

LOVE IS A STRANGER

British One Act Drama Script

by Joseph Hawkins

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Characters

VIVIAN

A transgender call girl, aged 27. Glamorous, composed and narcissistic. A strange mixture of the romantic and the cynical. NB Vivian is feminine-looking enough to “pass” as an attractive woman in everyday society.

CLIVE

A disgraced MP, about 35. Rangily handsome, Oxford-educated though from an ordinary background, bitter, a heavy drinker, self-obsessed.

LUCIA

A burned-out publicist, aged about 35. Sleek, polished, upper-class, self-deceiving.

TIME

The present day. The action takes place over the course of a few months.

ACT 1

The stage is split between VIVIAN in her room and CLIVE sitting at a table in a quiet, seedy pub. Each character comes downstage and addresses the audience in turn. During VIVIAN’s monologues, CLIVE is only very dimly visible, sitting drinking at his pub table. When CLIVE talks, VIVIAN has her back to us, busy putting on make-up in a mirror. VIVIAN is dressed in a long silk kimono, with her hair pulled back. CLIVE wears an expensive but rumpled business suit.

The sound of journalists, their cameras and their voices, from outside.

VIVIAN: So, you came. After all. Decided to pay me a visit. It’s alright. I know why you’re here. You needn’t pretend. This might be your first time, but it certainly isn’t mine. This ain’t my first rodeo (PAUSE). But enough about you. You’re only here because of me, after all. You want to know who I am, don’t you, punters? You’re curious. Yes, I know you are, I can tell. You’ve paid your money and now you want something for it, don’t you? You want to sit in the shadows, soaking me up like some expensive liqueur. You want a special preview of the real Vivian Viagra, a sneak peek before I’m splashed across the pages of the tabloid press. Will the real Vivian Viagra please stand up, you demand. Cast off all fakeness and stand before you, naked and pure, in all my gorgeous depravity. Well, that’s what we’re here for, so let’s get on with it, shall we?

I am Vivian “I’ll keep you up all night” Viagra. Aged 26, 34-26-36, shoe size 8, and of course, 9 inches. Interested? You’ll find out all about me on the

web. I'm quite famous, in my way. I advertise myself as a She-male Courtesan. A transgender sex slut. My clients vary. There are vicars, bankers, tweed-jacketted army men. Polish plumbers with heads shaped like bullets, Japanese businessmen who somehow manage to be more dainty – and far more fervent – than I ever could. Once, an Asian sweet-shop owner who wanted me to dress up in a rubber nun costume. I knew he was a sweetshop owner because he had a sign in his jacket pocket saying “Back in 5 Minutes”.

The secret of my success? It's quite simple, actually. I like it. Yes, I do, really I do. I, like my punters, am fascinated by myself. And when it's all over, I tell them that I love them. Well, a girl's gotta make a living somehow, n'est-ce pas? In this economic climate it's every She-male Courtesan for herself.

As I've got older I've developed more of an appreciation for my own cash value. So much of what they are buying is a commodity anyway. Acrylic nails, silicone boobs, collagen lips. Any surplus income is ploughed back into my plastic surgery sinking fund, my Isa to look nicer. Eyelid reconfiguration, breast enhancement, lip plumping, tummy tucking. The list is extensive. Not that I don't shell out already. Lingerie, cosmetics, hair treatments, nail design, garuta fish pedicures. In the immortal words of Dolly Parton, it costs a lot to look this cheap. Besides, if they wanted nature, they'd shag a goat. They want falseness, artifice, escape. (PAUSE. Sounds of the journalists outside) Speaking of which, the gentlemen of the press await outside. (VIVIAN goes over to a rack of dresses.) What role should I play for them? What fantasy should I fulfil? Shall it be the vengeful vamp in red? The tight-lipped mystery girl in black? The troubled yet desirable sex bomb in pink? Or white... what about white? No one ever knows what to make of you when you wear white.

CLIVE now takes centre stage. Pub sounds in the background.

CLIVE: Ladies and gentlemen of the jury... Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Rather an unusual venue for a trial. Still, I need a drink after the day I've had, and at least a hole in the wall like this offers a modicum of discretion. And an alcoholic cushioning to all the accusations and rebuttals. (Pause.) It's been a hard day. Did I mention? There's nothing quite so grating, I find, as buttering people up. I've been putting out the feelers today, you see. Lunch with an old mate. Got this firm out in Switzerland. Investment banking. And assuming this stuff with the papers doesn't go nuclear, I reckon I'm in like Flynn. And I should be, after speaking up so courageously for the Banking Community in the House. Calling in the favours, you see. Let's hope the same applies with Nick fucking Rich, King of the Hacks. Well, he said he'd get back to me. So there's nothing to do but sit tight and wait, with a quiet drink to settle my nerves. Well, drinks. Don't worry, I can take it. What was it Dean Martin used to say? – you're not actually drunk unless you can't lie on the floor without holding on to something. Wise words, those. Wise words indeed.

VIVIAN: You know what they'll want to ask me, the journalists? They'll want to ask why. Why do you do it? Tricks, I mean, the game, escorting. Why. "To meet gorgeous people like you" is the answer I always give to customers. I hold a mirror up, you see, to their own self-deceit. But now, with world fame, global domination at stake, perhaps I should address the question in more detail. Why do I do it? What welded me to this life – this life of a shemale courtesan, a transgender sex slut? Was it the money, the sex, the attention? The opportunity to wear preposterous quantities of slag-red lip gloss?

Or is it just that I can – or can't do anything else? But do you expect me to tell you all my secrets, punters, this early in the evening?

CLIVE: In a situation like this, they say, you find out who your real friends are. You wanna know who my real friends are? Non-ex-fucking-zistent, that's who my real friends are! Well, friendships, marriages, careers. They all have a time limit. And I never expected the politics lark would last forever, anyway. So now it's on to the next phase. With a bit of luck I'll make enough to retire in five years. Buy a little beach somewhere. Sail, drink, fuck. I mean, to hell with public service. I'm sorry, but after what I've been through. I mean to say, when you take a massive pay cut out a sense of public service, of duty, of representing your constituents and doing your bit to drag this country back from the brink of oblivion. Well, I tried. God knows I tried. And you lose your career, your family. Your little girl. And all over some hooker in the back seat of the car. Some little piece of trash, of nothing. And you wonder why this country's going to hell in a handcart, do you? Let me tell you, there are dark forces at work in this country. Evil things in the night.

VIVIAN: I fulfilled a need in Mondeo Man, a deep craving. I know he might not care to admit it publicly, but he needed me. Yes he did. He told me so himself. And it wasn't just a need for sex. He liked my femininity, and the fact that underneath all the shimmy and the satin, there's an aggressive pumping engine of male sex. No hard-as-nails tough guy who's really a softie deep down. Rather the reverse. The iron fist in the velvet glove. You see, I do the hormones and I've had some facial surgery, but the truth is, if I were to go for the full snip-snip, it would lessen my market value. Some people yearn for a vagina. I'm content to be desired and envied wherever I go, with a constant supply of well-heeled tranny-shaggers in tow. Men like Mondeo. High achievers with a mustard seed of curiosity and doubt. Ashamed of what they want and who they are. Would it surprise you to know that they all have something to sort out with their mothers? Something they're running away from. The big, bad vagina that spewed them out. Of course, they don't want you to guess that. So they act all butch, come over hyper confident. Mondeo is a prime example. He does a lot of stuff to put up a front. Including copious quantities of cocaine.

CLIVE gives a massive sniff.

VIVIAN: Hold on, I'll say, it'll stop you getting hard, as we sit side by side in the Ford Mondeo, on the corner of this rugby pitch that had become the agreed locale of our assignations. Don't worry, he'll say, rifling through his waistcoat pockets. Alights on his supply of Viagra. Soon enough he'll have an erection like a Bren Gun, drilling away through his Boden catalogue boxer shorts. And when we have sex, his face starts breaking out in purple blotches, like a Victoria plum. Like his collar is too tight. I worry for him, Mondeo. Worry that he is going to expire, in flagrante delicto as the saying is, in the back seat of his Ford family car. There was no reason why I should worry, at the end of the day, but if I were his wife and daughter... I've known all about them for quite some time, you know. A business card fell out of his pocket one time while we were hard at it, sprawled out in the surprisingly capacious back seat of his Ford Mondeo. He came all over my right buttock with a fat cocaine groan. For a second his sperm was scalding hot, then cold and sticky, turning stiff. I turned the card while he was zipping up. His real name, it turns out, is Clive. (She takes a crumpled business card out of her kimono) Clive Goodman, MP for Surrey South and Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Defence.

CLIVE: And, how would you feel, anyway if you had your whole life trawled through by the Sunday papers? Every mild flirtation, every lie you ever told, every time you've looked twice at somebody's arse. Who out of you would emerge the pure-hearted hero, eh? Tell me that. You'd have to be an automaton, a fucking machine. And that's exactly what we've got in public life nowadays. Cyborgs. And don't think any of this is sour grapes either. I've been tipped for the top job plenty of times, don't you worry.

The thing about politics nowadays is the relentless pressure. Oh, and presentation. Making sure your tie is straight and the sweat doesn't show when you're toeing the party line on the goggle-box. And if you haven't made it onto the Front Bench by the time the hair starts sprouting out of your nose, forget it.

VIVIAN: Later that night, I'm online, webcamming for this guy from Osaka who for some reason wants watch me stick a tampon up my anus – and that, my darlings is easier said than done – so painfully absorbent! Anyway, in between messages I study Mondeo Man's CV. It's on his website. Mondeo Man has been to Oxford. Not content with fighting a war in Bosnia, he went to Oxford to take a degree in Law, then chucked in his wig and gown to get elected to Parliament, and has held his seat by a narrow majority for the last seven years. Failure has been a stranger to Mondeo Man. He's lived a life as circumscribed, in its way, as mine. We both live in bubbles, kingdoms of our own making.

CLIVE: For a while at least I played the game. I got everything they wanted. Model wife. Check! Model daughter. Check! Ford Mondeo car – nice touch, that. Under normal circs I wouldn't drive anything lower spec than a Beemer if you paid me, but seeing as I'm playing the common man card, I sucked up the atrocious fuel efficiency and schlepped it round the constituency. I drank pints of dishwater bitter down the old Dog and Duck. Promised to do my best to clamp down on the bunch of lesbian weirdos squatting in Clifton Terrace. Even went to Marks and Sparks and bought a fleece. Sounds ridiculous, I know, but it all paid off at election time. Clive Goodman, the family man. Clive Goodman, the advocate of quiet common sense. As opposed to my opponent, Tim David, a queer from Hampstead who goes down the local pisser and asks for a glass of Montepulciano. And they're like, Montepulciano? Who does he play for then? (Pause) Well, the seat's his for the taking now. For all the good it'll do him. For all the fucking good...

VIVIAN: His wife's called Bella. There's a picture of her on the website too. Sleek, blonde, six foot tall. Wearing a puffy waistcoat and navy jeans. Obviously he married her because he thought someone really tall, really blonde and really rich might turn him straight. Some hope! How did I feel about Mrs Mondeo Man? Did I worry about her, as I zipped Mondeo Man's banknotes, all crisp and unanswerable, in my fake Gucci purse? Did I concern myself with her sufferings? Well, do any of us really concern ourselves that much with the sufferings of strangers? Apart from putting fifty pee in a beggar's bowl, or posting a cheque to some charity? Do any of us really give a toss? Not that I've noticed. If I really understood the sufferings of all the people on the planet, I dare say I'd go mad, or become a saint. And who wants to be a saint?

Somehow, though, the money failed to satisfy. I wanted more. I wanted something real. At the grand old age of 26, punters, and after more sex than Russell Brand on Spanish fly, I think I was falling in love. My thoughts kept flitting to him. My heart did little dances when I looked into his eyes. My fantasies formed around him, like swirling snow, building into that biggest fantasy of them all. Marriage. Oh, it was dangerous, dangerous territory, but as time went by, me and Mondeo Man started talking about running away together. Eloping! What a lovely word it is, elope! The loveliest word in the English language. But where would we run to? I'm a somewhat conspicuous companion. The only obvious place is Thailand, with all those delectable ladyboys, but Mondeo disapproves. He wants somewhere mountainous and bracing. I say we could live up high, overlooking the ocean, in some kind of cliff-top eyrie, with only one road leading up, and waited on by domestic servants of indistinct gender. Bliss! I'd spend all day painting my nails, eating chocolates, reading Vogue, waiting for the crunch of Mondeo Man's wheels on the drive. Except by then he'd have stopped being a parliamentary under-secretary and upgrade to Mercedes Man, with some swanky job at the World Bank to keep me in the splendour to which I would by then have become

accustomed. Yes, it would be high time for Mondeo Man to drop politics and move into economics. Or NATO. He could do that. He was in that war thing in Bosnia. He could act the hero, with a row of medals pinned to the breast pocket of his slouchy new Italian suit ... And once he'd parked the Merc in the drive, he'd stride upstairs, steal wordlessly up behind me and kiss me softly on the neck. And spend all night with me, and all morning, and all day! Oh, for that, punters, I would gladly give up my career, selflessly relinquish my life as a shemale courtesan, transgender sex slut to the stars...

But then I began to worry that perhaps Mondeo Man would always drive a Ford Mondeo. Perhaps he would always wear Boden catalogue boxer shorts, and always scuttle back afterwards to Mrs Mondeo Man. Making excuses about a late sitting. And my place would always be here, waiting for him, or else kneeling in the foot well of his Ford Mondeo, giving head. Or waiting on the edge of the rugby pitch, the rain cascading down on my see-through umbrella.

All this was new to me, you see – falling in love. At a tender age, I turned my back on romance. locked the screaming child of love deep in the wardrobe of high-class escorting. If you'll pardon the flight of fancy.

But there was someone else, once. A forerunner. An older man, black hair tinged with grey, charming, ironic about everything, including his eight-year marriage. I met him in the bar where I worked one summer, and he took me out on my night off. In his car after a few drinks I felt his hand on my thigh, moving higher, higher. Higher still. And then the look of hunger on his face turned to hate. Pure hate. I swore he knew, must have known - I mean, I wasn't even on hormones or anything at that point - but then everything went unreal, and I woke up in hospital with three cracked ribs. I was seventeen years old.

CLIVE: Do you know, I admired those Serbs. Couldn't help it. Couldn't help admiring their fighting spirit. Karadzic was mad as a box of frogs, mind. But if we had some of their guts in this country, I tell you... (Pause) They killed everyone, you know. After they'd driven all the Muslims into the forests, they'd capture a boy, you know, a 12-year-old or something, and get him to shout into the forest "come out – come out – it's safe!" And when all the little Muslim children came down from the trees where they were hiding, the Serbs'd just machine gun them down. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. All they left for us was the bodies. How do I feel about that? That's what that tart of a therapist used to ask me. You were so young, Clive. How did it make you feel? How the fuck do you think it made me feel. Feel. Feel.

Dozy tart. I wouldn't even have talked to her if she didn't have tits!

VIVIAN: We started to argue, Mondeo and me. I broke a rule, a golden rule – don't ever row with a punter. Just close your eyes and think of the money. But the more money he gave me, the more some other awkward part of me hungered, screamed out - for that vision of us, together, always. At first, he gave me more money to shut me up. Said he never wanted to discuss it. Said seeing me was his time off from thinking. Thanks! Stuffed my mouth with gold, he did, my fake Gucci purse with twenties. As though I couldn't get those from Asian sweet shop owners and Polish plumbers. One night, after he'd been particularly generous, I threw the banknotes back in his face. Told him, fuck the money. Told him I knew who his wife was, that I could speak to her if I chose. There came a look in his eyes, this hideous gleam, like he will literally, literally kill me. And now I'm scared. He's strong. He keeps a knife in his waistband. He can kill a man with his bare hands, he says. Learned how to do it in the Army.

CLIVE: The thing about creatures like Vivian, you may have noticed, is that they wheedle their way under your skin, find your weak spots, prey on them. You have to come down hard on them. Force them back into line.

VIVIAN: I needed to think. To obey the etiquette of ages. Deal with a violent punter. I went limp. Played dumb. Retracted everything.

CLIVE: It works for a while of course, violence. A good night down the gun club and a bottle of whisky. That generally put the lid on everything, I found, to start with. But a few days after the hangover wore off, my mobile would somehow be dialling that same number. I tried to stop, really I did, struggled with myself. It was like I was addicted or something. Obsessed. But if I couldn't bear to break it off, I needed to play for time. Squeeze a little more juice out of the orange. And the way to do that, of course, was with an extravagant romantic gesture.

VIVIAN: Well, punters, do you think I did the right thing? Played my hand wisely? Well, I can't have done too badly, because a couple of nights later we ended up having dinner at Prezzo's on the High Street. Ha, yes! Prezzo's! Quite a step up! I suppose it was quite a risk, eating out together like that. Or perhaps he didn't care any more. Perhaps Mondeo Man was beginning to unravel. Anyway, halfway through the dessert, he slid something across the table. A black box. A jewellery box. I open it, and inside, an eternity ring, all glittering emeralds. Eternity. But was this to be the eternity of wedded bliss, up in my cliff-top eyrie, flicking through Vogue on a chaise longue, or the eternity of being his dirty little secret, laddering my stockings on the carpet of his family car?

CLIVE: But come on, telephone, ring! ring! What can Nick fucking Rich be doing? (He looks at his watch). Well, they'll have gone to press by now. He's probably propping up the bar in one of those disgusting strip joints in Shoreditch, if I know him...

VIVIAN: Bella found out about us because of that eternity ring. Popped into her local Costa Coffee to get a skinny flat white to go, popped out again, life in ruins. Mondeo tells me the story between gritted teeth and whisky tears, about a week after he gives me the ring. We're sitting in his Ford Mondeo, me staring guiltily down at that arc of gems on my finger, the rain streaming down outside. She confronted him with his mobile phone – the texts, the emails, the calls. I try to console him, talk about Thailand, about eloping, about how this could actually be really exciting – it could be just what we need – the best thing that's ever happened to us, the rain on the windscreen blotting out the world outside. And thenand then....

CLIVE comes downstage and punches VIVIAN in the face. The two are now downstage, speaking directly to each other:

CLIVE: I never in a million fucking years intended to elope to Thailand! (SCREAMS) What the fuck do you think I am! How stupid, eh? Just how stupid?

VIVIAN: I'm sorry – I'm sorry – Oh, Mondeo!

CLIVE: Don't call me that!

VIVIAN: You promised to take me away.

CLIVE: You know as well as I do that was never going to happen.

VIVIAN: I was going to give up everything for you.

CLIVE: What do you have to give up?

VIVIAN: I'm nothing to you, am I? Just a fuck in the back of a car.

CLIVE: Whatever you are, I pay for it in full.

CLIVE throws a handful of banknotes at VIVIAN. VIVIAN does not react.

VIVIAN: Tell me that you love me.

CLIVE: What!

VIVIAN: Tell me that you love me! If you don't love me, then why did you buy me this ring, huh?

CLIVE: Don't start!

VIVIAN: Why did you give me this ring?

CLIVE: Because I couldn't get you out of my head. Because I couldn't bear to stop seeing you.

VIVIAN: Oh Mondeo!

VIVIAN falls at his feet, then pulls CLIVE down, grasping at his clothes, so they are both on their knees. CLIVE begins to cry.

CLIVE: Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!

VIVIAN holds CLIVE to her breast, soothing, like a mother with her child. Then VIVIAN slowly stands, walks coolly downstage, promenades among the audience. CLIVE meanwhile is on his knees in darkness.

VIVIAN: I think there was sex after that. I don't recall. All I remember is walking home alone in the rain, thinking, What the fuck happens now?

Then in the morning, I waited for the call, the text, some clue to what was going on in that handsome, hideous head. Nothing came. Evening rolled round. All I had was a black eye and this bloody eternity ring, inscribed "My Darling" like an unlucky charm. Still he doesn't phone, doesn't text, doesn't email. Then, around midnight, there's a call. It's Mondeo. "Don't talk to the papers," he says. "What the fuck are you talking about?" I say. "You mean you haven't heard?" he says. She's only gone to the fucking press."

And the next thing I know, the celebrity birdsong has begun, I have 86 missed calls on my mobile, cascades of emails, and the paps are encamped outside my door.

Then one bit of what seems like luck: because when I finally crack and snatch up the endlessly ringing phone, fully expecting a tabloid journo to sell my story to on the other end of the line, I find I'm talking to a certain Lucia Farringford-Bowles. Yes, really. Lucia Farringford-Bowles. A publicist so posh she makes the Queen sound like one of those girls you get on "Snog, Marry, Avoid". We're going to make a whole lot of dosh out of this one, darling. Dosh – she actually calls it dosh! Forty thousand pounds, she says she can get me. Forty thousand pounds! She says to give her a call anytime I want to talk business – only don't leave it too long. I ask her what to do about Clive. "Oh, don't worry about him," she says. "He'll be alright. This is your chance."