

Woman Walks Into a Bar: An Anecdote

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Pull up a chair, there's plenty of room.

You've not been here before, I take it? No?

Well, it's as good a place as any to have a drink.

You waiting for someone?

No, me neither. Well, not specifically. I am sort of looking for someone though.

Yes, the seat is free. That's not quite what I meant.

Let me tell you a story.

Just a short one.

You're probably not going to believe this. Nobody ever does.

I'll start by admitting that yes, over the years my anecdote has become a little worn, both embroidered and deformed with each retelling, moulded, as all true stories are, to the particular social purpose of a week, of a day, of an hour. But I swear to you that it did not start out that way, and if you'll let me I'll lay out the events for you, unvarnished and exactly as they happened.

Are you sitting comfortably?

So, once upon a time, in a town far away from where we are now I was sitting in a pub nursing a glass of wine and minding my own business. It isn't usual for me, drinking in the day, but I'd been having a problem with an article – writer's block, I suppose you'd call it – and the deadline was closing in at a rate of knots and I'd convinced myself that getting up from my desk and walking the twenty minutes from my flat to the pub would

blow the cobwebs away. I was sitting at the bar itself, drinking my wine and watching the after work crowd come in through the door behind me in the mirror, which is the kind of trick everyone thinks they are the first and only one to pull.

That's how she caught my eye – or I caught hers. In the mirror. Someone had written prices and specials on it in a marker pen – it was that kind of place – and her eyes flashed through the letters and bottles of gin.

Maybe that's not quite right.

Perhaps she'd been watching me for a while – I've since wondered if the conversation we had was an elaborate pick up routine on her part and I was just too dozy with wine or foul tempered to notice it.

Well, let's say we caught each other's eye and she smiled and came over and sat on the stool next to mine and ordered herself a drink.

Are you ready for a top up? I'll order us a bottle, shall I?

This isn't a love story, by the way.

It might have been. Perhaps its just the booze making me sentimental but I wonder if I'd have turned the conversation in a particular way, or acted a little differently, it might have been, and the fact that it wasn't – that it *isn't* — well, that's my cross to bear and not yours.

It might be a story of the-one-that-got-away, although I have trouble calling it that because isn't that how hunters and fishermen describe the deer and trout that evade them?

And really, I was the one that got away, not her. I was the one that ran away, that is.

I'm not making sense, I know. I'll get to it. Bear with me.

Bear with me!

‘You don’t look like you’re having much fun,’ she said, once she got her drink. She’d bought a packet of crisps too and she opened them, then tore the packet down the side and slid them over the bar so they lay between us and just like that, we were drinking together.

‘I’ve had better days,’ I said – which was the truth. I was completely stuck with the article, and I needed the money, and more than that, I needed not to displease an editor who had been slow to commission me in the first place and who didn’t need to be given an excuse to cross me off her list.

The article was a feature comparing different types of vacuum cleaners for a magazine aimed at middle class women in their fifties. The editor had asked me to find a particular angle on it – to include some sociology or something (that is exactly what she said) and I had agreed to do it without having any idea what she meant. That was the kind of work I did in those days.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ this woman said, and lifted her glass, and even though it was very unlike me, within a half minute I was telling her about the writing problem, and the financial problems – which in an ideal world wouldn’t be connected, but they were – and how depressed it all made me, and how I’d only really come out of the house to get away from the computer and get a bit of fresh air but it had been hours now and I’d wasted the whole afternoon drinking cheap wine and the article was due in the next morning and did she have any ideas about an angle on an article about a vacuum cleaner?

I suppose you’ve guessed by now that I was well on the way to being drunk. She was a sympathetic listener. Knew how to nod. How not to leap in and fill the pauses.

I should tell you what she looked like, though it won’t help you to imagine her. She was wearing jeans and a white shirt and a jacket that looked like it belonged to a suit: it was blue and grey with a light grey lining I caught

a glimpse of when she moved her arm to pick up her drink. But you could tell she didn't belong in that pub with the rest of the office workers just by looking at her and it was nothing to do with her clothes, but some air she had. Like the woman from the Cadbury's Flake advert. No, that's not right. Like a Queen from Alice in Wonderland, or one of the dryads from the Narnia books. There was something about her – the sound of her breath, or the smell of her hair, perhaps, that put me in mind of dark woodlands, or ancient castles, of cloaks made of feathers, or buildings with intricately tiled floors and impossible doorways. She would have suited a fur coat although she didn't need one; there was something animal about her just as she was.

You remind me a little of her, actually, now I come to think of it.

What's that? My jacket?

Yes, I suppose you could say it was a little like this one.

You haven't seen anyone by her description, have you? Happy hour, in a place like this? It seems like the kind of place I'd find her, if I was ever going to.

No? Oh well. You'd know her if you saw her. She was distinctive.

Yes. That's the word.

There are lots of pubs in the world, aren't there? Nobody in their right mind would think of checking them all.

I digress.

'Well,' she said, after I'd finished outlining my problem, 'aren't you're lucky we met!' and she winked at me.

I suppose this is what made me think she was perhaps trying to pick me up, though it wasn't quite that kind of wink. The last time I told this story the person I told it to said, 'well, what other kinds of winks are there?' and I was stuck for an explanation. But now I've time to think about it, I'd

say it was a gambler's wink. The wink of a card shark, a poker player – someone wanting you to think they'd just tipped their hand, when really the game was still on. That kind of wink.

'I fix things like this. It's what I do,' she leaned towards me and giggled, though it sounded a little like a purr or a growl, 'I'm a fixer.'

No, I didn't know what to make of it either.

And yes, you're right, I should have just asked her outright. But I didn't.

At the time I associated this word with drug dealing, and gangs, and all kinds of criminal dodginess. I thought she meant she had something to do with introducing one criminal to another, or sorting out stolen goods. Her fingernails were long and curved and unpainted but they were immaculately clean and now and again, while we were speaking, she tapped them on the bar as if to draw attention to them, or even to hint at some obscure threat.

I found out later that a fixer is also a term that photographers use – it's a kind of salt used in the final stages of developing film. It halts the process, but has to be washed away afterwards, so it doesn't burn and damage the pictures. I don't know why I'm mentioning that, as it wasn't something I thought about or even knew at the time, but anyway.

Forgive me. The wine is going to my head.

Did you want to get something to eat?

No?

Very well. I'll continue.

'What's the problem? Are your words failing you?' she asked.

'It's partly that...' I said. 'A trouble with my words. Finding a focus.'

She interrupted me.

‘I talked to someone the other day whose neighbour collected lawn ornaments. Not gnomes, but tasteful cement ornaments. Fairies, hedgehogs, frogs. All sorts. Her neighbour – we’ll call him Frank – had thousands of them.’

She tapped her nails again, and another set of drinks appeared in front of us. I didn’t need another, but I took it anyway, and sipped as she finished her story.

‘She’d see him sometimes, lifting another one out of the boot of his car with an almost furtive expression on his face. He’d bring them out then stand in his front garden looking around for a space to put them. It was, she said, a kind of addiction for him. One night she came back from an evening out with friends to find him sitting on his front step in his dressing gown staring at them. All their eyes and snouts pointed right towards him. Like he was some kind of prophet and they were his followers.’

She paused here, as if to gauge my reaction. I waited, expecting, as you are, no doubt, some kind of punch line.

‘The worst thing was,’ she said, ‘he was sitting there before them as if he’d prepared to address them, make some grand speech, to declare a previously unknown truth, and his words had entirely dried up. He was the conductor in front of a silent stone orchestra and he had nothing to give them at all. This woman told me he had tears in his eyes and she went into her house through the back door because she didn’t know what to say to him.’

She paused and drank deeply from her glass, though the wine didn’t seem to affect her the way it was affecting me. Her eyes were bright – a light colour they were, almost yellowish. Unusual. I’d know them if I saw them again.

‘It’s a great story,’ I said.

And it was, in its own way. I didn't believe a word of it, of course, but I've used the anecdote since, as a kind of shaggy-dog tale with an anticlimactic ending (the disappointing ending is the actual definition of the shaggy dog tale, as a matter of fact) with varying effects.

'So write about that. You could write about Frank. He won't mind.'

'I'm not quite sure that's what...'

'Okay,' she said, excited now. 'It's all right. I don't always get it first time. I've got another one. I read this in the newspaper, I'm sure I did. About a woman who hated her boss so much she broke into her house when she was away.'

'What did she do? Stuff the curtain pole full of prawns? That's an old one. Everyone's heard that before.'

The woman shook her head. 'Better than that,' she said, and touched the back of my hand with her index finger. 'Much, much better than that.'

My skin started to glow – not literally glow – but there was a warmth that spread through me as she told me the story of the employee who got all the bosses' photograph albums and took a pair of scissors and cut out everyone's heads and swapped them around. She was a dog lover, the boss, and there were plenty of pictures of her dogs on beaches with sticks in their mouths, flying through the air catching Frisbees, that sort of thing. So her own face in her wedding picture was replaced with the open snout of a Springer Spaniel with its tongue out and ears back because in the picture it was snipped from, it had been enjoying the draft from an open car window.

What I felt like, after she'd told me that story, was like one of those kids from the Ready Brek adverts: wearing a full body halo, centrally heated from the inside out. I remembered then that Greenpeace or perhaps some other pressure group had done a rip-off of that advert, and used those glow-in-the-dark Ready Brek kids to express some concerns about Sellafield, or Windscale as they called it back then. Glow in the dark kids. My thoughts

were getting muddled. It was the wine, of course, but also my proximity to her.

Have I mentioned how light her eyes were?

The irises were hazel – I think you'd call them hazel - but in the light from the bar they looked almost golden.

I did mention it?

Sorry. Sorry.

I'm losing my train of thought.

Where was I?

'That doesn't sound so bad,' I said. I helped myself to a crisp. 'I've heard of people doing similar with Photoshop. Putting people's heads onto the bodies of porn stars. That kind of thing. It could ruin your life. But a dog? Most people would just laugh that sort of thing off...'

The woman frowned. 'I don't think you're really getting this,' she said, and waved her hands for another drink. I looked at the empty glasses in front of us on the bar – not all ours, surely – and wondered how long we'd been sitting here. I fished around in my pockets but my money had all gone.

'I should go,' I told her. She gestured at me to sit down.

'We can try something different. A dream. Tell me about the last dream you had.'

She was keen but I wasn't sure I wanted to tell her about my dreams. There is nothing as boring as someone else's dreams, and anyway, I have peculiar night-time imaginings that are not fit for public consumption. Time moves strangely in them, and in the last one I had I was picking butterfly cocoons out of the grass and crushing them between my fingers. I was wearing red shoes and there were people – children, I think, or just little

people – hurtling through the air over my head like boomerangs. I woke up drenched in sweat and writhing in shame.

‘I don’t dream,’ I told her.

‘Nonsense,’ she said. There was touch of Mary Poppins about her then and she frowned again. ‘Everybody dreams. If you didn’t, you’d go mad and eventually your brain would turn into porridge. Did you ever hear the one about the man who stayed awake for eleven days and nights in a row? He worked for a radio station and they were sponsoring him to break a record. By the end of it, he didn’t recognise his best friend and thought spiders were crawling around inside his shoes. His wife said he was never the same again after that stunt. Ever,’ her drink arrived and she took a deep, long sip from the glass. ‘Of course you dream.’

‘Maybe that’s the problem,’ I said. ‘Maybe that’s what needs fixing?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘You dream. You just don’t remember them. Set your alarm half an hour earlier and see what happens.’

There is a gap in my memory here. It could be that one of us got up to go to the toilet or stepped outside for a cigarette. It might be that our conversation was interrupted by someone standing between us to order a drink at the bar. The pub was filling up – the after work crowd had gone home and the nighttime drinkers had appeared, in fancier outfits. The air started to smell like different kinds of perfume and aftershave, and cigarette smoke blowing in whenever the door opened.

‘Okay. Let’s take a different approach. Maybe it isn’t an article you need to write at all,’ she said, as if what she was suggesting was the most reasonable thing in the world. ‘Maybe you need to paint a picture or stitch a quilt or knit a jumper or...’

I laughed then, imagining my editor’s face when I turned in my copy on Monday morning in the form of an embroidered sampler covered in

tamed badgers playing volleyball with empty cans of coke and Redstripe. Someone turns to look at us and I wonder if we're being raucous, if we are out of place. We're just, I decided, two women sitting at a bar having a chat and a quiet drink. But I was suddenly self conscious.

'I don't think that is going to do,' I said.

'It might. It might if you think about it seriously,' she said. 'People make all kinds of things, but they do it for a very limited number of reasons.'

I couldn't see my own face at this point, of course, but if you just imagine me looking at her a bit sceptically, perhaps with a single raised eyebrow, which is an expression I've always wished I could pull off, you'll get the gist.

Just like you're doing right now, as a matter of fact.

No, no, it's all right. I said you wouldn't believe me, didn't I?

Don't be embarrassed.

We've all been there, cornered in a bar with someone who's had a few too many and just won't shut up, haven't we?

'No no. I'm right about this, I am,' she insisted. 'If you really take it down to brass tacks, people make things because they want to create an object that will become a piece of string connecting them to another person. It's just a kind of conversation. Doesn't matter if they're baking a cake or building a house or sculpting a giant piece of abstract...' she waves her hands in the air, 'art. It's a piece of string.'

'That's not true,' I said. 'Plenty of people make things without ever showing them to anyone else. They don't want an audience. They're not interested in what other people think.'

'Then they're making them for imaginary or remembered friends. Or God,' she said. 'Or what they're making is a recyclement,' (she did actually

say recyclement) ‘or a disagreement with something that somebody else has made. It’s very sociable really. These makers all like to think of themselves as lone and solitary geniuses but even if they never leave their garrets they are still having one big conversation with the things that they make.’

I wanted to disagree further but you must remember the state I was in and the effect she was having on me. And anyway, I was thinking about Theseus, fearfully entering the labyrinth with a ball of string unwinding behind him. And then I was remembering a picture I saw once of a great cruise ship leaving a harbour, the people on the ship all crowded onto the deck and leaning over the railings, each holding one end of a long piece of red yarn. On the harbour wall stood all their loved ones holding the other end of the strings, and the boat moved out slowly. It was kind of unbearable to think about and it made me very sad.

Another drink appeared. She carried on talking.

‘If it isn’t that – and it almost always is that – but if it isn’t, then they make things because they’ve lost something – a first love, a mother, a child – something like that,’ she sounded like she was talking about lost gloves and mislaid newspapers and I became certain that whoever she was, she’d never lost anyone. ‘Whatever it is. It doesn’t matter. They find an absence and they can’t stand it. They make something to fill it. And it doesn’t work. There’s a gap in that too. A space. So they make something else, maybe to fill the gap, maybe just to understand what the dimensions of the absence really are. That’s what a maker is,’ she paused. Winked again. I believe now she had been working up to this gag for quite some time. ‘Someone who abhors a vacuum.’

She laughed and pretty unattractively too.

You know how sometimes someone can appear quite ordinary looking, but as you get to know them and like them better, they seem to change, and suddenly become the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen?

You must have experienced that? Yes?

Well, with her, that night, it seemed to be running in reverse. When she laughed I noticed the yellowness and the crookedness of her teeth. The broadness of her shoulders and – well, there's no polite way of mentioning this – the trouble with her breath. Old meat and stagnant water. That's what she smelled like.

I said nothing, but thought about a pair of amethyst earrings I left on my bedside table one night and never saw again. They probably just fell down the back of the table and ended up under the carpet or inside the Hoover, but for a long time I was convinced that my housemate had stolen them and I think she knew it and things were never the same between us after that.

'Or,' she ploughed on, warming to her theme, counting her points off on her fingers, 'they make objects that stand in for themselves. Objects that even if they don't look like dolls, are little dolls, and they lay these objects out on a slab and cut them up and take a good long look at them, all their insides and backsides and secret places on show to the entire world, all their malformed limbs and tumours and bad wiring on display, and then they play doctor and nurse in front of an audience and try to stitch them all up back together.'

'I don't think...'

someone pushed past me then, shouting about someone else, a dispute over a game of pool or a bar tab, perhaps, and whatever I said next was lost. I know I was thinking about butterflies pinned on boards and displayed behind glass. I was thinking about old-fashioned operating theatres, with hundreds of men in old-style suits and moustaches staring into the open abdomen of a chloroformed woman.

I didn't say any of this, of course. Perhaps that disappointed her. Or angered her. She emptied her glass.

'I'll be right back,' she said. She got up from the stool and headed towards the bathrooms, but I didn't wait: I followed her. I saw the way she moved – the wide, rolling confidence of her gait, the length of her stride, the way she bounced on the balls of her feet like a...

...I was going to say a dancer. Or perhaps a boxer. She was very muscular. Even sitting next to her I had the impression she was strong. But it wasn't like that. It was more animal like that. Like she was a big cat – a jaguar or a tiger, perhaps – who'd been forced to wear clothes and stand on its hind legs for a while and was getting sick of it.

No, I swear to you. It was really like that.

Here, have some more.

We've a glass left, let's share it.

No?

I got into the ladies only a second after her – I could see the flick of her suit jacket as it disappeared around the door.

You'll have seen this coming a mile off – of course you have – Shakespeare's most ham fisted exit – but when I kicked the door open she was there, utterly changed, all glowing eyes and black fur, four feet planted on the floor, and a wet wide mouth opening. She was – if she were still a she – smiling or preparing to growl and there was no way of telling which.

I turned and ran – of course I did. I made it half way to home with the sound of toilet cisterns refilling and the hand dryers roaring throbbing in my ears, my heart thrumming in my ear lobes and fingertips, sweat dripping off me, before daring to look over my shoulder to see nothing but an empty street and an overturned dustbin.

I scoured the newspapers for days but the incident never made the papers. My head and my heart have holes in them now. I'm not the person I used to be.

But you haven't seen her. You're quite sure?

And you'd know. You'd know right away.

I never did end up submitting that article either.

It was time for a change in direction, anyway.

But that's another story.

Is that last orders? Or have we missed it?

You don't want to stay for another? Are you sure?

One for the road?

I only ask because you don't look like you're having much fun.

Perhaps there's something I can help you with?

ENDS

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