

The Lady in Waiting

Tick.

Doris lives in a squalid flat in darkest Clapham. There she lives out her dreams and masturbates from reality.

It is ten A.M. Doris awakens to the sound of autumn rain splashing in her head. It is a sound she finds comforting. She climbs from bed and makes over to the gas fire, taking the ankle length flannel night-dress with her for company. Striking of match and twisting of knob bring warmth and light to her world. Doris huddles to it, arms out, hands spread like the tails of two ageing peacocks, soaking up its energy. Warmed, she takes to the kitchen, where egg is boiled, bread toasted, and crusts removed; kettle is filled, teapot fed, and table set. She turns on the radio, twiddles the dial to a favourite station, which she never listens to, and finds a love song is playing. One she does not like.

The desert of sand has fallen through distorted test-tube and the egg is ready. Extra toast leaps from the cage of burning bars and falls dead to the counter top. The kettle whistles, screams and cries. It is a familiar nightmare to Doris, and as the tea seeps in boiling water, she herself seeps in a bubbling caldron of scolding loneliness. On this day though, with rain bouncing down outside, she is partially reprieved. Doris has hope for company. Her sorrow has been sent on holiday, and the nightmare, surrounding her, cannot for now get inside.

Tock.

Doris eats breakfast as formality would have it, slurps tea as required by the Queen. Bringing cup to lips her little finger sticks out in forty-five degrees of phallic rigidity. Meanwhile the rain, thousands of miles away, beats down on the street outside, hammering the heads of Red Indian post boxes, knocking the sense from forgotten garden gnomes.

Doris dresses, looks through the tear stained window pain and sees herself, reflected in transparency.

Doris works in the evenings, serving fish and chips to people she would like to know.

Doris' life stretches ahead like a dark road going nowhere. A cul-de-sac of unevents.

Tick

The morning slips on. She becomes a supermarket trolley woman, trudging along, humming tunelessly to herself.

"Hello, dear." The till lady greets Doris. They are of a kind. There is a feeling of camaraderie between them. Their fading dreams share the same bed.

"Hello." Pork chops, one pound seventy-nine.

"How are you?" Mince meat, one pound fifty.

"I'm fine. On top of the world really," Doris answers. Cabbage, forty-five pence.

"You working tonight?" The fish and chip shop is two doors away, down the parade, next to the Dog and Gun. Tomatoes, seventy-four pence.

"No. I've got the night off." Biscuits, thirty-five pence.

"That's nice. We could all do with a break." Eggs, forty pence.

"Yes." The black road begins to carry food to its end, where it piles up like a scrap yard of dead cars, awaiting some kind of purpose. Wine, three pounds eighty-two. The till lady's eyes register the bottle. It is not something Doris would normally buy.

"Going to a party, are we?" Her fingers pause on the till's insecure buttons, buttons that need the constant attention of their keeper, buttons with an insatiable desire to be touched and fondled.

"Something like that." Doris holds the secret to her like a sick child.

Tock.

Walking home, the rain continues to pour, but she remains dry, protected by an umbrella of brightly coloured expectation. Her plastic bag is overflowing with booty: packets of dream, cans of hope, for this is no ordinary time: Doris has been shopping with purpose, buying with reason, and even if the vegetables remind her of herself, perhaps she will turn out, by the end of the story, to be a succulent strawberry, and not simply a bland radish. There is meaning and direction to her stride, and Doris scales the staircase to the third floor flat with the agile, sure-footed movements of a confident and seasoned rock climber. Coat removed, her breasts have renewed buoyancy; she is alive with the demands of regained youth.

Doris, singing, looks almost pretty.

Tick.

The flat sighs with age, its walls groan with fatherly concern. It has seen all of this before. Will see all of this again. It has seen sorrow and pain and laughter and joy. Has heard rusty bed springs tapping out the rhythms of frantic lovers, heard the discordant cries of orgasm. It watches Doris through wallpaper eyes of fading roses, listens to her breath with its threadbare furnishings. And in the dark of night, when Doris gives comfort to herself, it turns away. Some things are too much even for a wise and elderly flat to bear.

Tock.

The morning is years away. Doris puts away the provisions in orderly rows. The cans stand to attention in her presence, but who knows what they do when the cupboard door is shut. Doris makes coffee, strong and dark and dependable.

The armchair takes her in its dying arms. The life remaining it would gladly give to her, if only she could take it. Offering what comfort it can, it moulds itself to Doris' tired frame. Sipping drink, gazing out of the window.

There is silence in the flat. A ticking clock divides that silence into neat segments, just as Doris likes it. Orderly. Out of the window, the rain has stopped. Doris places the empty cup on the coffee table and takes in a room full of air; her breasts strain to escape the constraints of dress and circumstance. Meanwhile, Doris herself decides to escape, into the outside world for a

while, to walk, to see what can be seen, while the light is good, while the mood is positive.

Tick.

Doris moves down the hall, down the staircase, leaving tracks of creaking steps as she goes. As she descends the final flight, the landlady appears from her secret chambers. A narrow lady, dark haired, fighting off forty-winning the battle, yet losing the war. She is a caretaker of sorts. The house is not hers. She has never owned anything in all her years, except a few toys when she was child. There is a black man who knows it is his, who paid money to the bank, signed papers of transfer. A black man who visits his caretaker by night, to rattle her bones, to play music on her xylophone ribs, to own another property.

Tock

"Hello, Doris."

"Hello."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible," Doris agrees.

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Shocking weather we're having."

"Terrible."

"Be seeing you."

"Yes, by the by." They are both adrift, on different oceans with no common points of reference. The owned and the ownerless.

Tick.

The sun shines with withered autumn strength. The avenue is covered by a kaleidoscope of rich leaf canopy, of multicoloured foliage, of protective tree hands, outstretched in transparent salutation. A bright light flashes. Doris closes her eyes and sees the after-image of Sorrow hang its head in shame. An old friend. She is comforted. This day is no run of the mill day: it is laced with prospect, chilled with the unknown, though sometimes, of course, it is nice to return to the warmth of things we know, no matter what they might be, and she offers Sorrow a half-hearted smile. Doris walks into the local park, along a mosaic foot path of sodden leaf.

Tock.

Evening comes on silent feet. The sun dies another death. The black man plays his percussive music. The caretaker takes good care of her obscure desires.

Tick.

The time is nigh.

Tock.

Doris prepares a meal fit for a king.

Tick.

It is seven fifteen. Yesterday, she had met a man in the park. He was called Harry. He was a few moments older than she.

Tock.

They had retired to a public house where they nestled in a corner.

Tick.

Doris manoeuvred her knee against his leg. Felt her heart b b b b b beat. Felt her loins moisten.

Tock.

He was charming. He was divorced. He was charming. He was divorced. She could feel the warmth of his breath tickle her ears with the sweetness of whispers.

Tick.

She heard herself ask him over, during a pause in laughter, tomorrow, for dinner. She heard him smile, glance down momentarily at her breasts, accept, with seeming pleasure.

Tock.

It is seven thirty. Food is cooking itself, and Doris retires to her bed chamber to dress. The smoothness of silk, holding her gently in its cupped hands, is telling her she is desirable. And the funny thing is, there is a certain truth to it. Doris, at this moment, is desirable.

It is seven forty-five. Doris uses make-up sparingly. Doris is ready.

She returns to the living room to sit. To wait. He is to arrive at eight o'clock. There is nervous silence about the place now, only the ticking clock seems calm. Deceptively at ease.

She pours herself a cup of coffee from the drip-drop machine to pass away the time. Sip, sip. How nice.

Tick

Not much longer, she thinks, and begins to prepare her script. What she will say and what he will answer. What she will think and what he will do. She plays this game like hop scotch, bouncing from one idea to another. Doris dares not look up to see the time, though she knows it is passing.

What he will think and she will do.

It must be almost time.

What he will want and she will offer.

Maybe it is past time. Maybe he got held up. Maybe he will be just a little late.

Forever has gone. There is silence. The moment is endless. She knows it is passing. She knows it is his passing.

Sip, sip. The coffee, with the passage of too much time, becomes sickly, almost putrid.

A plainness begins to cover Doris from head to foot. A cold creeping plainness. She stops playing and listens. There is something odd, but hard to place. She examines the air, searches out the enigma. Searching, she does not find. Seeing, she does not see. There is a stillness, like the afterbirth of a passing storm, the clouds gone, the woods silent, something missing, that was there but now is gone.

With blood curdling horror, Doris discovers what it is. Doris realises the silence is all there is.

Doris listens, hard.

There is no sound.

The clock has stopped.

Doris looks up.

Its hands are still.

The clock has stopped its hands are still.

The Lady in Waiting breathes horror.