

Cockeyed

All about the walls of Winston's living room were black and white photographs, leaning over in defiance of gravity, cockeyed, an insult to the perpendicular. Winston took a sip of his breakfast coffee, black, unsweetened, taking absolutely no notice of the cockeyed pictures. He took absolutely no notice of the church in shadow, its tall spindly steeple topped with a trident lightning rod; macro shots of mottled pebbles; a lamppost in half lamppost light; a well-framed paint-peeling window frame; an empty park swing in high graphic contrast; hills covered in black clouds; and a tomb stone, its inscription weathered away. The pictures were all old, relics of the past that refused to fade; lifeless images saturated and dripping with life, forming red pools on the linoleum.

And so, avoiding the slanted icons with unconscious expertise, Winston boringly drank his black unsweetened coffee.

Winston walked down a street with no name. It had once been called Lambeth Close, but hooligans had stolen the name and thrown it in a rubbish bin, and nobody really noticed, and those who noticed, didn't care. He knocked on a numberless door in the nameless street, kicking the step as he waited.

"Hi Winnie." A Negro man appeared.

"Hello Brown," Winston said, and walked into the gloomy house. There was a girl in the kitchen, putting on her shoes.

"I've got mice," Brown said.

"That's nice. Any coffee going?"

"I'm off then," the girl said. Winston poured himself a chipped mug of old coffee.

"All right," Brown said, hardly bothering to look at her.

"I put a trap down last night and caught one."

"I see that," Winston said, glancing in the direction of the parting girl. The door slammed shut.

"Funny," Brown smiled. "I really caught one. 'Orrible little t'ing it was."

"You mean killed one."

"You have to kill 'em to catch 'em," Brown said, with his usual backwards logic. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing." Winston gulped down a mouthful of the bitter coffee. The kitchen table was covered in old books and papers and broken pencils and loose change and dirty cups, so Winston nursed the cup in his hands. They sat in silence a moment, Brown busying himself rolling a joint.

"You not working today?" Brown asked.

"It's Saturday."

"Oh. So what's happening?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd just hang out. I'm in one of my moods."

"You always in one of your moods. What you need is a woman."

"There's no such animal."

Brown licked the length of the joint, ritualistically, and then handed it to Winston.

"No thanks."

"I roll it for you, man."

"Sure. Just smoke it, Brown."

He struck a match, lit the joint, and puffed away.

"You know," Brown began, with a trickle of smoke slipping

from his mouth, "you need to learn how to relax."

"You mean by getting stoned."

"Yeah. Get away from it all."

"I can go to Blackpool for that."

The high street was just around the corner from the street with no name. They sat in a small nearby park and watched the girls go by.

"Look at this piece," Brown said, watching the piece go by.

"I have to be back at two," he went on.

"How come?"

"Fuck, look at the tits on that." Brown watched the tits bounce along. Winston glanced up at the girl, not shyly, but regretfully, like a hungry child rubbing his nose against the baker's window, knowing that was as close as he could get. It was torment, Winston knew, but it was the only way to authenticate his life.

"I haven't had dumplings like that for a while," Brown said, and then added: "She looks like Cathy." Cathy was Winston's estranged wife.

"Don't talk to me about her." Winston never talked about her.

"Hey, look at this one." Another girl had caught his eye.

"Who was that girl at your place?" Winston asked.

"Another nut case. She was freaking out all over the place last night. I don't know what she was on." Brown shook his head.

"You remember that girl who overdosed in your place?" Winston asked, distantly.

"So?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking."

"You t'ink too much."

"Maybe."

"I wonder what happened to she?" Brown asked, for want of something else to say.

"She died," Winston said.

"She dead? How you know dat?"

"I went to the hospital the next day."

"You never tol' me dat."

"You never asked."

"How come you went to de hospital?"

"I don't know. I felt kind of responsible—in a way."

"Da's why you're always so moody. You's feeling responsible for everything. Sometimes t'ings just happen."

They sat in silence.

"How come you've got to be back?"

"Back? Oh, a delivery."

"A delivery!" Winston laughed.

"What so funny?"

"Nothing. You sound like a big business man."

"I am. Import and export." They laughed.

"Oh man, look at dat behind," Brown said. Sometimes the torment was too much; and Winston looked down at his shoes, kicked a stone.

"You should get out of it," Winston suggested.

"I am. When dis deal go down."

"I've heard that before."

"I mean it dis time. I wan' go home."

"To Barbados?"

"Where else?"

Winston knew Brown would never go home. Home would remain forever unreachable, and Winston knew all about unreachability.

Brown left for his delivery; and Winston took a solitary walk around the town—there and back to see how far it was—watching the girls, finally arriving back at the park. A girl was sitting on a bench reading a book, and Winston plonked himself down on the grass opposite. She had the look of a gypsy: her dress and blouse sheer, faded and floating; her hair black as night; her lips full and sensual. She noticed him, looked up from her book and stared. Winston became uncomfortable, sensing that the gypsy girl had some gypsy way of knowing. Not just knowing, but knowing why. Knowing why he could only look. He turned away from her eyes, embarrassed. Occasionally he glanced back, fancied himself holding her hand, touching her black-as-night hair. And occasionally she also glanced back, and Winston would turn away. Finally, the gypsy girl closed her book and left him alone.

It was worse. Winston knew it was worse. He should not even look. Once again the torment was too much.

Winston was a dustbin man. He took away other people's rubbish. It was easy to take away other people's rubbish. Sometimes he even kept some of it, took it home with him and added it to his own. All his photograph frames, for example, were other people's rubbish.

It had been a hard Monday. The crushing gear on his favourite wagon had conked out, and the depot mechanic—who liked new machines because they rarely broke down—decided that the whole vehicle wasn't worth the scrap it was worth. Whether the dustbin wagon would be carted away by another dustbin wagon—well, nobody was prepared to say. With all the stoppages, Winston's six hour shift had taken nine—instead of the usual four, and it was late when he finally

arrived home and climbed into the bath. As he lay, relaxing in the hot water, Winston decided he would eat out.

He checked for his keys on the way out, glanced around the room without seeing the cockeyed photographs, and slammed the door shut.

It was summer, the evening air warm; and Winston strolled down the road, hands sunk in his pockets, walking in no particular direction, passing several bustling restaurants on the way. And then he came to an Indian place that was almost empty, stepped inside, looked about shyly and found a table that was not in a corner, but at least well out of the way. He glanced over the menu and then suddenly lost his appetite. The waitress was coming. She had the look of a gypsy about her. It was terrible. It was fear. The terrible fear had sent his appetite packing. As she drew closer, Winston wondered if she would say something—after all, they were acquainted—desperately hoping she would not.

"Can I take your order?" she asked, offering a smile that possibly meant recognition.

"Er, I'll take a half of lager first . . ." Winston watched her disappear.

After the curry, Winston walked down to the street with no name. He knocked on the door, kicked the step, knocked again and then took a key from his pocket and let himself in. The house was dead quiet. On the table he found a small plastic bag of grass. Winston sat, opened the bag and rolled a joint. As he licked along its length, he heard the back door open.

"Oh, Winnie." Brown had a girl dangling from his arm. She was within spitting distance of being ugly.

"Hello."

"Rolling a spliff? What happened?"

"Nothing. I just felt like smoking." He struck a match as Brown and the girl joined him at the table. Winston had never seen the girl before, but he knew there would be no introductions. Winston, Brown and the girl were all glad there would be no introductions. Winston took a quick puff to get the joint burning properly and then another, long and melodramatic, leaning back on the chair, balancing on its back legs, the smoke in his lungs, spreading his arms like a bird in flight.

"How did your delivery go?" Winston asked. Brown, with a cryptic expression of warning, motioned towards the girl with his eyes.

"Fine," he said.

He knew it would happen: instead of getting out of himself, getting away from it all, the smoke dragged Winston into himself, towards it all. Towards the empty, wasted, bitter years since his separation: the still life, nicely framed and leaning over to one side.

They handed the joint back and forth, without the use of a safety net.

All week, Winston had a craving for Indian food. The closest he actually came to eating any though, was a walk along side an Indian restaurant he knew, and a quick glance through the window. When the weekend arrived, it seemed easier to go inside. It seemed a weekeny thing to do. He sat at the same table, and when a different waitress came to serve him, Winston felt relieved and watched the gypsy girl from a safe distance.

Winston always ate a large breakfast on Sunday mornings, and drank several cups of black unsweetened coffee. And all

around him, the pictures hung, a silent slanted reminder of things gone by, a cockeyed and wordless epitaph to the past. For a change, Winston allowed his eyes to cross lightly their angled path.

He took a sip of the black unsweetened coffee. He turned his attention to the grains in the bottom of his coffee cup. Dead silence.

During the week, Winston's craving for Indian food grew; and every evening he walked past the restaurant. On Wednesday he even went inside, but the gypsy girl was nowhere to be seen. During the rest of the week, Winston became an expert on Indian delicacies. The gypsy girl never reappeared.

Winston climbed naked from his bed. He walked towards the window, pulled the net curtains apart and looked out. It was a quiet street where nothing ever happened. There was an old fashioned lamppost, directly opposite the window, the kind with a cross bar near the top and a slender curving swanlike neck. During the night, rather than light, the bulb outside seemed to cast shadows into the bedroom.

As Winston walked down the street with no name, he knew he would never see the gypsy girl again. He knocked on the numberless door, kicked the step, thought about never seeing the gypsy girl again and finally offered a half hearted smile to Brown.

"Come in," Brown said, glancing up and down the street furtively. "I won't be a minute." Winston knew there was a deal going on, and followed him into the kitchen.

"Half an ounce, you said," Brown mumbled.

"Yeah." It was a new customer. She had the look of a gypsy about her. Brown disappeared off to his secret stash—

under the floorboards of the bathroom—and the gypsy girl looked up and saw Winston.

"Hi," she said with a smile.

"Hello," he answered, distracted, sitting down at the kitchen table. Winston was busy telling himself that it would do no harm to be polite. "Still working at that Indian place?" He said it three times in his head before it came out of his mouth.

"Nah. The tips were terrible." Winston felt guilty, and tried to remember how much he had left.

Brown returned with a small package wrapped in tin foil. The gypsy girl pulled a handful of bank notes from her pocket and the exchange was made.

"Thanks," she said.

"Want to stay for coffee?" Brown asked.

"Maybe next time," she said. Winston was positive she could see what Brown was like, with the girls. It was more of her gypsy magic. As she turned towards the door, her eyes met Winston's. "See you around," she said, with a sympathetic smile.

When Brown closed the door behind her, he asked, "You know her?"

"Me? No. Why do you ask?"

"The way she look at you."

"How?"

"You know what I mean . . ."

"What's her name?"

"Cathy," Brown said.

"Another Cathy," Winston said, wryly.

"She a nice looking piece. You see that behind? I wouldn't mind some of it."

Winston seemed to drink his coffee faster than usual, and

when the cup was half empty he stood up.

"I've got to go. I'll see you later on."

He walked up the street with no name, towards the small park. "She won't be there," he thought, almost hoped, and quickened his pace. Winston was busy telling himself that it would do no harm to talk. Just to talk. It would be nice to have another friend. Just a friend. As he came along side the lush lawn, he slowed, tried to appear casual, tried to look around without being too pointed. The gypsy girl was sitting on her bench, staring into space, and Winston suddenly felt scared, his heart beating like a drum, echoing inside his head. He wanted to turn back, but his feet pushed him on, and then it was too late. The gypsy girl looked up.

"Hi," she said. She was smiling, a warm welcome of a smile, a gypsy magic smile.

"Hello," Winston said. He was still intent on being casual, even with the drum beating warning signals. He knew she knew. He knew she knew why.

"Looking for me?"

Winston had no idea what to say; his feet shuffled on towards her.

"Sit down," she said, and patted the bench beside her. "I'm Cathy."

"Brown told me."

"You asked him?"

"No, he just told me." A pause.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"What's your name?"

"Winston."

"Shall we shake hands, Winston-like grown-ups?" She was

holding out her hand. Winston took it and knew he never wanted to let go. He was dreaming a lifetime of hand holding.

The gypsy girl had invited herself back to his house. She was looking at the paint, peeling on the living room window frame, as Winston unlocked the door with a terrible sense of foreboding. He was afraid. He just wanted to be her friend; just to hold her hand. What if she wanted to make love? That was the question now.

"So you know Brown?" Winston said, pushing the door open.

"Not really. A friend told me about him." They walked inside. "Do you live with someone?" she asked.

"No. By myself."

"How come you have such a big house, all for yourself?"

"I don't know," he lied.

And then they arrived in the living room.

"Wow," she said.

"What?"

"Your photos need straightening."

What did she mean by "straightening"?

"Did you take them?"

"A long time ago."

She walked around the room, looking at the cockeyed pictures. Winston watched her, at last admitting to himself that he wanted her.

"There're no people" she said, still perusing the pictures.

"I know."

"Don't you like people?"

"People don't like me." She had crossed the room, from the picture of the gravestone with its faded inscription, to Winston. She took hold of his arm, squeezed, looked into

his eyes and said:

"I like you, Winston." And then she kissed him.

Winston was terrified. Fear was leaking from the pores of his skin. He fell onto the bed. Catherine stood, watching him with her gypsy magic eyes, then unfastened the buttons on her flimsy blouse. There was a terrible noise in the room. A terrible drumming noise. As each piece of clothing, piece by piece, fell to the floor, the terrible drumming noise grew louder. He watched like a condemned man, counting the seconds before his execution; and louder and louder grew the terrible drumming noise. Then she was naked and joined him on the bed.

"I never . . ." he began. Winston knew he had to tell her. He knew he could not go through with it. He swallowed, tried to look away, to avoid her magic gypsy eyes, but she had tangled her gaze in his. It was all a terrible mistake, and it was all his own fault. "I never made love to anyone since . . ." He faltered.

"Since?"

"My ex-wife." There, it was out. It was out.

"You were married?"

"I suppose so." How could he escape?

"When was it?"

"What?"

"The last time—with her."

How could he tell her? How could he expose himself? She would laugh. What could he say? If only the drumming would stop.

"Three years ago," he said. It was the truth. She was weaving gypsy magic, pulling out secrets that, once exposed to the air, seemed to dissolve into insignificance.

"Poor baby. I'll help you," she whispered in his ear,

whispered so the ghosts would never hear. "Everything will be all right." She took his clenched fist, opened it, lowered her head to kiss gently his palm.

"Do you know how to read palms?" Winston asked. He was distraught; his thinking was confused, slanted.

"No," she said, "I only know how to write them."

Winston and Brown were sitting in the small park.

"I see you de other night," Brown said.

"Where?"

"Walking down de street."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You were busy, man"

And then it dawned on Winston, and he answered with silence.

"Was it dat Cathy girl?"

"Yes."

"So you giving it her," Brown smiled. "It's about time," he continued. "It's good for de health."

"Let's change the subject," he said.

It had been one more failure amassed with a lifetime's failure.

"I'm sorry," he had said, grateful for the shadows cast by the lamppost outside.

"Don't worry about it."

"What am I supposed to do?" With the voice of self pity whispering whispering whispering, the incident magnified until its proportions where overwhelming.

"Just relax."

"You don't know what it's like," Winston had answered.

Catherine was beginning to know what it was like. Each failure sowed the seeds for the next failure, until it seemed that the whole affair was a vast field of defeat.

"Why do you bother with me?" he asked. They were in bed, with Winston again taking refuge in the shadows.

"Maybe because I like you."

"Maybe you do, but—"

"It's not as serious as you think. Really."

Silence.

"A lot of men have the same problem—and it always goes away."

"So you keep saying."

"Because it's true."

Winston was crying.

Winston and Catherine had spent the evening at the local pub.

"I'm a bit tipsy," she said. "I need something to sober me up."

"Like what?"

"A kiss."

They were sitting together on the couch, surrounded by the lopsided icons of things gone by; Winston leaned over and offered a short-lived kiss.

"More than that."

They embraced in earnest, Winston finally gasping, "I don't want to start anything. You know what'll happen."

"Have you had this . . . problem . . . before?" Catherine asked, moving her lips to kiss his neck.

"What? Oh. I was only with . . . No."

"Your ex-wife was your first?" Catherine asked without intonation, but Winston knew she was surprised. And why was

she asking about . . . It was over. It was ancient history.

"It's ancient history." Winston said. "Can we change the subject?"

"What's her name?"

"Same as yours."

"Really?" She seemed to find this amusing, giving a girlish giggle. "Is she like me?"

"I hope not."

Catherine lifted her feet up onto the couch, resting her head on his chest.

"How long were you married?"

"You writing a book?"

"No," she said, looking up with a mischievous smile. "You are."

"How long?" she insisted.

"Too long—by the look of it. That's the church there." He motioned with his eyes to the topsy-turvy photograph on the wall. She knew which one without looking up, had seen them all a hundred times.

"You were married in a church?"

"It was my mother's idea. She kind of took charge. I was young—I was only eighteen; and she has this sneaky way of taking over. By the time you realise what's going on, it's too late. We were supposed to get married at the registry office. I didn't want it turning into a big deal."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I thought there'd be more pressure, afterwards, you know, to make the marriage work, if we made it into an event. I didn't want anyone around. I even thought of asking someone out in the corridor, a cleaning lady or something, to be the witness. That was the plan, anyway, until my mother found out."

"First she started inviting people—people she thought were my friends; and the whole thing got to be like a circus."

There was a pause, and then Winston said, "She was pregnant."

"Your mother?"

Winston half smiled.

"She was pregnant?"

"Yeah."

"You have a kid?" Catherine sat up.

"Is it so hard to believe? A boy. He's five now." Winston was having trouble speaking, the muscles in his throat twisting tight, wringing out tears. "I haven't seen him since he was two. My wedding was a circus, and I turned out to be the clown."

Catherine was weaving her gypsy magic, and the terrible words tumbled out.

With the summer over, and all the children back in school, the park was almost empty. Winston and Catherine walked passed the flower beds, where roses threw their paling petals to the wind.

"We went on holiday, one year, when Glen was two. A regular family holiday."

They passed an empty swing, dangling down with nothing to do.

"Where to?"

"St. Ives (I used to bring him here, to play), there was this really nice pebble beach, just down the road a bit, with big high cliffs protecting all the pebbles. We stayed there for two weeks. It seemed like . . . I don't know . . . It was just really, really nice. A few days after we got

back, she left—with Glen. No note, no nothing. So what was it really? Not just the holiday. What was everything?" Winston paused. "That's the hardest part—it strangles you—trying to figure out what it was all about. What did it all mean?"

"You have to find your own answers, Winston."

"Only I can't."

What did it all mean?

"I'm scared," Winston said. They were back at the house, lying on the bed.

"Of what?"

Winston looked at his lovely and sweet and understanding gypsy girl.

"Falling in love with you."

"It's too late to be scared," she said.

"You know what I used to think?"

"What?"

"I used to think most of my future was in my past."

"That must've been before you met me," she smiled.

No dustbin man had kissed like that before. It was the kind of kiss women read about in cheap novels: strong, sensuous, with no mention of tongues. And then, before Winston really knew what was happening, they began to make slow uncertain love; and if there were no earthquakes, there was at least a promise of future convulsions.

When they went downstairs, the gypsy girl said, "Oooh," brightly, her voice sparkling with the fizz of a dazzled child. "It's funny I never noticed earlier."

"What?" Winston was only half listening.

There was no big answer, after all. What did it all mean? Even the question seemed futile, even vain. Catherine had

been right: he was writing a book. The question was like trying to guess the meaning of an unfinished manuscript from a single solitary chapter.

The gypsy girl was looking at all the photographs, hanging on the walls, hanging even and straightforward, properly aligned, a compliment to the perpendicular, doing everything that photographs were supposed to do—and nothing else.

“You’ve been straightening your photos.”

Winston looked at her.

“What do you mean?” he asked.