

She looked in the mirror.

The mirror said "CHEAP." The girl turned away from the mirror and that sad, tired face. She could wash away the smell, the semen and the other bodily mementoes of the previous night, but not the memory, and not that cloying touch of shame. "Cheap," she was cheap, she must be cheap because that was the way he had treated her. He hadn't looked her in the eye the next morning; he had recoiled from her attempts to touch him. After the night, communication had been terse and awkward. The few words he had spoken had been delivered in gruff monosyllables, the tone of which shrieked "go away."

Ugly and cheap, that's what the mirror of her soul reflected back to her. All that brave talk about being a "New woman," about taking charge this New Year were just empty words. Without the alcohol, her friends and the buzz of the party, she was still the little girl who wondered if she would ever be beautiful; the little girl who had loved and needed the assurances of her father; the little girl who still needed fatherly assurances. She missed him. Her dad was the only man she knew she could trust. He had watched out for her, he had protected her and built up her self esteem. Why did he have to die when he did? Without him she had tried to construct a world in which she was a bright confident, sassy goal getter, but reality was the sore body, wounded heart, and miserable face staring back at her from the mirror. She looked into the mirror again. Her reflection was blurred; she was crying again. Why did it always end like this?

Her friends picked her up. They'd chided her for being a "little girl." Between the giggles and the alcohol, they made her see "reason." He hadn't used her, he hadn't slept with her then dumped her...she'd had him! She had enticed and then bedded him and if he didn't want to know, his tough luck! Of course she wasn't cheap or a tart! That was old fashioned granny thinking! No, she was living to the max! Between their talk and alcohol's comforting caress she saw "sense." The emptiness and loss that was gnawing away at her; the feeling that she had somehow lost something of herself was a hang up, a religion thing, too much of the daddy's girl thing. Daddy had gone now. Sure it was sad he had died, especially that way, but he was gone and she had to forget about him and move on with her life. "That is the problem of going too often to church," they said. It filled the head with a lot of "old fashioned stuff," they insisted. She was a modern girl earning more than religion could ever provide. All that "morals talk," was okay...for then, you know, for granny in her days, but society had moved on and girls only needed themselves and the comfort a couple of drinks and a good laugh provided to climb any and every mountain. And they were right! After half a dozen rounds with them and her favourite tipple, it all made sense. She felt whole again. She wasn't ugly; she was confident, strong and attractive. They'd go out again tonight and prove it. Nothing cheap about her except, she thought as she giggled to herself, the alcohol she drank.

Is she or isn't she? I have been watching the girl in the black dress for a while now; I cannot take my eyes off her...and cannot make up my mind about her. Beautiful that is, is she or isn't she beautiful? Sure beauty is subjective. Two men eyeball the same girl; one starts to get all tongue tied and happy clappy at the just the possibility of getting her number, the other wonders if his buddies' parents are aware of their son's failing eyesight. I know "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," - I've argued passionately and even fallen out with mates over it - my indecision is not because I cannot make up my mind about her, but I cannot see her! Forming an opinion is not what I wrestle with, seeing is!

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The lighting is poor. Disco strobes were never meant to bring Miami Beach brightness to a dance floor. The puny illumination provided by the strobe lighting is further discounted by all the vaporised sweat and the assorted tobacco smoke my fellow New Year revellers are generating. You would need to have the eyes of a Barn owl to see anything clearly in this gloom and unfortunately I don't. Even with my prescription glasses, my eyesight isn't quite 20/20. Yet as I stare at the girl, I know it isn't just the poor lighting and murk I am struggling with. The four cans of Special Brew Extra I raced through to get me in the mood, before gate crashing this party are really messing with my senses now. My mind feels more scrambled than a Mickey Dees breakfast omelette!

The mist has thickened. Hard core party animals have a name for this haze which forms from sweat and cigarette smoke; Party smog they call it. It only develops in venues which are small, have poor ventilation, and are ridiculously overcrowded. Its presence is a sign that either someone got carried away with the invites, or the bouncers have decided to do some serious underground supplementing of their pay packets. Once it starts to really mist up the place, it is best to know where the nearest exit is; tragedy is only a carelessly discarded cigarette butt away from striking. Yet party smog isn't all bad news. At least you know if you get caught up in it, that you are in the right place, if fun, frolicking and other extracurricular activities are what you are on the prowl for. Which returns my focus to the girl, for fun, frolicking and "extracurriculars" is what drew my attention to her in the first place! She is part of a small group of women. They are all wearing figure hugging dresses; they are all drinking and dancing wildly. It is obvious they too have come to have fun. Is she beautiful or even pretty or not? Who could make serious judgements with the current circumstances and in my present state of mind; but do I really care? Do I care whether she is a stunner or not...NO! For this I do know about the girl I have been eyeballing for the past five minutes and it is all that really matters; in that tight fitting black outfit, and the stockings, and the heels I find her incredibly attractive.

Like a Moth to the candle light or a child's hand to the reachable cookie jar; like a builder's eye's to a buxom woman's chest, or me to her, it is all about attraction and yes I find that girl very attractive. In that minimalist black lycra dress, she oozes that kind of sensuality rutting males find irresistible. I am the moth drawn instinctively towards her bright burning candle. She is sensual, alluring and desirable; and most importantly...she is available. That smile says so. Her constant over the shoulder glances say so. Even her dancing, a hypnotic fusion of matter and sound - serpent smooth body undulations that coil and weave in and out of the pounding migraine inducing rhythm; movements that cause her barely holstered chest to jut suggestively in my direction - cries so. With her eyes she signals that she has seen me watching her... and she likes it; she likes the attention; she is available! That interest is the bright light that guides me moth like in this murk, it is a light that shines and washes away the party smog and all my other confusions and deliberations. It is a bright light that bedazzles all other considerations; it draws me irresistibly towards her. She is beautiful! Her availability outweighs any other yardstick or parameter mere looks might throw up. She is available and that counts, it makes her gorgeous to me...and my lust.

It is a mutual lust.

No need for games; no need to even pretend to enter that treacherously confusing morass modern day courtship has become; she likes me, I want her, the pact is mutual. So from eye to eye contact,

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straight to a hand on her shoulder easily slipping to her waist, the twelve steps of relational courting circumvented with nothing more than a cheeky grin. And what is her riposte to such outrageous audacity? A cold look maybe, a shrill scream of outrage followed by a stinging rebuke delivered onto my cheek? No, it is a smile; the girl's response is a quizzical but clearly accepting smile. So things move quickly. From the barest of conversation, to face to face passionate kissing; the mutual attraction we share cemented by the music and the spirit of licentiousness emanating from the thousand souls merrily celebrating this New Year of promise. It forms the perfect backdrop to us greedily indulging in our mutual lust.

We talk on the way back to my place. Still fuelled by the party vibe and beer, we swap bits of information about each other. Some of the info is relevant, but most is instantly forgettable banalities. She likes Blur, so do I, her father died recently of cancer; I support Spurs, she Chelsea, she adores Pizza me too... well sort of. Her name is really exotic, Jasminder...I think she said; her cat is afraid of mice. While that and other trivial life pursuits are exchanged, my hands rove and establish a more substantial relationship with her upper parts. She is a willing canvass, gurgling and giggling at my alcoholically inspired jokes, accommodating actually leaning into every fumbling, fondling touch. Only once is that little voice raised and it is immediately stamped on. Religion and morality have their place, and I have my position in the pew - three rows from the front of the central dais of First Baptist of the Christ Mission - but that is on Sunday not now.

So we do it. We are on and into each other as soon as my apartment door closes out the rest of the world. What little that remains hidden is revealed and plundered, giggles give way to groans and the mutual pact of sexual desire is sealed. Starting in the hallway eventually finishing on the bed, driven by that voice which demands "carpe diem seize the moment, eschew all else," we know each other until the heat of our carnal desires is burnt crisp and exhaustion drags us away into deep sleep.

At first it is a hesitant presence. As it nervously flits from spot to spot, the tired body can easily ignore it. But it always grows. Increasing in boldness and confidence, its encroachments take larger and larger chunks of time until inevitably, everyone accepts that it, and it alone reigns...it, is, daylight. With the new day triumphant, the passion and the frenzy of the previous night slink's off. And what rides at the front of daybreak's triumphant baggage train? Morality and reason, reassessment and...

She isn't beautiful. Without the Grime Mc's music and the darkness, and alcoholically befuddled senses; without the spirit of the moment and with the sating of lust, she isn't even attractive. Those legs, so lithe and appealing in stockings and heels are actually thick and slightly bow. And her breath...how rank! Jameela or what's her funny name's make up is garish, and dare I think it, quite trollope like, and as for that nose shouldn't that be on some bird of prey? Of course with morality, reason and reassessment wreaking havoc in my head, it is only a question of time before the fourth horse man of the next day apocalypse turns up. I am filled with regret! I hadn't realised how young she is. I shouldn't have, last night was a mistake! It might have felt fine...then and it had felt right... last night but feelings are best acted on when caution and reason are sleeping, feelings don't handle daylight well. It was wrong and it did not have to be Sunday for the remorse to have me in knots. It would be best to end it quickly.

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She wanted to linger, she tried to kiss me, to touch me tenderly as we parted; I brushed her away, I'd had enough! Enough of her; her body, her touch, her scent and I was determined I wanted no more! She was yesterday's fruit, yesterday's mango, tasted enjoyed and now discarded—well past her sell by date.

She smiled bravely as I shut the cab door. She tried to feign nonchalant indifference, but the hurt was there. Strangely I did find her attractive, and almost beautiful in her moment of vulnerability. Yes for the briefest of instants an attraction not based on sensuality blossomed, then was gone as the cab sped off.

On the way back to my place, a commotion at the corner shop. A young boy flashes past; he has a treasure trove of sweets clutched firmly in his hands. Moments later, the shopkeeper, Mr Pratel puffs up, he is irate and he rages at the boy. As he leaks bucket loads of curry flavoured sweat, he is the picture of frustrated helplessness. Mr Pratel can only watch as the boy makes good his escape; he has no hope of catching the thief.

"Why didn't you stop him Charles?" he blusters at me.

I brush past him; I do not like Mr Pratel. His prices are too high and his ever present oily smile hints at smug satisfaction. He knows that the half a mile or so to the next convenience store is too inconvenient for the mix of pensioners and broke arse poor that make up the neighbourhood. He has been legally mugging us of our small coins for years now, who cares if every now and then the odd apprentice street hood pays him back in kind?

"Am I your security guard, are you my brother, am I your keeper?" I retort as I leave him to bemoan his loss to all who would care to listen.

"My brother's keeper." Those words come back to me later in the day when I think about the girl. She was young and there was a desperateness about her. I knew she was vulnerable. She said she had lost her father recently. It wasn't just that black dress or the lack of it that drew me to her, I felt her vulnerability. I took advantage of it and I know no beer, no party smog, or poor lighting can disguise that fact. The image of the thief flashes into my thoughts, but when the kid turns around to stick two fingers up at Mr Pratel, it is my face I see laughing at the helpless shopkeeper... and it is the girl not Mr Pratel who stares back helplessly. I Charles am the thief and I took something much more precious than a bag of sweets. I took her respect. I was not my sister's keeper.