

The Perils of Publication

Sappho Watergate checked the folder in her backpack. Yes, it held all the pages of her verse cycle, *Dykes on Bikes*.

She was on her way to see the editor-in-chief of Prickwick Publications. Brutus Bantammer had sounded so very keen to see her poems when they'd arranged to meet for drinks and discussion in Amsterdam's decadent Americain Hotel.

How exciting!

Shouldering the backpack, Sappho mounted her bicycle. A manic god playing timpani boomed thunder overhead. Drat. It began to rain. Double-drat. She was probably late. No time to go back home for her wet-weather gear. Peddling on, by the time she reached the Leidseplein, the big square in downtown Amsterdam, she was drenched.

Sappho locked her bicycle to a handy pole and entered the posh hotel. Avoiding the poncy receptionist's eye, she sloshed through the foyer, ducked into the Ladies and wiped her hair on a thick towel hung between the basins. She shrugged off the backpack and pulled at her saturated clothing, denim top and bottom. Glancing critically in a wall-length mirror, she arranged a curly strand over her forehead. Shivering with anticipation, she noticed her pointy nipples. Nothing she could do about that.

Hoping she didn't resemble a dipped sheep, Sappho entered the Art Deco café. She looked around, holding up her white backpack in display, waiting for Mr Bantammer to recognize the arranged signal.

Then she saw him waving at her from behind the trunk of a potted palm, tucked away in the corner. Heading in his direction, Sappho passed a podium on which a small-but-perfectly-formed orchestra was performing a flawless yet passionate tango.

Registering that all the players were women, Sappho allowed her glance to linger. She was enraptured by a pair of magnetic brown eyes. The first cellist, embracing her instrument with sensual strokes, was smiling appraisingly at her through a curtain of long blonde hair. Sappho concealed her response. This was no time for dabbling.

Foul purple smoke hung above Brutus Bantammer from a stubby cigar jammed into the corner of his mouth. He stood with a clatter of his rattan chair and beamed broadly. He was obese, bulging out of his burgundy shirt, belly bursting over the restraint of his belt. My gracious Goddess, thought Sappho, his tits are bigger than mine.



Pumping her arm in welcome, Bantammer said, "Great to meet you, missy. Come and sit down. We're going to do fine business together, believe me."

Keeping the backpack a shield between them, Sappho smiled shyly and sat. Bantammer snapped podgy fingers at a waiter to order two double scotches, no ice, without inquiring what she wanted to drink. As they waited, he ogled her.



Hyperaware of her sharp nipples, Sappho crossed her arms. "I got caught in the rain on the way. Sorry if I kept you waiting."

"Now listen honey," Bantammer said when the drinks arrived.

Sappho ignored hers.

"Prickwick is going to do your sweet little poems. They're great stuff, even if none of them rhyme."

Yihaa! *Dykes on Bikes* was accepted for publication. Sappho thrummed with excitement. She could hardly believe it. This was her dream come true.

"With a few sexy photos to illustrate your poems, we'll corner the lezzie lovers market, no sweat!" Bantammer blew a foul plume of smoke in her eyes and not-so accidentally landed a fat hand on her knee.

Sappho inched out of range. "I don't understand," she began tentatively. "Are you suggesting running pornography with my poetry?"

"Honey, be cool. Pretty poems don't sell. Pretty piccies do. Face da facts."

Sappho straightened in disbelief. "I've spent years and years honing *Dykes on Bikes*. My lesbian poetry is lyrical literature with a capital Elle. I won't have my work cheapened by puerile porn."

Bantammer steepled his fingers over his chest, leaned back in his creaking chair, smiling greasily. "You wanna be published, or not? You wanna a wide audience? Make some money or starve in a garret? Your call, honey."

Sappho was furious. Her poetry deserved, no, it demanded unbesmirched publication. What a letdown! She stood to leave. "I've made a mistake. I have integrity. I will not allow my *Dykes on Bikes* to be desecrated."

Bantammer heaved to his feet, blocking her exit. "No need to rush off, Sophia."

"SAPPHO Watergate."

"Sappho, schmaffo, so sue me! Just calm down, honey."

"Mizz Watergate to you."

"Relax, sit down." He smiled placatingly. "We're fair to our authors. You're being unreasonable, naive little girl. You must realize there's not much of a market for straight poetry."

"It's queer poetry," snarled Sappho.

“You know what I mean hon... Mizz Watergate. The days of slim volumes selling like cupcakes are over. Ever been in print before?” Sappho shook her head, unable to hide the truth. “Aha! I knew you were a novice. We are the ones taking a risk on you. Trust me, trust Prickwick to take care of you.”

Sappho was unconvinced. “I withdraw my work from consideration. So sorry. I seem to have wasted your time.”

Bantammer chuckled confidently and seized her arm. Not expecting his lunge, Sappho was thrown off balance and dropped her folder of poetry. With Bantammer leaning over her, she was cornered by a clump of palms.

His mouth slavered alarmingly. “There’s a lot you have to learn about the publishing business, sweetie-pie, and I’m the one to teach you.”

Before Sappho could protest, a melodious voice intervened. “Is this brute bothering you?”

Bantammer and Sappho looked around simultaneously. With surprise, Sappho recognized the blonde cellist. She hadn’t noticed the music stop. Glasses clinked, a nearby woman pealed a tinkling laugh, and a busboy dropped a laden tray with a shattering clatter.

Bantammer blustered, “No problem. The little lady is a friend of mine. And this is a private party if you don’t mind.”

Sappho took the opportunity to free herself, rubbing her wrist where the beast had clamped it. “As a matter of fact, this vile creature is bothering me. Thank you.”

Without a backward glance, Sappho went with the statuesque cellist, leaving Bantammer behind, gasping like a flounder on dry land. She was led to a quiet nook behind the podium, concealed from prying eyes.

The cellist spoke. “Let me to introduce myself. I am Rachel Euphrosyne PaperKlippe, leader of the PPCO, the PaperKlippe Palm Court Orchestra. Call me Rachel.”

Sappho stuttered her name in return. Silence stretched between them, comfortable yet tense with promise. Finally, Sappho averted her eyes and sat on the edge of the podium. Choking on sudden tears, she realized *Dykes on Bikes* was not going to be published after all. What a disappointment.

Rachel looked concerned. “What was that about?”

Sadly, Sappho related a synopsis of the meeting, ending with, “And now *Dykes on Bikes* will never see the light of print!”



Rachel clicked her fingers impatiently. "Mizz Watergate...."

"Call me Sappho, please."

"Sappho, listen to me. Prickwick are muckrakers, mere vanity publishers. You get charged a fortune for letting them put out your work."

"Gosh." Sappho admitted, "I didn't know. I answered their manuscripts wanted advertisement. Brutus Bantammer was so enthusiastic about my poems. He said I was a true new talent. He promised me the moon on a plate. I suppose I fell for his hook, line and sinker."

Rachel smiled sympathetically. "Perhaps I can help. I know Daphne Damson, works at Prune Press, the queer publishers, you know? Daph's a good friend. I could ask her to look at your work. I can't promise you'll get published or anything but I can tell you that Prune will consider your work fairly and treat it with careful respect."



Sappho quivered hopefully. Daphne Damson would assuredly recognize the excellence of *Dykes on Bikes*. "I've heard of Prune, of course, but I didn't know they do poetry. I thought they only published incomprehensible post-feminist neo-queer tracts."

Rachel just smiled.

Sappho grinned, confident again. Suddenly she squealed. "My verse cycle! I left it behind."



They returned to where Bantammer sat squashed into his chair. He snickered as they approached, one fat proprietary hand clamped on the folder of poetry. He dislodged his cigar, unplugging a balloon of filthy smoke. "Well Sophie-pet, I knew you'd come round."

"I'd like my verse cycle back, please."

"No chit of a lezzie stands me up and gets away with it. You've lost your rights to the work. I'll be taking it with me and Prickwick will publish as planned, with all the pretty pictures showing in juicy, full-color, graphic detail just what you lezzies get up to in the sack. Mm.... can't wait."

Rachel smiled venomously. If Bantammer had been cleverer, he'd have been warned. "Let me handle this," she whispered, so close to Sappho's ear that, despite the fraught moment, tremors rippled down her spine.

"Mr Bantammer," said Rachel firmly. "I give you five seconds to hand over Ms Watergate's property. Do it or face the consequences."

Bantammer laughed disparagingly. But Rachel PaperKlippe presented an awesome sight. She loomed haughtily above him, her stern head set at an arrogant angle.

"Three... four..."

Then Bantammer quailed, a rim of sweat slicking his brow. "How about a deal, hon?"

“Five... too late!” Moving so fast that Sappho felt the action was caught in a strobe light, Rachel hoisted Bantammer from the chair and deftly plucked the folder from his greasy grasp. She tapped him on his wobbly chest and he subsided like a beached hippo wallowing on the tiled floor.

The altercation, though speedy, was noticed. A waiter rushed to assist Bantammer who gurgled, “That’s assault! And battery! I’ll sue! See you in court, you mad lezzie bitch!”

Ignoring his feeble ranting, Rachel and Sappho strolled with dignity to the door of the hotel. Outside it no longer rained. The crisp night air curled their breath in imitation of Bantammer’s cigar smoke.

Sappho shivered, suddenly aware of her clammy clothes. “You’ve saved my *Dykes on Bikes* from the perilous fate of paid publication. How can I ever thank you?”

Rachel laughed. “Care to join me for supper? We’ll work out something.”

“But what about your orchestral commitments? Don’t you have to go back and play?”

“Nope, we’re done for the night. I’m free... if you are.” Keenly Sappho accepted. “Come along then.”

“But my bike is here.”

“Oh leave it, my Porsche is just around the corner.”

Stuffing the folder of poems into her backpack, Sappho ran to catch up. She felt buoyant with optimism. Exit Bantammer, enter PaperKlippe. Piss off Prickwick, Prune lay ahead. What a lot had happened in such a short while! She squinted at her watch in the dark. Drat. The rain had made it stop.

“Do you know what time it is?”

Standing by her car, Rachel loomed mysteriously in the dark. “I don’t wear a watch, but if you really want to know, I have an alarm clock at home.”

“Oooooooh,” sighed Sappho. ▼

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