

First Impressionism

by Charlene Kwiatkowski

2nd Place 2013 Fiction Contest

He's running fifteen minutes late, but it's not his fault. Traffic is bad. He puts a twenty-dollar bill in the driver's hand and steps into the colourful night. Elbows, shoulders, and purses push past him as he makes his way alone across Times Square.

Rushing to get to the bar, he wonders if he should be rushing. Who's to say she'll be better than the last one? Who's to say she's even there? On the sidewalk, a man and woman grab hands before crossing the street. He stuffs his own hands into his jacket pockets and keeps walking.

Catching his breath, he opens the glass doors of Blue Fin. At least there wasn't any trouble deciding where to meet. Their mutual love of seafood and live jazz made this bar an obvious choice.

He easily finds her on the second floor, bookending one end of a two-person table. Her drink's already ordered, expression already disappointed.

From her online profile, he should have known she'd be the early type. Probably type A. She checked off closet organizer as her favourite household item. She also plays tennis, if her profile tells the truth. It tells him she prefers cats to dogs, salty to sweet snacks, urban to rural living. She has four years on him and is looking for a serious relationship.

They exchanged a few emails leading up to this night. Each one, she signed off with her degree and title as if to impress him that she's made it in the city that never sleeps. Well, he's made it too. He was hoping an older woman would have less security issues than younger ones, but he's no longer sure. Remembering this, his anticipation deflates and he debates leaving before she notices him.

The lower ceiling of the second floor makes him feel taller than his six feet. The lighting is darker up here too, saturated with expectation. She sits in this thickness with her untouched drink, like the woman in Degas's Absinthe painting. His art major gives him the slightly aggravating but addicting habit of comparing the women he meets to figures in paintings. The last one looked like the redhead in Edward Hopper's *Summertime*, but that and her youth were about all she had going for her.

From a safe distance, he watches the brunette woman at the table a little longer. He cannot see her clearly, but she appears to stare at an indiscriminate spot on the hardwood floor, resigning herself to be her only company. He makes up his mind. No one should be alone in New York on a Friday night.

He approaches her table and she comes to life.

"Hi, are you saving this seat for anyone?" He motions to the empty chair.

"Yes, I'm waiting for—you must be—"

"Yeah, I am. Nice to meet you. In person," he adds with a grin.

He apologizes for being late and tells her not to get up. Certain rules must be followed if this is going to work, like her not standing, forcing them to shake hands as if business partners. Like him not asking, "Do I look different from my picture?" That line made the others awkward, and he's already not off to a great start by being late. He should at least try. After all, didn't they both indicate they're looking for the same thing?

He places his leather jacket on the back of the chair and orders a glass of wine. They decide on seafood appetizers to share.

“Thanks for showing up,” she says once he’s settled in.

He ignores the hint of sarcasm behind these words. Obviously, she doesn’t know the rules as well as him, or she wouldn’t have made such an off-putting remark to begin the night.

She plays with the folds of her napkin before spreading it on her lap. Her nails are painted a subtle pink and he’s relieved nothing about her is excessive, especially after coming from Times Square. He forgets to notice if she looks older than him. He’s too busy trying to decide what it was that reminded him of the frumpy Absinthe woman. The woman in front of him wears a slinky cowl-necked shirt that shows off a defined collarbone. Her thick, flowing hair softens the lines of her thin nose, high cheekbones, and sharp eyes. Maybe the two figures only share a similar setting.

The waitress brings his drink and their blue crab empanadas. His date takes one and he begins drawing her out.

“So you work in marketing at the Guggenheim? Any recent ad campaigns you’ve done?”

“Yes,” she says. “Did you see those posters on the subway of a Degas painting with—”

“That was you?” he asks, reaching for an empanada. “The ballerina with a pair of eyes creepily peering at her from behind a curtain, with the caption, ‘Take a peek at what you’re missing?’”

She nods.

“A bit of a subversive message there, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s true to Degas’s themes of the male gaze and women’s passivity. Besides, no one thinks the Guggenheim has many Impressionist paintings. We wanted to change this misconception in whatever way would bring more Impressionist lovers through our doors.”

“Well it worked. I went to the exhibit.”

“There you go.” She leans in, biting the stuffed pastry in slow motion. “I did my job well.”

Something about the way she says this unsettles him, as if she isn’t at all surprised he went to the exhibit. He wants to surprise her. That’s his thing. He remembers now why she reminds him more clearly of the Absinthe woman. It’s her eyes, which seem to speak more than her mouth. He doesn’t expect this from a marketing professional.

He’s tempted to tell her about this similarity without saying why since they’re talking about Degas and she’s obviously familiar with the reference, but he stops himself. She’s a little too familiar with it and he imagines her reading more into it than he intended. Besides, he prides himself on keeping it classy, so he decides to talk about himself instead.

“I’m into art as well. I do graphic design. Freelance,” he adds, not sure if she read his profile as thoroughly as he read hers.

“I know,” she says, with a perfect handle on the words.

He’s glad she doesn’t say how she knows. That’s understood. She reclines in her chair and sips from her Blue Fin cocktail, striking a different image than when she sat alone. He pushes his chair closer to the table.

She continues the conversation, showing interest in his work.

“How would you define your design style?”

“Modern. Sleek.” He gives careful thought to the next word. “Surprising.”

She pauses as if weighing each of his words before asking, “Where do you get your inspiration from?”

“Anything.” He shrugs his shoulders and looks around. “It could be this canoe-shaped light hanging from the ceiling,” he says as he points. “Or skyscrapers. Sculptures. Paintings. Even the weird installations at the Guggenheim,” he adds, tilting his chin to invite her reaction.

She laughs for the first time tonight, making him smile. Digging into the sushi platter that has just arrived, they launch into a discussion on the accessibility of modern art for the general public.

“It can be so esoteric,” she says. “A line here, some colour there, a symbolic shape in the middle no one understands. There’s so much guesswork involved.”

“Kind of like modern dating,” he says, accidentally aloud.

A slight blush covers her face as the bar grows dimmer, painting her in a softer light.

He’s breaking his own rules. He’s not supposed to draw attention to what they’re doing, but the similarity is so obvious in his eyes—and in hers, which are precisely proving his point by the way he can’t read them.

Fortunately, she gives a quick chuckle. “A little, yes.”

To the left of the bar, the jazz band starts setting up their show, testing their sound with a “1-2-3 check.”

Neither of them returns to the dating comment, but she starts to share more without his prompting.

“I used to do ballet as a kid.”

He pictures her gracefully balancing on tiptoe, long hair flying from her face as she spins round and round.

“What made you stop?”

“Oh, you know.” She sighs. “You can only fulfill your parents’ dreams for so long until you realize they’re not your dreams.”

He’s about to respond when the waitress comes by to clear their plates. Bending forward, she bumps his glass with her tray, spilling wine on his lap. She apologizes and tells him she’s new at this.

He shrugs. “Don’t worry about it, there wasn’t much left anyway.”

The waitress leaves and he jokes to his date, “I look like I wet myself.”

“At least it’s dark in here,” she offers with a kind laugh. “No one will see.”

“Yeah, good thing.” He scans the number of people who have moved to the second floor since the band started playing. Despite the crowds and low lights, the air doesn’t feel as thick as when he first entered the room.

Returning to the last conversation, they pass details back and forth across the table like tennis players in a rally. She tells him her mom would have preferred she graduate from Juilliard, not Columbia. He understands parental pressure and tells her he ran away to New York from upstate when he was sixteen to prove to his parents that he could.

“And could you?” she asks.

“Well, I ran back a week later, so technically no. Being on my own in the city wasn’t as great as I thought. And I ran out of money.”

She seems intrigued. “So you thought you were pretty tough stuff?”

Tough stuff. Not words he pictured coming out of her mouth.

“I like to think I still am,” he says with a glimmer in his eyes. He glances down. “As tough as I can be with wine spilled on my jeans.”

He raises his head to find her looking at him in a way that blurs the edges of everything around them. The jazz swings in the background, shoulders sway, and waitresses weave between tables to the syncopated rhythm.

When the music winds down, she's telling him about her favourite spot in Central Park that she's loved since childhood—Gapstow Bridge. She'd sit there for hours, watching ducks and swans skim the smooth surface of the water.

He sees her ballerina legs dangling back and forth over the Pond. He wants to sit there with her. He wants to tell her this, but the lights dim to almost black and bodies glide down the floating staircase to the exit. It's the beginning of the night. He's rushing. The words tumble out.

“Can I see you again?”

She takes a long sip and finishes her drink. She knows the rules better than he thought. His palms grow sweaty. What became of the Absinthe woman he was going to walk out on? He thinks back to what she said about Degas and his themes. The male gaze. He shouldn't have told her he went to the exhibit.

The clink of her glass on the table stops his running thoughts.

“Yes,” she finally says, looking at him with her sharp eyes that tell him she knew the answer a while ago. Her lips stretch into a smile. “Just don't keep me waiting next time.”

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