

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

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A compliment's a compliment

LIKE MANY SINGLE WOMEN IN THEIR LATE THIRTIES, I dreaded New Year's Eve. Yet another evening, clad in an unseasonable outfit, trailing from pub to bar, often in meat locker conditions, ending up in the inevitable nightclub. My friends getting louder with each rum and coke until their raucous laughter filled the street like the cries of seagulls, appropriate enough as we were often in Margate. I know that I sound priggish, but it is difficult to fake fun as I shivered behind them, no alcohol keeping me warm or taking the edge off the night, since I was the designated driver. My job, in the early hours to pour those who had failed to cop off, into my car, decanting them into their respective homes.

Some years I feigned illness. It had to be last minute to seem authentic. Of course, that incurred my friend's wrath as their free taxi service was withdrawn. They would wheedle 'You don't want to be alone on New Year's Eve'. But yes, I bloody well did. Many would sulk for months, but this could not detract from the bliss of staying at home tucked up in bed, with a G and T, watching a film and then sleeping through the village fireworks and any local carousing into the new year.

'Doing anything for New Year's? a gay friend asked one festive season, being temporarily between partners. 'Yes, going to bed with a bottle of gin.' He grinned 'Got out of Margate this year?' He had sworn off the town having once been asked to leave a club for wearing trainers. 'It was Primark central in there' he had hissed 'irate that his sartorial choice had been challenged 'Do they know how much these cost?'

'Come with us to Flamingos' Tom suggested. I admit it was enough to tempt me away from hot water bottle and turning in early. A gay nightclub was different. There was no threat of trying to be pulled by men leering at me through beer goggles. Or worse still sitting in a booth, nursing a virgin coke; my mouth stretched in a rictus grin. No dancing for me since the music was Pete Tong's Ibiza rave classics transposed to freezing Margate. The music one constant wave of noise that never seemed to vary and meant all conversation was a screech that robbed me of my voice by the end of the evening.

But my friend's offer meant that this year I would not have to sign the pledge as designated driver so could drink and better than that, the music would be familiar, 80s and 90s pop that would tempt even me to boogie.

I decided to channel Sade style wise. The black velvet column dress was unforgiving. But I was underweight in those days and on occasions flaunted it. At parties' other women would observe my body, and sigh 'How does she do it?' There was no secret, it was in the genes. I have always loved make-up, the way it can transform a face. I went all in. Smokey grey eye shadow, black kohl eyeliner, scarlet lipstick. My dark hair was scraped back, ballerina smooth and fixed into a bun. Large pearl drop earrings completed the look.

'Wow, fabulous!' Tom declared and unusually I felt it. We all piled into his mini. His three friends were clearly up for fun. I was nicknamed Fi-Fi at once and despite its connotations of pampered French poodles, I

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rather liked it. As the car romped along, a bottle of champagne was produced and passed around the passengers, the mini seemed to bulge with our laughter.

Even in late 90s Kent, gay nightclubs where secreted away as if shameful. There was no Manchester canal street where everyone was allowed to be out and proud. This nightclub was set back in some woods. Hidden from the road, you had to know it was there. Built like a large cabin, only its pink neon sign gave it away. 'Flamingos' a strange choice I reflected given its very English setting.

As a heterosexual woman who had never been to a gay club before, I tensed a little as I clambered out of the car. Not for fear of being eyed up by lesbians, I was hardly a catch, and I was certain their 'gaydar' would see straight through me. No, it was that acceptance works both ways. I did not want to be seen as a sort of gender tourist. I think too that I did not want to have drag queen acid thrown in my face.

But following my companions in, the atmosphere threw its arms around me. Tom briefed me on the layout; 'loos there, dancing there' and the 'quiet room' is 'probably not for you.' That was the last I saw of him until the early hours. He disappeared into a chorus of greetings and hugs. My friend has a talent for attracting people. Chances are we will go to some town miles away and he will encounter an acquaintance. We once watched a carnival parade where even the lord mayor hailed him. I think it's partly his positivity, he rarely has a down day and importantly he is utterly non judgemental. 'I'm Libran' he would say 'calm and balanced.' Tom is also exceptionally beautiful. Tall, with caramel coloured skin and eyes full and black as ripe cherries. Many of my girl friends have fallen for him over the years and despite my warnings have tried to 'turn' him. He accepts all such tributes with a giggle and a coy look as if he is fluttering his eyes behind a fan.

One of our group was visiting for the holidays so like me was a stranger to the club. 'Am I cramping your style?' I asked but he shook his head. He was recovering from a badly ruptured relationship so was content to window shop.

Drinks in hand we followed the music to the dance floor. A large glitter ball scattered sparkles of colour over the walls and dancers. The room was fringed with bean bags and sofas squishy with use. The DJ clearly knew his audience, 'Dancing Queen,' 'Satisfaction' and contemporary dance classics whose name I did not know but that had a rhythm that beckoned you to join in.

Parading seemed to be a feature of the club. Men in tight white jeans and tight white tops occasionally embellished with a jaunty boa would strut their stuff in a circuit, through the dancers, down the corridors where more casual chairs had been placed beside tables with empty goldfish bowls filled not with sweets as I first thought, but condoms.

'Want to catwalk?' my new chum suggested with a grim.

'Well, I've dressed for it, so may as well'

I set off comfortable that I had nothing these men would be interested in except my sartorial know-how. It was liberating to sashay along, but

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mindful of the stilettos that were not my usual footwear, and arse over tit would not be a good look.

Circuit completed; in silent accord we took to the dance floor. My inhibitions unlocked by alcohol I did not dance with usual conservatism instead took my cue from the other dancers and went for it. John and I had carved out a few squares of dance floor for ourselves and we danced together and apart as the music dictated for several hours.

Beaten at last we flopped onto a settee in one of the airy corridors puffing to get our breaths. 'Haven't danced like that for years he gasped. I could only respond with a thumbs up.

It was then that a man with all the attributes that would have raised my hopes in a straight club, squatted down beside me. He said something I didn't quite catch. We met each other halfway. I inclined my head, and he raised his voice. 'I just wanted to say how beautiful you look.' His eyes showed no mockery but genuine admiration. My careful dressing and cavorting were paying dividends. I positively preened. Just as I opened my mouth to thank him 'I found he had not finished 'You don't over do it like the others.' Tribute paid he disappeared into the throng.

At first, I only heard the initial part of his compliment. It took some-while for me to fully grasp the second part. The sting in a tail that was only a sting because he had misinterpreted me. There was no malice. He had meant what he said. My new chum John had observed the entire exchange with relish. He now sat back on a sofa, laughing so much his stomach resembled a bellows. As the headiness of flattery subsided, I realised there had been a bizarre case of mistaken identity.

'Did he just mistake me for a drag queen?' I queried.

'Oh yes ' John corroborated hands on his aching abdomen.

'But my dress is so tight 'I argued.

'There are ways love' he replied, adding 'You run the risk in a club like this.'

Looking round I noticed for the first time, as far as I could work out, I was the only womb baring woman there. In those days gay clubs seemed to segregate themselves and this was strictly for the boys. Studying the drag queens I saw that less is never more. In contrast I must have appeared as something of a novelty with my understated look. In this context, clearly, my bestower of compliments had thought me beautiful. Personally I would have preferred to be included in the ranks of gay icons, Marilyn, Kylie, and the like. But careering towards forty, an age when the ready tributes I once took for granted had begun to tail off, I shrugged and decided that a compliment was a compliment and accepted the praise in the spirit it was given. For the rest of the evening, I positively preened, became a touch competitive too. If I was going to be a drag queen for the night, I would enjoy being considered a classy one.