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THE GIRL

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The Girl

About halfway down Milsolm street stands a bus shelter of indeterminate age, an incongruous piece of post war architecture at the side of the road, nestled between the tall harsh fluorescent street lights recently added to this thoroughfare to assuage the council's guilt for the spate of traffic accidents that now plague this once suburban road. Next to the bus shelter stands one of the pollarded trees that push through the pavement, remnants of genteelness for the larger houses set back from the road, now converted into flats and maisonettes for those inhabitants poor enough to have to remain.

It is dark, but the street shines with the reflected orange glow of the neon lights in the drifting drizzle of this northern clime. Into this Dante's scene a solitary car moves slowly, leaving a slight vapour trail of spray from its wheels to fall back down on the surface in a chaotic pattern of shimmering incandescence, its tracks fading away as it proceeds. As it nears the junction with Queen Street it slows, the bright brake lights adding a splash of violent red to the night. It stops - and for a moment there is a hesitation in the scene - then a figure approaches the passenger door and stoops, its identity made anonymous by the distance. A discussion ensues, muffled by the dampness, before the passenger door opens and the figure climbs into the car that drives slowly away, leaving the street once again quiet and still.

The moment passes, its fleeting existence only known to the participants, until it fades from their memory. Even the girl sitting huddled in the corner of the bus shelter has not recognised its existence. She is too preoccupied with the trivia of her life for the moment to have had any impact on her conciousness. At no time did she wonder why the car stopped, why the figure approached, what made the figure get in the car, where did the car drive to, any number of a thousand questions material to the moments existence.

Nor does her preoccupation have merit. It is not based on some deep philosophical reasoning of being, or an unrequited longing of some distant lover, unfairly taken from her by events over which she has no control, part of a grand love affair that makes such memorable films. If she was contemplating suicide there would have been some merit in her preoccupation. At least we could ask if her passing will be noticed? Will her guardian angel step in and show her the significance of her life? Are there even moments in her life that he, or she, if indeed guardian angels have a sex, could use to counter the arguments going through her mind to terminate her miserably short existence that she knows as her life?

Instead, the very mundaneness of her preoccupation is her saviour, the rock of her sanity in an ephemeral existence like that of the moment she has recently failed to acknowledge or question. An astute watcher would see her hand move up to touch the spot so noticeable on her cheek that is the real cause of her preoccupation. The single puss filled pore that has brought her to this spot, to sit sheltering from the drizzle, shivering in her inadequate clothing, bemoaning the unfairness of life and hating that cow Angela who pointed out the offending pimple to that boy she fancied, the one who looked like the lead singer from her currently favourite pop group, the group she spent all last weeks money on buying a ticket to see.

Of course, the boy in question was not the lead singer and had the girl been more sober she would have realised that the resemblance was not quite as close as she thought. However, the infatuation, so recently brought to the fore and enhanced by the large posters of her idol that adorn her bedroom, has clouded her mind to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Her desire for the unobtainable led her to flirt with the boy as he paid for his new trainers in the shoe shop where she works, resulting in the invitation to the party she left some hours ago in tears of anger and frustration.

Another car turns into the road and cruises slowly down its length. Like the other, it slows and stops at the junction with Queen Street and another figure approaches, but this time walks away after a short discussion. The car continues its slow progress, purring gently, the engine hardly audible over the noise of its tyres on the wet tarmac. As it nears the bus stop it slows further, gently ceasing its passage, then falls into silence as the engine stops. The driver emerges and the door closes again with a satisfying clunk of prestige. He has already seated himself inside the bus shelter before the girl notices his presence.

"Are you alright."

The pleasantly smooth calm voice penetrates the girls thoughts. She looks up, wiping away a tear with the back of her hand and smearing the running mascara across her cheek. She does not jump, there is no sudden fright in her voice at the appearance of this man, no questioning of his motives, in fact hardly any real thought about him goes through her mind.

"You what?"

He smiles, engaging her with self assured eye contact. "I said, are you alright? You look cold."

"Just waiting." She smiles unconsciously, unaware that he has pounced and that she is a victim.

He continues, controlling his moment, blissfully unaware of the hidden danger that lurks in its depths, For this is a nemesis moment, one that will, through its insidious nature, ultimately extinguish his own

conciousness. "There are no more buses tonight." He reinforces her predicament, many more hours of cold or treat him as a friend. "Want some coffee?"

She does not nod or even acknowledge an understanding of his question, instead she simply watches him return to the car and retrieve a flask. She notices the way he walks, confidently, assured, unlike the boy she so recently wanted. Mature, but not old, his whole being makes her feel safe with him. He pours two cups out, hands her one and takes the other, sipping the coffee to show her that it is safe to drink.

Then he hands her a clean linen handkerchief, just so she can tidy herself up, make herself look presentable, make herself feel good. She hands the handkerchief back but he insists she keeps it, showing his generosity and kindness.

The girl gingerly sips the coffee and at once feels warmer, further reducing her anxiety, if indeed she has any. The argument and the boy leave her thoughts and she starts to concentrate on the man sitting in the shelter, not close enough to be threatening, but close enough to engage her. A vestige of intellect tries to rise in her mind, some long forgotten warning from a concerned parent about strangers tries to surface.

"What d'you want then?"

"I run a shelter, if you need a place to stay?"

"I ain't a runaway." God she must look awful if he thinks she's a runaway.

"Good." He holds out his hand for the cup. "So you'll be okay then?" He moves to the edge of the seat to show his intention of leaving, removing any remaining fear she may have.

In her mind she sees her flat - shared with the cow Angela - and the impossibility of returning there tonight, knowing that Angela will probably turn up with the boy. Perhaps Angela is there now, screwing away in her old bed, forcing the girl to listen to the long hours of base love making as the headboard thumps against the paper thin partition wall, interspersed with real or fake screams of delight. It is too much.

He senses her hesitation. "It's up to you." Knowing full well that it is no longer up to her.

"What's it like then, this place. I don't do God"

"Just a warm room, clean sheets, shower if you like and breakfast. Something to eat when you get there, if you want." Nothing she could refuse.

"Far?"

"Only twenty minutes, then you can sleep. I'll bring you back in the morning if you like."

"How much?"

"Five quid." Not nothing, nothing smacks of a suckers deal, nothing implies that there is something else, a hidden cost.

She rummages in her purse. "Yeah, okay." Cheaper than a taxi back to her parents, which she could not afford, even if she could find one at this time of night. "Here."

He takes the money, carefully folding the dogeared note into the smart leather wallet with its credit cards as the girl watches him intently. The deal is concluded and they leave the street behind in the drizzle and the moment passes with them into the luxury of the car, free now to weave its own existence without witnesses.