

Roshonara Choudhry: A Woman For Our Times – Almost

It was a bright April day, well brightish, but soon there would be a change in the weather that would bring a distinct chill to my garret flat. I hadn't been up long, having beavered away on the computer until gone 3am, and was just about to jump in the bath when the door bell rang. I don't usually answer it unless I know someone is coming, but I thought it might have been the postman or the meter reader, especially the latter, and was a bit surprised when on opening the door I came face to face with a young Asian woman. She was wearing a headscarf and was conservatively dressed, black trousers, matching blouse, jacket and shoes, but was obviously not a Jehovah's Witness.

She looked distinctly nervous as she spoke my name, "Mr Baron?"

"Yes", I said.

"As-Salāmu `Alaykum", she said.

"Wa Alaykum Salam", I replied, not absolutely sure I'd done it right.

At this point, her nervousness disappeared, and she broke into a smile, "Mr Baron, I am great fan of yours", she said.

"Oh". I really wasn't expecting that.

"Yes, I have read all of your website".

"I'm afraid that much of what I write isn't suitable for, er, polite young ladies".

"Humour never killed anyone", she said, "even bawdy limericks."

This was turning into a strange conversation indeed, the very last phrase I had expected to come out of her mouth was "bawdy limericks".

"Er, how can I help you, Miss er..."

"Choudhry" she said, "but you can call me Rose".

Rose indeed, I thought, still, a rose by any other name... "What can I do for you, Rose?"

"I need to speak with you", she said, "now".

"Er, what about?"

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Er, I can't invite you in, I'm afraid, the place is a mess".

"It can't be as bad as mine," she said, stepping forward.

"It really is a bit of a mess," I said, "if you'll give me a few minutes..."

"There is no problem I trust you..."

I'm sure you do, sweetheart, I thought, but I really didn't like the idea of inviting a strange woman upstairs and then having to explain to the local plod how I didn't put my hand down the front of her blouse, or some such. Then the postman did turn up, walking straight past number 95 he came in the gate and held out a handful of envelopes. As he did so, my unexpected visitor turned to him and asked, "Anything for Mr Baron?"

The postman, who may have been a Moslem himself, grunted, and held out the envelopes to me. Then she turned back to him and said "This is my boyfriend; we've just going upstairs to bed, aren't we Alexander?" And before I knew it, she'd thrown her arms around me and fused her lips with mine.

I don't know who was more embarrassed, me or the postman; I took the letters from him, and as he turned around she half shouted "He's a great lover; better than most men half his age."

The guy looked back before walking on to the next house; any embarrassment he'd shown had now turned to disgust. The charming Miss Choudhry turned back and said "Now you can invite me upstairs, and if I cry rape, no one will believe me."

I shook my head in disbelief. "I should point out that I am fifty-three years old, and for that and other reasons, I am immune to feminine wiles."

"I know," she said, brightly, "lead on Macduff."

I turned and led her up the stairs.

"Are you *gay*?" she asked?

I turned back to her, but she laughed, "I know you're not; I've read your website. Those perverts make me sick too."

"I make an exception for Noël Coward", I said.

"Who?"

"Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun."

"They do?"

"Yes."

As I pushed open the already ajar door, she took out her purse and said, "I want to buy some of your publications, but I also want your advice."

"You want the advice of a man who lives in a housing association flat?"

"Yes."

You won't conquer the world listening to me."

"No, but I may change it, which is what I want to do."

We climbed the stairs and I told her, "I've changed it already, well, saved it actually, but I don't think anyone will ever know."

We walked into my living room cum bedroom and her eyes fell on the hole in the wall.

"Oh, the place really is a mess. What is that for, do you keep dead bodies in there?"

"Yes," I said, "nosy Moslem girls who ask too many questions."

She laughed again, and I was amazed at this surreal banter.

"What is it for, really?"

"I've been here since 1986, and the regulations were changed a few years ago. You can't have a gas fire with a chimney space behind it or something, so when the bloke came to check the gas a couple of years ago, he yanked the fire out, and left me this." I pointed to the fan heater.

"Not much of a substitute," she said.

"Not so bad at this time of year."

"Can't you get it filled?"

"Not unless I want a cement mixer in my bedroom; you want a drink?" I asked.

"Gin and tonic", she said.

"Yeah. It's tea or coke in this household."

"Tea will be fine."

I went into the kitchen, and she followed me.

"I haven't got many pamphlets left, or books."

“It doesn’t look like that,” she said, obviously alluding to the boxes stacked up the stairs.

“They’re mostly books, they’re all on-line now, most of them.”

“I know,” she said, “I have read your book on the Holohoax”.

Somehow this didn’t surprise me, “Which one?” I asked.

“Both of them. And I’ve read your Tehran paper.”

“Do you agree with my thesis?” I asked as I reached for the milk.

“Yes, I think a lot of Jews died but nothing like six million.”

“So what do you want, a signed copy?”

“No,” she said, “I will buy some pamphlets as a *quid pro quo*, but I really want your advice.”

“So you said; I’ve finished with the Holocaust though, there are more important things in this world than dead Jews.”

“Like the money system?”

“Yeah.”

“That is why I want to see you.”

I lit the kettle, “You know how the scam works then?”

“Yes,” I have read all your Financial Reform website too.”

“I am flattered. I didn’t realise I had two fans.”

“Who is the other one?” she said.

“Do you need to ask?”

“Oh, of course,” she laughed again, “the man in the mirror.”

“Right.”

“I want to apply the Wizard Of Oz Syndrome to the banking system,” she said.

Now this *was* getting interesting.

“You’ve read that too?”

“I’ve read all your websites,” she said, “*all* of them.”

I sighed, “If you weren’t such a devout Moslem, and I were thirty years younger...”

“Yes,” she said, “I was thinking that, but you shacking up with a Paki would make Gerry Gable very happy, and I don’t think you’d like to do that.”

“Goddamn!” I said.

Not only had she read all my publications but she’d taken them in. When I’d finished making the tea, we went into the bedroom and I sat down at the computer, which I’d left on. Jiggling the mouse to reactivate the screen, I turned to her and said, “If you want a chair...”

“No, no,” she rushed, “I don’t mind standing. You were going to tell me about the Wizard Of Oz Syndrome.”

“Well, if you’ve read what I wrote...”

“Yes,” she cut in, “vicarious liability, but how do we get around it? More to the point, how do we apply it to the banking crisis?”

“Erm...take the Stockwell shooting.”

“Yes,” she said.

“What happened there?”

“The Metropolitan Police shot an innocent man.”

“Yes, but what happened next?”

“There was a whitewash inquiry.”

There was no arguing with that, but I wanted more, “What did the so-called Independent Police Complaints Commission do?” I asked.

“They ruled that no individual officer should be held culpable, and prosecuted the Metropolitan Police.”

“Right, and the Metropolitan Police is a what?”

She thought a bit, then answered, “A government organisation.”

“Well, an organisation, yes, the point is that you can’t send an organisation to gaol.”

“No.”

“If you prosecute a private company, you can fine it, and sometimes you can do others things, you can order it to do something, or not to do something, but an organisation that is funded by the taxpayer...”

She interrupted, “The taxpayer pays the fine, and it is no punishment at all.”

“Exactly,” I said, “in fact, they were actually rewarded, because you had dozens of officers sitting around at court drinking tea and doing the *Times* crossword...”

“And being paid for the privilege”, she put in.

“Right.”

“So they should have prosecuted the individual officers?” she continued.

“Ordinarily”, I said.

“Why ordinarily?”

In spite of what I’d said, I wasn’t so sure about this particular case; there have been cases where innocent members of the public have been murdered by the police in cold blood, literally, and I thought of James Ashley and Harry Stanley in particular, but although they’d killed a totally innocent man at Stockwell, and some of them had clearly lied about what had happened, I felt these were truly extraordinary circumstances. You had to bear in mind that fifty-two innocent people had already been murdered by another cell earlier that month; Ken Livingstone had called de Menezes the 53rd victim, and no one could accuse him of being a police apologist.

“Well, you have to consider all the circumstances”, I said, “but ordinarily you should prosecute the individual or individuals concerned.”

“But they never do?” she said.

“Well, sometimes they do, but never with full on, I mean, you’re familiar with the James Ashley case?”

“The naked man?” she said.

“Yes.”

“The judge sabotaged the trial.”

“Totally.”

“So the Wizard of Oz says the judge must be punished?”

“Er...”

“Somebody should punish judges who let off police who kill people?”

“Well, yes...”

“But there is no organisation to do this, no?”

“No.”

“So this is where the Wizard of Oz comes in?”

“Yes”.

“So if somebody killed that old bag of a judge, the next judge who tried such a case would think twice before sabotaging it,” she said brightly.

“Er, I’m not sure I’d go so far as whacking Mrs Justice Rafferty”, I said.

“Well, break her legs, then.”

“I thought you were interested in the banking system”, I said.

“Yes,” she replied, “first and foremost.”

“So how about we stick to that?”

“So we should whack a banker or two?” she asked.

“We?” I asked.

“Well, not us obviously, but if we formed a group that shot bankers, or if you think that is too over the top, kidnapped and tortured them...”

“And then what?”

“And then gave the government an ultimatum, abolish usury or we will keep this up until we have kneecapped every banker in Britain?” she said brightly. She kept saying things brightly, but I wasn’t feeling that bright myself.

“Well, you’ve sussed it then,” I said, don’t forget to send me your prison number, and I’ll come and visit you in Holloway.”

“Oh no,” she said, “I won’t be going to Holloway.”

I hoped she wasn't going to tell me she was the tip of an iceberg, but she said "I won't get caught, no one will suspect me."

"Of course not," I said.

The conversation went on in this vein for a good half hour, at the end of which she kept her promise, fishing out a fifty pound note, helping herself to a selection of my publications, and asking me to sign a couple. Telling me to keep the change, she changed the subject, sort of, and for the first time, she said something which made me suspect her motives, as opposed to her sanity.

"I need gun", she said.

"Pardon?"

"I need gun. A gun."

I realised that was what she had said, but wanted to hear her say it again. I began to shut down my machine.

"I need a gun; can you supply me with one?"

"Can't help you there," I said.

"You don't need yours anymore," she said, "do you?"

"I don't own a gun, and never have."

She smiled knowingly then said, "Please, I need it. I will pay you for it."

"I don't have a gun," I said firmly.

"You do," she said, equally firmly, then added the bombshell, "your girlfriend told me."

"What girlfriend might that be?"

"Your ex-girlfriend, the one from *****."

Suddenly I knew what this was really about. Or thought I did. I turned to her looking serious and said, "When did you speak to her?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me it does, yes."

"After I read..." she named something I'd written, I won't say anymore than that. Suddenly I hit on an idea.

"I don't keep it here," I said.

“Of course not, that would be madness, and you are not mad, just angry.”

“Who do you propose to whack first?” I asked.

“A banker.”

“Any banker in particular?” I said, thinking of one banker in particular.

“No, probably a minor one, then a share dealer, then a trader, until they get the message.”

“I see,” I said, “and what if you get caught?”

“Then those who follow me will finish the job.”

“Right”.

“How much did you bring with you?” I asked.

“A little over a grand,” she said, just like any good Moslem would.

Suddenly I had a vision of her wearing fishnet tights knocking back cocktails in a hotel bar. Or maybe she'd be dressed in jeans and dirty blouse, buying smack off someone round the back of Kings Cross Station. Kings Cross, now there was a thought, I could kill two birds with one stone.

“I can get more”, she added, alluding to what she obviously hoped was a prospective gun sale.

“No, that's all right,” I said, “seven fifty. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said, smiling triumphantly. And prematurely, I hasten to add.

“I'll need to have a wash, then we have a train to catch.”

“Where to?”

“Kings Cross. Is that okay?”

“Fine,” she said.

So it was that twenty-five minutes later we walked to Sydenham Station arm-in-arm; I wanted to keep up the pretence, and she had no objection, and after she'd bought both our tickets, we sat in an uncomfortable silence all the way to London Bridge, and then again to Kings Cross Underground Station.

When we got there I asked her what time she'd last eaten, “Yesterday,” she replied.

“Let's get something to eat first,” I suggested.

Probably not wanting to seem in too much of a hurry – or so I thought - she agreed, and I added “You’re paying.”

“Who says chivalry is dead?” she asked.

I nearly made a wisecrack about equal opportunities or rooting out *sexism* in a certain public service, but thought better of it.

I had an all-day breakfast, full English, she had an omelette; as we ate she asked “Is it far from here?”

“No,” I replied, “it’s in an old tunnel”.

“I thought as much,” she said, “will it be dirty?”

“No. No problems with anything, just leave it to Uncle Alexander.”

She smiled, like a spider about to feast on a fly trapped in its web, or so I thought. “The money,” I said, “I’ll need it now.”

“Of course,” she took out her purse, counted out seven hundred and fifty pounds, and handed it over to me.” The easiest day’s work you’ll ever do, I thought to myself. As I pocketed it I said, “You want some more tea?”

“Why not?” she replied.

“I’ll get it,” I said.

We were sitting close to the counter, and as I ordered it I asked the manager loudly if there was a toilet; he gave me a slightly confused look because I’d been using this place for the past ten years or more, but he simply indicated to the back and through the swing door. As I dumped the two teas on our table I indicated to my still smiling companion that I would be back in a minute, then once through the swing doors I walk past the toilet, through the emergency exit, and ran like the wind. I spent the rest of the day doing some music research in my favourite archive, stayed till chuck out time in fact, and travelled home via the West End where I deposited the money in my secret Swiss bank account. Well, not quite, but you get my drift. I grabbed a sandwich from my local Iranian store on the way home, and as I walked through the door, the phone rang.

I had a feeling it was her, and putting on an official voice I answered it with “Switchboard”.

There was a moment’s hesitation on the other end, then she said “Alexander?”

“Tintagel House”, I said.

“Tin what?”

“Or perhaps you’d prefer New Scotland Yard?”

“Alexander? Are you all right?”

“Fine. And quids in.”

“I was worried about you. What happened?”

“How stupid do you think I am?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s a simple question. How stupid do you think I am, Officer Choudhry?”

“Officer...”

“Or is your name Patel, or maybe even Smith?”

“Alexander, what do you mean?”

“Listen, you mendacious little cunt, don’t show your face round here again or...”

“Alexander,” she interrupted almost hysterically, “I am not a police officer, how can you think that?”

“I told you, don’t come back, don’t phone me, don’t E-Mail me, savvy?”

“But Alexan...”

I slammed the phone down, and that was the last I heard from her. Ever. But not the last I heard *about* her, because barely four weeks later...Heck, how could I have been so wrong? She was lying to me, that much is clear, she wasn’t interested in direct action against the usurers, or maybe she was or would have been later, but she had a more immediate priority. It was ironic really because months earlier I’d had some non-correspondence with Stephen Timms over another matter, credit creation! She said she’d read all my websites; I wondered if she chose him to send me a message. After all, he was hardly the most high profile supporter of the madness that was Iraq. On the other hand, as a more or less run-of-the-mill MP, he was a much easier target than the Prime Minister, or mass murderer Tony Blair.

I shook my head in disbelief; if only I’d taken her at her word, we could have had some real fun, and perhaps saved Britain and the world from the financial catastrophe that is sure to follow. O ye of little faith!