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Tale Telling

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Abstract
A friend of mine told me this story. We were sitting in the back room of a restaurant, which was the bar and snacks, drinking white wine, catching up with one another. Cass had asked me how my novel was going, and I'd said, well, I was writing a lot, but I was worried that nothing ever happened. People had social gatherings, and talked and thought, but that was about all. Still, I was planning on putting in a suicide, that should make for a bit of action, it was at least a violent event. But then, perhaps it would seem contrived. When I get started I can talk for hours about my novel. But I don't want advice. Just reassurance.
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Well, she says, suicides do happen. In fact a lot of people commit suicide, or try to. Her face twists. She’s just heard about an old friend, she’s still feeling upset. I say it isn’t a major character that will do it. It’s one of the lesser ones, sort of pointing up the options open to the heroine (if you can call her that); she could do this, but doesn’t, she chooses survival, there but for the grace, and all that.

Cass wants to tell me about her suicide. He was a young man, when she knew him, an electrician, who came to their house to mend the telly. She was just a kid at the time, fifteen or so, he probably ten years older. He was terrifically good looking, blond hair, golden skin, handsome shoulders, but more than that, he was nice, he talked to her. He didn’t have to, she was just a kid, but he made her feel he liked chatting her up. His eyes shone, his face crinkled, he smelled. I got the impression the telly took a lot of fixing.

Naturally, Cass got a crush on him. She would’ve even if he hadn’t noticed her. There were two buses she could catch to school, one from the corner a block away from her house, or she could walk two miles to the village (this was in England) and catch a bus there. In the village was the electrical shop he and his brother kept. So every day she walked that two miles, just to go past the shop, just so she might walk past that shop and just might see him, there, inside, blond and handsome, serving the customers.

Was he married?

Oh no; not then. Not till much later. His brother was, though. This married brother flirted with her a bit too, it was a sort of game, well, it probably was for the other one as well. Once, it was funny, she’d been
standing at the bus stop and he’d been driving past in his van and waved at her, hanging out the window, waving, grinning; he’d driven into the bus. Not concentrating on his driving, see. Nobody hurt, but the van a bit wrecked. His wife never spoke to her again. But the younger one, the one she found so thrilling, who always talked to her, he was a bachelor.

Cass’s eyebrows lift, her eyes widen, her face smooths; she’s a fifteen year old girl whom men like to chat up at the bus stop. Who has men do foolish things through just looking at her.

The young one, the bachelor, he kept it going, beyond that. Took her on a picnic, they sat under willows by a river, a flat still sort of river with grassy banks, it’s still in her mind’s eye. The unlined candid eye of the girl, seeing again that river of her former home, so different from the rocky broken rivers here. He held her hand and kissed her. That was all. It was just what she wanted. Romance. Well, at fifteen one does. But wasn’t it thoughtful of him, knowing that was just right for her, when he was so much older, and had slept with plenty of women?

Maybe that was how he knew.

Probably. Anyway, she’d often thought gratefully of him because of that. Then what happened? Well, nothing. She got older, went away to university, got married, migrated. And he, twenty years later, committed suicide. Last year, that was.

But why? How?

Drank a bottle of whisky, took a bottle of pills. Drove up to a local beauty spot, sat in the car. That gets to her, somehow, his going there. Sitting in the car at a famous beauty spot, choosing as his last view of the world the peaceful smooth downs, and in the distance, a chalk horse – do I know those strange monumental horses, larger than life, ancient, drawn on the downs? She sees him looking at that, drinking the whisky, swallowing the pills.

It’s sympathetic. The ancient landscape – no, it’s unnerving. To kill himself there meant that the landscape failed. Perhaps he sat in the car, whisky and pills ready but not finally accepted, waiting for that beloved countryside to save him. And it didn’t. So he had to take them. But the easy death, more or less easy, that is something to be grateful for. Neither of us likes to think of violent means to the already violent act, the wrist-cutting, brains-blowing, the jumping from high buildings, or railway bridges in the path of trains, the insistence on blood and mess to make the survivors suffer.

Yes, that’s the way I’d choose, if I were to think of it which I don’t, I add hastily, let’s not tempt fate by admitting the possibility. Life has not been that bad yet. The cowardly way people would call it says Cass, but why not choose a comfortable end when there’s an option.

A waitress comes to take our order, cold tongue or chicken pie, bread, salad. We order another bottle of wine, the house white, we sip a lot in the pauses of the narrative. This back room is a pleasant enough place,
except perhaps for the large numbers of men in natty suits who stand about the bar, one hand in pocket, the other round a glass, their legs slightly apart and very straight between the knife-edged creases of their trousers; frequently they throw their heads back and laugh loud ritual laughs full of teeth. What are they? Public servants, lawyers? Not journalists. Perhaps party men, or lobbyists. Cass hopes they don’t have people’s destinies in their hands; they probably do.

And this young man, the electrician, why did he do it?

Ah. Dreadful things had happened. The brother, the one who ran into the bus, he came home one night very late, very drunk, and murdered his wife. Strangled her with the electric jug cord. Sort of tool of his trade, you might call it.


In a way, but in reverse. He had a mistress, he was seeing her, was presumably sick of his wife. Neither of us can cope with this. Had the wife been having an affair and the husband killed her in a mad fury of betrayal, of jealousy, it might have been more bearable, it might have been tragic, like Othello. Even if he got it wrong. A kind of poetic justice, however bleak still logical. Instead the poor wife had been betrayed twice over. Of course, Cass says, he was very drunk at the time. Came home, strangled her, fell into a drunken stupor, woke up in the morning and saw what he’d done. Well, his eight-year old daughter came and woke him and showed him. He rang the police, said somebody’s murdered my wife, but there was never any doubt he’d done it, no sign of break-in or robbery, he the only one there. He was tried, convicted, put in gaol. He might be out now, it was eight years ago.

The food comes, the waitress brings plates and salad, bread sprinkled with chives, the second bottle of wine. We’re sitting in comfortable canvas chairs, under a skylight hung with massive ferns. The waitress brings cutlery wrapped in paper napkins, we sit with the watchful expectant air of people about to be fed. Our eyes glance about. The walls are hung with curious paintings of haloed naked saints, or chists perhaps, in the company of women naked too, perhaps they are holy whores, or their wives. In some they’re taking saunas. The paintings are for sale. We’ve agreed they don’t appeal to us. Glabrous.

We’re eating hungrily enough. Cass’s tale hasn’t put us off our food. But it isn’t finished yet.

And the other brother, her electrician, was he married by this?

Oh yes, says Cass, and that’s another thing. She sighs, the memory of that golden infatuation of her youth, of the kind beautiful young man so come to grief, oppresses her. Even though it happened far away in time and space, and she’s only just learned the details, from her mother visiting, venturing away from that small village life where nothing is secret. The mother smugly, nervously, eyeing Cass; a dreadful thing for
the parents, such nice ordinary people, you never know. Such a thing will never happen in her family, will it.

Oh yes, Cass says, there’s more to come. His wife committed suicide, the year before him. Went to town and up the highest building she could find, it was a small town and the buildings weren’t terrible high but high enough, and jumped off. Died almost instantly. All this business of the brother, the murdered sister-in-law, was thought to have preyed on her mind, she couldn’t live with it. She’d become more and more depressive, an ordinary clinical condition presumably, and so had he, the two of them weighed down by this family crime, not able to go on bearing it. And their children, they left two children, small, just going to school; think how terrible life must have become too much for them, to be able to leave their children like that, one after the other.

I notice the artifice in Cass’s apparently random and certainly unrehearsed telling of this story, her ordering of events for maximum pity and terror. It’s only at this point that she piles on the bit about the other wife’s suicide. The narrative can hardly hold together under the weight of it. No wonder it was all too much for the young electrician, in his forties now, to bear. It makes you feel unsteady, yourself; these young chaps prospering, business good, wives, children, everything going for them, and all gone to nothing. Four hundred years ago the teller of such a tale would have discoursed upon the theme of Mutability, how all is Mutability, on this cold earth beneath the moon. Nothing has changed.

The wife, adds Cass, jumping from that high-enough building, didn’t actually land on the ground. She fell on to a mini, belonging to a girl who’d just bought it, saving her money to buy the little red car she’d always wanted. Made a mess of it, in fact. The girl tried to get compensation, since it wasn’t insured, but nobody would have it on, it was nobody’s responsibility. She wrote letters to the paper, and everybody agreed it was a terrible shame, but there was nothing to be done.

We’re drinking coffee now, looking at the pictures of the laid-back saints, or christs, or maybe they’re just old-fashioned beatified hippies. Cass says, so you see, suicide’s pretty common. Even amongst ordinary people. So’s murder for that matter. Commonplace, when you look at the papers.

Of course she’s right. I see the form, the shape, the superlative repetitive horror of the pattern life has made. But I can’t see how I can possibly use it. Not in a work of fiction. Not that sort of truth. Life may be like that, but art isn’t.

I go back to inventing my suicide. Of a minor character, in a single chapter, cleanly, with sadness, not much horror. Drown her, swiftly, kindly, in an icy lake, the whole deed only seconds long. My heroine contemplates it and is safe.