



I hovered, make-up clotting, outside the apartment of the Most Beautiful Man I'd Ever Met. Preferring foreplay to climax, I watched the setting sun transform the West Village into a tawny Tuscan terrain, smelt the roasting garlic and heard the siren sounds of a Cuban chanteuse from the corner bistro. It was a moment sublimely unlike any other, reminding me, inexplicably of D.H. Lawrence, who believed erotic love would unite two people forever. Something to do with all those lashing limbs and repressed emotions. And if I stood there ruminating any longer I'd...

A buzzer sounded. My finger seemed to be on it.

"Hi, it's--"

"C'mon up."

I glided south, towards my writing group's final class of the term, held in his home instead of the usual classroom. It was now or never for love's redemptive powers to triumph and relieve my self-induced misery...

"Hi Fionna," said the Most Beautiful Man I'd Ever Met. He stood poised at the open door in khakis, white T-shirt and Converse sneakers. His mocking smile implied he'd divined my exact thoughts--putting him several moves ahead of me, in trying-too-hard Prada, making me look as if I were taking part in a Paris fashion show, instead of a fiction writing class.

"I would've brought a bottle of Scotch but the liquor store near me was shut and I didn't have time, so I got shortbread instead. And actually, I should have..." You're gibbering woman, shut up. I'd meant to contribute something more distinctive than

the requested chips and beer, but my offering looked mean and paltry. I wished I'd brought whisky after all, which would have established my taste and generosity. (Or deemed me desperate to impress/get drunk/laid?) "I could still go and get some--"

"Shortbread cookies--they're my favourite. No, really. Come on in," he said, eyes teasing. Iris's the color of--distressed denim? Lapis lazuli? Call yourself a writer? What clichéd crap. Perhaps something more inspirational would strike later.

"Beer or wine? Red or white?" he continued.

Encouraged by his benevolent comments about the shortbread, I chose red, thinking it somehow rendered me more sophisticated than boring, ubiquitous blanc.

"How's the new novel going?" I asked.

"Slowly." His mouth creased tactfully, but his eyes--like azure pools/blue as a Biro?-- lingered on the escape route offered by my fellow scribes in the other room. Shit. Wrong thing to say. We writers hated discussing works-in-progress. Having only started to consider myself, a writer, I was still rusty on the basics.

"Oh, you like flowers?" I said, staring at the sweet William dominating every receptacle in his cluttered, book-ridden apartment.

"Yeah." He sighed, as if they were an affliction. "They sprout weed-like on the roof garden, despite all my attempts to kill them off."

"One look from me and they'll all keel over. I'm known as the human herbicide."

"I knew there was something I liked about you."

I hooted, in a nervous attempt to dispel the growing tension between us. His flirting made me glow. Then, not knowing what else to do, I hurtled through to join the others and parked on a seat by the window.

Center stage was his old college friend Ira, an overweight, over-opinionated and over-married lawyer. Seated next to him was Judy, a pushy, saline-inflated blond actress in plunging spandex. In the corner, frowning and gnawing earnestly on a Number 2 pencil, was teacher Deanna, a Shelley Duvall look-alike who taught six graders in the Bronx. Then came Charlie, the balding real estate broker immersed in a science fiction tome that no one understood. Facing them, Elsa, the scrawny Dutch artist who rhapsodized about lesbian love, and Mike, the building super, working on a semi-pornographic collection of short stories. Shelly, the shy, middle-aged matron gestating a memoir of incest, hugged a chair on the group's outer rim. Ira was

pontificating about Norman Mailer still being able to get it up.

"Mailer's irrelevant today," interrupted Judy, inflated bosoms thrusting. "No one reads him any more. His latest novel's an exercise in verbal flatulence. His shelf life has expired. Ask Generation X."

"That's bullshit," bullshitted Ira, the lawyer, who had a habit of demonstrating his courtroom skills in the classroom. "When it comes to literature, Mailer's one smart cookie. He's brilliant at the long form--"

"Have you read his recent stuff?" said Judy. "He's past his sell-by date."

"So? Name another U.S. writer with the same impact on literature," said the building super.

Deanna, the teacher, stopped gnawing and murmured sotto voce to Elsa, the Dutch lesbian, who giggled.

"Aw, nobody cares about Generation X anyway," said our host. "Or at least they shouldn't." Everyone laughed. As if he'd said something funny. I tried to think of something scintillating to add, thus demonstrating my own intellect and witty, sparkling personality, instead of sitting mutely by, and allowing my writing peers to demonstrate theirs. Mailer had once appeared in an airline commercial being made by the ad agency I worked for. On the shoot, I'd asked him why he was doing it. He'd fixated me with his famous glittering cerulean crystal eyes, icy with intelligence, and said: Not everything in life has to be explained. I'd backed away in awe, stunned by its profundity. It was the perfect answer, leaving no room for a rejoinder.

Hope soared as I considered blurting this out, but even I, deluded and desperate to impress, could see no relevance to the current discussion. Besides, by the time I'd even formulated the syntax, the group was eviscerating Tom Wolfe, who'd never made an ad and with whom I'd had no such similar encounters.

When our leader became distracted by the buzzer's rude interruption, I searched his apartment for clues revealing further essence of him. I noticed that the spiral staircase in the rear, was similar to the one described in Hastie's Retreat-- to which the protagonist lashes his Italian flight attendant lover--before rendezvousing with his French girlfriend in the Cuban corner bistro! And wasn't his tiny kitchen, with its strip of skylight and butcher's block table, the very one detailed in Weber's Woe?

The last remaining member of the class swept in, causing everyone to gawp. Abandoning her customary jeans, Gap T-shirt and lank hair, Carrie, the unemployed, mousy anorexic, was transformed into something out of Bride of Frankenstein in a

crimson crushed velvet dress, vampire lips and hair piled snake-like on top of her head. Was she going to a fancy dress party later? She stood clutching a bunch of sweet William, sacrificially offered up at the same time it dawned on her they poured from every vase in the room.

"How sweet. They, um, grow on my roof deck, but thanks for the thought," he said.

Carrie's face reddened and she bolted mutely towards the empty chair by the ficus tree. For a moment my heart went out to her, then retreated thinking, it's every woman for herself. At least I'd been subtler. I got up and helped myself to some more wine, aware of my silk Prada folly sticking to my back with sweat.

"Let's look at Ira's story first. Who would like to begin?" he said, as he always said. Ira's yarn was studded with intellectual arguments--more intended to demonstrate its author's didactic, rather than story-telling proclivities. None of which I said, of course. Initially, I'd considered writing workshops a joke; an American invention designed to provide income and occupation for failed writers. (Couldn't imagine Dickens, Joyce, or Ms. Austen attending one.) But having ignored my own literary impulses until a geriatric 36--thanks to my regulation Scottish working class inferiority complex--I needed all the literary life support I could get. And after being rejected for the class of the writer I'd actually heard of, I was shunted into the class of some unknown.

"Sorry about the late start," that unknown had mumbled, erupting into the classroom, blond mane flying behind him, like some leonine Cocteau-esque creation from another era. Not to mention another planet. He swept a great shank of hair off his face and claimed his place at the head of the table.

"Bureaucratic bullshit to deal with. I'm Scott Jones. I'll be teaching this class. We're going to look at the novel and the short story and examine their possibilities through the prism of your own work..."

His voice was deep and lyrical; the cadence so hypnotic the rest of his preamble could have been in Serbo-Croatian for all I knew. He was, quite simply, the Most Beautiful Man I'd Ever Met, and my physical ideal: lean, long-haired and rock star-ish. Even his name was beautiful. Scott Jones, Scott Jones, I whispered repeatedly, studying my fellow scribes to see if anyone else was similarly smitten. But all ten sat studiously taking notes, seemingly unmoved by the vision before them.

He described how the class worked, and read from one of his own novels, quipping we could still back out, should we hate what we heard. The passage concerned a lovelorn Manhattan photographer down on his luck. Witty, self-deprecating and bristling with brio, the words pounded in my ears, leaving me punch drunk. I felt as if

I were listening to a budding Bellow, Nabokov, or Amis. Unable to avert my eyes, I wanted to lick him all over and telepathed him messages to that effect.

Next day in Barnes & Noble, I stood captivated by his broody, troubled image staring out from the inside back cover of his latest novel. Decorating the book's jacket were glowing quotes, some from writers I'd even heard of. "Rabelaisian in his scope," wrote one. Another labeled him, "Shakespearean in his Romantic sensibility." I purchased everything by him. Back home, I pored over his words, entranced. His protagonists were thinly disguised self-portraits: misunderstood, romantic rebels up against the vicissitudes of a cruel world and faithless lovers. His writing was ironic, imaginative and verbally dazzling, and it puzzled me why he wasn't more successful. This oversight made me determined to uncover his dark secrets and penetrate his most intimate crevices. Pheromones partied Puck-like up and down my spine, convincing me I'd finally met him, the one for me.

I always knew I'd meet him one day, the man for me. And this was different from the previous man for me, the writer for the famous literary magazine. I'd noticed his photo when it appeared under the headline, "New York's Ten Most Eligible Bachelors," in Cosmo. As bait, I'd sent him my own equally fetching photo, accompanying a short story I'd written, willing him to fall for me, as I had for him. Such things happened all the time to other people, didn't they? But not to me. Back came a note, stating such photographs could be deceiving, and regretting his inclusion in the article. Then he'd kindly passed my story on to the fiction editor, who'd promptly rejected it.

But this time would be different. How fitting that having waited until my late thirties to show up, the prerequisite soul mate should be spectacular in every way. We even looked alike for God's sake. Same moody eyes and hair, long, blond and all over the place. I conceived of a simple plan. Just as I'd fallen for his protagonist, he'd fall for mine (also a thinly veiled self-portrait).

This explained why, the week after I handed in my story, I arrived trembling, in a tourniquet of a short skirt and enough make-up to stock a cosmetics counter, feeling more alive than I'd felt in years. The air crackled with energy as his eyes fastened on mine. He said I wrote terrifically (those were his very words, "terrific"). He singled out phrases and passages he liked and wrote "good" and "wonderful" all over my copy. My dialogue could be sharper, plot could be stronger, and there were tense and grammar problems, but over all, a great start, he thought.

Afterwards, head spinning, I rushed home cradling the marked-up mss, examining every semi-legible scrawl. His praise confirmed my official status as, A Writer. My epiphany was Joycean and the world felt like a different place. Having recognized my genius, our obvious chemistry dictated it would be only a matter of time before he'd

make a move. And our lives as the perfect literary couple would begin.

Over the next few weeks, I pieced together a profile. He was single, had a PhD from Columbia, an unlisted phone number, and a habit of jogging along the Hudson each evening. He was a Piscean, which according to my roommate Martha's well-thumbed copy of Linda Goodman's Love Signs, happened to be the most compatible with mine--Scorpio! Well, that confirmed it. I imagined us making love, an intense, heady tangle of D.H. Lawrentian lashing limbs and sweaty bodies.

But despite such obvious chemistry, nothing further happened between us. His very presence rendered me tongue-tied and blushing. And instead of hanging around to chat with the others after each class, I'd head home with my fantasies, unencumbered by reality. I asked my flatmate Martha's advice. Why not ask him out for a drink, to discuss my work? When I dismissed this as too pushy, she suggested "bumping" into him after class. Hang out where he hung out. What could be more natural?

What indeed. That explained why, the following week, I could be found jogging nightly along the Hudson--all to no avail. And also why I interpreted his meaningful wink and playing with a book of matches from a fashionable Village restaurant as a secret signal to meet him there. I spent three evenings in a row guzzling red vinegar and chatting up the barman, before abandoning that tactic too.

"Throw a party. Invite the whole writing group," persisted Martha. She even stood over me when I finally called him--two days in advance-- no need to appear too eager.

"Hi, it's Fionna from the Writer's Group."

"Oh, hi." His voice gave nothing away.

"I'm calling because we're having a Halloween party and I'm inviting everyone in the group..." I squirmed.

"Oh, thanks. I already have plans with some friends--"

"Bring them too." "O.K. Um thanks. If I can make it, I will."

"O.K. Bye!" I'd hung up feeling pathetic and wishing I hadn't bothered. Especially when, needless to say, he didn't show, nor even bother to acknowledge my invitation in class. And instead, began paying extra attention to Judy, the saline-afflicted actress. Feeling snubbed, overnight my feelings of amour turned to humiliation and a desire for revenge. My days of fawning were over. I'd play hard to get and feign indifference, thereby gaining his attention and boosting my own enigmatic allure. I began ignoring him and flirting with Charlie, the balding science fiction writer. And

my next story, about an anal-retentive, narcissist writer who jogged, was clearly a thinly drawn portrait of him.

Unfortunately, such tactics backfired, producing the opposite results from those intended. His--burka-blue?-- eyes flashing, he'd savaged my efforts, embarrassing me in front of everyone. Making me doubt whether I was even meant to be, A Writer. Plus Charlie, the balding science fiction writer, started following me around devoted lamb-like.

I regrouped, perplexed over my lack of success. Was he a man of principle who didn't date his students? Neither Martha nor Linda Goodman knew the answer. Clearly, the challenge was more Sisyphean than I realized. But that only strengthened my resolve. Abandoning plans A, fawning, and B, playing hard to get, I resorted to plan C, persistence. Thus, when the first session ended, I signed up for a second, and then a third. Such emotional jousting had continued until this, the last class of the third term, after which even I couldn't possibly take any more classes without attracting serious suspicions of stalking. After Ira's story, I headed towards the bathroom and peered into the cabinet above the sink, convinced he could intuit what I was doing. But all it contained was hemorrhoid cream, anti-dandruff shampoo and teeth-whitening toothpaste--no mysterious prescriptions or traces of female occupation. Back in the living room, I helped myself to more wine as the group dissected Charlie's latest chapter, alien by alien. Then Elsa asked Scott how his latest book was selling.

"Not fast enough," he growled. "I told my agent, 'I can't live on these royalties.' 'So write faster,' he says." The congregation tittered in sympathy. He turned and smiled at me with eyes like, Norman Mailer's. He had, not Betty Davis, but Norman Mailer Eyes. Yes! The wine was obviously helping inspire me. I drank some more. Perhaps I'd hang around after class and offer to write a profile of him and pitch it to Esquire, or Playboy. A move bound to impress him and enable me to stay in touch. Brilliant. I spent the next five minutes imagining myself responsible for making him acclaimed and him beside himself with lust and admiration for me.

By the time I'd exhausted such Mitty-esque possibilities, it was nine o'clock and the group was whittling down. By nine fifteen, there remained Carrie in crushed velvet and serpents, Judy in saline, Ira in lawyer's serge and yours truly in sweaty silk.

"Hey Scott--" I began. Everyone turned to stare. I clutched my wine for support. Why don't I write a profile of you and make you rich and famous, so we can get it on.... "I met Norman Mailer once..."

But the story didn't seem nearly as interesting out loud as when I'd composed it in my mind. I suddenly felt foolish and depressed. Judy got up to leave. Scott looked first at

his watch, then at Ira with an expression of long-suffering that was painfully clear. In a flash, I had a second Joycean epiphany, as I realized Ira's role was that of chaperone, protecting his pal from flower-proffering, Prada-clad admirers. And far from being glittering cerulean crystals, icy with intelligence, his particular portholes on the soul more resembled opaque icebergs, towards which I'd been steering a Titanic-like course. Desperate to leave with some dignity intact, I got up to leave. And so too did Carrie.

"Good luck," he said, as we headed out the door. "Let me know how the writing goes, if you get published or anything..."

I fled down the stairs and out into Bleecker Street wallowing in self-pity, feeling betrayed by my instincts and wondering if I was even meant to be, A Writer. "Jesus, who knew he grew those frigging flowers on his roof," muttered Carrie, somehow attached to my side. "I felt a frigging fool."

"Oh well, never mind," I said, too consumed by my own misery to deal with hers. I wished this bizarre creature would go away. We hadn't spoken much before and I certainly didn't feel like starting then.

"Wanna know something? I had the hots for him, big time. I planned on staying the night. Crazy, huh? But he's so frigging cute. And can he write, or what? The main characters are all him. He praised my writing. Friends even said I looked like him--"

I almost choked. Nowhere in my wildest dreams could I have imagined how this malnourished, comely stick insect thought she bore any resemblance to the Greek god we'd just left. Funny how some people deluded themselves. "Really?" I said.

"Yeah. Donchta think so? I even went running along the Hudson--and I'm no runner--hoping to bump into him. Crazy, huh? It's not like I'm making it up. We're both Pisces. Linda Goodman's Love Signs said we'd be perfect for each other."

I spluttered and observed for the first time, not a caricature, but a real human being with sad eyes and a pretty mouth. I saw myself. "Fancy a drink?" I said, both humbled and seized by the need to compare notes with someone with whom I'd so much in common.

We entered the Bleecker Tavern to strains of Rod Stewart inconsiderately crooning Tonight's the Night.

"I suppose my dress is kinda over the top," said Carrie.

"No, no. Not at all." She was, after all, talking to someone in purple Prada.

"I brought a toothbrush and two condoms. Be prepared. Know what I mean?"

"Two, you're optimistic." I giggled hysterically, thinking of the three condoms, dental floss and mouthwash stashed in my own bag. I drooped over the bar, craving a cigarette, then reminding myself I'd stopped.

"I imagined us having brunch the next day. He kept coming on to me with those frigging eyes, like, like--"

"Norman Mailer's?"

"No way. Paul Newman's."

I decided to give up writing. For ever.

"I fantasized about moving in with him. Catch my drift?" continued Carrie.

There was a long pause before I ventured, yes, I did catch her drift. I described my own amazingly similar experiences, although normally I'd rather have been run over by a herd of Aberdeen Angus than reveal my innermost secrets to the real life incarnation of Mrs. Frankenstein, to whom I desperately did not want to be compared. Ironic how, in trying to be different from everyone else, I'd ended up depressingly the same. I revealed everything, except the extent of my own overnight ambitions. Some details were simply too personal.

"Guess neither of us should call him again, huh?" said Carrie, as we left the bar. Some of her vipers had come undone and hung limply over her shoulders.

"He did say to let him know, if we get published, or anything. I thought maybe I'd give him a buzz, offer to buy him a drink--" "No! We should write about this instead. That's what we writers do--write about what we know. That way, we'd get him out of our systems and concoct different versions of the same story." Over the course of the last hour, I'd somehow gained the wisdom of Linda Goodman.

Carrie's melancholy eyes sparkled. "Yeah and we'll send them to each other to critique. Great idea! Give me your number. Let's keep in touch."

"Absolutely," I said, knowing I never wanted to see her, or her vipers again. Back home, after I'd peeled out of my Prada, I deposited Carrie's number in the bin. Then I sat down at the typewriter. It was time to opt for climax over foreplay. "Not Everything In Life Has To Be Explained. By Fionna Carlisle," I typed. And underneath, "I hovered, make-up clotting, outside the apartment of the Most Beautiful Man I'd Ever Met..."

§ § §

Ann Forbes Cooper is a transplanted Scot, who originally came to Manhattan for six months, and suddenly 17 years later... she's a freelance journalist and editor, whose byline has appeared in the likes of the *London Sunday Times*, *The Scotsman*, *the Aberdeen Press & Journal*, *Forbes*, *Ad Age*, *New Woman*, *HouseBuyer*, *the Wine & Spirit International Year Book*, *Lithoprinter* and *Carpetbaggers Weekly* (OK, she made up the last one) among others.

She has written several short stories and three novels, the third of which is currently being turned down by some of the UK's best publishers. She has had chapters published in a UK magazine called *The Source*. She's given readings at *The Knitting Factory*, *The Ear Inn* and numerous other venues.

E-mail acooper370@aol.com

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