

What We See (When We're Not Looking)

Robert lay in bed with his eyes closed, listening to the house—to Cynthia moving through it. Footsteps (hers), coughs (hers), doors (opening, closing, opening). A symphony of presence-absence-presence that pulled him from sleep and into the day.

The slide of a drawer. The rustle of fabric. The soft thud of her dressing gown hitting the floor. A whole choreography of not-looking. Because here's another thing about looking: sometimes it happens by accident, sometimes by design, sometimes in the dark when you're carrying someone who's had too much to drink, placing them on the bed and taking their clothes off to make them more comfortable when their eyes flutter open at exactly the wrong moment (or is it the right moment?), and they see you seeing them.

He'd not planned to look. But he did.

And what do they see when they see you seeing them?

Disgust? Pity?

Last night, he had undressed her in the dark, hands moving carefully, as if she might break. He knew he shouldn't have looked. But he did.

She was brushing her hair now, the sound harsh, tearing. She took pride in her hair, in its length and colour. It was the same colour as his, a "Demerara beige," she called it, like time itself had a taste, a sweetness, a dissolution. They were often mistaken for brother and sister, but his eyes were Listerine green and hers a Malteser brown.

He imagined her standing there, her back to him, her skin pale in the dim light. She would be pulling on her bra now, the white sports type she always wore.

She would be tucking the falsie into the left side. Her body something glimpsed but never seen. Always undressing with her back to him. A ballet of secrecy.

Here's the thing about pretending to sleep: you become acutely aware of every sound, every molecule of movement, every ash-fall from every cigarette (hers) onto every floor.

The bed shifted as she sat down. He wished she would curl herself around him, bury her face in his hair. But she did not. She smoked her cigarette down to the filter, the sound of her lips on the paper sharp in the quiet room.

Sometimes she would look at him with a gravity and say, "Do you love me?"

"Of course," he would say.

"But I love you more," she would reply.

And he would stretch his arms wide, as if to measure the breadth of his love. She would do the same, and they would stand there like crucified lovers, his chin resting on the top of her head.

"That's so unfair," she would say, her voice soft and teasing.

He would pull her close and whisper, "I could not love you more, silly."

Eight months wasn't a long time, but already their love was the colour of years.

But here's the thing about love: it survives in the spaces between seeing and not-seeing. He hadn't planned to look. But he had.

The scar was not what he had expected. It was not neat or small. It was a raw, jagged thing, stretching from her armpit to her sternum. The nipple was still there, a dark smudge in the centre. He imagined it would be gone, scooped out with the rest of the tissue, a thing stolen in a clean-lit room by men in masks. But it was a butcher's work, a slash across her body.

She laughed when he asked her to quit smoking.

“What’s the point?” she had said.

About living? About loving? About looking?

The wardrobe door creaked. She was putting on her uniform, the tight blue one she wore to the salon. The colour of Milk of Magnesia.

She was leaning over him now, pulling the sheet back, brushing the hair from his face. He feigned sleep, his breath catching in his chest. He could not escape it. He would have to open his eyes.

“Hello,” she said, voice soft.

He blinked up at her, heart pounding.

She was wearing makeup, her lips painted a bright pink, her eyes dark with mascara and shadow.

He pulled her down to him, kissed her neck, breathed in the scent of her.

“Was I totally off it last night?” she asked.

“No worse than usual.”

“Oh. Right. Thanks.”

He held her at arm’s length, his gaze drifting to the left side of her dress, to the bulge where the falsie sat. He thought she saw him looking. He rolled over, pulling the sheet up to his chin. Eight months folded into a single gesture.

The clock on the bedside table read twenty past seven.

He felt her watching him, her eyes on the back of his head. The bed shifted as she stood. Her lips brushed his cheek, her breath warm against his skin.

“Love you,” she whispered.

He opened his mouth to say it back, but she was already gone.

He got out of bed and went to the window, pulling the curtains open. The grey light of morning filled the room like a headache. Then he opened the drawer of the bedside table and took out the photograph, the one he had stolen from her album. It was a picture of her on a beach, her skin golden, her body whole. She was wearing a purple bikini, her legs stretched out in the sand. He didn't know who had taken the picture, he just hoped it wasn't a man.

He looked at her breasts, perfect and unmarked, and wondered if the cancer was already doing its wrong.

Here's the thing about looking: sometimes you have to un-look. Sometimes you have to take a photograph (beach, bikini, before) and cut it into pieces so small they become like memories, like moments, scattered across the kitchen floor like cigarette ash (hers), like evidence of something that can't be unseen but can be unmade. Because that's what we do, isn't it? We unmake the things we can't un-know. We cut up the things we can't un-remember. And we love in the dark because sometimes the light is too much, too true, too now.

He folded the photograph over, and over again.

He began to cut.