

The Voyeur

Just half an hour ago someone almost got beat up. I watched the whole thing from my apartment window. First there was shouting, then someone comes racing around the corner, with two others in pursuit. The guy being chased runs up to the door of my building, tries it, but it's locked. The other two are instantly on top of him. One of them's got a stick. He holds it over the guy's head and shouts something which I can't make out. I'm thinking I ought to call the police, but, of course, no phone.

And then they all leave. Like nothing happened.

Out on the street I hear the heels of my shoes clicking on the concrete sidewalk. There is no moon. The only stars are the hundreds of streetlamps bathing the night with an awful fluorescent haze. It's foggy. A cold winter fog. The fog collects itself like haloes around the streetlamps. The first snow of December is still on the streets.

Inside I'm warm, a belly lined with brandy, the collar of my jacket turned up around my neck, hands cradled in my pockets.

A few old men shuffle past, not hurrying. Two more are crouched in a doorway, passing a brown paper bag between them. I watch them from a distance. One of them sees me and calls out, "Hey you. Come over here."

I walk over. In the dim light I can see that his teeth are broken.

"A quarter, man, that's all I'm asking for. Only a quarter. You got a quarter, don't you?"

"Sorry," I reply. "I'm just as broke as you are."

"Liar," the other man says. His teeth are also broken.

I saunter on. It's snowing again. And then there's music. It sounds like a saxophone. Muffled. On the second floor of a building, silhouetted on the curtain of a window a man and a woman are dancing. They stop abruptly. The woman walks over, draws the curtain, and throws open the window. I can see the vapor from her breath hit the cold night air as she sticks her head out of the frame.

In one of the glass panes there's a vision. The saxophone becomes a medieval recorder, the music a medieval melody. And the woman is a medieval maiden, a *princesse lointaine*, the incarnation of beatific love. The snow falls. Warmth radiates from her body. Her eyes refract light from an unseen sun. From her fingertips flow the colors of a rainbow.

Mesmerized, I cannot turn away. I will secretly admire her from a distance. She will never know I exist. I shall write poems of courtly love to her. I will shower her with honor and respect. I will never try to curry her favor nor reveal my own joy and despair. I shall never cease loving her, even though my love be unrequited.

Suddenly the woman sees me standing there. Our eyes meet. The window slams shut.

Across the street a fire is burning in a 55-gallon drum. Some shadowy figures are huddled around it, trying to keep warm. The flames rise and I see my body rising with them, disappearing into the night.