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Fictions

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It was that curve which first attracted my considered gaze. A line drawn from nowhere concrete, hinting at some elusive essence of femininity. At least in the sense that I understand it. A collection of properties. None which singularly define the whole but all of which signify the promise of it. A knowledge that a man would like to possess. That curve of jaw line, nape, breast, and breath. Breath because it is the most subtle of animations.

I was all me. A beer or three has the potential to endow me with some essence that is at once more honest, and more ugly, than I would care it to be. I don't particularly like myself and so go about constructing an outward guise that is meticulously designed to exude a confident, personable mystery. Silent, dark, alone. A void.

I had read at some stage a feminist film theory concerning the female gaze. Women characters in cinema were constructed as a void in which the male viewer inscribed his desire and fears. The femme fatale. It struck me as a powerful device. It would be a thoroughly nasty individual that took this theory and turned it toward the purpose of appropriating carnal knowledge. Truth in art is that whose contrary is also true. It made me smile. The symmetry, the equality, the potentiality of desire. I considered the room carefully. How best to attract her attention. Her and those whom she accompanied sat in a booth that offered little hope of executing that most complex of maneuvers, the chance encounter. Nothing may be left to chance.

The noise of Oxford street cluttered through the wide-open windows of the pub, encouraged by the refreshing flow of a southerly. The crowd was an odd mix of trade blokes 'drinking to the end of another week' and cashed-up young locals eager to

start the weekend's proceedings. A couple of tired-looking blue collars, fitters or machine men, vacated a table and stool across from the booth in which that exquisite thing sat drinking. I closed my book, collected my beer, and walked from where I stood at the bar to the vacated stool. A woman from the bar, a sprightly blonde with a knowing smile and carefully exposed cleavage, wiped down the table. I swung my stool around so that I could watch the proceedings over the edge of my book.

The setting sun painted everything with a twilight glow. The girl in the booth laughed as her friend talked. She cocked her head to one side, leaning on a propped elbow. Her hair caught the sunlight that then trickled down her body. She glanced for a second in my direction. I looked down at the page. My book was upside down. She may well have seen. I placed the open book on the table and struck what I hoped would seem a whimsical pose staring out into space, detached yet thoughtful. Then for a moment or less our eyes met, but there was no connection.

I picked up my book and assumed an engrossed countenance. I read 'pushed each other's darkness into the corner, believing in each other's light'. And as the southerly swept over and around me in a turbulent gust that seemed quite out of place in the confines of the pub I forgot about the girl and remembered my self. Music was needed. Music was essential. Something cool hot. Something *Kind of Blue*, but later. Maybe the humming passion of Keith Jarrett. I left the stool rocking as I set off to the bar. I wanted scotch and I wanted tunes. All of a sudden nothing else was of any consequence.

Jess finished her first drink and another appeared. She was a woman of such alarming beauty that those who encountered her where often struck with some anxiety regarding their obvious inadequacies. Jess was somewhat accustomed to the distance that this created between herself and the world. Her beauty reflected everything that was not.

Jess sat with a female acquaintance. Her name was Carol but Jess didn't know it. Jess had worked with Carol for sometime but found their relationship detestable. Carol used Jess like an oversized handbag. A fashion accessory. Carol thought that Jess made her look good, but the truth was that Jess made Carol invisible. There was no

person in that room or passing by on the footpath outside who would be able to recall Carol's presence. She was the prop. An animated gray cliché, a set piece, juxtaposed against the intense luminosity of Jess's presence.

Jess propped her head on her elbow. The table's surface had the clammy viscosity that surfaces in such places seem to have. A distinctive dirty memory of a thousand drunken spillages tempered by the cigarette ash of so many tedious social performances. Jess had few real friends. Just acquaintances. People who wished to possess her. People who competed for her attention, constructing elaborate lies in the fear that their actuality would bore her. That they would lose her presence. That they would cease to exist.

Carol talked incessantly. Jess gave a perfunctory smile and laughed at the anecdotal noise spilling from Carol's already drunken tongue. Carol quite literally spat out the conclusion of the anecdote. Jess wiped the spittle remnants of Carol's words from her right arm with barely contained disgust. She had had enough. Carol paid no attention. She excitedly reached out and grabbed Jess's wrist as she delivered the punchline. Jess gave a perfunctory chuckle, conscious of little else but the tremendous gust of wind that careened off the street, playing with her hair in a manner so tactile it bordered on the sensual.

Jess looked around the room. Most of it was grayed out. But a man in black looked at a book and as the wind came through his soul appeared to spark. Something swept in by the wind invaded his being and made him visible. And in the twilight and the cool breeze this impression was somehow contagious. Carol let go of Jess's wrist. She was looking up into her eyes for a reaction and she saw something strange. The man in black walked to the bar entranced by the idea carried in on the cool wind. Jess followed his movements closely. Carol feigned mock offence at Jess's lack of attention. But Carol had turned gray and insubstantial. She was hardly even there now. She was just another nothing.

As the cool rhythmic flow of piano transformed the room, the noise swept away. Jess stood up and walked to the bar. And there a man and woman sat on close stools, turned toward each other and searched each other's eyes. The pub was empty and gray. The couple's drinks appeared as if by magic and they dwelt in the ebbing tide of each other's presence till the small hours. And the piano of Jarret was their private space. They were the only two remaining souls in the gray world. But that world was insubstantial. It meant nothing. They were both here now. And it was there.

At the beginning there was hardly even an idea. Just a man and a woman who needed something. Two desiring beings in a world of people not connecting. A world where every person is a performance. But I am a romantic. There seems no need to extrapolate the misery and tedium of modern urban existence. What does that achieve? We are already conforming to some constructed sense of who ourselves should be. We are all fiction. Why not encourage some vision. But that too often results in Mills and Boonish crap.

As I watch them I can see that guy. He is self-conscious and moves with a walk and stance that tells us a lot about who he is trying to be. He wears dark featureless clothes and black thick-rimmed glasses. He believes his sarcasm adequate in masking his social ineptitude. He is trying to convince himself of his own empowerment in a world in which he has none. At the same time, he is pitifully self-aware. Look at the way he thinks. The structure of his thoughts. The needless obfuscation of what is essentially a primal and biologically driven lust. He wants to fuck her. That's quite plain. He is quite forthright about his intentions but I feel like perhaps this too is a performance. He is just using the abrupt edge of his desire to cover for the fact that he really craves intimacy. Intimacy that the world has learnt to lose because of its frightening potentiality.

I love the attempt he makes to theorize his position including the twist of irony. A self-conscious concerned reading of Feminism has convinced him of his predatory nature. I watch him. I wonder why he's not interested in the bar girl. Is she unattractive? Is this a class-based reaction. She works in a bar so he doesn't see her. I would probably have paid more attention to the bar girl. In my mind she is a simple soul who likes to laugh. She is much more natural than the girl with whom he is concerned. Maybe he needs the complications of artifice. Maybe he sees some element of complexity and depth in that. Maybe. Maybe his elaborate theories mark the self-conscious ramblings of someone who fears his own disappearance in a world of rambling gray. Maybe he is a baseless aesthete ashamed of his own pretence. He notes the bar girl's cleavage, so the latter possibility seems quite reasonable. Does he carry his book as a mask? He enjoys a word that is certain. He enjoys structuring his thoughts with neat precision. It helps to assuage his lack of confidence.

Was it pretentious to add the Wilde quote? Was it my pretension or was it his? He understands his potential to shape the world around him by the way he perceives and is perceived. But so do I. And so do you. When the southerly blew through I looked up at my wall and saw the quote. I quite like perfected little pieces of prose and this one, 'believing in each others light' is perfectly turned. If I went to the pub I would take that book. It gives you a space, a mindset from which to see the world. And there was some direction in it that my characters lacked. It was a gift that I could give them. Is that plagiarism? I began to relax. But he relaxed as well. He relaxed into himself and realized that his was a pointless game. Before this point it was so contrived. I got up and put some music on. Keith Jarrett, *Inside Out*. And then I was there with them and they began to seem like people. They didn't seem so shallow after all. They had a space. Music was important. Music changed things.

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