

*Collision.*

She sat at the table behind me, her back to mine. I noticed her as I entered the café, as I surveyed the room, assessing the situation, the environment, finding emergency exits and signs to the toilets. This is what I do, so that no matter what situation may arise – fire, robbery, a sudden onslaught of diarrhoea – I know what to do, where to go, how to handle myself. So I noticed her, of course. Again, that's what I do, I notice. Things, people, signs, expressions. Bits of conversation. I try to find the stories that are underway, filling in the gaps myself, living the lives I never will through these slices of stories, these disembodied, borrowed, stolen narratives. I noticed that she sat alone, with her coat still on. Why didn't she take it off? Did she not plan to stay long? And her scarf, still nestling her neck. Why? Certainly she can't be cold? Maybe there was no one to offer to help her, no husband, boyfriend, no one to say, 'May I take your coat?' or 'Can I help you with that?' What do I long to be the one to do this? It's not my place, my role. Why do I find myself feeling the need to be everyone's hero? Perhaps because I know I'm no hero. She sat there with her coat still embracing her, and she it, her scarf in its place. She drank slowly. Deliberately. What did she drink? Something warm. Certainly she is so

warm...too warm. How can she not be warm? Watching her, even this much is making me feverish. The fabric, the wool, the steam rising from the cup. The shards of sunlight in the window. So much light, so much warmth. I sat. I sat behind her, also alone. By myself. Alone, like her, with her. Our chairs back to back, our shoulders inches apart. Why did I sit so close? And I cannot watch from here. A deep breath from her table. Sorrow? An emanation, expression of loneliness. I remember, her eyes looked lonely. I think. What did her eyes look like? What colour? I should have asked to join her. I should have asked to take her coat. To buy her a coffee. Is she drinking coffee? What do I know? I echo her sigh...A deep breath, inhale, exhale. I detect a light, floral fragrance, lavender, honeysuckle? It must be her. I breathe her in again. Breathe her out. What is this foreign feeling? This strange seduction? Does she sense it? It isn't possible, could it be possible? I lean back slightly and can feel her presence. This presence of the other. Not touching, but nearly, close enough to feel I'm near, not alone. I move my arm back, by elbow searching blindly, carelessly for hers. That they might encounter, brush together, seemingly unintentional, but contact all the same. My body touching hers, even if through sleeves, coats, the fabric of the space between. Suddenly, rising, she pushes her chair away from the table, crashing into mine. The

screech of metal chair legs across the hard floor, the collision of her chair-back into mine, the impact pushing me forward, away from her. 'Sorry,' she breathes, awkwardly. Then with more confidence, more grown-up, age-appropriate, professional, 'I'm so sorry...that was clumsy of me.' I gaze upon her face, transfixed, smiling. Why am I smiling, like a fool? This is painful. I am not confident or professional. This pause lingers, lingering, wait, but not so long that it becomes uncomfortable. She smiles. 'Do you know that you're beautiful?' I hear myself say. 'I'm really sorry,' she says, again, slightly sheepishly. Did I really say that? Did she hear me? Why does she repeat herself? Surely I didn't just say that, not aloud. 'You really should know, you're incredibly beautiful.' I say again. 'Don't you know?' 'Sorry,' she says a last time, half-smiling, and walks out of the café.

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