

The Writer and the Lady

“Not quite right,” she said to herself with an echo that sounded like she was talking to herself through a long pipe, “This lipstick’s smeared.” She mechanically dabbed at her lower lip with a kleenex. Stroking the brush with a slender hand, she stared as the liner traced sharply the outline of her lips. Without a paragraph of thought, the ceremony was again complete. Beginning with the foundation, she’d passed through powder, blusher, lash curler, eye shadow and liner, mascara and lipstick for her full, rose lips, though this young model did not need make-up, and would not need it for years. “Done.” She stood, and drifted for a moment as if she did not know who she was, or where she was going. “The party will be over,” she sighed, “before I even arrive.” She spun on her glossy shoes, and picking up the cap and scarf, walked from her home through the breaking night to her shiny little car.

Lorelei drove alone; her best friend had called and bowed out at the last minute. “*Try to have a good time tonight,*” she had said, and Lorelei thought she would. It was going to be a gaudy affair: Maurice Charles would read from his new work for an audience of celebrities. Lorelei should have felt honored to be among them, but tonight she did not, even though she’d been invited by his agent and promoter. She was almost always, however, invited to elegant parties. Some of her friends would say this was because of her good looks, and maybe it was true, since her first photographs, her likeness had become well known. But something within her ached for attention to that which was not already noticed. Men, especially, would sometimes talk *at* her, not *to* her, and if she were asked a question in front of them, often they would answer it. When introducing themselves, their women would look away, and find reasons to leave. She was bothered by her beauty. “I’m real,” she wondered, but people often talked to her as if she wasn’t really there. She felt transparent, like a cellophane doll, and yearned for something new, but did not know where to find it. She was trapped by her gorgeousness.

Yet on the long ride in, a quiet excitement welled up in her. She felt sad and lonely, and at the same time filled with energy. “What’s happening to me?” she asked herself, although realizing that her heart’s confusion might take time to solve. There was a small electricity stirring, and a choice had been made, but of what, she was not yet aware.

Brandon, however, had already made his decision. The collar would definitely be worn outside the coat. Slower than a Monday, he dressed painstakingly. He was suitless, and slightly threadbare in his sports coat, and wondered if he would be expelled from a literary banquet. “Maurice Charles, . . . so what?” he gloomed. Slight, balding, intense, good-natured mostly, he had lost his natural optimism, and was imagining ruin. “Come on, Brando, you’re a published author now, you’ve got to be seen in the right circles,” his publisher had said, and he knew it was true. For him it was decision time; he could live on with just one published story, and shrink

back from its consequences, or risk failure and grow. So “good old Brando,” the clerk’s clerk, a man who would rather drink scotch in a bar with friends than do anything else but write, inserted his collar into his coat, and nervously headed for the literary world. As his train plodded into the city, he tried to abandon all his expectations, both of failure and fame, and was only moderately successful. He awaited the coming evening ambivalently.

Not as late as she had expected, Lorelei walked into the Montford Hotel’s lavish ballroom. It had a gilt ceiling with a chandelier in the center, and a stage with a microphone in a far corner. Buffet tables were arranged in the middle. There were already many luminaries, and certainly more would arrive. As she walked vampishly in, several single men, talking at the door, tried to engage her in conversation. With tactful “No thank yous,” she avoided their politeness, and searched the room for her host, Daryl Freed. She found him, at last, conversing with a thin, balding, serious figure next to the bar at the side of the room. She crossed the floor to meet him, and held out her hand for the greeting.

“Lorelei, my love, you look *sensational*.”

The thin, mature-looking man turned also, and as his eyes met hers, they halted at her smoothness. He seemed familiar, for some reason, and she had to look twice to realize that she had never met him. He was older, with deep brown eyes and a mustache. He also seemed slightly uncomfortable, as if his clothes did not fit. He acknowledged her with a nod, then looked at Daryl apprehensively.

Oh, I’m sorry, Brandon Wilde, this is Lorelei.” Daryl looked at each in turn as they stared at each other. “Brandon wrote a story in last month’s *Harpers*.” Quite good. I think he’s destined for greater things than being a bookkeeper.”

Brandon winced, but Lorelei did not seem to mind his comment.

“You must be quite proud of yourself,” she smiled.

He blushed. “Yes, well, it’s my first story, but Daryl said that he can sell more; he wants to be my agent.” He blinked at Daryl, who looked apologetically back, after the last remark. Brandon had already forgotten it.

He was not usually good with beautiful women, as they liked artifice, which he had always lacked, and he was therefore cautious, but she looked directly at him, and seemed drawn to what he was.

“What is it about?” she glimmered.

“Oh, the story? It’s about an unlikely love affair, and how love persisted.

“Does it have a happy ending?”

At this Daryl interrupted. "I must introduce Monsieur Charles to our audience, and I can see that you two have enough to talk about." He squeezed Brandon's arm, kissed Lorelei, and left for the stage, which he climbed with the Frenchman. After a brief introduction, Monsieur Charles began reading in lively, French-tinged English, into the microphone.

Brandon was feeling more at ease, now. Lorelei sensed this, and suggested they tour the auditorium, to meet some celebrities she knew. He was warm, and she resisted a compulsion to tell him everything about her. She thought he was the kind of man who would not use anything she told him against her, as many men did. She felt safe with him. So they strolled aimlessly about the room, and she showed him to many people, while he endured the admiring glances of mysterious women, and the envy of men. At each stop, she would introduce him as "the short story writer, Brandon Wilde." As they walked farther, Brandon's worries evaporated in her enthusiasm. He felt lighter and happier, and optimistic again.

"So tell me about this unlikely story, this love affair," she twinkled. "Do you really believe two people can give to each other what they both need?"

"Of course, but first you must know what that is. Some of us go through life in a vacuum; we feel that there's something missing, but we're afraid of change, too timid to try. It's happened to me. Many times we don't even have the guts to find out what it is we *do* need."

"And do you know what you want, what you really desire, Brandon?"

The party was now a million miles away. As it was early summer, the glass doors were open, and they walked onto an open deck and were alone, surrounded by the lights in the sky above them, and in the city at their feet.

Lorelei suddenly sensed herself as never before. She realized that she *did* like to be popular, and beautiful, and to have lonely eyes stare at her from the far corners of rooms. And here was a man to share that with, to symbolize everyman, to be everyone for her. She whirled from the night toward him, and heard him say, "I want you, Lorelei."

And as they kissed, she knew she would have him, this honest and wonderful man. She squeezed him tightly, and he looked out into the night with the eyes of a man who had everything he wanted, and who would know many beautiful women.