

People Watching

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THE YOUNG COUPLE at the bar looked happy enough – she played with the zip on his jacket. His hand cupped her elbow. But I could hear what she was saying, and his gaze was somewhere above her head. ‘If you’d just told me about the flask in the first place, it wouldn’t have been a problem.’

The man behind the bar wore a grey wool hat pulled right down to the rim of his glasses. After every customer, he took time to smooth the pages of his paper back out across the bar. He ducked down behind the rack of paired, plastic-wrapped biscuits to read.

At the table across from mine a middle-aged couple struggled with three young children. The baby’s cry sucked air in around it. The mother threw a bottle across the table at the father. I waited for her to throw the baby as well. A heap of coats, soft toys and changing-paraphernalia had created a bunker around the family, which two little girls destroyed with delight again and again. They wore fairy wings over their aran jumpers and bounced about in bright pink wellies seeing who could fly highest. Their screeching didn’t needle me as much as the forced politeness in their parents’ admonishments. ‘Chloe, sweetheart, please don’t scratch your sister’s face.’

It was the elderly couple I was drawn to most. The man had his back to me, but I could still get a sense of him; see how he was with her. The contour of his back and arms suggested he was holding her even from across the table. Her face was still; its wrinkles suggested past smiles. I tried to imagine looking at someone with such trust. He poured her tea a little at a time into a second cup and helped keep it steady as they raised it together to her lips. They didn’t have need for words.

I slipped out of my booth and crossed to the bar. I’d been noting what others had ordered and decided to treat myself to the day’s special, hot chocolate with rum. The spirit bottles hung neck downwards. Their contents made me think of the different shades of preserving fluid that hold tiny corpses in jars. The bartender removed a mug from beneath the rum bottle to pour my measure and then swiftly replaced it. The little plastic tap on the neck was dripping rum with such regularity you could set a watch by it. How long it would take for the bottle to empty that way, I wondered, and would the man pour the rum back into the bottle, or drink it himself?

Two crumpled fairies, mouths smeared with chocolate, jumped up beside me to peer into the fish tank next to the bar. ‘Look, look, look!’ The tank’s inhabitants were brown and lethargic. They worked their way round the edges of the tank sucking at green scum. A faded sticker on the glass said ‘Visit Lakeside Aquarium Today. A Fantastic Fun Family Day Out. Open 9-6, 7 days a week’.

‘Chloe, Lucy. Sit. Down. Now.’

The girls pinballed between the tables. A ripe smell suggested the baby needed changing. The mother dispensed mat and equipment and laid the baby on the table just as the girls piled back in around her.

The young man seemed compelled to watch. He looked confused. His girlfriend didn’t glance up once from touching the screen of her phone.

For a moment, I saw them all pinned like specimens to the narrow tables. The two girls’ wings fluttering as if they could not be held down. I would preserve the elderly couple beside each other, lying in companionable sleep as they must have done for so many nights of their life.

I wondered what they all thought of me sitting there alone. Stretching out sips of my rum-laced hot chocolate. Would they see how much I struggled with it: not wanting to drink it too fast because then the warmth would be gone, but knowing in my hands it was losing heat anyway. Or perhaps they hadn’t seen me. I often suspect aloneness renders one invisible.

Condensation had claimed the windows, jewelling the dusk outside. The elderly man stood. He pushed the cups to one side of their table and started to ready his wife’s things. I watched him put on her grey wool coat, a pair of pink mittens, a white scarf. I thought of a father dressing his little girl. Buttoning her up against the world. They both moved with arthritic tenacity. I marvelled as she stood at the curve of her back. She was curling into herself.

The last mouthful of hot chocolate was bitter and grainy. I watched the children flit about for a few more minutes before pulling on my coat and heading outside.

The air was so cold it hurt. At the top of the steps, I slipped into the nearest row of blue plastic seats. They were icy to the touch. Wind snatched threads of hair from under my hood. I tried to orientate myself against the shifting landscape. There was a blurring between hills, lake and sky. Dusky greys leached into one another ahead, but the boat sailed on darkness. The wooded hillside to the left threw down a blackened reflection that was broken only by occasional fingers of light from the shore.

The elderly man was sitting alone. Where was she?

I scanned the top deck. He was sitting on the boat’s right side, mid-way to the front. There was nobody else. A single lamp hung from a pole out ahead of the boat. I thought of a lighthouse. I thought how a lighthouse that moved would be no use to anyone. The rows of plastic seats were covered in shadow. Where had she gone?

In the gloom, I picked out a pair of swans. Swans mate for life. A man had told me once how they liked to remain close to each other, but not to touch. I imagined her fall. It was hard to judge exactly how far above the water we were. Would she have scattered the

surface with a splash, or parted it evenly like the cormorants did? I could hear the empty chimes of buoys. No shouts. No screams.

Had he pushed her? She couldn't have climbed over the railing alone. But if she'd resisted he couldn't have got her over. Not so quickly. How could he be sitting there so calmly? The lake was deep beneath the boat.

I thought I should shout for help, or run below deck and ask the crew to stop the boat, but I didn't move. The man's back was inscrutable to me now. I realised at no point had I seen his face.

Lights neared the boat at the water's edge and assembled themselves into a town. It had been too cold for her, of course. She'd surrendered to her age. I'd been distracted by the view as she passed. She was below deck, safely returned to the snug of the bar. He'd remained on the top deck to watch the lake for them both.

The boat cut its engines as it pulled into the marina. Only in their absence did I realise how constant the hum had been. I returned below to the booth I'd left. The air inside was so thick with warmth it was difficult to breathe. My empty cup remained on the table. As the boat came to a stop an automated announcement asked us not to move until it had moored, '... and thank you for joining us on Miss Lakeland today. We wish you a safe journey onwards'. The barman continued to read his paper. Rum dripped into the mug. The young couple both touched their phones. The mother swaddled the baby against the cold. The girls flew about trying to escape their father and the confinement of coats. There was an audible crush of wings. It didn't matter how hard I watched the empty booth. She wasn't there.

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