LA PETITE BOURGEOISE

NORMAN MAILER

"LA PETITE BOURGEOISE," *a short story by Norman Mailer, was never published. It is not known with certainty when Mailer wrote the story, but its date of composition is believed to be circa 1951. A transcription of the story follows the images. The Norman Mailer estate has graciously given permission to reprint the story. Images are courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.*

—Phillip Sipiora

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La Petite Bourgeoise

Rosalie has lovely red hair and blue eyes; she is plump and she has the throaty voice of a young actress. She carries her body provocatively, it whispers innuendo, and even as one is convinced that she is offering something, her eyes deny it with their blue innocence. She is just a child they seem to say. Altogether, Rosalie is quite appetizing.

I met her first at college. She was taking a two-year course at one of those female institutions whose title is the name of the spinster who founded it, Miss Julia's perhaps, or Miss Thatcher's—I hardly remember—really the sort of place whose function is drawn midway between a finishing school and a business college. I suppose that together with such subjects as English and French, Silver-Service and Party-Management, Rosalie also submitted to a course or two in Stenography and Typing. Whatever the curriculum, she has certainly forgotten all of it, except perhaps the hour devoted to Flower-Arrangements.

It can hardly be said that we had a romance in college. We went out a few times, we probably kissed a few times, and that was the extent of our activity. I heard later that she got married, and still later I heard that she was divorced. She was eventually to tell me in her husky voice about that marriage. "It was all sex, Michael," she was to say, "and it was just silly. If only I'd gone to bed with Robert, I would never have married him. It was his fault. He was such a boob. He could have made me go to bed with him, but he adored me too much, so I had to pay for it by marrying him."

The marriage had been empty enough. She had thought Robert to be the most attractive man in the world, she had become a bride expressly to be deflowered by him, and on her wedding night, long after he had fallen asleep, she lay alone in the darkness, and wept big solemn child's tears. She had gotten married for that, and it was nothing.

Still, it lasted two years. They rented a small house in Westchester, close to

the large house in which her family lived, and she spent her days visiting her girl-friends, playing bridge and then Canasta, shopping with her mother, while Robert worked in his father's store, a rather large emporium for television sets and electric cocktail mixers. What she had done to him was awful, she would admit freely. He had a hangdog look about him, he had no confidence at all, he had not the remotest idea of whether it was his fault or hers, whether he should hate her or apologize to her. She loved him for his boyishness, but she suffered his acts of love. Finally she screwed up her courage to divorce him. It was either that or have a baby.

When I met her again, she had been free for a year. She was at a party escorted by a young man in a business suit. He looked proper, efficient, and somewhat deadly to me. He had a pale face, and his straight black hair was thin and showed promise of being prematurely bald. He spoke softly, he stayed close to her, he possessed her by his presence, and though he was as civil to me as he had been to every other man who approached Rosalie, it was quite evident that he was a formidable watchdog. The three of us talked at random. Rosalie employed her blue eyes: they seemed to tell me that she was delighted to see me again, that I must pay no attention to the young man beside her, he was obviously repulsive, and I was as evidently attractive. We had the sort of silly party conversation which is always the compromise between liquor, intention, and embarrassment. We talked about body deodorants.

Thomas, which was the name of her escort, took deodorants seriously. "He's disgusting," Rosalie said loudly, while Thomas smiled faintly. "Do you know he takes three showers a day?"

"Out, out, damned spot," I murmured.

"He's so clean," Rosalie said. "He makes me feel like I'm a sewer-pot or something. Thomas won't go out with me unless I put him under my arms."

"I've found something new," Thomas drawled, his eyes upon the ceiling. "It's Ennds. You take a pill and it dissipates all odors." He had almost a lisp, and I found him unpleasant. He was making a dull courteous effort to be humorous about himself, but it was apparent that he took the subject seriously.

Rosalie began to laugh. "And then there's Quik-Tips."

"What are Quik-Tips?" I asked.

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"Oh," said Thomas, "they're little sticks with cotton swabs, and you use them to clean the lint from your navel, and replace it with a gentle scent." He giggled remotely.

"You see the kind of man who wants to marry me," Rosalie said furiously. "Thomas, you know what you are, you're nothing but an old homosexual, that's what. If I marry you, I'll have to use Qwik-Tips."

"You do already," Thomas said softly, but firmly. It was his way of announcing that he was familiar with the navel of Rosalie.

I searched for some way to get Rosalie alone. Later, while I was talking to other people, I saw her go to the bathroom, and I was preparing to detach myself from the group in which I found myself, when I discovered that it would be pointless to wait for Rosalie outside the door of the john. Thomas had taken his station there.

Rosalie arranged matters. As she was leaving with Thomas, she made it a point to stop and say good-night. "Telephone me, Michael, will you?" she said in front of Thomas, and handed me a slip of paper. I probably showed my discomfort. Thomas was not exactly the sort of person, I cared to arrange a rendezvous before. "Good-night, Rosalie, I'll telephone," I said. "Good-night, Thomas."

He nodded his head. In his colorless gray eyes, glinted a remote humor.

I did not call Rosalie for quite some time. I decided after the party that if she had really wanted to see me, she would not have made such a point of it before Thomas. I had been used, I thought, to arouse his jealousy.

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