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BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU



Beautiful World, Where Are You

‘When I write something I usually think it is very important and that I am a very fine writer. I think this happens to everyone. But there is one corner of my mind in which I know very well what I am, which is a small, a very small writer. I swear I know it. But that doesn’t matter much to me.’

—Natalia Ginzburg, ‘My Vocation’ (trans. Dick Davis)

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A woman sat in a hotel bar, watching the door. Her appearance was neat and tidy: white blouse, fair hair tucked behind her ears. She glanced at the screen of her phone, on which was displayed a messaging interface, and then looked back at the door again. It was late March, the bar was quiet, and outside the window to her right the sun was beginning to set over the Atlantic. It was four minutes past seven, and then five, six minutes past. Briefly and with no perceptible interest she examined her fingernails. At eight minutes past seven, a man entered through the door. He was slight and dark-haired, with a narrow face. He looked around, scanning the faces of the other patrons, and then took his phone out and checked the screen. The woman at the window noticed him but, beyond watching him, made no additional effort to catch his attention. They appeared to be about the same age, in their late twenties or early thirties. She let him stand there until he saw her and came over.

Are you Alice? he said.

That’s me, she replied.

Yeah, I’m Felix. Sorry I’m late.

In a gentle tone she replied: That’s alright. He asked her what she wanted to drink and then went to the bar to order. The waitress asked how he was getting on, and he answered: Good yeah, yourself? He ordered a vodka tonic and a pint of lager. Rather than carrying the bottle of tonic back to the table, he emptied it into the glass with a quick and practised movement of

his wrist. The woman at the table tapped her fingers on a beer mat, waiting. Her outward attitude had become more alert and lively since the

man had entered the room. She looked outside now at the sunset as if it were of interest to her, though she hadn't paid any attention to it before. When the man returned and put the drinks down, a drop of lager spilled over and she watched its rapid progress down the side of his glass.

You were saying you just moved here, he said. Is that right?

She nodded, sipped her drink, licked her top lip.

What did you do that for? he asked.

What do you mean?

I mean, there's not much in the way of people moving here, usually. People moving away from here, that would be more the normal thing. You're hardly here for work, are you?

Oh. No, not really.

A momentary glance between them seemed to confirm that he was expecting more of an explanation. Her expression flickered, as if she were trying to make a decision, and then she gave a little informal, almost conspiratorial smile.

Well, I was looking to move somewhere anyway, she said, and then I heard about a house just outside town here – a friend of mine knows the owners. Apparently they've been trying to sell it forever and eventually they just started looking for someone to live there in the meantime. Anyway, I thought it would be nice to live beside the sea. I suppose it was a bit impulsive, really. So— But that's the entire story, there was no other reason.

He was drinking and listening to her. Toward the end of her remarks she seemed to have become slightly nervous, which expressed itself in a shortness of breath and a kind of self-mocking expression. He watched this performance impassively and then put his glass down.

Right, he said. And you were in Dublin before, was it?

Different places. I was in New York for a while. I'm from Dublin, I think I told you that. But I was living in New York until last year.

And what are you going to do now you're here? Look for work or something?

She paused. He smiled and sat back in his seat, still looking at her.

Sorry for all the questions, he said. I don't think I get the full story yet.

No, I don't mind. But I'm not very good at giving answers, as you can see.

What do you work as, then? That's my last question.

She smiled back at him, tightly now. I'm a writer, she said. Why don't you tell me what you do?

Ah, it's not as unusual as that. I wonder what you write about, but I won't ask. I work in a warehouse, outside town.

Doing what?

Well, doing what, he repeated philosophically. Collecting orders off the shelves and putting them in a trolley and then bringing them up to be packed. Nothing too exciting.

Don't you like it, then?

Jesus no, he said. I fucking hate the place. But they wouldn't be paying me to do something I liked, would they? That's the thing about work, if it was any good you'd do it for free.

She smiled and said that was true. Outside the window the sky had grown darker, and the lights down at the caravan park were coming on: the cool salt glow of the outdoor lamps, and the warmer yellow lights in the windows. The waitress from behind the bar had come out to mop down the

empty tables with a cloth. The woman named Alice watched her for a few seconds and then looked at the man again.

So what do people do for fun around here? she asked.

It's the same as any place. Few pubs around. Nightclub down in Ballina, that's about twenty minutes in the car. And we have the amusements, obviously, but that's more for the kids. I suppose you don't really have friends around here yet, do you?

I think you're the first person I've had a conversation with since I moved in.

He raised his eyebrows. Are you shy? he said.

You tell me.

They looked at one another. She no longer looked nervous now, but somehow remote, while his eyes moved around her face, as if trying to put something together. He did not seem in the end, after a second or two, to conclude that he had succeeded.

I think you might be, he said.

She asked where he was living and he said he was renting a house with friends, nearby.

Looking out the window, he added that the estate was almost visible from where they were sitting, just past the caravan park. He leaned over the table to show her, but then said it was too dark after all. Anyway, just the other side there, he said. As he leaned close to her their eyes met. She dropped her gaze into her lap, and taking his seat again he seemed to suppress a smile. She asked if his parents were still living locally. He said his mother had passed away the year before and that his father was 'God knows where'.

I mean, to be fair, he's probably somewhere like Galway, he added. He's not going to turn up down in Argentina or anything. But I haven't seen him in years.

I'm so sorry about your mother, she said.

Yeah. Thanks.

I actually haven't seen my father in a while either. He's— not very reliable.

Felix looked up from his glass. Oh? he said. Drinker, is he?

Mm. And he— You know, he makes up stories.

Felix nodded. I thought that was your job, he said.

She blushed visibly at this remark, which seemed to take him by surprise and even alarm him. Very funny, she said. Anyway. Would you like another drink?

After the second, they had a third. He asked if she had siblings and she said one, a younger brother. He said he had a brother too. By the end of the third drink Alice's face looked pink and her eyes had become glassy and bright. Felix looked exactly the same

as he had when he had entered the bar, no change in manner or tone. But while her gaze increasingly roamed around the room, expressing a more diffuse interest in her surroundings, the attention he paid to her had become more watchful and intent. She rattled the ice in her empty glass, amusing herself.

Would you like to see my house? she asked. I've been wanting to show it off but I don't know anyone to invite. I mean, I am going to invite my friends, obviously. But they're all over the place.

In New York.

In Dublin mostly.

Whereabouts is the house? he said. Can we walk there?

Most certainly we can. In fact we'll have to. I can't drive, can you?

Not right now, no. Or I wouldn't chance it, anyway. But I do have my licence, yeah.

Do you, she murmured. How romantic. Do you want another, or shall we go?

He frowned to himself at this question, or at the phrasing of the question, or at the use of the word 'romantic'. She was rooting in her handbag without looking up.

Yeah, let's head on, why not, he said.

She stood up and began to put on her jacket, a beige single-breasted raincoat. He watched her fold back one sleeve cuff to match the other. Standing upright, he was only just taller than she was.

How far is it? he said.

She smiled at him playfully. Are you having second thoughts? she said. If you get tired of walking you can always abandon me and turn back, I'm quite used to it. The walk, that is. Not being abandoned. I might be used to that as well, but it's not the sort of thing I confess to strangers.

To this he offered no reply at all, just nodded, with a vaguely grim expression of forbearance, as if this aspect of her personality, her tendency to be 'witty' and verbose, was, after an hour or two of conversation, a quality he had noted and determined to ignore. He said goodnight to the waitress as they left. Alice looked struck by this, and glanced back over her shoulder as if trying to catch sight of the woman again. When they were outside on the footpath, she asked whether he knew her. The tide broke in a low soothing rush behind them and the air was cold.

The girl working there? said Felix. I know her, yeah. Sinead. Why?

She'll wonder what you were doing in there talking to me.

In a flat tone, Felix replied: I'd say she'd have a fair idea. Where are we heading?

Alice put her hands in the pockets of her raincoat and started walking up the hill. She seemed to have recognised a kind of challenge or even repudiation in his tone, and rather than cowing her, it was as though it had hardened her resolve.

Why, do you often meet women there? she asked.

He had to walk quickly to keep up with her. That's an odd question, he replied.

Is it? I suppose I'm an odd person.

Is it your business if I meet people there? he said.

Nothing about you is my business, naturally. I'm just curious.

He seemed to consider this, and in the meantime repeated in a quieter, less certain voice: Yeah, but I don't see how it's your business. After a few seconds he added: You're the one who suggested the hotel. Just for your information. I never usually go there. So no, I don't meet people there that much. Okay?

That's okay, that's fine. My curiosity was piqued by your remark about the girl behind the bar 'having an idea' what we were doing there.

Well, I'm sure she figured out we were on a date, he said. That's all I meant.

Though she didn't look around at him, Alice's face started to show a little more amusement than before, or a different kind of amusement. You don't mind people you know seeing you out on dates with strangers? she asked.

You mean because it's awkward or whatever? Wouldn't bother me much, no.

For the rest of the walk to Alice's house, up along the coast road, they made conversation about Felix's social life, or rather Alice posed a number of queries on the subject which he mulled over and answered, both parties speaking more loudly than before due to the noise of the sea. He expressed no surprise at her questions, and answered them readily, but without

speaking at excessive length or offering any information beyond what was directly solicited. He told her that he socialised primarily with people he had known in school and people he knew from work. The two circles overlapped a little but not much. He didn't ask her anything in return, perhaps warned

off by her diffident responses to the questions he'd posed earlier, or perhaps no longer interested.

Just here, she said eventually.

Where?

She unlatched a small white gate and said: Here. He stopped walking and looked at the house, situated up a length of sloped green garden. None of the windows were lit, and the facade of the house was not visible in any great detail, but his expression indicated that he knew where they were.

You live in the rectory? he said.

Oh, I didn't realise you would know it. I would have told you at the bar, I wasn't trying to be mysterious.

She was holding the gate open for him, and, with his eyes still on the figure of the house, which loomed above them facing out onto the sea, he followed her. Around them the dim green garden rustled in the wind. She walked lightly up the path and searched in her handbag for the house keys. The noise of the keys was audible somewhere inside the bag but she didn't seem to be able to find them. He stood there not saying anything.

She apologised for the delay and switched on the torch function on her phone, lighting the interior of her bag and casting a cold grey light on the front steps of the house also.

He had his hands in his pockets. Got them, she said. Then she unlocked the door.

Inside was a large hallway with red-and-black patterned floor tiles. A marbled glass lampshade hung overhead, and a delicate, spindly table along the wall displayed a

wooden carving of an otter. She dumped her keys on the table and glanced quickly in the dim, blotchy mirror on the wall.

You're renting this place on your own? he said.

I know, she said. It's much too big, obviously. And I'm spending millions on keeping it warm. But it is nice, isn't it? And they're not charging me any rent. Shall we go in the kitchen? I'll turn the heat back on.

He followed her down a hallway into a large kitchen, with fixed units along one side and a dining table on the other. Over the sink was a window overlooking the back garden. He stood in the doorway while she went searching in one of the presses. She looked around at him.

You can sit down if you'd like to, she said. But by all means remain standing if it's what you prefer. Will you have a glass of wine? It's the only thing I have in the house, drinks-wise. But I'm going to have a glass of water first.

What kind of things do you write? If you're a writer.

She turned around, bemused. If I am? she said. I don't suppose you think I've been lying. I would have come up with something better if I had been. I'm a novelist. I write books.

And you make money doing that, do you?

As if sensing a new significance in this question, she glanced at him once more and then went back to pouring the water. Yes I do, she said. He continued to watch her and then sat down at the table. The seats were padded with cushions in crinkled russet cloth.

Everything looked very clean. He rubbed the smooth tabletop with the tip of his index finger. She put a glass of water down in front of him and sat on

one of the chairs.

Have you been here before? she said. You knew the house.

No, I only know it from growing up in town. I never knew who lived here.

I hardly know them myself. An older couple. The woman is an artist, I think.

He nodded and said nothing.

I'll give you a tour if you like, she added.

He still said nothing and this time didn't even nod. She didn't look perturbed by this; it seemed to confirm some suspicion she had been nursing, and when she continued to speak it was in the same dry, almost sardonic tone.

You must think I'm mad living here on my own, she said.

For free? he answered. Fuck off, you'd be mad not to. He yawned unselfconsciously and looked out the window, or rather at the window, since it was dark out now and the glass only reflected the interior of the room. How many bedrooms are there, out of curiosity? he asked.

Four.

Where's yours?

In response to this abrupt question she did not move her eyes at first, but kept staring intently at her glass for a few seconds before looking directly up at him. Upstairs, she said. They're all upstairs. Would you like me to show you?

Why not, he said.

They rose from the table. On the upstairs landing was a Turkish rug with grey tassels.