

Les Wicks

FLASH

The light was barely there. Illumination hung in the corners like the worst of cowards. The hotel was lit like we were the only ones in town and the licensee had to open up specially for us. The licensee was obviously saving electricity as he accepted our loose change and shuffled back to his paper. News from the world.

The hotel was dimly lit. Not intimate.

Marina drifted around our conversation like some lazy blowfly. You get dropped into these chance meetings on the street. Your afternoon plans (few or many) evaporate on collision with some old friend not seen for years and here you are in a pub swapping tales of past naughtiness and potted, sanitised versions of more recent events.

(There is need to justify the path you chose, that kept you distant from her and that world all this time. Necessary lies/no offence.)

Marina hasn't changed, the same fire flickers in the tiny iron stove frame — mannish suit and porkpie hat sits rudely on a sharp face that could have been sculptured by a hedge trimmer.

She hesitates no longer and swoops down into the moment with a hungrily remembered intensity, waving her Rothmans filtered cigarette with the style of a conjurer. Which she is. Words pour out like telex. Like telex, oblivious of whether the receiver understands. Her still thick Italian accent.

We discuss lost friends. Figures like Cliff who escaped some Spanish prison to disappear in Mexico. Others who even Marina could glorify in their absence. And more, mourned like the dead and condescendingly seen as slipped back into normal, predictable futures.

Marina weaves like a spider in grey herringbone. Another drink and her hat tilts rakishly. Her own flawed self-metaphor. Lover, Celeste, arrives at the door, comes over and sits petulantly. How she knew we were here I have no idea but she's made it and now waits upon her woman like an acolyte. Marina discusses her art and the poker player hardness in her settles for a bit. Her studio, a reborn factory, is still there ... the same old jokes about manufacturing. Reality: like all of us who care, we've been worn down behind the well-practised collage of our words, colours or

shapes. She moves onto other pastimes and the facade returns. She's a cop on the beat, Mata Hari, Joan Crawford as she loosens her tie and yells to the barman for another round.

Too astonished to react otherwise he complies and is bringing them over when another of her crew arrives in rag-rotten shirt sleeves and bow tie. Doug is (let's be honest) too ineffectual and ugly to be hated by anyone. I feel good to see him again though, unlike Marina, there's no need to question him about an unnecessary past and an incidental present. Marina is clearly gathering her tribe and I'm just another one caught up. I say I've had another book out, talk about working with the Union and I've lost her again. Her mind hovers above my small stories whilst I sit amongst her friends who seem to accept her blank spaces just as I did once.

Doug's talking about dope as usual when Marina returns to the conversation with a thud. Celeste's eyes light up as if she's been trapped with two men who speak a foreign language. Perhaps she thinks men do speak a different language. Perhaps she's right. Either way we all realign our orbit as we gather round Marina's briefly eclipsed sun.

She speaks with a new intensity as the darkness comes early. She's talking about a party. It started sometime during the week after the funeral of an old musician and had gradually tapered off to thirty or so people at any one time. While she's still talking everyone's been somehow organised so we're all on our feet and rolling down the street towards the house.

Nobody answers our knock, but around the back and the door's wide open. The place is large though laid out by the usual inner city prison designer with one long corridor and symmetrical rooms in rows like cells. Music comes from at least three of them — the loudest is the Rolling Stones. I feel tired but the scene transfuses itself into Marina and by osmosis her followers. The party folk seem exhausted but content in their celebrations of history and passing on. Numbers seem stable despite it being day four. Many are asleep, some naked in the corners like dinner refuse. A jumble of styles. On the floor a woman greets the needle while two men in suits nearby stand complete and disembodied.

Marina's arrival has also had an effect on the people in the rooms. Three or four get up, pass kisses, joints or words with the newcomers. The smoke leaves me slightly sick and I don't know why.

The woman has a plan. She gears up and the magician is working again. Her coat comes off with a shrug amongst the hot snake of Rothmans magic fingers. Her shirt is thin, reveals pragmatic breasts.

I'm unmoved by her ideas. I don't want to go along her trails which give her oxygen but leave the followers empty as a beer can. Talk, too tired to lie. She has a temper, turns and yells. The tie flashes like a whip. Her jacket flies back on like authority as I'm discharged from the corps. Abuse follows me onto the street.

The streetlights were barely there. The light hanging in the corner like young girls at a country dance. As usual our moments end with little learnt, no climax or finish. Flickering burnt-out streetlamp. The light. Etcetera.