

The Hanged Man

By Stewart Sheargold



‘The human condition seems to be one of waiting to be rescued.’

Jeanette Winterson

Gut Symmetries

“Human happiness depends upon the greatest possible extension of pleasure.”

The Marquis De Sade

Winter



I

I sit at the window and wish it would snow. It is cold today. The few tufts of grass sprouting from the cobblestones are silvered with dew. I woke up and almost froze. I'd left the window open. I lay in bed and thought for a while about getting up, but there seemed no point at all. Then I remembered Celia was waiting for me. Dressing quickly, I snatched up my camera and made my way here.

Morning light spills into the room. Chairs and tables are struck with cold white. The walls are heady scarlet, the tables deep blue, the booth seats a striking retro orange. Serviettes seem like highlights. You are attracted to people's lips when they unfold the triangles to dab at their mouths. I am interested in colours especially. My own life is grey. I only speak in metaphors, see. It's too difficult otherwise. I am an advocate of honesty - for other people, but being honest about myself just tends to give me heartburn.

The sun beams down into the windy cobblestone streets, sifting apart the early gloom. I can see everything clearly. People march briskly. Faces line up.

I take another photo.

The camera clicks, capturing.

Celia places the first rich, steaming cup of coffee of the day in front of me. She sits opposite and lights up. I taste the shock wake-up call of the smoke before she exhales.

'Have you tried the patches?' I ask.

'No,' she says. 'They itch.' She looks into the street.

I look at her nicotine-stained fingers and feel somewhat romantic. She is beautiful, strikingly so – pale face slackened of emotion, a jet black bob, large piercing eyes; it is a beauty that relishes its ordinariness, disdaining perceived, conventional glamour. I like it how she holds her cigarette in long, limp fingers. She pushes a dark curl behind an ear. She indulges me, which is probably dangerous. I've never been able to fathom her kindness towards me. I consider her the closest thing I have to a friend. Besides, she knows far too much about me to let her go. I like Celia.

I take a photo of her.

She flicks back a look. 'Can I see it when it turns out?'

'Sure,' I say. Though it's a lie.

She measures me with ambiguous, hooded eyes - cloudy grey, I think - and takes my hand, turns it palm up. 'Interesting,' she pauses to smoke, 'Your lifeline is hard to read.'

'Is that good or bad?' I peer at the intricate lines of my hand but see only weathered skin.

'Could be.' She exhales a cloud of smoke that plumes vaguely above her. Should I be portentous? Celia sees far too much, and I believe her far too often.

I am cold in spite of my heavy jacket.

Out on the street it is raining. Beads string the length of the railings; the sheet of wet on the concrete entrance bounces and ripples with their intermittent fall. A woman trips, heel caught in a groove, and green apples spill from her shopping bag.

I take a photo.

I wonder if she was going to make apple pie.

I've slept with Celia twice. Both times I drifted into her atmosphere through accident.

It was the colours that pulled me to this place. Their vividness leaks out into the street, ensnaring passers-by. A glimpse of such livid red, like the tongues of flowers inviting you in to their scent. Celia was behind the counter painting coffee cups in shock-tactic hues. I have already said that I like colours, their jollity; they explain everything. Her mopped fringe flopped like a sexual suggestion. She gave me a look that seemed to say she was as brooding and intense as the jars of exotic coffee lined up on the shelf behind her.

I ordered a coffee and a slice of creamy shortbread.

When she came to my table, she stopped. She looked pointedly at my camera dumped between the salt and pepper shakers. I was about to move it when she said:

‘This table’s better,’ placing my order on the next one down the line. She paused, perfectly still, eyes and lips taut, waiting for me to comply.

I moved. When I sat I realised why it was better. From here, I gained a clear view of the entire cobbled street and the beginnings of the square that led from it. The windows of all the shops seemed open and I could see transparently into shopper’s lives. The sun swooped in and cleared out shadow. It was beautiful. I took a photo.

‘You’re a photographer,’ she said, matter-of-fact, a quick nod.

‘Amateur,’ I said.

‘Oh.’ She swept off to morning chores. I thought she was unimpressed but...

I took five rolls of film, and I was being selective. Faces were infinitely interesting, all the thoughts bleeding from the eyes. I captured beauty, snapped shut upon it. Made it infinite. I felt a perverse thrill runnel through me as the camera, my eye, reached out and closed upon a moment in these anonymous lives. I wondered if they ever knew.

Celia brought me coffee throughout the day. That first day... She braved a joke once, telling me I ought to have an assistant. Her smile waxed and waned. She lazily left each cup where it sat, placed on the table clean ones with successive coffees, so that by the end of the day the table mushroomed with brightly-coloured cups.

I clinked and clattered them back to the counter. Unaccustomed to juggling I dropped a clutter of them. They smashed across the floor in sharp slices, tinkling beneath chairs. I was so embarrassed, immediately pulled out my wallet. Celia waved me down, smirked kindly and knelt with a dustpan and brush. The image of her on the floor: carefully collecting each jagged piece, the gentle inclination of her fringe over eyes, a considered, easy balance. I took a photo.

She looked up. ‘What’re you going to use that one for?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. I didn’t.

The brush shushed the broken crockery into the pan.

When finished, she straightened, pulled out a cigarette and lit it. The cafe was silent. It was 6pm. Outside the windows, fading light. She shucked off her thin green jumper, threw it over a chair

back. Brushed back then forward her dark locks, fingers clamped about the cigarette with perfect practice. There was something tantalisingly seductive about that.

‘Why do you photograph people?’ she asked.

‘They’re interesting.’ Which was not an answer at all.

She blew smoke lazily out the side of her mouth. It drifted up to slide along the ceiling fan.

‘Do you think I could be interesting?’ Her eyes - grey? - betrayed nothing, stunned me; I knew the giddiness of smoke-smothered bees.

The only answer was ‘yes’.

‘Mm,’ she said and walked into the steel coolness of the kitchen.

I photographed her in there, naked, her pink flesh startling, newborn, the colour of succulent watermelon against the heartless blue-grey of the steel appliances. Her body was strong and elegant. Her legs and arms hinged on exact bones and sinew. She was comfortable with her tapered frame. She wanted art and so climbed into the oven. Her awkward pose, the fleshy vagina protruding like a question, made her vulnerable and erotic.

The counters were still warm from the days baking. I licked her up as though she were the squeezed plush of fruit; she had the most exotic flavour.

When I came inside her, the pots and pans see’d and saw’d on their hooks above us.

The second time was when I day-dreamed that I’d died. I had been drinking her thick coffee then the hot liquid was all over me and my mind was assaulted with the huge backwash of wings. I was suddenly five again. There was snow and tents and a blazing moon. A cool, lichen-green forest; we were camping in a dell of ferns. An angel zipped and dipped in and out of canvas doors on Christmas Eve, searching. I should’ve been asleep. He turned and gave me a complicitous wink. Poking from under his thick Arctic coat was a tail of soft feathers. He handed me a package, heavy and all of blue. When I unwrapped the gift, he’d given me a crystal ball. I looked into it and saw myself screaming, flames surging around me, licking my ankles. He smiled at me and said, ‘Time’s up.’

Celia kissed me back to life. She bolstered my heart with her hands. In the hospital bed she lifted her skirt and straddled me. ‘To make your heart beat faster,’ she said. She placed my hand on her small, hard breast.

Afterwards I told her: ‘I don’t normally sleep with women.’

She had curled herself around me like a comma. ‘How did it feel?’

‘I don’t think I felt a thing.’

‘Oh,’ she mumbled. Her eyes did not open.

Celia’s eyes are grey as morning-after snow slushed in gutters.

‘Why do you sit here all day?’ she asks. She’s pushy for an answer to this procrastination.

‘Something to do. So I don’t go mad with inactivity,’ I say and shift uncomfortably. Another lie. I am sure she can see through me, and I wonder why I can lie to a friend.

She raises eyebrows, universal gesture of dubious inquisition. ‘Most people are mad,’ she muses. ‘Look at me. I wake up. I eat breakfast and turn on the tv for Sam, who refuses to use the remote. I take him to school where he already has a reputation. I open up the shop. I serve. I talk to you. I close the shop. I go home. I eat dinner. Sometimes I may go out, pick up, and let someone stronger fuck me. Mostly I just masturbate in the bath. I read a book in bed and hope the next day snips in two the line I walk on.’ (Pause as she considers this) ‘I’m a supporting character in my own life.’

‘Do you think we’re designed to disintegrate?’ I ask.

The cafe is silent around us. I feel stupid, fusty, and important all at once.

Celia reaches out, reaches out to touch (touch!) my hand. ‘You’re beautiful.’ She squeezes it.

I pull away sharply, dramatically, shoulders back in the seat. She doesn’t flinch. She casually grinds out her cigarette stub, collects the cup and wanders to the counter.

I glance down at my body. A soft pink-fresh fleshy body, dark-haired, a flesh-fold line across the stomach. The insecurity tells me it is there. How I have wanted to cut myself there, cut a slit,

bleed, become as thin as an advertisement. I will not let anyone curl their arm around my waist. My wrists are alien thin, easy to cut. I stare into the mirror and see a falsity, an imperfection. Mirror mirror on the wall...let the fairy Godmother pumpkin-coach me to the ball where I shall meet Prince Charming. A snow white Cinderella. I dream too much.

I see the mature, adult frame beneath my camouflaging layers. I turn the camera on myself like a gun, grimace at the flash whine.

I take a photo. I will probably burn it later.

When he was five, in the ignorance of Heaven, he believed in angels. He saw them on cakes and Christmas trees. He asked his mother if he could attend Sunday School regularly. He liked the stories where the angels descended on high and spoke to the common believers. He came home from school with bruises and, once, a broken arm. He learned the word smite and sang it like an incantation, a ritual as the school fists pummelled him. He declined the roast beef on Good Friday, frowned at his parents as they chopped and swallowed.

When he was five he went to church, persuaded his Sunday School teacher, Mr Hope, to let him take communion. The flaky circle of Jesus' flesh - take of my flesh and I shall take of yours - tasted sweet. He believed despite all the odds against him. He said his prayers every night, on his knees, the supplication position, always starting with 'Dear God' and ending with 'Amen'. He believed he was getting through. He thought of God as a great transmitter in the sky.

When he was five he was taken on a Christmas holiday by the church to the snowfields. They tobogganed and slipped down slopes of powdered snow. He loved the icy grind when he took off a glove and crunched snow in a fist. They threw snowballs and fought over how many eyes the snowman should have. In the tent that night he heard the heavy breathing of Mr Hope and felt stifled. He crept outside, being tentative with the zip, and saw an angel, delivering all the presents. The angel winked at him, wings unfurled. Came forward to take him away.

The forest glowed cool green, a ruffle of feathers floated on the night air.

Or perhaps he dreamed it?

I say goodbye to Celia. She closes the door behind me with an unsure smile. I walk home in the rain, the pewter light of the day's fall at my heels. I let myself become sodden, my clothes cleaving themselves to my shape. I stumble once and inadvertently - finger expectant on the button - take a photo.

I am alone in the square.

My flat begins with an unobtrusive warehouse door, painted Byzantine-amber to fit in with the alt-stadt appearance of this street, this town. I sometimes let myself become lost as I walk homewards. My feet always end up at the door as if through providence.

This town is a hive, as intricate as the veins of ice that map my windows in winter. There is a black steel staircase to the yellow door. The key turns, the door swings open, the moment plunges, and you're inside a snowdome. I have painted the entire two-room flat ice-blue. Even the ceiling; especially the ceiling. I lie awake at night, look up, and dream of snow. It's easy, having no heater and being cold. More remarkable than this is the wallpapering of the walls in thousands (yes, there would be over a thousand now) and thousands of photos. These are the snowflakes.

There is a bed and a desk, a small kitchenette, and an indented bathroom cum darkroom off to the side. I have picked wild blue daisies and tucked them in glasses.

The window at the front opens onto the swelling convexity of an iron balcony. It looks onto the street, and its awnings and window boxes, and markets on Saturdays. The rich spices sift up to me and make my mouth water. I often walk amongst the crowds though rarely have the money to buy. The things you can find - I was once excited by a gramophone crumbling gently into ruin. Stall owners ply their foods and medicines and fine rugs with a customary cry of over-enthusiasm. Sometimes the sound gets to me, and the grotesque onset of people and people, and I have to shut myself up, close my ears, and curl foetal. Contrary to opinion, it does help.

Now, I head straight for the darkroom, secure curtain edges, taped cardboard, shut out the end-light. The red bulb is seedy and fascinating. Liquids slosh from their bottles into trays. The sink is filled too, though cumbersome to work with; photos flatten themselves to its sides. The film wraps around the spool. The excitement of wonder at the images. Swirling film in chemicals to make the light physical, to harden it forever. It takes some time.

I dry the negatives and take them out, hold them up against the bright room light. Some good images. All this beauty I have for myself. People hold photographs by the edges, afraid they may tumble in if they look further, or touch too closely. I like to rub the photos all over my naked body, become what I take. A life-giving balm.

There are three photographs that make me stop. The street. I lay them down on my makeshift light-tray. The magnifying cup pulls images into the glass like a premonition, as I glide across them.

There is a boy in these three photos. He is dressed in ragged clothes, a close cropped hairdo with the cactus-spike of recent regrowth. He is exactly the same height as I am, exactly the same weight I would guess. But for dissimilar accoutrements he is the exact image of me. He is not hiding behind all the faces, he is out in the open, clear. Bodies blur about him. I should have noticed him. That isn't what bothers me.

His eyes are sharp, arrowed straight at the camera. And beyond, behind the camera. At me. Through me.

Outside, the sound of rain like gravel on glass.