

Liz

by Robert James Russell

I catch a glimpse of myself in the small mirror on the adjacent wall and find myself becoming shy at my own reflection, which is ludicrous in theory, shying away from oneself, but as I lock onto the few freckles I have spread neatly on both cheeks I can't help but redden a bit. I wasn't even aware until first stepping foot in Wellington some nine years ago that I was even what some would call a walking stereotype, however with far fairer hair and more olive-hued skin than the Irishmen depicted in literature and children's books, but I was, as was pointed out to me rather egregiously after a night of drinking, a stereotype nonetheless and if nothing else exclusively because of those dark specks on my face. And it bothers me that even though it's no longer a negative connotation to be Irish, and hasn't been in my lifetime, I still find it absurd that as loud and brash as I can be in most social situations, exaggerated of course by the type and quantity of spirits present, that I, myself, am the greatest cause of my own timorous conduct.

I'm sitting now, next to Daniel, his pink hand on my thigh and rumpled amongst the flowered fabric of the long skirt I'm wearing. We're at that new pub-slash-martini bar called Black Swan in the City Centre and near the bus depot, a block away from the renovated Wellington Theatre House, with two mutual colleagues, Jacob and Lucy Aaronson, both tenured, middleaged professors who work for Wellington University as well. Jacob, a renowned (and often dramatic) Sociologist has taken Daniel under his wing in the past year, which has been a tremendous boost for his ego in a field otherwise ready to shit him out and pass him over. Lucy resides in the Philosophy department, a rather raucous voice in existentialism, someone I find rather intoxicating when sharing a dialog with (when sober, of course). Then there's me, the little English Fellow, the girl who loves Modernism that they pander to between great sweeping breaths by asking me, "How're the studies coming, Lizzie?" and "Are you still attending those *conferences* in the States, m'dear?" with

only a touch of irreverence which could be, I rationalize sitting here, picking at a blemish on Daniel's hand while the three of them discuss the tenets and implications of Dramaturgy on the self, nothing but my imagination. However, they do, I've come to realize, find it quite difficult to sway the conversation away from all things academia and, as much as I do love a rousing conte about Kierkegaard's supposed secret sexual identity or another dissection of Buber's *Ich und Du* (which Lucy professes on quite often when drunk on brandy), sometimes I long for a pointless and needless conversation about who's fucking whom. About what drinks get you the most lashed. About the mundane daily rituals of students in the dormitories. About music and fashion trends. And I can't help that my mind wanders, looking outside the large windows in the front of the place, watching drunk students meander down the sidewalk, pretty girls and pretty boys dressed to impress with their only cares hovering on who's going home with whom tonight.

And I don't blame myself for falling for Daniel, or that we've been together since Fresher's Week all those years ago, or that sometimes I feel as if there is a life out there that I can almost grab on to, then seems just always out of reach as if I was never meant to take it at all. He's a good man, and will make a good husband, some day, even though neither of us are in a hurry whatsoever when it comes to this matter, and I do love him, that's not in contestation, but sometimes...sometimes this life isn't enough for me. Sometimes it is as if the person I truly am is more so a dream than reality, masked by who I always thought I wanted to be, the good little girl, however boisterous she is at times, more often than not hopelessly unflappable for fear of some phantom retribution doled by a spectre who watches my every reserved movement.

I smile from time to time, briefly studying Jacob's pocked nose and sunken cheeks, the endless bags under his eyes and the eyes themselves, those little warm vestiges peering into a genuinely warm soul. His whiskers, the black and gray and white mashed together on his chin, sculpted into something trendy, for lack of a better word, and all I seem to crave now more than anything is

isolation, the last half of Anderson's *Dark Laughter* and a joint the size of my index finger, none of which I'll find tonight, I'm sure, but the prospect of such an evening on the horizon is enough to sate for now. Daniel squeezes my fingers, a cue to raise my eyes and smile wide, to become social again. To become alive again, before it's too late. Just too late.

"Did you hear that, Lizzie?" he says knowing I don't particularly like being called Lizzie, but I tolerate it nonetheless. "He says he might be able to get you a sit down with

Craig Chapman when you're in New York. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh, that would be...fantastic, Jacob. Thank you."

"Of course, Elizabeth. Anything I can do to help you with your *fellowship*," Jacob says smiling broadly, his thin lips something you might find on a creature of reptilian descent, but far more endearing.

"Yes," I say, pondering on a long string of anecdotes in which to engage the table, but not letting myself utter another syllable beyond the first.

"She's a bit reticent this evening. She's had a long week," Daniel says now squeezing my thigh.

"Oh, my poor dear," Lucy chimes in with the glass affixed firmly to her hand. "Everything alright, I hope?"

"Yes, *quite*," I say quickly, smiling broadly, chastising Daniel in my head for being overly flip this evening and myself for letting him drink as many pints as he has.

"Well, whatever is the matter?" Jacob says between sips of a dark lager whose name leaves me at this moment. "I hope the academic system isn't dragging you down. It's a bugger, at times, but don't you worry your pretty little face. It gets easier over time, like all good things. I could ring *Monsieur* Kerr, if you'd like. We're old friends, if I haven't mentioned it before."

"Yes, perhaps you should. Give ole Ollie a call, lighten my darling's burden, for heaven's sake!" Daniel says pretending to wring my neck, laughing his shrill laugh, Jacob and Lucy joining in

and I'm sitting here, unsure of what is so funny. Of what is so goddamn funny.

"No, no. Just one of those weeks. I'll be fine, but cheers."

"Quite alright," Jacob says closing his eyes, smiling, lost in some inebriated daze then, shooting out of it, he begins discussing quite immediately micro-level sociological theories to which everyone at the table, excluding myself, of course, has an opinion of. I look at my drink, which is half-full, a watered down version of its former self. The tinge is almost reminiscent of watercolors, my reflection splayed in the glass and caricaturized by the crystal. I look to the ceiling, pipes and paneling exposed to look like it's not quite yet finished in some modern artistic sense of style I don't fully understand. The finished look of being unfinished. I yawn and my eyes water, then someone at the table laughs and I'm not quite sure who, but it's followed, obviously, by the others guffawing as well. Daniel removes his hand from my thigh, using it and the other to gesture as he says something to the extent of, "Harold Garfunkel can, quite literally, go fuck himself," to which even more laughter emerges. I don't find the humor in this either, in nothing they are saying, and now I regret telling Daniel I wanted to go out tonight at all, the pit in my stomach as the words left my lips expanding and enveloping all my insides. I should learn to listen to my voice, to not squash it down as I tend to do. Too late, I suppose. I yawn again, they always come in pairs for me, and receive an overwhelming sense that I'm in some cage whose bars I cannot fully see, a feeling which percolates throughout my body.

"I'm going to get a drink," I say suddenly, touching Daniel's shoulder lightly, noticing the way the light hits the wrinkles formed at the creases of his eyes, his mouth. He turns, scans my drink then my face, and says "Yup" as I leave, going back to his damning and cursing, his verbal fornication.

At the bar I slip in between two couples. On my right a younger couple, what would appear to be a first date with all the flirting and compliments being tossed about, which makes me smile. I catch myself and turn to my left where I see a more normal couple,

settled into each other's lives after, presumably, years of service to one another. They barely speak, turned at sharp angles. He says he was happy they came out tonight, to which she says "Mmm," a sentiment I can absolutely concur with. The bartender appears as if from nowhere and I order a vodka tonic and immediately turn to study the rest of the place, of the patrons sandwiched within the walls, of the gelatin-like music wafting about gone unnoticed until this very instant. The crowd is eclectic, a mix of young and old, the décor of the place schizophrenic so, I presume, it would only make sense it would attract a likeminded cohort of patrons.

I glance back to Daniel and company and now see Lucy at the beginning stages of what would appear to be a soliloquy of some sort, on a topic of any sort, with wild pantomimes and grandiose, crescendoing dialogue to accompany, of which everyone's attention is affixed. From here their faces look like opulent theatre masks, with deep curves and long shadows, exaggerated features, and I can't help but stare at them, blindly wondering what it is that keeps them going. I then hear an uproarious laughter come from the opposite end of the room, and I find myself squinting through the dismal lighting (better for drinking and cavorting, one would assume) to see a group of students, ages uncertain, holding up glasses and saluting one another in nonsensical prose. The panorama makes me smile, makes me reminisce entirely too much back to a time that only exists in the recesses of my imagination now, and as I lean against the bar, getting more comfortable as floods of memories return and a warm fuzziness appears where my stomach and intestines should be, I see Richard, tall, broad, American Richard amongst the throng of beguiled students making a home in the most cavernous parts of the room. At first I see an outline, nothing more, and then the outline turns and becomes a complete profile and transitory fears that I've subscribed Richard's qualities to some stranger with similar features are instantly vaporized, his wide, gated smile and an infectious charm spitting out even at such a great distance. I watch him for a moment, the way he touches his chest as he talks, not realizing it, an involuntary habit

it seems, lecturing to a throng of eager girls wearing skirts and far too much makeup, which makes me wonder if it was ever me, the sad little girl talking to a man out of reach, painted like a clown. Richard looks at them, over them, around them, and finally, through them. He laughs when he's supposed to, when he's cued to. He's on at all the right times, having mastered the art of conversation faultlessly. A boy comes to him, a boy with a very young face, they talk then separate, and Richard goes back to the young thing in front of him, a glass in his hands, a glass in her hands, everything in front of them. Nothing but time. Nothing but time and energy, a limitless supply of anything and everything, and I catch myself scowling, but not at them, but at who they are. At what they represent and how they rub it in my face.

I hear the bartender appear behind me and I turn and slip him quid for the drink and as I turn again back toward the room with all intention of slipping unnoticed back to Daniel's side, my rightful place, it would seem, I notice he's taken sight of me, waving, lifting up his glass on a mock salute which causes me to do the same. I take a sip of my drink. It's strong. Powerful. Look up and he's gliding toward me, the audience between us parting for him, it seems, until he is at my side and his smell becomes overpowering.

"Why, hello there, Liz," he says stumbling a bit.

"Hi, Richard," I say, far less nervous than I thought I might be.

"Crazy seeing you here. I mean, I woulda thought I'd run into you eventually, you know? Wellington's not *that* big."

"That's a...very good point," I say. "How do you like this bar?"

"Um, it's alright. I prefer the older pubs, the ones with character, but beer's beer, I guess."

"Yes, very true," I say and drink three large gulps in a row, finding it difficult to breathe after the cold has numbed my throat.

"What're you drinking?" he says.

"Vodka. You?"

"Beer," he says smiling. "Remember?"

"Well, *right*, but what kind?"

"Actually cider. Warwick's. I was in a cider mood tonight."

"Good a night as any."

"So, I've got a lot of work done on my dissertation. I mean, I like seriously worked my ass off this week," he says taking turns looking at me, then away, watching my body in a way that makes him believe he's being sly about it.

"Excellent," I say, clearing my throat. "That's really...*great*."

"Are you here with your boyfriend?" he says and the instant he does my mind treks down a cacophony of different avenues, alternating stories I could tell this young man about who I'm here with, about who I spend my time with, but, in the end, I give up and blurt out what I could be considered the most far-fetched of these yarns: the truth. "Yes, he's over in the corner there, in the blue shirt. Daniel."

"Oh, nice," he says glancing in the direction I've indicated, the look on his face designated as more apathy-like than anything else.

"What about you? Seem to have quite the little gathering back there," I say drinking again.

"Oh, yeah, my flatmate, Toby, his friend, Clara...it's her birthday. I needed to get out of the house so...here I am."

"Well, it sounds quite lively, over there."

"It is, it is. Are you having a nice time? Do you come here...often?" He says and laughs, drinks, then, "God that sounds like a pick-up line."

"No, I know what you meant. First time, actually."

"Yeah, it's okay. I'm a bit drunk, anyway, so everything's good," he says and I smile at the way in which he just belches out whatever's on his mind. "How're you?"

"I'm...fine. Tired. It's been a long week."

"Have you been here long?"

"A few hours."

"You know, I can hear your accent like...a lot more, tonight, for some reason. Maybe because you're drinking."

"You can?"

"I can. It's very nice. I wish I had an accent."

"Well, you do."

"Yeah, but I mean an exciting one. Irish is very sexy."

"Don't know about that."

"Well, I think so, anyway."

"If I could give it to you, I would," I say unsure of what that even means, but regardless, he's smiling, looking at the floor then directly into my eyes.

"Wanna do a shot?" he says, I fear, with far more devious plans buried beneath it.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure..."

"Aw, come on, in honor of...Clara, or whatever. It's early. We could get your boyfriend one too. Is there anything he doesn't drink?" he says testing me and I can't help but smile at the corners of my mouth just a bit, and although I think I'm being sly myself now, I think he's picked up on it.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Ah, now that is the question, isn't it," he says, smiling, finishing off his cider in a large gulp, standing there, tall, young, squared, radiating, towering, his smell overpowering, the lights in the bar brighter now, for a moment, then flickering back to dim once again and the world comes crashing around me, two world's colliding, two worlds not meant to live amongst each other sucking each other into vortexes they've created and nurtured, and time, time goes on. Time goes on no matter where I stand in this place, in this city, in this life, and time goes on as he flirts with me and we take shots and then, almost as if it never happened, as if I dreamt the whole thing, I'm walking back toward Daniel and Jacob and Lucy, walking toward them with no drink in my hand. With nothing. Looking behind me once and seeing Richard's outline amongst the other young ones, what would appear to be his dark silhouette pressed against the dark wall, the words spoken between us now

folded up into time and forgotten. And then I sit down, my head spinning, dwelling on flesh and the idiocy of youth, on the fleeting transit of it all, and as I get comfortable again, in my chair, and almost as if he were nothing but automaton, acting out a predetermined chore and nothing more, Daniel's hand returns to my thigh, his fingers grasping it, fingering the fabric of my dress as if they never left, his mind posturing on the prospects of sex now, quite obviously thanks to the lagers, my own thoughts dwindling on a life abandoned years ago, a life once lived then forgotten. A life missed and desired but just out of reach. Needs, wants, and well-wishes suppressed for reasons never fully understood. Wasted. A girl who seemingly exists at one moment and, even though in flesh she sits here today, she's very much been dead many a long while. Drunk, I think to myself, watching their eyes, their beady eyes and their thin mouths as they continue to converse the same droll topics of always and forever, and I smile but it fades quickly enough. Then, perhaps due to the liquor, I envision a giant brass pocket watch floating above me like my grandfather's, the one taken from me when I was a girl, the minute hand ticking down in loud, echoing clicks as if to remind me with every broad stroke what it is I've missed out on in my waning years. Of what it is I can never have back. And for some reason, sitting here with no drink, with nothing in my own hands, my own empty, red hands, the blush returning to my cheeks, this harbored clock alerting me to the things I find hard to admit aloud, or never could, I suppose, I can't but think I'm far too late.

Just too late.

