

## TLC Showcase

# Marek Slodkowski



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## A note from TLC Reader Ashley Stokes

When I first read Marek Slodkowski's *King of the Jungle* the first thing that struck me was its vivid, vocal style. Although not much seemed to happen, the novel was floated by a bracingly direct monologue. We see life through the slant-view of Jonathan, a man who has dropped out of the Brit Art scene to work as a gardener in a horrible London park. Jonathan's frequently scabrous observations about his colleagues and the park's habitual denizens (the shambolic Ronald Polio comes to mind) made me laugh out loud and laugh out loud a lot. The novel, though, is much more than just a rant or a gripe or a survey of unfortunates. Jonathan's observations begin to percolate, eventually raising from the dregs a deeply moving storyline of love and loss, sex and collapse, one that is all the better for being withheld and drawn out in a staggered fashion. It's unusual to come across a writer with such range and a range achieved largely by voice alone. It's a cynical voice in places, a plaintive one in others, but it's sincere and refreshingly free of sentiment and guff. Marek Slodkowski more than deserves a readership.

## Introduction to *King of the Slags*

This piece is adapted from the first chapter of a novel I'm writing called *King of the Slags*, a thirty-something sarcastic black comedy following the lives and loves of a group of friends and adversaries of the new millennium's creative generation.

Inspired by trauma, conflict, friction, and an intertwining narrative structure, this chapter introduces several characters at a party, isolating individual moments in time, and hinting at the repercussions to come when those moments overlap . . .

## Extract from *King of the Slags*

A novel by Marek Slodkowski

Wilder sat in an original burnt orange Arne Jacobsen *Egg Chair* quietly drinking a very large vodka tonic and lime. I wonder what the night will bring, he mused.

The party was already busy. Wilder looked around. He knew most of the people from work, or from those really happy college days or whatever. The ones he didn't know, he didn't care about. As he made his way to one of the three drinks tables, he spied a few girls, sorry, *women*. Women with boyfriends, husbands, butchers, bakers, candlestick makers. He recognised the looks they threw back at him because, well, he *was* putting it out there, his tease, his glad eye. Unrepentant.

He was wearing his beautiful Dave Wax suit, and why the hell not, it *was* his birthday party after all. Well, shared birthday party with Ben. But there always has to be a dominating figure, the bar around which all the other cogs grind and slip and and and.

One has to make the right impression, he thought. Knew. And single for nearly two years while he finished his novel, his first novel, Wilder felt the time was near, the time had come to re-enter the ridiculous arena of masochism that is a relationship. Over those two years of having time and space to himself, it hadn't been difficult to meet someone, just someone he liked. This was important to Wilder, because God knows he could have had a girlfriend every day if it was about girls/women liking him. No, it was just so rare that he met anyone he actually liked, that he was genetically attracted to. Even his last girlfriend was only an emotional and intellectual attraction, and then once that faded . . .

Some kids in their mid-twenties he knew through friends of friends had arrived. Wilder had only invited them as a quid quo pro; he wouldn't have bothered otherwise. The bloke in particular was a bore. I *still* do not have the

time to deal with his insecurities, Wilder frowned. I *still* can't be that older brother he's always wanted. Wilder did concede though that he had to say hello, had to welcome, knowing this idiot would ask the same question he always asked, not appreciating how Wilder could be single for so long and not need to talk about sex all the time. Age is the answer, Wilder guessed.

Wilder mwah mwah-ed the girl, complimented her on her dress then tutted at Cooper, joking, winking at the kid, who, after the prerequisite small talk, now geared up for that question.

'So, Wilder. Seeing anyone?'

'No one special.'

'So no one then?'

'That's right,' Wilder conceded, sighing.

Okay, wait . . . waaaaaaait for it . . . waaaaait . . .

'So Wilder, when *was* the last time you had sex?'

'Ask your girlfriend.' Laughter. Some of it nervous.

Red faced pretty girlfriend.

It's a good job everyone always thinks I'm joking, Wilder thought.

Jessica felt sick, nodding to herself as she sat on the toilet, moving her black hair out of her eyes. Last night, the night before, tomorrow night - when will it end? Too much partying and I'll burn out, she sighed. God knows she wasn't getting prettier the older she got; because well-groomed means fuck all when you're not really that attractive . . . Twelve bottles of *Veet* later . . . Oh god.

Jessica scrunched up her face, breathed deeply, hating the lines slowly smoothing out around her eyes. Who's party is this anyway? Where are my friends? What have I been drinking? Where's the next line coming from?

Too many questions, she said, out loud.

Trotting along the hallway Jessica spotted her friends, Amy and Ellen, and then saw Wilder approaching. Not him. Not. Him . . .

‘Hello Jessica,’ Wilder purred, and smiled with a look that always hinted at something but never meant anything. ‘Oh, have you brought any of your pretty friends with you?’ he said, peering at Ellen and Amy. ‘No. No, you haven’t.’

Jessica sighed. ‘Hi, Wilder.’ Wilder always gave her a hard time. He always, always asked after her friends, and always, always after Amy.

‘Is that Amy? Horrid Amy? Hello, Horrid Amy.’

Amy glared at Wilder.

Wilder glared back. ‘Do you know what, I used to know a Crazy Amy. Only need a Grumpy, Sleepy, Dopey and a Happy, and that’s almost a full set.’

Amy sniffed, flashing a quick look at Wilder. ‘Why are we here, Jess?’

‘You know very well why,’ interrupted Wilder, then, winking at Jessica, he muttered under his breath: ‘Don’t need a Doc.’

Jessica watched Wilder dance and jig his way towards the stairs, squeezing a girl’s waist as he passed, ignoring the enquiring look. Then she eyed Amy. Did he *fancy* her? What wasn’t to fancy. Beautiful, unusual Amy. The sort of girl Wilder *would* like if you were to indulge in speculation. Yeah, she’s just the type he’d fuck and Amy knew it, Jessica was sure.

Andrei was thirsty and starting to feel restless surrounded by a selection of close-ish friends. At least there were hardly any hangers-on around. That fucking novel had been the fattest albatross in living history. Hirst could’ve stuffed it and shoved it in a vitrine for all Andrei cared. Oh, at first it was all right, made a right cocking change from emptying bins and burying tramp shit for a living, that’s for sure; unfortunately, the attention, the *invasion*, had taken its toll and now he was so hatefully full of resentment that he felt duty bound to be horrible all the time. Horrible in his eyes anyway, amusingly *wrong* in others. Minor fame among his peers bought a lot of free passes . . .

A girl walked by, calling to her friends that she was getting a refill. Andrei took a chance.

‘Get us a drink, would you?’

‘Oh, okay. What do you want?’

‘I’ll have what you’re having. Is it rohypnol? No? Here, have some of mine . . .’

‘That’s really out of order, actually.’

‘No it’s not. It’s just an atmosphere setter, something to get into the mood . . . what?’

‘I find that quite offensive.’

What a surprise, Andrei thought, sitting back. ‘Okay, well, if you’d known me for about four more seconds then you’d realise that I like to play with evil. I like to poke the soft underbelly of evil. And what I tend to find is that people who get offended tend to get offended because they’re intimidated. Here’s this guy, he’s good looking, intelligent, charismatic, plays with subjects I can’t possibly have the bottle to play with, and not only that but he’s explaining it all to me like I’m stupid, which makes me feel stupid in spite of the fact that it’s actually an elaborate and complex flirting technique.’

‘Is it really?’

‘Nice. That was almost sarcastic. Who else am I talking to? Who else am I giving my undivided attention to? Yeah, so you’re offended, angry even, but we all know where that leads, don’t we? We’ll spend a while during other conversations stealing moments of aggressive yet tentative aesthetic assessment, then eventually those looks will mean something else. And we both know what that is, don’t we?’ Andrei laughed then stared blankly at the girl. ‘Undiluted. Infinite. Dislike.’

Hitting parties at the right time for personal maximum impact was a skill, and Suzanne had managed it again. It didn’t matter that she had left her friend Natasha outside with some prettyboy wannabe actor type, because Suzanne

felt good, spotting faces she knew, faces she wanted to know, looking for Andrei, or rather, checking to see where he was and who he was with.

As she admired Monique's original and far too beautiful and jealousy inducing 1960s lava lamp, she watched Andrei running through a routine with a blonde haircut type. Time to assert, she thought, nudging the girl.

'Don't mind him, he's writing a book . . .'

'A book?'

'Yeah, I think he's testing.'

'Twat. Do you know him?'

'He's my ex-boyfriend.'

'Oh god, sorry. How did you put up with him?'

'He's good looking, intelligent and charismatic, plays with subjects . . .'

See, that's how it works.'

'But the rohypnol thing? You can't joke about rape.'

'Don't get him started on paedophilia. Trust me.'

'What's funny about paedophilia?'

'Nothing, but it's the way he says it. Apparently it's okay as long as you promise to kill the mum and dad.'

'What?'

'I didn't say it right, but . . .'

'I bet you're glad he's your ex-boyfriend?'

'That's what I said to his ex-girlfriend.'

'Really?'

'No, I'm joking. See, it rubs off on you.'

'That's cruel.'

'Yep. Glass of rohypnol?'

Suzanne allowed herself a quiet giggle, wondering whether it was better to be with than without. They were still fucking occasionally, and it was casual enough for her to feel that she had time and space to do her own stuff. Suzanne didn't really believe in relationships anyway, at least not magazine or

film or TV style relationships. Wasn't it more realistic in this day and age to be selfish, put yourself first, be in control, have someone you like but still have yourself? How many of her girlfriends had jumped onto the sinking ship of complete mutual adoration only to get hurt?

That's not for me, Suzanne smiled. But it's worth all the hassle just to feel that tongue on my clit, his cock in my mouth, the way he fingers me and bites my lip when he comes as I wank him off.

Wilder had noticed Suzanne before at one of Andrei's book launch parties, and he knew they were seeing each other in that modern metro-fuck sort of way. He liked Suzanne. He liked brunettes, and he liked her haircut, plus she had a great body shape. If he still drew he would like to draw that figure, which was lean, almost dancer like. And she moved well too, with confidence. Most of all he found that he liked her mouth. Look at that *width of lip*, the distance between the top lip and her nose; the way her jaw-line was slightly ahead of her forehead. This, Wilder realised, is starting to feel like genetic attraction.

It was always the same though, a definite attraction to Suzanne left him struggling to make contact, and contact in the right way. He wasn't sure why he had this problem, the denial of what he actually wanted. Yeah, he could flirt with Jessica and Amy, and he did like Amy especially, but Suzanne was in a completely different league.

Like he said, it was genetic attraction.

Wilder listened in to Andrei's conversation. The shit-faced teenage pop tarts couldn't possibly know who the artists were he was talking about - not that it was stopping Andrei from super-indulgently amusing himself.

'You fucking name dropper, Andrei.'

'Wilder! How dare you! Knowing things is good. Isn't it, girls? Yes? . . . Yes.'

Wilder cocked his head. 'Whatever. Personally I prefer artists I don't know, artists I have never heard of, or *even seen* their work. They're my favourites. How many just want to get their faces on the next new Matthew Collings show like This is Modern Art? No, wait, *This* is Modern Art. It'll be said like that won't it? *This* is Modern Art.'

'I had lunch with Collings the other day.'

'No you didn't.'

'No, I didn't.'

Andrei laughed. He enjoyed Wilder's company, which was too rare for his liking. Mutual friends Ben and Monique kept their universes fairly separate except for some very unavoidable social occasions. Wilder seemed a bit kindred soul-ish in that deliberately evil sort of way, and Andrei appreciated that. If he fucks Suzanne though, I *would* have to kill him, he grinned, as he watched Wilder glance in Suzanne's direction.

And now, ignoring the pop tarts, Andrei smirked to himself. I like this triangle. Suzanne by that terrific lamp. Wilder next to the emptied book shelf. Me, sitting here. Where have they stored the books?

'Where are all the books, Wilder?'

'What books?'

'Very good. Empty book shelves. What a statement. What minimalism.'

'Hardly. They've just moved in, you pretentious fucker.'

'I could take that literally and you'd be upsetting some very unpretentious girls.'

'That can't be true if they're sleeping with you.'

'Nice comeback. You should write a book.'

'So should you next time.'

Andrei laughed. 'Suzanne? Come here, sweet heart. Have you met Wilder? Come on, doll, don't be shy.'

Wilder watched Suzanne give Andrei a big smile followed by a private flutter that made Wilder feel like he shouldn't have seen it; or wish he hadn't

seen it. Then she turned and smiled at him. Close enough, he thought, admiring her eyeliner.

‘Wilder,’ she said softly.

‘Sorry, didn’t quite catch your name?’

‘Suzanne.’

‘Jonathan? That’s a . . . lovely name . . . Jonathan . . .’

She laughed. ‘Thanks. Do you tend to know a lot of Jonathans?’

‘Wilder’s a novelist too,’ Andrei interrupted, pulling Suzanne to him.

‘Really? Never would have guessed.’

Andrei continued to say words, but as Wilder pretended to listen he caught Suzanne linger with a look that was despite, or perhaps because Andrei was holding her close.

‘Who’s your publisher, Wilder?’

‘I’m still writing the synopsis.’

‘Still writing the . . . very funny. Really, I’ll put you in touch with my agent. Let me read your *unpublished* novel and I’ll pass it on.’

‘Andrei, you’re so selfless. I don’t know how I ever believed everything everyone always said about you.’

‘Stick a gold star on my chest.’

‘What, in the hole where your heart should be?’

‘I’m all heart. That’s just a pocket where I keep loose change.’

Suzanne sighed, shrugging Andrei off. ‘You two should just get your cocks out.’

‘That’s a bit obvious for you, Suzanne,’ Andrei said, innocently.

‘If you were being just a little less obvious I wouldn’t have had to say it,’ she said, walking away.

‘What do you mean? Wilder, what do you think she . . . ?’

‘You’re on your own, Andrei.’

And with that Wilder walked off too.

Jessica sat up. How long have I been asleep? she wondered. The party was still busy, a good cover for her embarrassment. Some people passed by, smiling and mouthing: 'Are you okay now?' Fuck off, Jessica thought, nodding politely. Hopefully no one who matters caught me sleeping, and hopefully Wilder didn't see. That bastard. Why was he so horrible? Why was he so horrible to her? Anyone else and you could think it was attraction, but with Wilder . . . It was so difficult to think anything other than he's just a bastard. Whatever. *WHATEVER* . . . Oh god, I'm shit-faced, she finally accepted, standing up and tottering along the hallway. The world started to spin, and while this wasn't unusual for Jessica, suddenly it felt different tonight. I've had enough. It's too much. Too much, babe, she muttered, nudging someone as she sat down on the stairs.

Wilder tapped Ben on his thick, broad shoulder. 'Have you seen that Suzanne?'

'Don't even go there. Andrei's on to you. He was telling Monique all about it.'

'So? He's not as good looking as me.'

'Yeah, but he's dirtier looking. And I think that's what Suzanne likes.'

'Bollocks, I can be dirty looking.'

'No you can't. You're just handsome. Just, and only, handsome . . .'

'Bollocks. But thanks.'

'S'okay. Good party, innit?'

'Yeah, happy birthday.'

'Yeah, happy birthday to you too. There are plenty of birds here, mate. Steer clear of Suzanne. You don't want to get involved.'

'Is that a dare?'

'Aren't you too old for all that now, Wilder?'

'You're right.'

Ben squinted. 'Hmm.'

Wilder winked at Ben then moved towards the stairs where he had just been caught by Suzanne's eye. As he approached her, Jessica bumped heavily into him before slumping onto the steps. Poor Jessica, Wilder laughed, then turned his attention to the woman of his dreams; which made him laugh even more - the absurdity of that phrase. To men, *any* woman at any moment is the woman of their dreams. He wondered how long he would continue to pretend that was true.

'I'm so sorry, I can't remember your name?'

'Suzanne.'

'Tony? That's a . . . lovely name . . . Tony . . .'

Suzanne breathed out. 'You're horrible.'

'We barely know each other and you've already worked out I'm horrible? How typical.'

'Is it?'

'One of my friends says I'm a sociopath, but I think he means sociable, because once he told me he'd seen my nemesis, and I said which one, and he said he didn't know, so I said what did he look like, and he said like you, and I said you mean *doppelgänger*.'

'I see. Is that from your novel? Andrei has that tendency too.'

'Tendency to what?'

'Use lines from his work. Testing it out. I think you know what I mean.'

'Yeah, I probably do.'

Suzanne leaned back against the wall, red wine in hand. 'So, come on then, what's this novel of yours about? Interest me.'

'Well, thematically it's about misplaced creativity, narratively it's a fairly orthodox Joseph Campbellian hero's journey.'

Suzanne snorted.

'You fucking writers,' she laughed, slightly more than she meant to.

Wilder watched as she composed herself, felt a jump in his gut, waited, then said, 'So, come on then, what is it exactly you see in Andrei?'

'I don't know,' Suzanne replied coyly, not fully knowing why.

'Dump him. Go out with me. I'm better.'

Suzanne tutted.

'Honestly. He can only actually be richer or have a bigger cock. That's it.'

'Wilder . . .'

'What?'

'Do you think I don't know what you're like? Do you think I could ever possibly take anything you say seriously?'

'Do I look like I'm joking? This is my serious face.'

Suzanne shook her head. 'No. I think that's your poker face, and I think I'm going to fold . . . That's right, isn't it? Fold?' She giggled, placed a hand on Wilder's arm, smiled that smile again, then pulled Wilder upstairs to a bedroom.

Fucking slag, Wilder thought. I'm the king of the fucking slags.

## About the Writer

Born in London in 1973 and brought up in the midlands, I graduated from art college in the mid-90s. After briefly freelancing as an illustrator and retiring as a fine artist, a succession of low maintenance, low paid jobs followed.

In 2007 I set about writing *King of the Jungle*. The novel is set in contemporary London and explores, with all the humour and the horrors associated, the street scene and art scene worlds. The novel examines various themes, such as social and artistic disconnection; the rules of modern attraction; and ultimately, the accepting of love, and of fatherhood. I sent *King of the Jungle* to The Literary Consultancy and received excellent advice from my reader, Ashley Stokes, tightening, trimming, and tarting it up. Because of my art background, the cult fiction, pop culture art scene element is a consistently explored theme.

I am currently sourcing a new novel, provisionally entitled *King of the Slags*, a sort of *Casanova* meets *The History Man* eats *Five Easy Pieces* . . .

