

# TOO PERFECT

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The man and the woman were standing side by side at the marina, studying the new housing development on the other side of the water. He had been expressing surprise tinged with disgust at the sight of the red-brick buildings with their gabled windows and arches and as he put it ‘postmodern gee-gaws’. While she, having no knowledge of what had stood there before and no great opinion on architecture, said nothing.

Then into the silence that hovered between them he suddenly offered ‘Do you mind?’ and before he had finished asking, took her hand in his. In reply she gave a squeeze of assent, noting as she did how large and warm and smooth his hand was.

To a passerby it would have looked like nothing out of the ordinary. He or she, on seeing this man and woman by the water’s edge, would assume that this hand-holding was a commonplace event for them. But it wasn’t. This was the first, the only time of any real physical contact between them.

Later, still awkwardly holding hands, each now afraid that letting go might signal some end to that which had not yet even begun, they made their way to the old Town Hall, once the home of commerce and council and now a centre for literature. This was the purpose of their trip, the reason why at seven that morning she had stood at the window of her

bedsit in Cambrian Street, Aberystwyth, waiting for the tin-soldier red of his Citroen to emerge around the corner.

Each had expressed an interest in visiting the Centre and had behaved as if they were the only two people in the world with such a desire. That was why, uncharacteristically, he hadn't suggested the trip to the other members of his tutorial group. It was also the reason why Claire had omitted to tell any of her friends, why she had agreed to wake Ginny that morning at ten o'clock, despite the fact that she and Dr Terrence Stevenson would probably be enjoying coffee and toast together in Swansea by then.

Terry, as he was known to colleagues and students alike, was a large man, over six feet, with large bones and large appetites, which now as he neared fifty expressed itself in his frame. He had once been lithe and muscular but his body had thickened with age. He blamed too many years at a desk, the expansion of his mind at the expense of an expanding behind. But he dressed well enough, choosing dark tailored jackets and corduroy or chino slacks, as well as the odd devilish tie, which was about as subversive as he got. In colder weather, as on this grey October day, he wore his favourite black Abercrombie overcoat of cashmere and wool mix. The coat hung well from the shoulders and had the effect of tapering his body, disguising its imperfections with a veneer of powerful authority and masculinity.

Claire thought he looked like one of the Kray twins in this coat of his, and to her that signalled a sort of dangerous sexuality. She could not help but imagine herself engulfed in that coat, held willing captive in its soft folds.

Next to him, she looked tiny, even less than her five feet and a half inch. Claire had very long hair, grown in excess to compensate perhaps for her lack of height. It hung down, straight and sleek to her bottom and a great deal of her time was taken up with this hair: washing, combing and plaiting it before she went to bed each night. Most of the time she wore it loose and her gestures, the movement of her head,

body and hands were all done in such a way as to accommodate her river of hair. When eating, for example, she would hold the fork in one hand while with the other she held her hair away from the plate. She was very proud of her hair and if asked which part of herself she liked the most, that would be what she would choose. Her last boyfriend, whom she had met at the Fresher's Dance at college and dated for almost three years, had loved her hair; had sometimes spread it over her naked body, Lady Godiva style when they made love; had once even made the pretence of tying himself to her by it.

Claire's body was like a boy's: flat-chested and slim-hipped. And today she was dressed like a boy too, with jeans and heavy black lace-up boots and a white shirt and a man's tweed jacket two sizes too big. Through both her right eyebrow and right nostril she wore tiny silver rings and her eyes and lips were exaggerated with make up in shades of reddish brown. She seldom smiled, but when she did her entire face was transformed into something not quite wholly beautiful, but something very like it.

They had trudged through an exhibition of artefacts relating to the town's one famous poet: the scribbled postcards, the crumpled snapshots, the yellowing newspaper clippings, all framed for posterity like the relics of some dead saint. Terry had begun by clucking and tutting yet more disapproval of the venture, disapproval he'd been nurturing and planning since he first heard of it, but with Claire by his side he found himself softening, growing acclimatised to her open-minded acceptance of all such endeavours.

They spoke in whispers, though the place was almost entirely deserted, this being after all a grey Tuesday in October, and around the back, beneath some engravings by Peter Blake they kissed their first kiss. It did not feel like the world's best kiss for either of them, but did well enough as an awkward, uncertain snatched preliminary to better things. Afterwards Claire had wanted to wipe her mouth with the

back of her hand, not from disgust but just because the kiss was a little wet. His mouth had swallowed hers, had not measured out the size of her lips yet.

After the kiss they each felt like a conspirator in some deadly plot; what they would create that day felt as if it might be as deadly as Guy Fawkes' gunpowder, as bloody as any revolution.

The second kiss came as they sat in a deserted bar of the Pump House. The barman, a student, they decided, was propped against the far end of the counter, his head bent over a book. They took turns to guess what the book might be. Terry said it was a handbook about computing, and she thought it was a script of something like *Reservoir Dogs*.

The clock above the bar, a faux-nautical affair, hung with nets and cork floats and plastic lobster and crab, read twelve-fifteen. They had the afternoon and the early evening to spend together. He was thinking about the Gower coast, a cliff walk, the lonely scream of wheeling gulls and the sea a grey squall bubbling under the wind. She was thinking about a hotel room, the luggage-less afternoon ascent in the lift to the en-suite room and the champagne, herself languishing on the sheets, feeling intolerably beautiful under his grateful gaze.

After that second kiss, which was prolonged, they wrenched themselves away and began to speak in a strange language of unfinished sentences and hesitant murmurings.

'Oh.'

'Gosh.'

'You know we...'

'I never...'

'Oh my...'

'We shouldn't...'

'I never thought...'

'Nor me...'

'I mean, I always thought that maybe...'

'Me too...'

Then they kissed again and the barman, who wasn't a student, raising his eyes briefly from his novel by Gorky, watched them with mild interest and thought they made an odd pair.

The odd pair finished their drinks: pints of real ale. She stubbed out her cigarette and they made their way towards the exit, his arm thrown protectively around her shoulders while his broad back wore her tiny arm, its fingers clutching the cloth, like a curious half-belt.

The sky looked by now greyer and darker than before. To the west a blue-black curtain advanced, promising heavy rain and a wind blew up from the east, sending her hair on a frantic aerial dance. They ran across the empty square as raindrops as big as shillings began marking the paving stones with dark circles.

Then she half stumbled and he caught her and in catching her, gathered her to him and they kissed a fourth time, this the best, with the rain splashing their heads and water pouring down their faces.

When they had done with this, this their unspoken moment of willingness and promise and wilfulness, their pact to indulge in what they knew was an unwise thing, he quickly kissed the tip of her nose and then hand in hand they began to run again.

Under the covered walkway, they slowed down and shaking off the worst of the rain from their hair and clothes, barely noticed a man standing close by. He was busy putting away a tripod and Terry muttered, 'Afternoon' and the man, grinning broadly replied, 'Thanks'.

Naturally neither of them made much of this, assuming it to be yet another curious aspect of Welshness. A further example of the strange smiling politeness, the thanking of bus drivers and so on, the chatting to strangers which each of them had at first perceived as alien, but now despite their breeding, accepted and in part adopted.

Later that afternoon, in his car near a field in the north of

Gower, with the day as dark as ever they almost made love. The next day, back in Aberystwyth, they did make love.

She had rung him from the payphone in the hall of her house when she was certain all the other students had gone out. His wife had answered the phone and she'd given her the prearranged message, which was that she'd 'found the journal with the Lawrence article he'd wanted.'

What happened that Wednesday was perhaps rather sad, though not necessarily inevitable. It became clear to both of them that what they sought was a fugitive moment; that there could be no more than this, the furtive opening of the front door, the climbing of the stairs, the single bed dishevelled and cramped under the sloping roof, his glances at his watch, her ears constantly straining for any sounds from down below. Both of them too tense for pleasure, but going through its rigours, him professionally, she dramatically.

Afterwards, when they had dressed again, they sat side by side on the bed like strangers in a doctor's waiting room, each thinking silently about how to end it, how to escape. She took his hand and held it on her lap, then began to speak.

'Your wife...'

'Catherine?'

'She sounded...'

'Yes.'

'She sounded...'

'Nice?'

'She is. I...'

'I don't...'

'I can't...'

'I think that...'

'Me too.'

He sighed. She understood his sigh to mean that he didn't want to leave and she sighed back at the thought that he might cancel his three o'clock lecture in order to stay. He had sighed because he was wondering how long he ought to stay

to make it seem at least remotely respectable. He rested his eyes on the small wooden bookcase next to her bed. She had all the required texts as well as a rather unhealthy number of books by and about the American poet Sylvia Plath. This made him sigh again. She was trying very hard to imagine him back in his study, with the coffee cups on the window ledge and the view of the National Library and the letter trays overflowing with student essays and she sighed again because now that she'd seen him in his underwear that ordinary idea seemed impossible.

He stood suddenly, ready to go, but somehow his watch had become entangled with her hair and she gave a yelp of pain as he unthinkingly yanked at it, ripping the hair from her head. They both looked aghast at the tangled clumps sprouting from the metal bracelet of his watch. He pulled at them but they cut into his fingers and stretched and curled and slipped and clung until finally they snapped, leaving short tufts poking out here and there.

Tears had come to her eyes with the sudden pain. He looked at her and seeing this, with ill-disguised irritation as much at himself as with her, said 'I'm sorry,' then bluntly, 'Why don't you get that cut?'

That would have been the end of the story, except that some moments, elusive as they may seem when lived, come back in other guises, unbidden. Theirs was a photograph, unfortunately a very good photograph of a young girl on tiptoes, her long wet hair lifted wildly in the wind and a black-coated man bent over her, his hands delicately cupping her upturned face as their lips met. Rain glistened on their faces and shone in silvery puddles on the paving stones at their feet and behind them the sky was a black brooding mass of cloud.

It was a timeless image, a classic to be reproduced over and over, whose currency was love, truth and beauty. The people who bought the poster and the stationery range and the postcard assumed that it must have been posed, that it was really too perfect.