

THE FICTION MAN

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Long before morning I knew that what I was seeking to discover was a thing I'd always known. That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all betrayals came easily.

Cormac McCarthy, 'All the Pretty Horses'

The Fiction Man was conceived when Dr A left the woman who'd been his wife for twenty years, and their only son. It became whispered in the small town that the reason for this scandal was because he was in love with another woman. The truth was he'd made two attempts to end an affair that had dragged on for three years, and his lover (henceforward called Mrs B) was having none of it. Women choose men and she had chosen him. Shrewdness, wrote Leopardi, is employed more often to make up for scarcity of intellect, and to overcome a greater abundance of intellect in others. The female nostril of intuition sensed she was losing her hold on Dr A, and she did not intend to. Being a woman of a certain age, she knew nature was not on her side. She knew that Dr A, *par contre*, was still attractive, this tall man of big build, Roman nose and soft brown eyes – although he had a stoop, the hunch mid-spine giving him a vaguely furtive look, the forward curve only slightly disguising the expanse of his belly. For Dr A had a weakness for food, and Mrs B was an exceptionally good cook. She needed him, so she cooked for him. Her intellect did not match his, nor did their interests correspond, but she made up for the imbalance with strategic skills that were second only to his. He acted meek so she would think she had the upper hand, but in actual fact he manipulated her need for him, knowing perfectly well his false submissiveness gave him the power over her.

The son of Dr A came to call her The Shrew. What happened to him in the fiction Dr A would invent as the story of his life was about to devastate him and mark

his life indelibly: he was seventeen, and about to sit final exams in the school where his father taught English Literature (fiction). It was the day before Princess Diana was killed in a car crash and Dr A had gone abroad on a trip to the Far East for the Education Board he worked for from time to time. Back home, a manila envelope arrived in the morning post, addressed to Dr A. Unaccountably (except female intuition operated in her, too) his wife Mrs A opened it. To a document was attached a 'darling' note, saying how wonderful it would be to be together on this trip to the Far East. If Mrs B had intended to, she had timed it beautifully. Dr A's wife picked up the phone and told him if he didn't come home on the next plane, the marriage was over. Dr A, six thousand miles away, had a split second to consider her ultimatum. He disobeyed. He made a choice, and walked into the spider's web.

Let us not talk things of the heart here. This is not a man who left his wife for love of another woman. He was found out. His marriage was stale as many are after twenty years. He was already tiring of Mrs B, and had been having a parallel affair with the school secretary. He knew this secret would be exposed too, now that the other infidelity had been busted. From now on, ambition to break out of small-town life and climb the ladder much as Mrs B had done in a distant city of some distinction, became the lodestar. He saw a chance to reinvent himself in a place where nobody knew his history. Mrs B's previous marriage had been to a member of the minor aristocracy, and he was not averse to the cachet. She was better-off than he and owned a small suburban semi-detached property she kept as neat as a pin. As for her, the prospect of losing the younger, urbane and rather charming Dr A after three years of an exciting-because-illicit relationship she knew to be her only chance of long-term companionship, was unacceptable. Their agendas were in accord. An unspoken Faustian pact was forged. Dr A moved into her dolls-house. He went back to the home of his marriage only once, to collect his clothes. Before he had time to close the front door behind him, his wife of two decades and mother of their son had thrown the contents of the wardrobe down the staircase at him. He never plucked up the courage to return. He had chosen, in that moment's surrender, to share the rest of his life with a woman who would cook, hen-peck and keep house - and him on a short lead.

She made the prison walls cosy. But inside, his darkness was remorse and guilt unending.

Let us say more about Dr A. Thus far the reader may be out of sympathy with a man who left his wife and son so suddenly and cruelly. An adulterer, obviously. A serial adulterer. Ambitious. Cruel, selfish and self-seeking? A deceiver, dishonest

undoubtedly. Sins of which he was conscious, and to some degree penitent. But he hid his troubled dreams and the darker side of his anguish from Mrs B – even, to a large extent, from himself. He partly believed in his reinvention, because their joint survival depended on acting out the Fiction they had created in the prestigious city that had become his new home. That he had left his family for an overwhelming love. That they would create a new, stable family together (on her terms of course, for *her* daughters and relatives, since his son would never buy into this myth). In this genuine anguish we can see a redeeming light in Dr A, for he had – as well as the evil shadows in the abyss of his psyche – a gentle nature, sensitive, thoughtful, intuitive, warm, with a deep response to things beyond human insight. He was moved by the beauty of nature, by sacred buildings, by poetry and all well-crafted writing (especially fiction). Ironically (with an irony he would have appreciated in the literature he taught to wide-eyed and often nubile students) his genuine dislike of conflict had placed him in conflict without end.

Increasingly, Dr A lived much of his life inside his head, thinking much, reading much, walking city streets in the island of his soul of which Mrs B knew nothing. They had established routines, and life was materially more than comfortable. Anything other than mundane conversation faded to a minimum. She let her figure go now she had trapped him. Soon he became bored with home life. Knowing he loved his food she fed him epicurean meals in the hope that he would put on weight and become unattractive to other women. He resorted to benevolent silence. And, obediently, ate. They came to know each other's ways and there were many things about his life with Mrs B that he appreciated. She earned more than he, she managed money-matters well, and she would soon have a pension coming to her. Unlike him.

Two years after *The Great Escape* he met the woman he would love more deeply than any woman in his life. This he told her with words spurting from arteries of the deepest truth he knew. This meeting turned out to be the great love of both their lives. Its joy and pain took them to heights and depths they could only have imagined. Let us call her Ms C.

But Dr A could not give up his suburban cage for Ms C, he could not explode his domestic life, not again. It was vital that *The Fiction* be maintained. The shrewd Mrs B knew how important appearances were to Dr A. He was not a man who liked his mask to slip and to reveal who he really was. He was attached to the image of himself as a good, upstanding and conventional member of society. The web had been expertly cast: Mrs B had been ingratiating herself with his ageing mother, Dr A was slowly mending the hurt he had inflicted on his son, his new job was tied up with Mrs B's.

Dr A realised he had to find a way, in both his life and Ms C's, to accommodate their love: for it was impossible to sever the bond. They tried several times, and found it couldn't be broken. Dr A had learned much about infidelity and its effects, and Ms C knew intuitively that surrendering to a full-blown sexual affair would shatter the emotional structure of their love, and end by forcing their separation. She wisely sensed they had to follow a different path, not merely in the light of his previous amours, but in the light of the quality of what they shared. Their bodies, close if not conjoined, must insist on chastity. Courageously - possibly naively - they attempted to discover what it is to love beyond desire and to mine the depths of a chaste loving friendship.

For the first four years they trod an un-navigated path, tossed by the proverbial tempests of love and dazzled by its light, as close as two human beings can be, two hearts as one, a union of mind and soul. Hand in hand they walked the streets of many cities - Paris and London, Birmingham and Ely, Berlin and Cambridge, Verona and Durham. They walked along rivers and estuaries and on canal towpaths, they sat on the damp moss of dark-leaved woods and crossed stubble-fields after harvest. They lay together in long grasses at midsummer, they sat on winter afternoons by the leaping flames of a log fire and read books and watched films on her sofa, they shared meals and listened to music and drank wine. They talked of many things under the sun and of the things beyond it, they laughed and they wept. Dr A told her he had never loved like this, he told her she would never know how important she was to him in his life, and, one December, how the fleeting hours they spent together to exchange gifts was his real and only Christmas. He called her his precious love. *You are the extension of my soul*, he said, and she believed it because she too felt the numinous nature of their love. They made a pact of a lifetime of loving friendship. Without adultery. Whatever the odds. They spent some days in Venice floating in the sublime light of their love and on their return he fell ill for three days, cold as a corpse under duvets and blankets, knowing that what they shared was out of this world and unreachable and shivered with the terrible recognition of his irretrievable mistake.

The Fiction tightened its stranglehold. Mrs B's antennae were alerted. Suspicion grew. There were clues but no evidence. She asked Dr A to tie the knot now that his divorce had gone through, and marry her. She pointed out to him that if he did, he would inherit her pension. He had surrendered his with the teaching post he lost on leaving his wife, he had given up his house in the divorce settlement, he had no capital. God or Mammon? What could he reply? That he has been in love with another woman for the past five years? *The great love of my life and best friend, deepest*

companion, my beloved, the person I laugh with, weep with, find my being in? My life, my pearl....how could he tell her that?

He agreed to marry Mrs B.

What might happen next in this Fiction? You would assume that the Great Love must end. We can only imagine the pain the woman he still loved, Ms C, went through that summer. Loving him as deeply and truly as she did, she let him go. She did not create a scene, did not write a vengeful letter of exposure to Mrs B (now the second Mrs A) in order to claim the man she loved as much as life itself, did no late-night dialling. Her nobility cost her much and affected her health but she kept her life going with some dignity by the grace of God.

Three months three weeks and three days after their parting, just ten weeks after his wedding in a registry office attended only by Mrs B's married daughters, Dr A walked back into Ms C's house. Slowly they tiptoed over the broken shards of the weeks apart and found a new way, a careful way to continue with their deep loving, calling it brother and sister but, as he often said to her, *'we both know where we are in our love for each other'*. Their love had survived even this test. When Dr A had married his earthly wife, he had already espoused the wife of his heart. And her heart was his. They remained faithful to this invisible pairing. She was the one who reflected his light back to him, her life was dark without that light. He would be as lost without her as she would be without him.

There was much suffering but the son was the one who suffered most. What of him? He began to see the father he had loved so much and lost, although he never visited Mrs B's (now Mrs A's) house, and some of the hurt inflicted began to heal. But he disliked his step-mother intensely. He saw through The Fiction of Happy Families they had constructed, through the paper-thin walls of the dark prison they had constructed. *'Mr and Mrs'... 'my husband, my wife'... 'We think'... 'We like'...* He exploded in rage at a family wedding where this farce was enacted in public. Dr A, who after all had taught literature and read fiction constantly, now experienced for himself the truth expounded by J.M.Coetzee in 'Elizabeth Costello': that our lives are *but a story made of air that we tell ourselves...* He now discovered he was locked into the Fiction he had created in order to make coherent his past actions, but what was meant to be a story had turned into his life. It is more common to assume that love is a fiction, and life real: but the story Dr A had created had been turned on its head. Suddenly he had discovered that it is love that is real, and his life was a fiction, a Fiction that now threatened to destroy him. Faust had sold his soul to the devil and the devil was about to have the last laugh. But not quite, not yet. Dr A knew in his

heart that the most important thing in life, the point of being alive, was at risk of being smothered: that glimmer of the divine, that light so easily extinguished, must be kept burning by kindling its flame with the glimpses he had of it with the woman he truly loved.

She too, Ms C, had to create a Fiction in her own life in order to tolerate the loss of not sharing her life with Dr A the way she yearned to, deprived of his companionship for much empty time, yet knowing in her soul that they were never apart, they were one wherever he was. *We are always together when we are apart*, he said to her more than once. She had several suitors who wished to have love affairs with her, thinking she was 'available', but she had discovered (not much to her surprise) that even though she was in theory available, in practice she was not. So she created a Fiction of the contented single woman in order to satisfy the curiosity of those close to her, and a Fiction for herself as 'the other woman' constructed along the lines of star-crossed lovers of legend. She was prepared to do this, for the love of Dr A. Create a Fiction so plausible it could be written as a story with a happy ending. A tale of fidelity of the heart, against the odds. So this secret and illicit love must continue, unseen by the world, until their ashes mingled in a place they had decided upon together, a place they both loved and had written in codicils. *Dust these bones may be, but dust that loves you still....*The Fiction would never end and as people come to know of it after they had gone, they would be moved by the last gesture, of mortal dust scattered by a river estuary stretching out to where sky meets earth at the wide horizon of the North Sea.

Two, maybe three years later, a second Fiction unfolded. One day Ms C heard something in his voice. She began to notice that she did not have Dr A's full attention the way she used to, that he was often thinking about something else while they were together. She put it down to the evolution of relationship and was content to let things go unchallenged. Nevertheless, there were moments when a frozen hand clamped her guts and tied them in a knot. She noticed he said things that didn't add up, about where he'd been or what he'd been doing. One day he phoned her as he regularly did, early in the morning. She heard that thing in his voice again. The ambient background sound was wrong. Her intuition told her he was lying to her. She walked around the house. If he was worried he would always tell her, when he was stressed he invariably shared it with her. So it wasn't that. Unhappy, tormented or perplexed, they leaned on each other. She was there for him, and she had waited. But now she was about to do something she had never done before. She picked up the phone and followed his trail. Her instinct was right. He was not where he had said he

was. The blood drained out of her bones. Clearly her great love must be deceiving her. Why else should he lie to her? They shared everything. The cold knot tightened and grew so strong it throttled her. Her body went white. It could not be true. She must be wrong. They had sworn a lifetime together in their special love. Their love could not be a Fiction.

But she would wake in the dark hours of the night and knew she had not been mistaken.

For a while she said nothing to him, but asked gentle questions to check on her disbelief that he could have been lying to her. With the ice-pick of betrayal he dug deeper, telling her things she knew to be untrue about that day he had phoned. She changed the subject but his antennae were alerted and now he insisted she tell him what the matter was. So she did. He sat very, very still. He made a weak attempt to deny his lie. When she told him what she knew, he admitted it. She held on to herself, did not scream or weep or accuse, but waited. She told him that all she wanted was the truth, that whatever it was, it would make no difference to her love for him, and to their deep friendship, that they could resolve everything by talking it through. All she asked was to know the truth.

He was mute. After a long pause he said only two things. That he was sorry for letting her down. And that this was the end of their loving friendship of seven years. He never came back. Brutally, silently, he walked away out of her life to create the next Fiction.

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