

Bon Appetite

She was dining alone beside a Eucalyptus tree, maybe ten or twelve feet away. All of a sudden the lady sneezed catapulting her ocular prosthesis across the restaurant in my direction. With wicket keepers prowess I deftly apprehended the missile mid-flight. Other patrons acknowledged this timely intervention but refrained from applause. The thing is, what does one do next? Should I saunter over and quietly say, I think this may be yours' or might such well-intentioned bonhomie only serve to escalate her vulnerability. The bio ceramic accoutrement had narrowly avoided a dip in my lobster bisque and obviously needed repatriation. Then, as I sat pondering my next move the lady in question donned designer sunglasses and continued her lunch. So I decided to ask the waitress to return the escapee on my behalf but before I could attract her attention the elegant stranger slid out of her seat and sashayed across to my table.

I'm Mellissa, she said, proffering a well-manicured hand. And I rose to greet her.

She appeared undiminished and surprisingly buoyant in the face of adversity.

'Laudable dexterity' she whispered. You've spared me the indignity of scrambling about on all fours.

Then with a mix of mischief and serenity she lowered herself onto the chair opposite.

'Tell me' I said, 'What's the protocol in these situations?'

'There's no established convention for a handover' she purred, 'were you expecting some sort of ransom?'

What could have been an emotional exchange became a moment to savour, and seconds later she was gone.

After my rack of lamb and roasted zucchini I waved away the desert menu. The busy room felt empty without her. I was reluctant to leave without another glimpse but then, as hope was rapidly fading, I felt a friendly hand upon my shoulder.

'Would you'd care to join Mellissa for coffee?' enquired the waitress.

And my heart soared.

The Orangery was awash with the flowery scent of Darjeeling tea and cucumber sandwich connoisseurs.

Melissa lifted her head and smiled coquettishly

'Do you know what day it is today?' she asked.

'June 25th'. I believe.

'That's right' she mused, 'a sombre day of remembrance'.

How so? Said I.

'T'was on this day, in 1876, my great, great, great Uncle Edgar perished at the battle of the little big horn'.

'That's grim' I declared. 'He must have been serving with the 7th Cavalry alongside General Custer.'

'No' she replied, 'He was camping nearby and popped over to complain about the noise'.

Our spirited collusion gathered pace. We gravitated from coffee to cognac, from fellow diners to co-conspirators, from unknown quantities to endless possibilities.

Then, as the late winter sun sank below the horizon in a blaze of yellows and reds my hand found hers.

'I'm so pleased we met, I confessed, 'but why would a smooth operator such as you wish to while away an afternoon with a rough diamond like me?'

'To tell the truth,' she said, 'you just happened to catch my eye'.

Colin Smith