



A Portfolio of Modern Short Stories

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She's Going to Look Back

I stand from my workbench and walk to the sink. I turn on the tap and run my hands under the water. I pick up the cloth and begin scrubbing, until I can feel the material right there, under the nail. The water is cold, as cold as the lake. I look over at the bench. Its long neck is bent back beneath itself, as though it can't bear to look at me.

I'm so fucking tired of them not looking at me.

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"We're wedged in like cattle to slaughter."

"Bit morose, Nige."

"Morose? Who says morose?"

He was right. The traffic this morning really has been dreadful. The whole intersection between the plains and the university is in complete deadlock, with cars packed bonnet to bumper for a good half mile. The group speaking are ahead of me, all of them a mixture of knees and elbows. They're an animated bunch; all chattering and clanging about, even though the bus is packed and they can barely move. They are hardly older than boys.

"I could probably swim there faster than this."

"You could drown faster, you mean."

There's a girl sitting next to me, on her phone. Engrossed. I look about, and everyone has their heads hunched over their chests, craning over the little screens. In the morning twilight the light reflects off their faces, and they look like ghosts. Even the boys ahead keep checking them, as though they're waiting for an important call.

"I would have gone too, if it weren't for this lecture. My attendance is low enough as is."

"You'd only go because there's birds there."

"Too right I would, it's been weeks since I had a good -"

The bus jolts forward a foot. Those standing lose their balance and clatter into one another. A woman falls against the side of the bus, unable to grab onto anything with a phone in her hand. After a few moments she steadies herself. No one says anything. Normal service is resumed.

"I really should've gone."

"Gone to what?"

"To what? You haven't heard?"

"How'd you miss all the posts?! It's all over my Facebook."

"It's all over everywhere."

I pull my hat down, just a little lower. It's a cold morning and I've forgotten my gloves. The traffic ahead starts moving forward, and for a moment a crowd of people can be seen around the university gates. A van fills the gap and the line is resumed, slowly crawling forward.

The girl next to me tucks her phone into her pocket and begins drumming her feet against the floor of the bus, sounding a dull metallic ring. After a few beats she stands and turns.

"Sorry, this is my..."

"Of course," I say, and step out into the aisle.

She doesn't get out straight away. I wait.

Eventually she slips past me and walks quickly off the bus.

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... rosby is the home to roughly 700 full time residents locals as we call them and about 1000 students **point at graph** once a thriving farming town the soil was overworked leading to a rapid decline in produce quality and therefore diminished profits **speak louder** the town now relies heavily on two streams of revenue **use hands** the first is of course from the university itself and the money you lot all spend in the pub on a Saturday night **smile laugh** the second is from tourism with the nearby lake a natural hub for bird life **slowly** of this a bevy of swans have become the main attraction **change slide** drawing in nearly a million visitors annually **click to zoom** it is hypothesised that without these famous swans the residents of rosby would have little to no income **they're not listening** central to this is the tale of rosby **clear throat** you may have heard many stories about rosby before coming today most of which are not true **eye contact** the most famous of which is of course that of the aforementioned swans **look at...**

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"...it begins with a scientist, an outcast, they say, becoming devoted to discovering the secret of flight. After years of travelling he came here, to this very place, and built his home out on the plains. He would watch as the birds flew over his house to the lake, and hypothesise of their trajectories and flight paths, and scrawl diagrams and figures on paper. The villagers of Rosby thought the man completely insane. Over the years the scientist became more and more extreme in his methods. He barricaded himself in his house and blocked the windows with the papers that detailed his own designs."

We all stare straight ahead, looking anywhere but him. Just as we had planned.

"One night an explosion rocks the town to its foundations. The vibrations send the surface water all along the lake into turmoil, and waves crash against the marshes. The villagers run out onto the plains, to see that the entire house has vanished. All that remains, there on the sand, is a swan."

He looks out at the crowd. Anxious. Desperate.

"All nonsense of course. If there ever was a house out on the plains it was likely swallowed by one of the many sinkholes that you will come to study during your time here. As long as you don't fall in one after a night out!"

He waits for laughter. In the pause that follows I realise that it must be now.

"If you walk down to the lake then you'll -"

"-Professor-"

"-surely see one of the beautiful creatures th-"

“-what is your response to the various reports that -”

“-I’ll take questions after, sweetheart.”

The chatter of the crowd stops. There is silence. That would be enough.

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“Morning, Andrea.”

She doesn’t look up as I walk past. She’s occupied by one of her crossword puzzles and mustn’t have heard me. I hurry through the reception and up the stairs, into my office. I had left the door open last night, just as Ginevra had insisted. I glance at the clock above my door. Quarter past. I sit down behind my desk and login to my email. My hands are still cold and it takes several goes to get the password right.

Inbox (0)

They must have already been and gone. 15 minutes is a long wait, at their age. They would email when they got home asking if the meeting had been cancelled. I could use the time to reorganise my notes, although I’ve almost got everything back in place already.

“Professor?”

“Ah! I knew you’d still...”

A girl is at the door, half her body visible, one foot in the room.

“I have a few questions, if you’re free.”

“If I’m free?”

Her eyes widen slightly. She takes a step back.

“No, no I meant – I – only if you have time. For the university magazine.”

She’s young, likely a first year. She’s holding a notepad in one hand, a pen gripped in the other. She taps them together as she speaks.

“We’re doing a profile on all staff. I can just say you were busy.”

“I have a few minutes. Come in.”

tap tap tap

She sits in the chair opposite my desk. Her back is rigid, as though her spine has been broken and replaced with a wooden plank.

“Would you like a drink? There’s a water fountain in the hall.”

“No-no this won’t take long. I just need some background stuff.”

tap tap tap

“How long have you worked here, at the university?”

I look at the walls of my office, and count the pieces of paper that almost completely cover the plaster.

“Almost 22 years.”

tap tap

“And what brought you to work here?”

“My mother was also a lecturer. Many years ago.”

“Ah.”

tap tap

“I have down that your father is a butcher?”

“He was. He isn’t anymore.”

That is the first thing she scribbles down. Her handwriting is delicate, although rushed. It would not make the wall.

“And you specialise in Geography, yes?”

“Geography and Environmental Management. I also supervise the first years.”

Next to us a piece of paper comes unstuck from the wall. It floats to the floor, swaying from side to side like a bird in the breeze. We watch it fall.

tap tap

“What are all these?”

“My students’ work. An essay from each year.”

“I’ve spoken to some of your past students, actually.”

“Oh?”

“They describe your style as unconventional.”

“It’s never been a problem before.”

scribble scribble

“Some even mentioned favouritism, and you taking a particular interest in -”

“My wife says these walls are decorated with the hearts of my students. That with each essay they write they open themselves up to me, raw and naked and afraid. And that I cut out the best bits and hang the meat up to dry.”

Her eyes are locked on mine.

“Will that make a headline? Is that what you’re looking for?”

The pen is still. I watch as her knuckles change colour.

“Now if you will excuse me, I have another lecture I must prepare for.”

She opens her mouth to speak. To ask what she really wants to know. What they all want to hear.

“Yes,” she says instead. “Of course.”

She leaves. The fallen piece of paper lies crumpled in her wake.

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From my office window I watch as she walks away, this would be reporter. Her back is turned to me, heading in the direction of the lake. I wait for her to look back.

In the distance, a swan takes flight from the surface of the lake and soars into the sky. It shakes the water from its wings and disappears on the horizon.

She'll look back. She's going to look back.

Romance is Dead

She saw it first, I still had my eyes closed like some romantic fool, and she just started screaming.