

A Smile in the Dark

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An after-work pint, a paper, and packet of crisps. A minor sin on the grand scale of the deadly ones. A luxury I idly enjoyed when the door to the pub opened, spraying the room with the glare of a sun not yet set, and placing both the paper and my pint far from my mind.

A woman had stepped through the dramatic opening, moving into the wash of light like a creature that didn't quite belong. Beauty in the abattoir. This otherworldliness – this separation between her and this place – somehow enhanced by her elfish face, silhouetted in the fading beam of the closing door.

Her name was Samantha. A man sitting in the corner called it out when she failed to see his friendly wave. At the sound of her name, she had turned and smiled. A beguiling glow, fresh and open, easy and friendly.

I hadn't noticed the man who called to her. Not especially. Apart from seeing him return from the bar with a pint glass once or twice. I never saw him go, only comeback. As though it was the beer that attracted my attention and without it, he was just another nondescript member of the pub, passing under my radar.

When Samantha came in he visibly brightened, cigarettes discreetly vanishing into a pocket as he stood to greet her, bending to plant a single kiss on her cheek. She didn't return the kiss, but the smile remained a fixed feature as she swept into her seat, skirt smoothed outwards with a practised gesture of one hand. While she arranged herself, half the population of the room looked on.

It was difficult to say what made her so special; so watch-able. Perhaps it was the curve of her perfect chin, the grace of her eyes or the smooth curl of her silky red-hair. Or maybe – for the more base male – it was the line of her breasts, fleetingly displayed beneath the thin material of her white blouse.

I think we all saw something special, something unique in this woman, but for me, it was her inner light. A gifted radiance that captured my attention and held me rapt as a voyeur, half-hidden behind my forgotten paper.

A damned curious light. Almost a concentrated beam of self-centred attention, emanating from deep within her, pulsing outwards in quiet waves of confidence. The light eclipsed the flickering candles that centred each table in the pub and cast long shadows over the other women in the room. Women who looked darkly in her direction without wanting to be seen doing so.

She ordered a white wine, which the man fetched leaving her to look around the room with disinterested interest. Dark green eyes flickering here and there until...

...she caught me watching her. And for a moment. A heartbeat. She acknowledged my gaze with a knowing smile.

Then her drink arrived, along with the man, and I was once more forgotten. Once more free to watch a conversation drowned from my ears by the conversational motion of people around me.

Without the chance to listen, I settled for being a quiet corner watcher and soaked in the picture she painted of herself, as she used the air for a canvas and the precise movements of her body as a brush. Like the hand, white and without rings that ran through her hair; spilling bouncing locks over slender shoulders that appeared always to be full of movement and life. Like the dimples she produced by smiling just so. Like the precision with which she used her carefully plucked and exquisitely arched eyebrows.

But through time and observation, and with the alcohol to help free my thoughts, I came to realise that everything about this woman, every gesture, every emotional calculation was just that, premeditated and deliberate.

From the way she moved, to the way she didn't. Even the simple manner of holding a wine glass – held loosely by the stem, a finger from her other hand tracing the rim in endless circles – appeared under her tight, casual control. Right down to the amount of teeth she displayed in her careful smile, to the exact length of time she allowed her eyes to stay fixed on his. All of it was an act.

Beautifully played, but played nevertheless.

At some point, she stood and said goodbye to a disappointed looking man and as she turned to leave, her eyes caught mine for a split-second of sparkled interest, a moment in time that my imagination feasted on.

Then she was gone, walking close by my table on her way out of my life. Her perfume lingered in the air for the briefest of moments before she left by the glowing door she had entered. The room becoming that much darker with her absence.

The End