

PORTRAIT of a CONVERSATION at a MIDNIGHT HOUR

'OK, Mark, admit it! Afternoon well spent! Exhibition just of portraits of women!! All of them with all their clothes on!!! Well, nearly all.'

'Beth, yes, it was much more interesting than I thought it would be.'

'Those two women, the older one reading Le Figaro and the younger one operating the lathe, they got to you didn't they? Why?'

'I don'twell....maybe I saw my mother in both...at different times in her life. I almost felt like talking to them! Imagine what stories they might have. Different times, different social classes but..., Beth, don't laugh....'

'I'm not, dearest. I'm not. Come on. The gallery's closing down. Lights out time! Maybe *they'll* have a chat when everybody is out!'

'You think so?'

'Maybe they've never been placed next to each other before!! They look so different in age, time and class. You never know. Might be an interesting conversation'

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There is a bench that faces the two portraits. Katherine sits at one end and Ruby Loftus sits at the other. Just as they have sat for the last three nights since the exhibition opened. It is their secret pleasure when nobody else is around. A relaxation from the daytime rigidity of framed silent inactivity. You are surprised? Ah, but then, how many exhibitions have you been to when the gallery's doors have been locked and the lights have been out?

They have not talked on any of the nights so far. They have both seemed too *distant* to the other. Ruby cannot stay silent for so long though. Her affability is stretched to breaking point.

Hey, missus, my name's Ruby. What's yours?

.....
Mine's Ruby Loftus..... there, on my frame. See.1943

.....
Noswaith dda....just being friendly, like. I'm Welsh. That's Welsh for Good Evening. Us Welsh can get real posh like, sometimes. I could have said Hiya. I usually do, but you being a lady an all and a foreigner I thought I'd be a bit formal. I mean you're from Italy ant chew?

Italy?

The newspaper? Figaro? See, I know a bit about opera. Coming from Wales, like! The Marriage of Figaro! Weren't that Italy. Our local amateur opera group done it once when I was young. I might 'a gone, I dunno, but Ma an Pa both said I'd be a bit bored so we all went to the flicks instead.

It is a French newspaper. I am French.

But in't Italian? Figaro. I'm confused.

It is a fairly simple story if you know about a man called Beaumarchaise and early to mid nineteenth century French cultural and political history. Do you?

Missus, I don't know nothin' much about British history, nothing about Welsh but I ain't half caught up with bloody German history these last few years.

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.....I would quite like to hear some Welsh spoken. I have never heard the language spoken by a native or anyone else for that matter. Would you do that for me?

Oh, I don't speak Welsh. I was just being a bit silly there. Why should I speak it? Nobody I know ever speaks it around here so what'd be the point. I got a French word I know, though, I have! Viola! Don't know what it means but it sounds real nice, dunit?

Mmm.....

What does it mean, Viola?

It is used in slightly different ways depending on the circumstances. 'Here it is' or 'Look at this.'

I suppose our lads, when they get to go back to France sometime soon, I suppose they'll be learning a bit of your language. What'll you bet? Bet they do.

Of course! They will certainly want to know as much as they can about our culture and history.

!!!!!!.....OH, WE!! "Madamozell, I zink you are tray, tray bootifull!". Ah, Ah. Oh, Missus, you just wait an' see. These'll be young men out for what they can get before the war gets them. Poor young bastards.

Miss Loftus, in my language, I am addressed as Madame, not this - this "missus" appellation. I wish you would use the correct word not your slang expression, please. We have a difference of age, and I dare say social class that in my country would be recognised by this politeness. Perhaps we could return to earlier in our conversation.

MADAM? Alright then, Madam! You know, Madam, Madam can mean different things in English. You can call a snotty nosed girl a right little hussy or a right little Madam an they call a woman who runs a brothel a Madam....

Stop! I think I know that horrid word, brothel, how dare you. . . .

What you mean? I never called you a Madam in that sense, how could you think I would do that? Christ, you're a bit touchy all of a sudden! I was going to say you'll always hear shopkeepers when they see a well-dressed woman looking to buy something, like, you'll always hear them asking, "Is there anythin I can help you with, Madam?" And you'll hear a man, like my pa sometimes, when they're home after a

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few hours at the pub with their mates say, "Would you, dear Madam, care to make me a cheese sarnie?" Like all stupid an thinkin' they're God's gift to the top class comedian's act.

Mmmmm. Sarnie? That is a Welsh word? What does it mean?

It's English so far as I know. It means sandwich. You know, two slices of bread, bit a drippin or margarine spread on an somethin stuck inside to chew on. Posh way of sayin it's a sandwich but around here we're not so posh as you'd notice.

My impression is that you seem to think we are so very different. You, perhaps, in the grip of wartime change, maybe assuming the relaxation of normal behaviour is a normal response. In fact I think it is the age difference and the difference between the eighteen seventies and the nineteen forties that accounts for some tension between us. My times assumed that there should be a deference of youth, whatever level of social class, to older age.

Whew, that all sounds a bit like our vicar when he goes round the schools giving his little lectures. I'm not for all that bullshit – pardon my French, as we say hereabouts – I'm for them that can doin it and sayin it their way and not kowtowin to them that are passed it. Anyway we're at war now. I don't expect you know much these sort of times, livin in a big posh place like Paris. Well, wherever. Where do you live? In the city or the countryside?

I have lived nearly all my life in Paris. I was living there when the Prussians besieged our city and bombarded us for weeks and weeks. When some people almost starved to death and many died. Life was not easy then.

Who are the Prussians? I didn't know nothin about this. Are you havin me on?

You know nothing about 1870 in France or the Prussians! What history do they teach you at school?

Waterloo, Trafalgar, Indian Mutiny, Boer War, the Great War an how it's always best that Kings an Lords rule over us cos they knows best. Stuff 'em says me and my mates, just you wait till the war's over. An before you tell me I know we've had the vote for a while but we've never had the rule. It'll come, you mark me. Come on then, Madam, tell me about the Prussians.

You are a passionate young woman. I can see that and I understand that. I was once passionate, especially when the Prussian attacked Paris, in eighteen seventy, and people I knew got killed and our soldiers in the field got slaughtered. Two of them were my young

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cousins! The Germans were relentless and savage on the battlefield. Can you imagine all that? People were beginning to starve in the streets of Paris because there was a siege?

The Prussians were Germans?

The biggest of the many Germanic states. After they won the war against us, which was due to the incompetence of our leaders, they, these manic Germans, took Alsace and Lorraine from us, and joined up all those little states to make Germany. Can you imagine the turmoil and bitterness of those times? Can you imagine grieving for lost relatives? Young lady, in time you might suffer but you will not be alone. Suffering is a woman's lot in wartime. Yes, lost two dear relatives in that war.

Oh, Madam, Madam! Sorry. I'm so sorry for you.....but I am learnin.

Then I am sorry for you! The more you learn the more you know what is in store for you!

Before the war started my Da got a job in London an we all trooped of there an it was so exciting to live in a really big city. But it seemed no sooner than we get there the war broke out an them bloody Germans bombed all hell out a London. So we moved back to where we come from see, Llanhilleth, near Newport. In Wales. No sooner than we got home than Jerry bombed Newport bad too. An all the young lads were gettin called up or had gone already an Danny, my lovely cousin, more like a brother we was so close, Danny had gone into uniform before we got back an he was at Dunkirk an they killed him. The Jerrys killed him, Madam. He got smashed up. An... Oh, Oh, bloody hell them fuckin Germans they smashed him up an I'll never see him ever again, ever again. Oh, soddin hell. Why? Why, Madam, why. He was only eighteen...just eighteen!..why?..why? sorry, sorry.....

..... *My dear... Ruby... please, call me Katherine.*

Sorry, Katherine, sorry. I don't usually let go, I don't. It's just, sometimes, it gets to you, don' it? Things have built up in my mind, like. What I'm doin' all the time in the factory means I have to concentrate an be clear an precise. Make a mistake an it's not just money down the bosses financial drain it's time lost an one up to Jerry.

Whatever the machine is it is almost as big as you are in the portrait. That is quite unusual in the portraiture I see normally. A woman doing factory work.! What are you doing?

I'm machinin' the screw thread into the breech of an anti-aircraft gun. There that's flummoxed you hasn't it! That's a gun that shoots down planes from the sky so they don't drop bombs on us or anyone else. All that's after your time. Lucky you. You won't know about all that do you? The result, hopefully is that the planes crash, the crew get killed an no bombs drop an kill us. Ain't that terrible? I'm helpin' t

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I'm helpin' to kill people. Young men just like Danny! Sometimes I can hardly sleep for thinkin' about it all. My mind goes in a spin. But there's a war on so what can you do? Do your bit they say. Well I'm doin' mine. Because there's a bloody war on, int there, Katherine? I believe it's our political an moral duty to know why us women are lettin' all our men folk go to war an I believe we have to do our part. That's high falluttin, int it? An my part is to have learnt, in just seven months, to do the trickiest job in the Royal Ordnance factory in Newport. See, before the war, it took nigh on seven years for the men to get as skilled as I am. I'm proud of that. I am really proud of that.

Ruby...

Proud of helpin' kill people.....bloody world...it's not fair Katherine....it's bloody not well fair.

Our times are so different, Ruby, and so similar. New inventions, new discoveries and wars seem to change everything but they are so often superficial.

Don't seem very superficial to me. It's all physical and in yer face right now.

I suppose I'm nearly old enough to be your grandmother. I must look very staid, sitting there reading my newspaper, Ruby, while you are so obviously intent and focused on your job. But what I am doing, in my time and in the place I lived, in the level of social class I was in, is something that is almost shocking for my times. Most men of my generation and many women, too, were scandalised. Reading a newspaper was a man's work! Only they could be expected to have the knowledge and education to understand all about finance and politics.

What were women expected to do then? Hang on to a man's every thought and clap when he brought the money home every week?

Most women had little education. I was lucky to be home educated. By the time we were seventeen or so the only thing on all our families' minds was that we should look decorous, marry well, bear children and manage our household well. If we went outdoors we had to have a chaperone or friend with us if the husband was otherwise engaged.

That does sound a little bit like my Gran's mothers time. I bet it were different if you came from the working class, though.

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Yes, of course. When has it not been? I only had enough time to fight my battles, however. Why could I not work, be a politician, stroll on my own anywhere I chose to in Paris? Why could I not vote? Why could I not manage my own dowry? Why was everything I brought to our marriage his and none of it mine? Why did one half of our country, the men, run everything? Why?

For the same reason as today. It's a man's world though I reckon we got it a bit better than you had it. I got a better education than my Gran had, we got the vote and we got a better chance of working if we want. Except we're still the ones who have the babies, the ones who have to likely stay home from then on and I know what'll happen when this war is over and the men come home and want their skilled work back. They'll get their jobs back however good we are and I suppose that might be fair.

You know, young lady, you have made me think more than I have for a very long time. I feel alive, stimulated.

It's what us youngsters are for, Katherine. Run you older lot about a bit, keep yew up to the mark. It's a law of nature!

I feel tired, though.

Suppose me too. I feel shattered end of every day at work but that's just physical, on me feet all the time. Now it's me mind's tired out.

I feel. . . I have come to know you better but want to know more. Do you understand, Ruby?

Yes, my Madam, Katherine. Nighty, Night.

Bonne nuit, mon amie.

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'Mark, time to stop talking and pay the bill! Drink up and get out time. We're the last left just like in the gallery.'
'Beth, I've remembered what Alice In Wonderland said.'
'Tell me, then!'
'What's the use of a book without pictures or conversation?'