



ean Burns
The Regs

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‘YOUR PRIVATE LIFE DRAMA, BABY,
LEAVE ME OUT’
– Grace Jones, 1980

The Regs was the name we gave to the many men who passed through the flat – though we had other words for them, too. My housemate would often saunter up to me and announce: ‘I have a 5:15,’ or ‘The revolving door is *open*.’ The Regs umbrella contained subcategories, which we assigned according to the frequency of their visits: New Regs, Reg Regs and even Old Regs.

We knew about one another’s Regs, but we rarely saw them. I occasionally noticed one looking for a sink or lost on his way to the loo. Most of hers were men using online sites to meet crossdressers.

Their visits happened like clockwork: a sharp buzz at the door, ‘It’s on the second floor,’ two or three minutes to climb the stairs, a single firm knock, straight into the bedroom, the smell of weed permeating the flat, 30 or 40 minutes passing – sometimes less – her door frame shuddering, and then the front door slamming as they left. After each visit, she’d sashay down the hall for a debrief in the living room.

‘How was that?’ I’d ask, without looking up from my phone. If he was a Reg Reg, I already knew what she was going to say.

‘I love having sex with him, but I can’t always see him because of his complicated family set-up.’ She often went for unattainable guys, because she didn’t want the responsibility of accommodating them in her day-to-day life as a non-sexual fixture.

If he were a first-time visitor, she’d go into more detail about his *energy*. ‘His wife has just given birth to their third

child, and he popped in on his way to the hospital,’ was a particularly memorable one.

I’d feign scandal at the details by opening my mouth wide or exclaiming, ‘REALLY?!’ – but we both knew it wasn’t uncommon.

She liked being the other woman, even if playing that part meant providing a mechanical scratch to a fleeting libidinal itch. The Regs opened to her in a way they didn’t elsewhere in their lives. And she opened to them, too. Some days, there would be three or four visitors, hence the revolving door comparison. Only the door wasn’t revolving; it was a heavy, self-slamming, Chubb-lock affair that the council – who owned the flat – had fitted three months before I arrived.

One morning, I heard the usual routine begin with an aggressive buzz, an impertinent knock and a two-minute wait. The Reg stepped across the threshold but left almost as soon as he’d entered.

‘It’s always good to say,’ I proffered, emerging sheepishly from my adjoining room.

‘Yes, I didn’t like him,’ she replied. ‘There was an *energy* clash.’ That didn’t happen often, though; she was almost always welcoming.

On a near-daily basis, parcels would arrive in the post containing new drag bits: anything from an all-over fishnet body stocking – that stretched from the size of a postage stamp to cover her entire frame – to transparent, six-inch stripper heels with squeaky plastic straps.

‘How can you please without a Pleaser?’ she’d say to me. Then, she’d push her delicate feet into the shoes and strut up and down the narrow hall to break them in.

There was so much beauty in watching her perform tasks like heating pans of beans on the gas hob in tall Pleasers and loose, grey tracksuit bottoms – moments when sheer quotidian humdrum rubbed so closely against transcendental glamour.

I'd ask, 'Is he straight in the outside world?' They almost always were. The flat had a cocoon-like vibe – warm, full and away from the world. Everything in our lives had a once-removed category or name, picked over and chewed on before sticking forever.

'The Guilts' was a religious-like reaction that some Regs – and I, sometimes – experienced immediately after our desires had been realised. Once it was over, the anvil of doubt would often crash from the heavens above, sabotaging any residual passion.

The flat wasn't tiny, but it was made tiny by the volume of junk inside – books, old VHS tapes, broken light fittings, branches, thousands of towels and millions of vinyl records. It belonged more to these objects than it did to me. I was living in their space.

I went from having one towel that I used for everything and washed regularly to having a cycle of 25 indistinguishable towels that I never washed. I'm raising this only to evoke the idea that, in my tiny bedroom, I lived like Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Venus of the Rags*. And, like Venus, I found it impossible to turn away from the heap.

My Regs were more fleeting – and most of them didn't make it back a second or third time to be considered legitimate Regs. I had a more consumerist appetite. She took an addictive tack. She was never satiated. We were both motivated more by curiosity than self-destruction, though.

She hadn't worked as a DJ for months – and we were trapped inside what I semi-affectionately termed 'her head' (the flat), staring into blue backlights, waiting for something to shift. Noisy squirrels inhabited the minuscule balcony more than we did, bringing bits of branches and broken plastic toys from the grassy area below.

On one occasion, I arranged to meet a guy in the stairwell of his grey tower block near Belsize Park. He was dressed head to toe – including a complete face mask and gloves – as Spider-Man. I asked him, 'Do you have much crime to fight tonight?'

'Yes,' he responded, without hesitation. Those were the only words we shared.

People with niche sexual fetishes – maybe Spider-Man isn't that niche – often manufacture situations in which the proposition to execute their preference doesn't seem like their idea. Spider-Man messaged me a few weeks later, insinuating that we repeat the same setup with a different costume.

'You enjoyed it,' he said, as if I'd gifted him the look and insisted that he wear it. I wondered where he stowed it so that no one would discover his night-time transformation.

She occasionally carried out odd jobs for a friend in their garden, repairing light fixtures and tidying up hedges. One afternoon, she came home pregnant with excitement over the advances of a shopkeeper. She'd visited a hardware store in south London – I can't recall the exact name but, suffice it to say, it had the word 'screw' in it – to buy some screws.

Wearing red shellac nail polish and glamorous £1.50 black plastic wraparound sunglasses with bejewelled diamante arms, she approached the counter to make her request.

What she thought was a handwritten receipt for 45 standard six-inch wood screws was, in fact, an invitation for a different kind of screw.

I don't know if she ever did get screwed by the screw man, but we laughed about it for weeks.

'I've still got it,' she'd say, and she was right.

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The two consecutive nights during which we constructed the shelves were amongst the most memorable in the flat. The units themselves were pointless, and we both knew it. Organising the ocean in a washing-up bowl would have been easier; there was no way the immense amount of junk we had would yield to two quivering metal towers.

In this sense, the activity itself was the goal. Her metric for life was an exuberant and rich experience, a total presence that embraced every moment. We wanted to build the shelves because they meant being together in a performative gesture of organisation that would create more mess but unite us, nevertheless.

Games, were always on the agenda. Everything could become one: folding bed sheets together or selecting a film to watch. The game for building the shelves was to spend one night discussing all the women we'd had romantic relationships with. Then, on the following night, all the men.

We were sticking to the headlines – the people from the past who had left a lasting impact, the ones we loved, and those who got away. It was cathartic and exciting, mythologising our proclivities.

We sat on the parquet tiles in the living room late at night, trying to prevent the small washers and bolts from

falling between the endless cracks. It was a two-person job, screwing them in by hand. The shelves were utilitarian – the kind you might find in a mechanic’s yard.

Whereas the Regs were what George Michael might have called ‘fast love,’ that night, we focused on lingering, long-term love, or pugnacious and feverish adolescent desire – the kind you hope to re-create in later life. Love isn’t always demonstrative or explicit. In fact, the most sustainable love can be slow-burning and manifest obliquely through gestures, the impact of which engenders a feeling of total security, like the one I felt in the flat. The most articulate love can go unnoticed.

Although we didn’t discuss our relationship that evening, I knew she loved me. I rarely discuss love in relationships where it’s present because there’s nothing to be gained from the clarity. Occasionally, I’ll see a game show advertised on television for straight people, where the primary jeopardy is how closely the contestants can adhere to monogamy in a hot situation engineered to induce the reverse. There’s punishment if you fail.

A contestant might list their future desires in a partner or lifestyle to the camera (pectoral muscles, a bank account, kindness, etc.). My counsellor used to call it ‘technological thinking.’ How can someone be so sure of what they want? The Regs were fascinating because they were an anomaly, a schism in the veneer of respectability. The sexual lives of straight men are the world’s best-kept secret.

The traditional family is treated as a golden ideal in society, a construct wielded to bind people to a model that rarely accommodates the skittishness of our desires and our need to evolve. The family had been painfully tricky

for both of us in different ways, and all our parents had suffered because they could not stay within the confines of their social mores.

I didn't want cold suburbia, where desires become strange, wither on the vine, and the illusion of stability turns into a competitive sport. Britain's suburbs were my idea of complete hell. As a teenager, I'd watch the lad across the street wander around his driveway topless, talking on the phone to his mates, desperate for him to come over and see me instead.

The shelves: I was more than 30 years her junior, which meant my amorous litany was somewhat less impressive. But she had loads of lovers to discuss, some of whom have escaped my memory. School had been particularly difficult for her because of her dyslexia and the bullying that smothered and diminished her beauty.

She'd found solace, like many of us, in the characters of the night. Soon, her schooling would fade away in favour of an alternative street education administered by lost rent boys with sweeping fringes, cross-dressers who drove lorries in the daytime, and drunk young Londoners who had nowhere else to go.

I wanted to try and see things as they were in front of me. I feared judgment – more precisely, exposure. Shame is a big emotion to move around yourself, and my desire was closely tied to my shame. It wouldn't be accurate to say we both craved intimacy, which is something I hear people loosely say about everyone, as though we're all shivering guinea pigs. We sometimes just wanted meaningless sex for its own sake. (This isn't a tale of morality; I wouldn't know where to begin.) But intimacy certainly was an ingredient,

and we all need to be held sometimes by someone who – in our imagination, at least – understands us.

‘Observe, allow, and don’t judge,’ she used to say to me, especially when I buried myself beneath my worries, which were constant. Keeping up is a never-ending suburban cul-de-sac of horror. I’m not pitching any of this as a universal truth, something to inject or drink. It’s only how I see things for myself. The freedom she had fought for – and many had died for – wasn’t what had been realised.

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