

The Afternoon After

Lavender

She had square nails, unvarnished. She had muted hair – light brown fleshed with light red, tendrilling to just under her shoulders. Under her ribcage, on her long waist, on her left hand side, she had a beauty spot; just a dot. There was no silicone in her breasts.

She kept a list on lined A4 paper. The list itself was folded into an envelope, which was tucked into the pages of Ayn Rand's 'The Fountainhead' which lay (seemingly carelessly, third from the bottom) in a stack of books, piled on the hearth of the small fireplace. The fireplace, unused since 1929, had small burgundy tiles, a metal insert and a painted wooden surround.

She bent down to retrieve the envelope from the book and fished out her list. There were eight names on the page. She had started the list when she was seventeen. In the intervening fifteen years, only seven names had been added. This was a very selective list, this list of the men she might have sex with, at some clouded point in the future, should the conditions, weather and otherwise, be right.

Two of the early names on this list she had lost touch with. One had died. Of the others, she saw them once in a while, perchance, when the conditions made themselves so. She herself had made no efforts: no calls, no valentine's cards, no scheming drinks get-togethers. Creating perfect conditions was not her forte.

Occasionally, she looked at this list. Very rarely, she added to it. Today was such a day, come after sparseness. She added the new name, from the evening before. Matthew Yeats. Yeats was not really his surname. For the purposes of the list, it's what she wanted to call him. She let the glow of excitement flood her, her breathing ragged. She savoured her moment, what a moment, the addition of a name to her list. Then she folded the lined paper, returned it to the envelope, and slipped it back into a random page of 'The Fountainhead.'

Matthew

He had pale arms which had not seen the sun. Let's be honest, these were not the sinews of a body builder or a gym fox. These were slender arms. It was his voice which was honed to perfection. Cultured, well-modulated, finessed; it enticed and was never constrained by ums and ahs. He had dark hair curling all over the white sheen of his flat belly.

He, too, kept a list. His was on unlined paper and hidden in a secret compartment built into the computer desk. He had to reach in from behind the computer, pushing aside cables, to pull out this small concealed drawer. His list was longer than hers. It named all the people he had ever slept with. But unlike Tracey Emin, he didn't include his brothers and sisters and childhood sleepovers. His was a 'scoring' list. It was a good, sound, multicultural, globe-trotting list.

This afternoon, he would look at it, that's all.

The Evening Before

It was International Women's Day, March 8th, and Lavender's friend, Xyla Jarnieri, a professor of gender and sexuality was speaking at a forum. The crowd was large, comprised of other academics, friends, acquaintances and students, but it was growing restive. Xyla addressed them on one of her topics of expertise: the unfair burden. In brief, and generalising: women get paid less, do more, keep house, have and grow the children, all without sufficient support from the male population or the captains of industry or the government.

Xyla, who despite her subject was the antithesis of a haranguing feminist, was immensely popular with colleagues, with friends, and with students. She was the reason for the lecture hall bursting to its seams with a supportive, if fidgety, audience. Both genders and all sexualities of the human species were represented. To celebrate her successful lecture Xyla led a select group of friends and colleagues to 'The Dove and Elk', a nearby pub.

Matthew, like Lavender, was AFX. 'A Friend of Xyla.' Matthew knew Xyla from her work at the Royal Geographical Society, where they were both honorary members of a fundraising committee.

At the pub, Xyla, on a post-lecture high, continued to expound on how the gender order needed shaking up. Her cap of shining black hair fell forward emphatically in sync with her forceful statements. After a few minutes of this Lavender set down her beer and said wearily, 'It will not change. It will only change when nature takes a new step or science takes us forward. When men can conceive

and will carry babies for nine months and deliver them and breastfeed them, then there will be the kind of gender equality you want. Till then, this is a futile cause.'

Lavender's comment caused big nods of approbation. Xyla looked at her with disgust in her dark brown eyes. 'That attitude will not solve anything,' she said. 'The question is how can we help here and now?'

But Lavender had sparked a tangential conversation on scientific advances; a topic sufficiently off-track from International Women's Day for it to be pounced upon by a group fatigued by women's issues.

Xyla sat back and let the diverted conversation flow away from her for the moment. She knew how to wrest it back if she wanted. She watched her friend Lavender, how her long thin eyes rested on a particular man, rested at the spot where his shirt sleeve stopped, rested on his belt when he rose to get a round of drinks. Xyla awaited her opportunity.

In the midst of a discussion on increasing numbers of men signing up for cosmetic surgery, she heard Lavender say, 'You can't discount it completely just because you say you will never have it. You have to let those who have gone through it, those who believe they've benefited from such surgery to speak for it.'

'Really?' Xyla interrupted now, a false laziness in her voice. 'Actual experience counts for more than education, research and observation?'

Lavender, sensing the undercurrent of Xyla's frostiness, was silent. But someone else, Matthew, in fact, nodded enthusiastically at this pronouncement. To which Xyla added, 'So, Lavender speaks for nature to change or science to lead us

forward before we can revolutionize the situation for women, but she herself has zero experience. She has never even had a boyfriend, that I know of.'

She turned to face Lavender. 'Are you a secret siren?' she asked. 'Or could it be that you're waiting for the new dawn, the day males will conceive, and till then you will remain virginal.'

'Virginal,' someone spluttered, 'what a quaint word.'

'Virgin.' Xyla addressed Lavender, and it seemed a taunt.

'I leave you to your imaginings', Lavender responded breezily, as a secret siren would. After which Mathew leaned in closer and the evening hue became rosier. Xyla apologised to Lavender by way of a wink. Lavender, who was more aware of Mathew's arm pressed against hers, acknowledged the wink with a barely perceptible nod and no sign of a sulk. It was hard to hold anger against Xyla. In tandem with her razor tongue she bubbled with kinship on the human condition.

Speaking of conditions, they were almost perfect. But then the bar closed and when the group of stragglers found themselves on the wet street, they seemed to remember that tomorrow was another day and it was time to head home. Lavender had caught Matthew's sidelong gaze, but as ever, she was too shy to say anything. She was good at letting the right moment pass on by.

Matthew had darted another oblique glance at her, but said nothing.

'Virgin or siren,' thought Lavender, 'what did it matter, if they were going to be so daunted anyway?'