

Fixations

Fiction • Camiell Foulger

Late December leaves a sheet of ice on the sidewalks and on the cracked roads, ruined by seasons of cold and snowmelt. Darkness swallows the streets, where men shuffle, eyes downcast, and hands in pockets, intent on reaching their next destination. Few lights tremble in the apartment windows towering above the pathways.

Towards the end of the town, the only open bar hums with voices and smells of smoke. The light of the sign above its entrance flickers on and off. The Cat's Paw. It would have been frequented by a different mess of people at a different time of the year, but the kids are out of college for the holiday and the cold is creeping.

A woman slinks in, her hair pulled from her round eyes. She is average in stature and soft in the face, with the skulk of a kicked dog. Her denim coat bears the stamp of multiple patches and erratic stitching. No one looks at her when she settles down in a cheap, metal chair pulled up against the aging wooden bar.

She nods politely at the bartender and orders a gin and tonic. She knows she shouldn't be drinking, especially here, but she wants to empty her head. She hopes to pour out the mess of questions and bad answers into her palms, praying she can crush them within

her fingers. She unfolds her hands on the bar, traces the contours of its edges through the thick varnish and analyzes the messages scratched into the finish. Kevin loves Sheila. Call if you're looking for a good time. Sam Johnson 1998.

She tries to remember the last time she entered this same place, a year ago, in the dead of winter. She cannot think of the exact circumstances of the instance, nor anything particularly revealing about the visit, other than the wind chill she felt when she left as she opened the door to the outside and was met with the cold embrace of an empty city. Everyone had left the college town for the holidays, leaving the place vacant and unilluminated by apartment lights.

The bartender continues glancing at her as he assesses and attends to his other customers. A drunk man pounds his fist against the leg of his chair and spits curses about his wife. He continues mouthing off, even when the bartender tells him to leave. She feels her face burning, feeling embarrassment and shame at the man's behavior, but she cannot look away. Eventually, when the bartender refuses to serve him, he leaves, dragging his chair against the unfinished floor and snarling.

She averts her eyes, concentrating on the sensation in her mouth, the exquisite dryness. It reminds her of lollipops stuck to baseboards, of being young.

The bartender grins and hands her a second drink. He tells her it's on the house.

"Are you doing alright?" he asks, rubbing sweat from his temples. "You haven't been around much, Blake." The grizzled bartender smacks his gum over and over, waiting for her reply. His mouth looks like a wound, wet and gaping. It is something to be stitched into silence.

"I'm fine, Buck," she says, her words rounded and thick, bearing the single drink she had before. She likes Buck, but she isn't interested in talking. "How's business?"

"You know how it goes. Depends on the season." He's still smiling. "I'd say it's as good as it usually is at this time."

"I'd say that isn't too bad then," she says, making eye contact. "I hope Sandy is doing well."

Buck shakes his head and smiles sadly.

"You know her. Still kicking."

He dips his head and turns to begin filling another glass of the beer on tap for the man at the other end of the bar.

The man asking for his beer has a predatory expression pasted on his face; he doesn't hide his salaciousness. The few women at the bar ignore his constant aggressions, knowing the type of man he is. He turns his attention to Blake, and she knows immediately he's going to

throw his weight around for her.

Mouth pinched, she lowers her eyes, refusing to meet his gaze. He exaggerates his movements in the hopes of catching her eye. If she could, she would smirk, she would snap, she would permit a small explosion in the hopes of running him off.

Blake narrows her eyes, watching his gaze crudely comb her edges, prospecting and possessive. On the edge of the counter, she braces her hands, engaged in the routine of picking and pulling. Her fingernails are split along the edges, cracked through and fractured. Her cuticles are bleeding and the skin around her nails is peeled back, spotted with splashes of scarlet. The scars on her arms read like cigarette scars, symbols of burnout abuse. She loves the fact they make people wary and unable to speak. They always look at her like she's an accident, something to be hidden and picked up, tucked away under chair and left to be attended on another day. A better day.

This man remains unbothered. Instead, he perseveres.

Blake continues judging him from the corner of her eyes. Counting blessing and curse, moment and the hour, her mind shifts to the possible progression of his actions.

He stumbles from his seat, his wrinkled, aging face relaxed with the release of alcohol.

His fingers graze her elbow; tug at her sleeve. His leer is wide and dangerous, an accusation and a plea. She knows the exact breed of his want. She has seen it, she has heard it, and she has felt it. The man, built like a bear, breathes hard in her face, unable to gauge anything but his own desire. She notices the scent of cheap alcohol and his choice of cigarettes on the puff of his hot and humid breath. A pack of Pall Malls bulges from the waistband of his pants, unfiltered. The packaging reminds her of her grandfather, some vintage reminder of another life.

Blake rolls his touch off her shoulder and turns to him, more irritated than angry.

"Sir," she says flatly. "I am not interested."

He laughs, his tone tense and heavy, and keeps pushing for purchase. "Pretty girl, like you, what are you doing in a bar alone?" He pauses and strokes his beard, as if to appear if he is thinking something over. "You are such a nice piece of ass. I'll buy you a drink."

She looks up at him and stops picking the skin of her hands.

"I'm fine, but thank you."

"You must be joking," he says, face ruddy with drink and looming indignation.

"No," she says, fingers tightening on the edge of the bar.

He sneers, mouth curled in a snarl, his teeth exposed. "Really?" he

growls, twisting a napkin between his hands. “Your tits are sagging and you’re fat. It isn’t like you’ll do any better.” His sneer morphs into self-satisfaction, the edges become soft, his eyes become vacant.

She sighs but bites her tongue. She thinks of the men who have offered her weed, food, the promise of shelter in exchange for action. She builds the world of the good and the bad inside her mind; she paints the strict morality she continues to promise herself but does not always follow. She crosses valleys, she cries in defeat, she stares into the world knowing it will never change. She is tired. She is worn. She is twenty-seven.

The man with the Pall Malls looks like every other man who has touched her with his eyes and his words. Their eyes rove over her baggy clothing, her resentment, and the charred remains of her fatal naivety. Their eyes and their actions touched her as a child, touched while she was in stride with her mother on the street, touched her in church, touched her behind the counter at the coffee shop as she rung up their drinks.

They love to touch, they love to own, they love to take.

Men will fuck anything, her mother always told her.

She cannot count the number of times seventy-year-old men looked at her breasts, stroked her ass with their eyes like a loved possession.

Her mouth tastes like blood; she’s been biting the inside of her cheek.

The man with the beer belly and the Pall Malls spits at the floor and walks off. No one notices the exchange, or no one cares.

The conversation continues at the bar and she slides out of her seat. Her receipt crackles between her fist, something to play with as she walks home.

“Have a nice night, Buck,” she says quietly.

She steps out, partially out of embarrassment, partially out of shame, and embeds a cigarette between her lips. Her reddened fingers, slick with blood on the ends from picking her scabs, stain the package of smokes she pulls from her denim jacket’s pocket. She chews it for the stimulation, liking the foul taste and enjoying the fact she can focus on something other than her thoughts.

She walks back quickly, her head down. The wind remains blistering, an assault on her body. Her mind keeps her company like a warm blanket, muffling both sound and feeling.

When she gets back, the hotel welcome center is empty, so she strides in unbothered, quick to reach her door and turn the lock once inside.

Blake tugs off her shoes and tosses them to the floor. The ice and snow has cracked the leather, but she doesn’t bother making an attempt to save them. She flips the main light off and climbs into her rented bed.

She closes her eyes, knowing she should try harder, be kinder, but the expanse of her own compassion only reaches so far.

The motel covers carry sweat, stickiness, and the remains of food she cannot even decipher. Saltine crackers crushed in the carpet, mind numbing guilt bleeding into the edges of the room.

Blake counts stars in the popcorn ceiling. She thinks about the time she walked barefoot in the snow and the sharpness of the cold brought her back to feeling. She wishes she could harness the explosion of nervous energy tearing at her chest. Instead, she feels slave to feeling.

The rush of conviction alarms her, breaks her from her rage.

She thinks she will never wear her heart on her sleeve, she will never ask for help, she will never rely on the voices of others.

Later, she knows will measure her wrists in the motel bathroom, even though the light is flickering and even though the air feels like its own personal sense of suffocation. It is a check of size and weight, the creation of a body born of control.

Her tongue presses the alcove between cheek and teeth, an aid to concentration. The bed reeks of past transgressions, it reeks of stale and rotting Chinese food from a nearby restaurant she used to frequent long ago. The wet, heavy noodles were always saturated with salt and the consumer's latest suffering. It was a place where the food seemed endless, bottomless, and it always felt like stones in her stomach.

Eyes downcast, she traces the spaces between her ribs, the marble of her spine, the sharpness of her elbows. The bathroom mirror glints back with each startling spark of the broken light; it is her own self-portrait of self-hatred, a sickening sense of her own inverted self-absorption.

She looks back into a face she doesn't quite know.