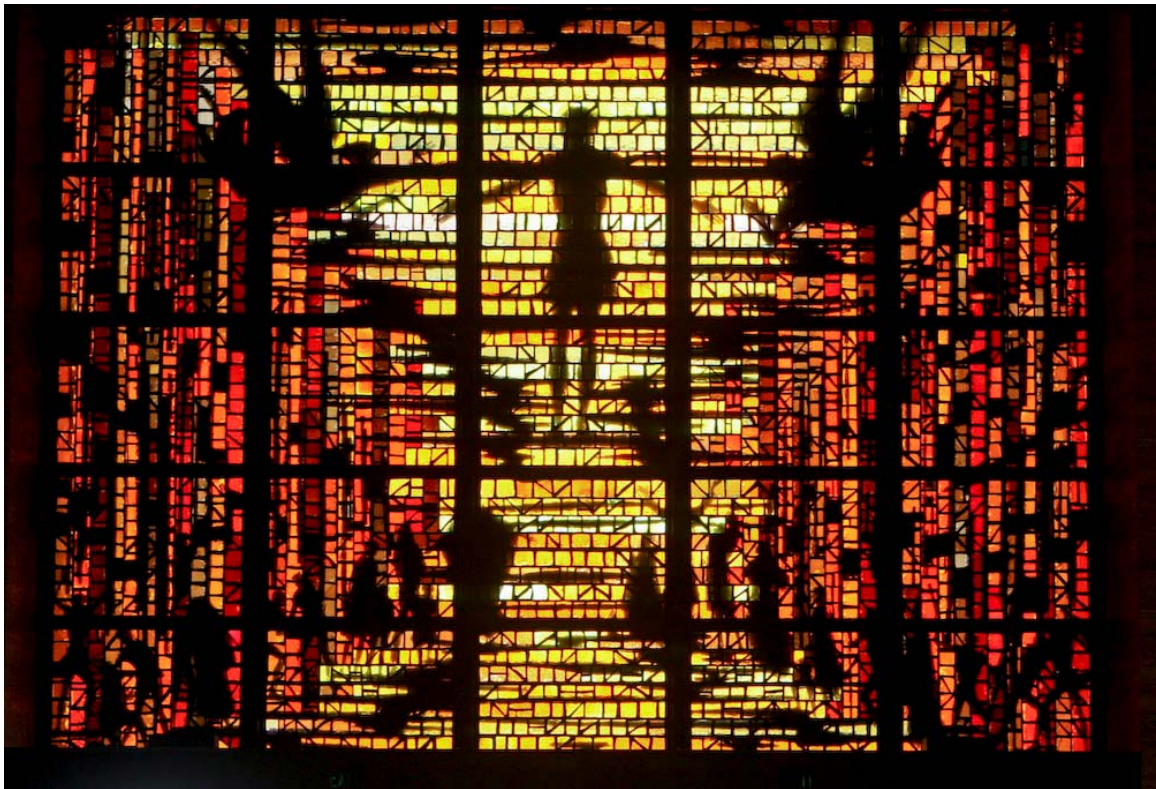


The Girl who will be The Girl



Erik Beck

I am out here on the sidewalk tonight because I am waiting for a girl. I am waiting for the girl who will be the girl who likes me. She is not a boy; I know and am certain, though it would not have mattered if she were. She is a lovely and heroic individual. She saved me from this burning dance club and got me a towel. Who I am is a charming and functional man, though it would not matter if I were a soft-faced woman. We embraced, and I got that impression. Then she went back inside to save the others. They all need her, just as much as I do, I suppose. Everyone is in trouble because tonight the dance club is burning. She pulls from the wreckage the living bodies of young people, all smelling of hair products and sweat. She pulls them out of the shimmering but probably really hot dance club. No, I don't care if she is wearing a wig. This is the girl who will be the girl who likes me. I wave to her across the littered pavement. I wave in a way that would not even signify distress, yet she comes over with a wet bandage and wraps the parts of me that were burned. It feels like a cold licking. I feel as wanted as the family pet. But there are other bodies that need saving. The fire alarms squeal like adolescent girls. It's a bowl of noise to be out here on the sidewalk tonight. The bodies have to yell to be heard over one another. It's a damn frying pan with boiling oil in it:

“To be able to see only a little sliver of the side of her complexion and the rest mostly hair—which is probably a wig anyway—yet still understand her to be a delectable item and mind-splittingly pretty. That's foreboding.”

“You haven't seen her face yet?”

"No, I was unconscious. As she carried me out, I dreamt I was a child in the arms of its mother and she was trucking me off to bed. She excites within me the sensation of mother-love, as well as the other kind."

"I find my mother repulsive. Her lips are very loose and moist, almost equine."

"You're exaggerating."

"I try not to, but I always end up remembering the waste basket in our upstairs bathroom, which is the one my mother and my sisters used to dispose of their feminine things. So I have a hard time disassociating the thought of women from the thought of compost."

"And vice-versa?"

"No."

"Are you really being honest with us about how you feel?"

"I think I am, yes."

"It doesn't seem true to me."

"Well what he's saying doesn't have to be true for him to be honest about it."

"With feelings it does. The reality of the feelings is manifested by your belief that there's something to be felt."

"I share that sentiment."

"I just had a terrible thought about the feeling: What if the feeling is in our minds? Like you know how you chew and it's louder in your own head—"

"I for one feel that I am perfectly capable of recognizing my own true feelings. For starters, my nerves are all suddenly provoked, and I feel inclined towards touching. Secondly, I teeter precariously on the edge of capsize and fatal collapse. The symptoms are all there, exactly as I would expect them to be."

"Would she stabilize my chaffing problem?"

"She would soothe your chaffing."

"That's nonsense. She's going to make us all miserable. She'll make our deepest desires worthless as dirt. Because she'll only be loved; that's all she's good for. A common life, sustained over the course of many years would be unthinkable with her."

I'm sure of it—I can just feel it. But do you think that makes me want her any less? This should tell you something about feelings: to think of them as transitory or even a mirage only makes it worse. I feel the emotion moving inside of me like a swarm of red ants."

"No, it's gentler than that."

"It isn't, though, because I want it that way. I want it to devour me completely."

"Don't listen to him. He's trying to trick us into leaving."

"She'll let you do anything you want to her, but it won't mean anything."

"You're focusing on the negative. Think of the back rubs."

"She won't do them. She's the object and objects don't do you any favors."

"She saved us, didn't she?"

"Yes, and now here you are. Are you happy?"

"Bat's mouth; we're dealing you out."

That one says that because we're playing cards. We are all doing a big game of cards together while we wait; but we couldn't come to an agreement on what to play, so the gentleman who brought the cards just deals everyone in for his or her own game of solitaire with the idea that if you're missing cards you have to ask your neighbor or someone around if they have what you need. It's very challenging to play it that way. Anyway, they dealt the dissident out for his pessimism and for making up absurd fetishes.

"I hope she likes my family."

"I hope she doesn't mind us sleeping in my twin-size bed, at least for a little while."

"Will she need changing, do you think?"

"I don't see why she should. She's the perfect fit. That's why we're all still here. Would any of us be this dedicated to something that needed to be fixed right off the showroom floor?"

"Yes!"

"Right from the get-go even?"

"Yess-se-se-se."

“Son, if you were old enough to have lived out all your best years, you’d know that when something like this comes along you don’t ask it be different. You do your best to change yourself so that it can go on being how it is, because who she is is what’s important. You’re here for the cause, and if you drop, one of us will step in to take your place. There’s something amazing in that dance club tonight and any man or lady not committed enough to make the appropriate sacrifices should leave right now.”

No one leaves. But in the meantime the immaculate, pure and perfect right-girl emerges onto a third floor balcony with yet another unharmed individual slung over her delicate and lightly-freckled shoulder. She drifts on gentle night breezes down to the street below, all busy with emergency workers and the saved. The place erupts in hysterical applause. The south periphery of the crowd descends into blind violence. The girl for whom I’ve been waiting my entire life suddenly ignites a furious jealousy in the breast of every man, woman and pubescent teenager in attendance by delivering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to the most recently rescued survivor, a stout girl with curly red hair who lies limp on the cement and sidewalk like a dead fish. We watch her chest expand and contract. It’s proof of the breath, breathed from the deep and hidden center of our lady. I think of origins and suddenly feel faint, like I need to lie down.

“She’s waking up!”

The curly hair girl begins petting the flanks and back of my one good reason to go on being. She attempts kissing but like a moist spring wind running through the empty wilds, the one constant topic of my thinking has already plunged back into the burning dance club for more saving. A part of the crowd is irritated over the new arrival’s having gotten to touch and wants to stomp on her and kick her throat in. Out of fear and desperation she defends herself:

“You have to understand I did everything I could to keep from wanting to follow. I had my friend keep my glasses in her purse so that I wouldn’t have to see the way she looks. I didn’t want to lose track of myself. But it didn’t work. I liked her even better when I couldn’t see, and she could have been anybody.”

As the dilemma becomes clear to us, we feel sorry for her. It is the dilemma of having to close one's eyes to sleep and to dream that we all know well.

The girl with no glasses extends her tongue and removed from its tip a single contact lens. "She gave me this. It was in her mouth." She puts it in and proclaims that she is able to see true color.

"Help me find the other one, please. I've slipped into wanting something I've never even seen, and now I want to."

We all kind of glance down at the ground, but it's more like hanging one's head than it is helping.

"I'm through with mysteries. I want to mean something and be able to show it. I want to be able to look inside a person and let them notice I'm doing it without feeling ashamed of that. I met her before the fire. I saw her in the ladies' room and it wasn't even so much that I wanted to tell her everything but just that I wanted to say the exact thing I was thinking and feeling at that moment. I don't even remember what it was anymore. I let it go unspoken, and now it's lost. She makes being a real person with a detailed history and vital desires impossible, which is probably why I like her so much. But that doesn't do anything about the problem of having something inside of me that needs to get out. I have this very pleasant fantasy where I punch her in the stomach and throw my drink in her face: I'm showing her something about myself—what, I don't even know—but I'm doing it to show her."

The idea is fierce and attractive, and I consider the beauty of it silently to myself, along with everyone else probably. It is a new and intriguing reaction to the great uniting crisis we're all facing tonight: the hopeless inability to duly and sincerely express—violently if necessary—the caress. It makes you want to leave your friends, be loud in public, and spend weeks inside your apartment just taking showers and sleeping. It makes you want to do something, but also resign from doing anything ever again. Should I command myself to weep, I ask myself. "What for?" my self responds. To get at my feelings, I say. I demand to cry; I demand it of myself. No, I say. I cannot, and it

will never work. Why, I ask. Because you don't even know your own feelings. I ask how I can expect myself to weep if I don't even know what for?

There she is again: ineffable she, delivering someone else from ruin. This time it's a juvenile boy. She sends him down the old-fashioned fire escape slide. He thinks it's fun.

Still searching for her contact lens, the girl continues speaking, as if in a trance: "Now there's a wall of flame separating us, and her cell phone won't even work. I feel very foolish for ever coming out of the fire to begin with. I should have trapped myself beneath some debris, or something. I have a spiritual desire to put more distance between me and the world, like how it looks when you look through the backwards end of a pair of binoculars, like looking up from the bottom of a deep hole."

It just so happens there is a man in the crowd using binoculars to survey the burning dance club. The curly haired girl, the one with no glasses and only a single contact lens, comes over and peers through the other end. The man is all at once confronted with an enormous pair of snowy green eyes, far bigger than his own. The girl sees the little eyes of the man far off in the distance. They are mesmerized and stand very still watching each other's watching. There are people in the crowd wanting to call this love. Maybe it's just looking. Presently, I am beginning to think of a world beyond this burning dance club and the object of infatuation inside of it. I see myself going different places, living alone, medicating myself and finding repose in the modest dignity of feeling fine. But the deeper my thinking goes into the open world the more overblown my obsession is to carry the girl who will be the girl who likes me off into it. It occurs to me that the man and the girl are pleading for help with their eyes and having repeatedly to ask each other and never stopping because neither is capable of providing that kind of relief. At the very least it can be said that they are not losing their faith in one another. I wonder if this is the most one can give and even if it isn't, I hope that it's enough.

The fire department has turned off one of the hoses it had set up to blast through the blown out shop windows on the first floor. Our lady hurdles through the

opening bearing one of their own, a firefighter, in heavy coat and helmet, curled up in her arms like an infant. She lays him at the feet of his coworkers and escapes back into the building before they can tackle, bind and confine her in the ambulance/makeshift paddy wagon they have parked nearby. God knows what they'd do to her. No one here understands the fire department's intentions. They seem to find her courageousness attractive, but they are also envious. It's clear that they want her for themselves. They're no different from the rest of us in that respect; but to do what? Surely it isn't to love her. To use her, maybe. We're ready to fight them if we must, whatever the consequences.

The firefighter's coworkers approach to offer medical attention. He kicks them away but still moans, "I'm hurt. I'm hurt." We look over him. He's not.

"Get her back here. I'm not gonna pull through it this time."

The paramedics tell him he'll be alright.

"No, bring her back. I want to thank her before I go."

"Bring the stretcher we have to get this man to a hospital."

"No!"

"Quiet, now. That's enough theatrics. We need you to get onto the stretcher."

"I'm a bad man."

"Stop it. People are watching this. You're disgracing the department."

"No. This is her fire, chief. We've got no business being here."

The fire chief signals the paramedics to drug the firefighter. He remains recumbent on the ground and kicks them away with his legs.

"I thought I could sneak some away, but that was stupid. I'm not sufficient for that." We watch him crawl beneath a parked van where they can't reach him. Paramedics and firemen surround the vehicle, but he has his axe out now and is threatening to chop at their ankles. Then he gets quiet and starts whispering to himself. The firemen kneel down to the ground and bend their necks, trying to determine what the firefighter will do next. He lets them get close. He wants to tell us something:

"I always knew I was a bad man and I thought that made me hard. But I was wrong about that. You have to be soft and vulnerable in places. Maybe hard in others, but you can't be hard all over. I can't tell in what places I'm what. I weep and it isn't for the smoke. That's why I'm going to dig up my face now and show where it all starts and comes springing out. I've done things I can't come back from. It didn't make me hard like I thought it would, but I can't go back to being soft either. I mean, I've done these things. I've burnt homes for money. But I burnt them also because they told me to. I gone in and messed up the foundations of places that had people still living in them. I never stuck around to see them collapse, but they probably did. I set a man's feet on fire once to make him confess to a crime I did myself. I made an old lady climb a telephone pole for calling us out to her place for nothing, then laughed when she fell and shattered her hips and knees. Fuck, I pulled a baby out of the rubble one time still alive and just fucking spiked it to the ground when no one was looking. I don't even know why. I didn't feel a thing when I did it. I feel it now. She warms your heart to that stuff and makes you remember, like getting drunk off something that's really hot in your throat. You start to get sentimental. You start having feelings you never knew you had. And the feelings are strange to you, but you know they're yours and you're ashamed you never acknowledged it. It's just that when a feeling turns on and you keep feeling it all over, over and over, you get used to it. You stop feeling it because you're always feeling it, and you forget it's there. Then she makes it come back and you realize you haven't felt who you are for more than half your life. You wonder what good it was ever being you to begin with. But I know better now. I was sleeping all this time, but she knelt down beside my bed and whispered in my ear my true name. She showed me that I'm not who I thought I was. I saw my shadow on the ground, and I thought it was me. It's like I was trying to hold a fragile little bird in hands that are numb from the cold. I was an old dog left out in the rain, but I've come inside to warm myself and I'll not leave until the shiver's been thawed out of me.

The firemen drag a hose just a few feet away from the man who before was a fireman but now has apparently been reborn as something else. They blast him out

from under the van into the open street. The department heavies are over there now putting a bag over his head. They drag him into a waiting ambulance where they give him a round beating before driving him home to his family and telling him to take a sick day before coming back to work. In the meantime, a second fire department has arrived. They're arguing with the other units already on the scene over where their hoses should go. No one's spraying water on the club to cool it down so the fire burns crazy like a sofa doused in gasoline. The glare and the roar and the curious lack of oxygen in the air wake the people in the neighboring buildings. Groggy and half-dreaming they come down to see what all the commotion is about. We tell them it's because of a girl. "Oh," they say, and turn to go back inside.

"No," we tell them. "This is the girl to beat all girls. This is the one. We're serious this time." They look skeptical.

"No really," we insist. "You haven't even seen her yet. She's in there saving people. She's a hero. Just wait until she comes out. Once you see her you'll understand."

They stop and they wait in their sleeping clothes and their slippers. We insure them that they won't be sorry. Why we care what they think I don't fully know. Are we afraid they'll tell us that she isn't that great? And wouldn't it be better for our chances if they weren't around? God forbid one of those drooling morons ends up taking her back to his grubby little room. I can't say that any of us are particularly worthy of that gift. But someone will have her, she who sits at the perfect center of all things, and the means by which he wins her will be random and arbitrary. In my mind I make this person out to be a deranged animal. He'll make her pay for things when they go out, and he'll say cruel things to damage her self-esteem. At night, he'll handcuff her to the radiator and make her submit to endless, humiliating sex. He'll lash her thighs with a coat hanger and cut messy incisions into her torso with a dull paring knife. My forehead becomes hot thinking of the faceless villain. I dream that I burst through the door just as he is about to push her flawless face into a pail of lye. I throttle the monster to death with a brick I find in the hallway. I pull out his eyes and stomp on his skull which

splatters open like a rotten melon. Then I look over to the girl, the girl who will be the girl who likes me, but we are no longer in the apartment. We are out in front of the burning dance club, not a soul around, just me and she. Held aloft by thermal drafts, my lady floats through the night sky like a pale apparition. She comes down to see me, and I cower in a kind of exhilarated terror. As she nears, my body begins to quake. Then, as if delivering an invitation to a place at the table of the feast of life, she places a kiss on my quivering lips. My eyes spout tears of ecstasy. Her cheek touches mine and it feels like the wing of a maiden moth suffused in florescent electricity. She does not smell like smoke. She smells like the meadow lane in May. I am about to abandon myself to an everlasting rapture when suddenly I am thrust to the asphalt by a blast of heat and concussive force. The dream is extinguished. In the real and true world a disaster has just occurred. The multitude is wailing. They convulse on the ground and bleed from their eyes and ears. The dance club has collapsed. It is beyond comprehension. I scream into the faces of everyone around me, but their eyes are doll eyes, their skin made of felt. The dance club is a field of embers. Those unable to cope hurl themselves into the smoldering mass. The rest of us won't accept that she was inside when it happened. We search the smoke clouds above for some sign of her. We overturn cars and rampage through the homes of the innocent in vain search of her. What use is it to try to describe any of this to you? The window of what is possible has slammed shut. What is left is what's normal. I want to tell people, but how would that help anything? The mob stands blinking in the dark, incapable of thought. They console each other with impassioned hugging and the sharing of cigarettes:

"What do we do now?"

"What do you think? We wait patiently for this thing to fix itself."

"Right, of course... Say, did you drive here?"

"Why are you asking me that? I'm not leaving."

"Oh, me neither."

"Hey, are you two talking about leaving?"

"Um—"

"Because I need to be at work tomorrow. But I'm going coming back on my lunch break. I'll do my waiting then."

"What makes you think she'll be here at the exact time you're on your lunch break? You're almost certainly going to miss her."

"Maybe not. What do you think about doing shifts?"

"I don't expect her to come back, but I'm going to wait anyway. I just want to do it that way."

"That's not right. We owe it to her to be honest about what's happened here."

"To be honest, or to be truthful?"

"Assessing the losses is crucial to keeping oneself on record."

"You don't think she's coming back?"

"She doesn't need to, being saved is enough for me."

"I honor her by awaiting her return!"

You've lost track of yourself. It's fine, we all did. But that horse has lain down to die. Your whipping it won't make it pull."

"I've lost another occasion to have chosen to be free but not the knowledge that there will be others."

"You think there will be other girls?"

"No, only her. But there will be other fires. In the future, I'll know what to do."

As the fever dissipates and the ground ceases to undulate, we look at our tattered clothes and our sooty faces, the halter-tops drenched in sweat and the knotted gold chains. We fix our hair. We check our voicemail messages.

Birds sing in the pre-dawn glow and the streetlights begin to flicker out. We, the survivors of the burning dance club, stumble back to our sublets and our suburban tract housing like wounded animals seeking a place to mend. We slip into bed next to our wives and our live-in boyfriends. We wake after 40 minutes of sleep and go about our morning ritual. What day is it today? What day will it be?