

Cheap At Half The Price



The screaming beauty with sparklers on her mind: A millionaire's wife heads for Bond Street with her eye on a glittering royal masterpiece...

Short story by best-selling author
Jeffrey Archer



Women are naturally superior to men, and Mrs Consuela Rosenheim was no exception. Victor Rosenheim, an American banker, was Consuela's third husband, and the gossip columns on both sides of the Atlantic were suggesting that, like a chain smoker, the former Colombian model was already searching for her next spouse before she had extracted the last gasp from the old one.

Her first two husbands — one an Arab, the other a Jew (Consuela showed no racial prejudice when it came to signing marriage contracts) — had not quite left her in a position that would guarantee her financial security once her natural beauty had faded. But two more divorce settlements would sort that out. With this in mind, Consuela estimated that she only had another five years before the final vow must be taken.

The Rosenheims flew into London from their home in New York — or, to be more accurate, from their homes in New York. Consuela had travelled to the airport by chauffeur-driven car from their mansion in the Hamptons, while her husband had been taken from his Wall Street office in a second chauffeur-driven car. They met up in the Concorde lounge at JFK. When they had landed at Heathrow, another limousine transported them to the Ritz, where they were escorted to their usual suite without any suggestion of having to sign forms or book in.

The purpose of their trip was two-fold. Mr Rosenheim was hoping to take over a small merchant bank that had not benefited from the recession, while Mrs Rosenheim intended to occupy her time looking for a suitable birthday present for herself. Despite considerable research I have been unable to discover exactly which birthday Consuela would officially be celebrating.

After a sleepless night induced by jetlag, Victor Rosenheim was whisked away to an early-morning meeting in the City, while Consuela remained in bed toying with her breakfast. She managed one piece of thin unbuttered toast and a stab at a boiled egg. Once the breakfast tray had been removed, Consuela made a couple of phone calls to confirm luncheon dates for the two days she would be in London. She then disappeared into the bathroom.

Fifty minutes later she emerged from her suite dressed in a pink Olaganie suit with a dark blue collar, her fair hair bouncing on her shoulders. Few of the men she passed between the elevator and the revolving doors failed to turn their heads, so Consuela judged that the previous 50 minutes had not been wasted.

She stepped out of the hotel and into the morning sun to begin her search for the birthday present. Consuela began her quest in New Bond Street. As in the past, she had no intention of straying more than a few blocks north, south, east or west from that comforting landmark, while a chauffeur-driven car hovered a few yards behind her.

She spent some time in Asprey's considering the latest slimline watches, a gold statue of a tiger with jade eyes, and a Fabergé egg, before moving on to Cartier, where she dismissed a crested silver salver, a platinum watch and a Louis XIV long-case clock.

From there she walked another few yards to Tiffany's, which, despite a determined salesman who showed her almost everything the shop had to offer, she still left empty-handed.

Consuela stood on the pavement and checked her watch. It was 12.52, and she had to accept that it had been a fruitless morning. She instructed her chauffeur to drive her to Harry's Bar, where she found Mrs Stavros Kleanthis waiting for her at their usual table. Consuela greeted her friend with a kiss on both cheeks, and took the seat opposite her.

Mrs Kleanthis, the wife of a not unknown shipowner — the Greeks preferring one wife and several liaisons — had for the last few minutes been concentrating her attention on the menu to be sure that the restaurant served the few dishes that her latest diet would permit. Between them, the two women had read every book that had reached number one on the New York Times bestseller list which included the words 'youth', 'orgasm', 'slimming', 'fitness' or 'immortality' in its title.

'How's Victor?' asked Maria, once she and Consuela had ordered their meals. Consuela paused to consider her response, and decided on the truth. 'Fast reaching his sell-by date,' she replied. 'And Stavros?' 'Well past his, I'm afraid,' said Maria. 'But as I have neither your looks nor your figure, not to mention the fact that I have three teenage children, I don't suppose I'll be returning to the market to select the latest brand.'

Consuela smiled as a *salade niçoise* was placed in front of her. 'So, what brings you to London, other than to have lunch with an old friend?' asked Maria. 'Victor has his eye on another bank,' replied Consuela, as if she were discussing a child who collected stamps. 'And I'm in search of a suitable birthday present.' 'And what are you expecting Victor to come up with this time?' asked Maria. 'A house in the country? A thoroughbred racehorse? Or perhaps your own Learjet?'

'None of the above,' said Consuela, placing her fork by the half-finished salad. 'I need something that can't be bargained over at a future date, so my gift must be one that any court, in any state, will acknowledge is unquestionably mine.' 'Have you found anything appropriate yet?' asked Maria. 'Not yet,' admitted Consuela. 'Asprey's yielded nothing of interest, Cartier's cupboard was almost bare, and the only attractive thing in Tiffany's was the salesman, who was undoubtedly penniless. I shall have to continue my search this afternoon.'

The salad plates were deftly removed by a waiter whom Maria considered far too young and far too thin. Another waiter with the same problem poured them both a cup of fresh decaffeinated coffee. Consuela refused the proffered cream and sugar, though her companion was not quite so disciplined. The two ladies grumbled on about the sacrifices they were having to make because of the recession until they were the only diners left in the room. At this point a fatter waiter presented them with the bill — an extraordinarily long ledger considering that neither of them had ordered a second course, or had requested more than Evian from the wine waiter.

On the pavement of South Audley Street they kissed again on both cheeks before going their separate ways, one to the east and the other to the west. Consuela climbed into the back of her chauffeur-driven car in order to be returned to New Bond Street, a distance of no more than half a mile.

Once she was back on familiar territory, she began to work her way steadily down the other side of the street, stopping at Bentley's, where it appeared that they hadn't sold anything

since last year, and moving rapidly on to Adler, who seemed to be suffering from much the same problem. She cursed the recession once again, and blamed it all on Bill Clinton, who Victor had assured her was the cause of most of the world's current problems.

Consuela was beginning to despair of finding anything worthwhile in Bond Street, and reluctantly began her journey back towards the Ritz, feeling she might even have to consider an expedition to Knightsbridge the following day, when she came to a halt outside the House of Graff. Consuela could not recall the shop from her last visit to London some six months before, and as she knew Bond Street better than she had ever known any of her three husbands, she concluded that it must be a new establishment. She gazed at the stunning gems in their magnificent settings, heavily protected behind the bulletproof windows. When she reached the third window, her mouth opened wide, like a new born chick demanding to be fed.



From that moment she knew that no further excursions would be necessary, for there, hanging round a slender marble neck, was a peerless diamond and ruby necklace. She felt that she had seen the magnificent piece of jewellery somewhere before, but she quickly dismissed the thought, and continued to study the exquisitely set rubies surrounded by perfectly cut diamonds, making up a necklace of unparalleled beauty.

Without giving a moment's thought to how much the object might cost, Consuela walked slowly towards the thick glass door at the entrance to the shop, and pressed a discreet ivory button on the wall. The House of Graff obviously had no interest in passing trade. The door was unlocked by a security officer who needed no more than a glance at Mrs Rosenheim to know that he should usher her quickly through to the inner portals, where a second door was opened and Consuela came face to face with a tall, imposing man in a long black coat and pinstriped trousers.

'Good afternoon, madam,' he said, bowing slightly. Consuela noticed that he surreptitiously admired her rings as he did so. 'Can I be of assistance?' Although the room was full of treasures that might, in normal circumstances, have deserved hours of her attention, Consuela's mind was focused on only one object. 'Yes. I would like to study more closely the diamond and ruby necklace on display in the third window.'

'Certainly, madam,' the manager replied, pulling back a chair for his customer. He nodded almost imperceptibly to an assistant, who silently walked over to the window, unlocked a little door and extracted the necklace. The manager slipped behind the counter and pressed a concealed button.

Four floors above, a slight burr sounded in the private office of Mr Laurence Graff, warning the proprietor that a customer had inquired after a particularly expensive item, and that he might wish to deal with them personally. Laurence Graff glanced up at the television screen on the wall to his left, which showed him what was taking place on the ground floor. 'Ah,' he said, once he saw the lady in the pink suit seated at the Louis XIV table. 'Mrs Consuela Rosenheim, if I'm not mistaken.'

Just as the Speaker of the House of Commons can identify every one of its 650 members, so Laurence Graff recognised the 650 customers who might be able to afford the most extravagant of his treasures. He quickly stepped from behind his desk, walked out of his office and took the waiting lift to the ground floor. Meanwhile, the manager had laid out a black velvet cloth on the table in front of Mrs Rosenheim, and the assistant placed the necklace delicately on top of it. Consuela stared down at the object of her desire, mesmerised.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Rosenheim,’ said Laurence Graff as he stepped out of the lift and walked across the thick pile carpet towards his would-be customer. ‘How nice to see you again.’ He had in truth only seen her once before, at a shoulder-to-shoulder cocktail party in Manhattan. But after that, he could have spotted her at a hundred paces on a moving escalator. ‘Good afternoon, Mr...’ Consuela hesitated, feeling unsure of herself for the first time that day. ‘Laurence Graff,’ he said, offering his hand. ‘We met at Sotheby Parke Benett last year, a charity function in aid of the Red Cross, if I remember correctly.’ ‘Of course,’ said Mrs Rosenheim, unable to recall him, or the occasion.

Mr Graff bowed reverently towards the diamond and ruby necklace. ‘The Kanemarra heirloom,’ he purred, then paused, before taking the manager’s place at the table. ‘Fashioned in 1936 by Silvio di Larchi,’ he continued. ‘All the rubies were extracted from a single mine in Burma, over a period of 20 years. ‘The diamonds were purchased from De Beers by an Egyptian merchant who, after the necklace had been made up for him, offered the unique piece to King Farouk for services rendered. ‘When the monarch married Princess Farida he presented it to her on their wedding day, and she in return bore him four heirs, none of whom, alas, was destined to succeed to the throne.’

Graff looked up from one object of beauty, and gazed on another. ‘Since then it has passed through several hands before arriving at the House of Graff,’ continued the proprietor. ‘Its most recent owner was an actress, whose husband’s oil wells unfortunately dried up.’ The flicker of a smile crossed the face of Consuela Rosenheim as she finally recalled where she had previously seen the necklace. ‘Quite magnificent,’ she said, giving it one final look. ‘I will be back,’ she added as she rose from her chair.

Graff accompanied her to the door. Nine out of ten customers who make such a claim have no intention of returning, but he could always sense the tenth. ‘May I ask the price?’ Consuela asked indifferently as he held the door open for her. ‘One million pounds, madam,’ Graff replied, as casually as if she had enquired about the cost of a plastic keyring at a seaside gift shop.



Once she had reached the pavement, Consuela dismissed her chauffeur. Her mind was now working at a speed that would have impressed her husband. She slipped across the road, calling first at The White House, then Yves Saint Laurent, and finally at Chanel, emerging some two hours later with all the weapons she required for the battle that lay ahead.

Consuela did not arrive back at her suite at the Ritz until a few minutes before six and was relieved to find that her husband had not yet returned from the bank. She used the time to take a long bath, and to contemplate how the trap should be set

Once she was dry and powdered from her bath, she dabbed a suggestion of a new scent on her neck, then slipped into some of her newly acquired clothes. She was checking herself once again in the full-length mirror when Victor entered the room. He stopped on the spot, dropping his briefcase on the carpet. Consuela turned to face him.

‘You look stunning,’ he declared, with the same look of desire she had lavished on the Kanemarra heirloom a few hours before. ‘Thank you, darling,’ she replied. ‘And how did your day go?’ ‘A triumph. The takeover has been agreed, and at half the price it would have cost me only a year ago.’ Consuela smiled. An unexpected bonus. ‘Those of us who are still in possession of cash need have no fear of the recession,’ Victor added with satisfaction.

Over a quiet supper in the Ritz’s dining room, Victor described to his wife in great detail what had taken place at the bank that day. During the occasional break in this monologue Consuela indulged her husband by remarking ‘How clever of you, Victor,’ ‘How amazing,’ ‘How you managed it I will never understand.’

When he finally ordered a large brandy, lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair, she began to run her elegantly stockinged right foot gently along the inside of his thigh. For the first time that evening, Victor stopped thinking about the takeover. As they left the dining room and strolled towards the lift, Victor placed an arm around his wife’s slim waist. By the time the lift had reached the sixth floor he had already taken off his jacket, and his hand had slipped a few inches further down. Consuela giggled.

Long before they had reached the door of their suite he had begun tugging off his tie. When they entered the room, Consuela placed the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the outside doorknob. For the next few minutes Victor was transfixed to the spot as he watched his slim wife slowly remove each garment she had purchased that afternoon. Forty minutes later, Victor lay exhausted on the bed. After a few moments of sighing, he began to snore. Consuela pulled the sheet over their naked bodies, but her eyes remained wide open. She was already going over the next step in her plan.

Victor awoke the following morning to discover his wife’s hand gently stroking the inside of his leg. He rolled over to face her, the memory of the previous night still vivid in his mind. They made love a second time, something they had not done for as long as he could recall. It was not until he stepped out of the shower that Victor remembered it was his wife’s birthday, and that he had promised to spend the morning with her selecting a gift. He only hoped that her eye had already settled on something she wanted, as he needed to spend most of the day closeted in the City with his lawyers, going over the offer document line by line.

‘Happy birthday, darling,’ he said as he padded back into the bedroom. ‘By the way, did you have any luck finding a present?’ he added as he scanned the front page of the Financial Times, which was already speculating on the possible takeover, describing it as a coup. A smile of satisfaction appeared on Victor’s face for the second time that morning.

'Yes, my darling,' Consuela replied. 'I did come across one little bauble that I rather liked. I just hope it isn't too expensive.' 'And how much is this "little bauble"?' Victor asked. Consuela turned to face him. She was wearing only two garments, both of them black, and both of them remarkably skimpy. Victor started to wonder if he still had time, but then he remembered the lawyers, who had been up all night and would be waiting patiently for him at the bank.

'I didn't ask the price,' Consuela replied. 'You're so much cleverer than I am at that sort of thing,' she added, as she slipped into a navy silk blouse. Victor glanced at his watch. 'How far away is it?' he asked. 'Just across the road, in Bond Street, my darling,' Consuela replied. 'I shouldn't have to delay you for too long.' She knew exactly what was going through her husband's mind. 'Good. Then let's go and look at this little bauble without delay,' he said as he did up the buttons on his shirt.

While Victor finished dressing, Consuela, with the help of the Financial Times, skilfully guided the conversation back to his triumph of the previous day. She listened once more to the details of the takeover as they left the hotel and strolled up Bond Street together arm in arm. 'Probably saved myself several million,' he told her yet again. Consuela smiled as she led him to the door of the House of Graff. 'Several million?' she gasped. 'How clever you are, Victor.'

The security guard quickly opened the door, and this time Consuela found that Mr Graff was already standing by the table waiting for her. He bowed low, then turned to Victor. 'May I offer my congratulations on your brilliant coup, Mr Rosenheim.' Victor smiled. 'How may I help you?' asked Mr Graff.

'My husband would like to see the Kanemarra heirloom,' said Consuela, before Victor had a chance to reply. 'Of course, madam,' said the proprietor. He stepped behind the table and spread out the black velvet cloth. Once again the assistant removed the magnificent necklace from its stand in the third window, and carefully laid it out on the centre of the velvet cloth to show the jewels to their best advantage.

Mr Graff was about to embark on the piece's history, when Victor simply said: 'How much is it?' Graff raised his head. 'This is no ordinary piece of jewellery. I feel' 'How much?' repeated Victor. 'Its provenance alone warrants' 'How much?' said Victor again. 'The sheer beauty, not to mention the craftsmanship involved' 'How much?' asked Victor, his voice now rising. '..... the word unique would not be inappropriate' Graff continued. 'You may be right, but I still need to know how much it's going to cost me,' said Victor, who was beginning to sound exasperated.

'One million pounds, sir,' Graff said in an even tone, aware that he could not risk another superlative. 'I'll settle at half a million, no more,' came the immediate reply. 'I am sorry to say, sir,' said Graff, 'that with this particular piece, there is no room for bargaining.' 'There's always room for bargaining, whatever one is selling,' said Victor. 'I repeat my offer; half a million.' 'I fear that in this case, sir

'I feel confident you'll see things my way, given time,' said Victor, 'but I don't have that much time to spare this morning, so I'll write out a cheque for half a million, and leave you to decide whether you wish to cash it or not.' 'I fear you are wasting your time, sir,' said Graff.

'I cannot let the Kanemarra heirloom go for less than one million.' Victor took out a chequebook from his inside pocket, unscrewed the top of his fountain pen, and wrote out 'Five Hundred Thousand Pounds Only' below the name of the bank that bore his name.

His wife took a discreet pace backwards. Graff was about to repeat his previous comment, when he glanced up, and observed Mrs Rosenheim silently pleading with him to accept the cheque. A look of curiosity came over his face as Consuela continued her urgent mime.

Victor tore out the cheque and left it on the table. 'I'll give you 24 hours to decide,' he said. 'We return to New York tomorrow morning — with or without the Kanemarra heirloom. It's your decision.' Graff left the cheque on the table as he accompanied Mr and Mrs Rosenheim to the front door and bowed them out onto Bond Street.

'You were brilliant, my darling,' said Consuela as the chauffeur opened the car door for his master. 'The bank,' Rosenheim instructed as he fell into the back seat. 'You'll have your little bauble, Consuela. He'll cash the cheque before the 24 hours are up, of that I'm sure.' The chauffeur closed the back door, and the window purred down as Victor added with a smile: 'Happy birthday, darling.' Consuela returned his smile, and blew him a kiss as the car pulled out into the traffic and edged its way towards Piccadilly.

The morning had not turned out quite as she had planned, because she felt unable to agree with her husband's judgment — but then, she still had 24 hours to play with. Consuela returned to the suite at the Ritz, undressed, took a shower, opened another bottle of perfume, and slowly began to change into the second outfit she had purchased the previous day. Before she left the room she turned to the commodities section of the Financial Times, and checked the price of green coffee.

She emerged from the Arlington Street entrance of the Ritz wearing a double-breasted navy blue Yves Saint Laurent suit and a wide-brimmed red and white hat. Ignoring her chauffeur, she hailed a taxi, instructing the driver to take her to a small, discreet hotel in Knightsbridge. Fifteen minutes later she entered the foyer with her head bowed, and after giving the name of her host to the manager, was accompanied to a suite on the fourth floor.

Her luncheon companion stood as she entered the room, walked forward, kissed her on both cheeks and wished her a happy birthday. After an intimate lunch, and an even more intimate hour spent in the adjoining room, Consuela's companion listened to her request and, having first checked his watch, agreed to accompany her to Mayfair. He didn't mention to her that he would have to be back in his office by four o'clock to take an important call from South America. Since the downfall of the Brazilian president, coffee prices had gone through the roof.

As the car travelled down Brompton Road, Consuela's companion telephoned to check the latest spot price of green coffee in New York (only her skill in bed had managed to stop him from calling earlier). He was pleased to learn that it was up another two cents, but not as pleased as she was.

Eleven minutes later, the car deposited them outside the House of Graff. When they entered the shop together arm in arm, Mr Graff didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. 'Good afternoon, Mr Carvalho,' he said. 'I do hope that your estates yielded an abundant crop this year.' Mr

Carvalho smiled and replied: 'I cannot complain.' 'And how may I assist you?' inquired the proprietor. 'We would like to see the diamond necklace in the third window,' said Consuela, without a moment's hesitation. 'Of course, madam,' said Graff, as if he were addressing a complete stranger.

Once again the black velvet cloth was laid out on the table, and once again the assistant placed the Kanemarra heirloom in its centre. This time Mr Graff was allowed to relate its history, before Carvalho politely inquired after the price. 'One million pounds,' said Graff. After a moment's hesitation, Carvalho said, 'I'm willing to pay half a million.'

'This is no ordinary piece of jewellery,' replied the proprietor. 'I feel

'Possibly not, but half a million is my best offer,' said Carvalho. 'The sheer beauty, not to mention the craftsmanship involved

'Nevertheless, I am not willing to go above half a million.' '..... the word unique would not be inappropriate.' 'Half a million, and no more,' insisted Carvalho. 'I am sorry to say, sir,' said Graff, 'that with this particular piece there is no room for bargaining.' 'There's always room for bargaining, whatever one is selling,' the coffee grower insisted.

'I fear that is not true in this case, sir, you see

'I suspect you will come to your senses in time,' said Carvalho, 'but, regrettably, I do not have any time to spare this afternoon. I will write out a cheque for half a million pounds, and leave you to decide whether you wish to cash it.' Carvalho took a chequebook from his inside pocket, unscrewed the top of his fountain pen, and wrote out the words 'Five Hundred Thousand Pounds Only'. Consuela looked silently on.

Carvalho tore out the cheque, and left it on the counter. 'I'll give you 24 hours to decide. I leave for Chicago on the early evening flight tomorrow. If the cheque has not been presented by the time I reach my office

Graff bowed his head slightly, and left the cheque on the table. He accompanied them to the door, and bowed again when they stepped out onto the pavement.

'You were brilliant, my darling,' said Consuela as the chauffeur opened the car door for his employer. 'The Exchange,' said Carvalho. Turning back to face his mistress, he added: 'You'll have your necklace before the day is out, of that I'm certain, my darling.' Consuela smiled and waved as the car disappeared in the direction of Piccadilly, and on this occasion she felt able to agree with her lover's judgment.

Once the car had turned the corner, she slipped back into the House of Graff. The proprietor smiled, and handed over the smartly wrapped gift. He bowed low and simply said: 'Happy birthday, Mrs Rosenheim.'

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