

La Flâneuse

David Wheldon

I was for a time called *La Flâneuse*. It's an unusual title to give a woman, but I don't mind. It saves me using my given name until you know me better, and so I have a degree of anonymity. And I don't mind that at all.

The city fascinates me: I always return here. I received the title *La Flâneuse* in a café in a side street off Covent Garden. I had climbed up the spiral staircase of the underground station: it's a long climb and the constant clockwise turn puts you in a meditative state of mind. I take the stairs at a half run, and am always astonished when I see, half-way up, people younger than me out of breath and holding the hand-rail. The same goes for the lower storeys of the Eiffel Tower, I suppose. Or any other long set of steps. Odessa, perhaps. It's just that I like making my own way about places. You can see so much more, experience so much more, when you set your own pace in accordance with your own mood.

Though I'm not gregarious I am actually searching for something. I can't tell you what it is, because I do not myself know. But it is part of me, and I am part of it. It is a human quality. More than that I do not pretend to know. I do not wish to make conjectures. I feel it in the privative, as a sense of personal incompleteness. Yet I have a visceral feeling that, when I come across it, its identity will be already known to me. This may seem obscure, but you will find that it is not.

So, I was taking an espresso in that Covent Garden café. It was early morning. I don't need much sleep: about five hours, if that. I looked at my watch. 7:30. There was only one other person in the café, a man of my own age. I had seen him in here before. And elsewhere. In fact almost everywhere I looked. He was in the habit of following me. Some might use the word *stalking*, but so far he hadn't been aggressive: he just tracked me and invaded my privacy. I knew that he was very much aware of my presence and that he wished to speak to me: I also knew he was frankly nervous of approaching me. That I could understand. A tall young woman with quite a muscular but feminine physique, wearing a formal City man's attire and with short hair dyed bright orange and brilliantined. You'd be wary of approaching her.

I was quite certain that the man wished to speak with me. And I knew he would never dare approach. So I would be tracked endlessly, to no conclusion. I sat looking at him rather frankly. And then I reflected on what his conversation might be like. Could I make a guess from his appearance? I didn't know. I'd probably get bored of him quickly. I have — as does everyone — a unique slew of human faults, as the saying goes. One of my faults is that I quickly weary of nearly everyone I meet. And that's quite a bad fault. Sometimes you can run to the end of someone's psyche in a minute. "Is that the repertoire?" you ask yourself as you rise and go your way. Other people can surprise you: but not that often. In fact it's rare to be surprised. It's a bad fault. I pick people up on my city walks and when I tire of them I leave them and walk away, often without a word. Men and women. I never turn round. My annoyance is rarely visible. Why I'm telling you this I don't know. And who is this you I am telling? Possibly it's me, or someone close to me. This story isn't intended for publication, so I can say more or less what I like, and I can tell the truth as I see it. I could exaggerate if I wished. But

there would be little point. It's best to be truthful to yourself at least, if you can do it. Do I wish to talk about the past? Well, I'll allude to it. Without any false modesty I can say that, in the sciences at school — Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry — there was me and then, after a very considerable gap, the rest of the field. It happened to be like that. I'm not conceited about it: *I didn't make my brain. I am not responsible for what I was born. I may have shaped the first material later: I wouldn't know.* If you are given a good brain at birth maybe it models itself superlatively as its tracts are developed in adolescence. And so they tried to push me into all kinds of places where I didn't wish to go. I was actually invited to read Mathematics at Cambridge. But I didn't want to do that. Instead I read Medicine at a good, modern university because I find the human organism fascinating. I've delivered babies and conducted post mortems and done quite a lot in between. And then, inheriting a modest sum of money, I played the markets aggressively until I was financially secure, bought outright a sound-proofed one-bedroomed flat in Bedford Square on a ninety-nine year lease and began my career as an observer of those things human which surrounded me. And I began my search for the elusive other, who was part of me. I had a private practice, hiring a room in Long Acre which I had furnished. An examination couch, screens, a Victorian leather-topped desk. I hired a young nurse, Annette McPhail, who was very dedicated. I didn't charge more than the going rate for consultations, to be honest. You see, the only reason for my practice was the examination of people. I just can't get enough of the variations in the human psyche. I am always taking things apart. And, unlike other historical investigators I could name but won't, I never try to codify what I find. If you try to codify you become proprietorial of a theory, and then the inevitable happens: you tailor evidence to fit your system. You put it in your box, if you wish me to be frank. And that's your independent integrity forfeit. I didn't wish for that. It happens a lot in medicine, where there are complex interactions of ill-understood pathologies. So I travel light, I suppose, working from what I find. If you look for something you tend to find it: if you don't look, you won't find. Annette saw this, and was fascinated by it. "You have the curiosity of a cat, Dr Mandor," she once said, after a particularly stringent consultation. I treat her as a colleague and had pointed out the triad of transverse myelitis, new onset asthma and vasculitic changes in the corners of the sclera of the eyes in a patient who had just left the room. "And I never saw a doctor more selective about who they'll see." She spoke sincerely as she washed the instruments and put them in the small, bench-top autoclave: her comments just came out. I smiled at her. What did she think of her part-time employer, a tall, energetic young woman who dressed in the style of the most formal of wealthy men, with a soft, amused voice, short hair dyed bright orange, white-powdered face, bright-red lips, a sardonic view of life? She invited me to her wedding. The first time I had ever been inside a church. Honestly, it's true. I was impressed beyond my expectation. I had always avoided places of worship. I don't understand the idea of worship. I don't see the need for it. No-one has convinced me otherwise. I think the congregation was impressed by me, too. "Who is that woman? Is she a woman?" In fact, I might as well tell you the truth: my task then was to give away the bride, Miss McPhail having no living father or brother. So I walked down the aisle in black morning-dress with a figure in white on my arm. I actually put quite a bit of money into Annette's wedding, being a sort of surrogate parent. But I still felt that sense of personal incompleteness as I knelt in unbelief before a stained glass window of utter beauty.

I looked at my watch. A quarter to eight. I summoned the waiter and ordered my usual breakfast. Toast and marmalade, an apple, grapefruit juice, more coffee, a latte this time.

The other customer — my tracker, follower, stalker: whatever you wish to call him — stood up. Actually, he was no longer the other customer: the café had suddenly become quite full. He looked at me but didn't dare approach me. He stood uncertainly in the aisle. *Let's get it over with*, I said to myself. It was a sudden impulse on my part. I beckoned him with a single movement of a single finger.

He came over to me on the instant as though he were a dog I'd trained. He stood in front of me.

'Please take a seat,' I said, lapsing involuntarily into my clinical self. I gestured with the flat of my right hand. I watched him observantly. I have a method of looking at people while apparently doing something else. People behave very differently when they know they're being watched.

[This is a preview. The full text is about 16,000 words.]

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