapes covering the picture window. She imagined they were open and she was gazing at a clear blue sky. There were whitecaps on the water and gulls chasing each other across the sun, blocking out the light. She felt the first slide, then she felt nothing. She knew he was moving above her, but she didn't feel him. She felt nothing. The gulls were cawing, scolding her for disturbing them. Their wings were white on the inside but there were streaks of grey on the outside. There was one that had a grey blotch on its chest, like a stain where an animal had done something dirty in the snow. The man made a noise like a hurt

bird and fell heavily against her. "God," he said again. After a moment, he rolled away from her.

The girl got up and put on her bathing suit.

"Would you like a drink now?" the man asked. He was still lying on the rug, flat on his back, one knee raised, his face glowing from the fire. "A Pepsi?" There was contempt in his voice.

"No. I'd like to go now."

"I see." After a moment, the man got up. "I'll get you your money."

"Please put on your clothes," Charlotte said.

He went out of the room. When he came back he had on a bathrobe, different than the one he'd worn on the beach. He handed her an envelope. "I think you'd have trouble cashing a cheque so large. I hope you don't mind carrying so much cash."

The girl opened the envelope. "I've never seen so much money," she said.

The man shook his head. "It's real, I assure you. And it's all there, but you can count it if you desire."

The girl closed the envelope and held it tightly in her fist. "Was it good for you?" she asked him coldly. "Did you enjoy yourself?" She wanted to hurt him, to make him feel small. She wanted to make him feel as loathesome as she herself did.

He shrugged. "It was all right," he said lamely.

Charlotte looked at him sharply. "Is that all? All right?" She thought that, later, she could come back with a gun and kill him. Or she and friend, a boy she knew, could hold him and hurt him until he gave them money, lots of it, it meant so little to him. Or she could set this house on fire during the night, while he slept.

He shrugged again. "It was wonderful. Best ever. You are one great fuck. Feel better?"

"That's very funny," the girl said. "You're a real comedian."

"I thought you were in a hurry to go."

Charlotte picked up her book and her sunglasses. She looked around for her towel. There wasn't any way, she realized suddenly, that she could hurt him as much as she already had. She went to the door and opened it, blinking her eyes in the bright sunlight. She squeezed the envelope, feeling the thick wad of bills. She turned around. He was sitting on the sofa smoking a cigarette, watching her. Behind the lenses of his glasses, his blue eyes were flat as the sky.

"Would you like me to come again?" she asked abruptly. She held up the envelope.

The man in the bathrobe snorted through his nose, smiling crookedly. "No, thank you."

The girl continued to stand there, looking at him. "I wasn't that bad," she said.

"You were fine," the man said, sighing. He got up and opened the drapes, standing in the centre of the window so that he blocked out a good deal of the sun. "I hate to be crude."

"Go ahead," Charlotte said.

The man shook his head slowly, as if he were explaining to a child why he should not stick his fingers in the fire. "You've been used," he said. He thought for a moment, then added: "Flat."