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Kim Farleigh
Collective Dreaming

Fiona rang Luke and asked: "Are you coming to Sally's party? These parties are so boring if you're not there. It'd be great if you could come. Just being able to speak to you, if only for a while, would be so great."

Being desired by the desirable illuminated Luke's insides. His head floated. She should be with me, he thought, not Mark.

"I'll be there," he proclaimed.

"What time?"

Her pleading tone reinforced his pleading hopes that she was for him.

"At five," he declared.

"Great."

When he arrived at the party, she dashed off immediately, leaving him alone with Mark. Mark disliked socialising with strangers. He and Fiona had arrived at four-thirty, Fiona spending enough time with Mark before "doing the rounds." She interviewed people about their plans. The guests were all business graduates, except Luke, who had studied literature.

"Luke," Sally and Fiona often said, "is a dreamer."

Fiona claimed: "I'm with Mark because he's got a future." (Mark had studied business and was already in a senior management position in a multinational) "And he's got artistic interests."

Fiona wasn't interested in art. Her pretentious curiosity got aroused by things spoken about at dinner parties.

When darkness fell, the reassuring stars above suggested that promising futures existed.

Fiona had discovered other people's plans. Luke had kept Mark occupied.

"Mark feels comfortable with Luke," Fiona once observed, "because Luke's no threat."

Sally asked Luke: "What are your plans?"

Her eyes shivered inquisitively. She held off smiling. She wanted to laugh about Luke with Charles, her lawyer boyfriend.

"I'm going to London," Luke replied.

Sally blurted out: "You're such a dreamer."

Sally didn't manipulate people, so she was sincere, if not perceptive.

Luke created three categories: those verbally hostile to his ambitions; those quietly hostile; and that minority who acknowledged his imagination, thinking there might be something in this after all. Many, however,

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interpreted "imagination" as "madness." People often said: "You're strange," Luke fascinated that they knew "everything from so little."

He loved confusing them by saying: "I adore your humility. But, really, you don't have to feel so inferior."

Fiona knew Luke had "imagination and "wit", but she couldn't extrapolate from there, for Luke's aspirations were "ludicrous." Those "absurd ambitions" didn't involve big salaries and baby production.

Luke shared a flat with someone called Max. Max saw Luke writing every day. Max admired Luke's determination. When a significant literary magazine published Luke, Luke told Max to keep it quiet.

"Why?" Max asked.

"Let them find out for themselves," Luke replied.

Luke became a civil servant to make money to travel. Occasionally, he saw Fiona. When Fiona returned from a long trip in Asia and Europe, her pride in her adventurousness was uncontainable.

"How many women travel by themselves?" she asked.

Because this question produced silence, she believed it was rhetorical.

Mark had joined her in Paris towards the end of her trip. Marriage's sweet fragrance scented the air.

"But not before I see the Himalayas again," the intrepid Fiona pronounced.

Her materialising plans demonstrated how simple things were.

"Intelligent plans," she declared, "create satisfaction. People like Luke make life so difficult for themselves."

When war erupted in Kosovo, Luke quit his job to work as a volunteer in refugee camps.

"What a decision," Sally sniped. "He's got no future."

Charles agreed. Charles had "common sense;" and he looked "superb in striped shirts and expensive suits."

They didn't realize that for Luke unusual experience meant success; therefore its pursuit meant "common sense."

"Destiny," Luke told them, "means connecting all activities to the pursuit of one thing."

They were stunned when he added: "Security doesn't come from maintaining the safely insipid. Maintaining the meaningless only causes regret."

They chortled at his "prophetic brilliance."

An ex-school friend told him: "You think you're something special, trying to set yourself up as Shakespeare."

Luke told Max: "They know more about me than I do. If only their fantastic perceptual ability could be used to make relevant discoveries."

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Kosovo, with gunfire, refugees, political debates and dramatic scenery, caused Luke to say: "You're a baby until you experience war. Most people die "young"."

He felt thrilled listening to BBC World Service reports with his fellow workers, getting updates on the war, air strike shock waves wobbling the surrounding UNHCR tents, an experience without "demeaning responsibilities and the pointless ownership of irrelevant objects; a gold mine of gorgeous nuggets of information. That information for a person with real curiosity is priceless."

Later, he said: "In Kosovo, I learnt a hundred times more than I had in the rest of my life combined."

The novel he wrote about Kosovo got published in London. A critic said: "Brutality has never been evoked so elegantly."

When Luke won the Booker Prize, Fiona throbbed with shameful envy. Her first child was a year old. The friction that child caused between his parents demonstrated that Mark and Fiona only had money and biology in common.

When Luke returned home, he visited Fiona, who looked significantly older, as if the Australian sun had special vanity-reducing powers.

Fiona used Luke as the excuse required to briefly avoid parental responsibilities. They drove to the beach. Mark gave her permission to do this; but only if she accepted that it was a favor. Fiona's face clouded on hearing "favor."

"Don't I agree that if someone has made the effort to visit you then you should spend time with them while I look after Richard?" she asked.

"It's a favor," Mark persisted.

Fiona huffed, forced into agreeing before going beachwards.

In the car, she said: "As a parent you always feel you're being taken advantage of. It's a constant battle."

Life was now a petty struggle without opportunities to accolade herself for being daring, her ego not receiving the boosts she believed it deserved. Trapped in bland sameness! Her! The Intrepid One, who had demonstrated audacious greatness, trapped in suburbia amid trivial conflicts with an unreasonable man! Unbelievable!

"Common sense" had once made everything so clear.

Fiona avoided commenting on her previous estimations of Luke's plans. People, Luke knew, "transform the past," a theme of his second novel that was set in Palestine.

While his third novel topped the British best-seller lists, Fiona visited him in London.

She said: "I should have gone out with you instead of Mark."

He didn't comment.

"I'm dreading going back to Dublin," she sighed.

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She was now living there with Mark and her children. Mark was working for IBM.

"But, I have to," she added, facing Luke's bedroom ceiling.

She had contacted Luke's publishers to reach him after they had drifted apart.

Pushing prams in parks with unadventurous mothers didn't compare with Himalayan trekking, the last thing done before motherhood arrived. Luke had just returned from Palestine. He was preparing another Middle East venture.

"A paradise," he said, "for a writer."

"You were born to do what you're doing," he told Fiona. "So-called dreamers chase what they know will produce a long-term sensation of living. That's real security."

They were in bed together for the first time. Mark had given Fiona permission to visit Luke.

Fiona had told Luke at university: "You're father must be so disappointed with you."

That paternal disappointment disappeared after Luke's first major success, his father ignoring his previous antipathy towards Luke's so-called "laziness" by revealing a memory designed for luxurious survival, a common tendency.

Sally's marriage had also created tiresome responsibilities that Sally would have dispensed with had she had a second opportunity.

"Our mothers," Fiona said, "insisted we got married."

Gratifying perceptions allure.

"You wanted to do it," Luke reminded her.

His voice had veracity's solid calmness.

"You said," he added, "at university that you would marry at twenty-seven. You didn't even know the man. But you knew the category of man your husband would be coming from. You chose a category, not an individual. You would have married anyone good-looking from that category. Individuals were irrelevant. You don't understand the determination inherent in having a real destiny; what a focussing force it is."

Fiona grimaced in acknowledgement.

"Instead of underestimating people with clear destinies," Luke added, "like me, you should have asked yourselves what you really wanted. Your mothers avoided telling you that money isn't enough. But, worried about their retirement funds, they kept that quiet."

Silence swayed in truth's fetid wash.

"If you don't want anything," Luke continued, "I mean something that burns within, like a fire destroying the significance of all other things, then you end up wanting everything because there isn't anything that can stop the pointless yearning for the unnecessary; and what good is that?"

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After she returned to Dublin, Luke never saw her again. There were too many other people, with interesting destinies, in individual channels, free of mainstreams, with vital imaginations, and fascinating senses of what constitutes drama, for Luke to love.