

Scar

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Citation:

EARNSHAW, Steve (2015). Scar. *The Wrong Quarterly*, 2, 15-20. [Article]

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Scar

I

When we are fascinated we extrapolate from scraps, fantasise, claw at the surface of the woman desired. If we had been born into a different age, Melissa would wear the scar on her face proudly, like a wedding ring. Here, she is curious to me, and out of all colleagues, she is the attractive one, a purely aesthetic fetish, engaged by Melissa's careless attitude to time and fashion, her demeanour being what it is. I know nothing of her doings where we are, at work, and rarely see her outside, except I know she has a husband and children, the mere appendages of an outward conformity for which she has no time. Inside, and perhaps the manner is hidden from herself, she galumphs charmingly in a thoroughly heterodox style, bearing her *ressentiment* in a cultured way which I presume, mostly in the right, has psychological benefits in private, to do with her personality. There is a nemesis, a large man, in the room down the corridor from her own cubicle, large physically and intellectually, who deems Melissa *de trop*, who finds her large wooden necklace beading an affront to his bluff grasp of the nature of the universe. So you see that in this state I am the one who is scarred, under imagistic lesions, while she, Melissa, enrols me into her titanic struggle agin the office monster – as if she cares for me, which she does not.

As it is, the offices run down and off a long corridor towards the top of a tall building. Occasionally in my signature slope to work I take the time to scan the roof and find there people, workers surely, keeping all in order for the forty-five storeys beneath their feet. It has to be imagined that they push the physical materials for spiritual well-being down through the tubes and vents and aerials that mark the building's celestial features. At one end of the corridor there are stairs, forbidden, which take you outside and ascend to the summit, if any timid paper pusher or overbearing manager would dare enter the clouds. To my knowledge, there has been no breach, and keeping inside this line has meant that the city has remained in good order. Sometimes the plumbing fails and we suffer under the reek of sewage, along with the nearby train station and shops, and sometimes the alarm goes off and we trundle away from the lifts down endless flights entering the growing stream of doubt. These are not common events, really, not common. And Melissa comes and goes as she pleases into her cubicle, she is all that I perceive. It is possible she should be at work, at her desk, more often. The system is lax, and yet, paradoxically, it is in good order.

II

I see Melissa handed down from the carriage, certain that in me is a man who is fascinated by the woman he knows at work and who he comes into contact with only tangentially. There is nothing romantic or erotic in this dynamic with the woman, just the intrigue of another life which he has no access to and which he has to constantly extrapolate from, often from small scraps. He fortuitously comes across a letter she has torn and thrown away and is faced with a moral dilemma. He reads it, but it reveals nothing but some mundanities about officialdom. The family, in her name, it is addressed to her, is behind in payments for groceries, an unusual arrangement. A shame comes over me, not because with so little struggle I took out the letter which promised so much and gave so little, but a shame that I didn't wrestle with a conscience regarding her privacy, this unwarranted and unknowable to her intrusion into the life of herself and familiars.

III

The fear is a more unknown woman much further down the corridor, who carries the sign on her face. Melissa's scar is ordinary, misplaced, accidental, stable. Her name could be anything, I haven't discovered it and it has not been unconcealed, as if it is one of those names which cannot be spoken for fear of invoking demons. All misogynistic folk nonsense, obviously, as I watch the scar dance over her face under a difficult light – the new lights, as all things, supposedly an improvement on the old ways, and sometimes they are, and many times we are disappointed. The fear which grips is straight out of Poe, a childhood favourite author, that the scar on this unknown woman is the outward sign of some inner moral imperfection which does not exist other than in my projection on to her. Am I one of those terrible Poe Men? I believe not. The work I am obliged to do is tedious, a Kafka Clerk am I caught in the bureaucratic machine with nothing, not even a modern mind. Melissa is handed down from the carriage in the nearby station, leaving a letter behind for me to read, as if she didn't know. Where had she been to return so late on a Sunday evening, unencumbered by children, in typical harassed, *distract* mode. Melissa! The letter is a bill for unpaid groceries, a fabrication – nobody has a personal grocer from whom vegetables are obtained on the never-never.

IV

The tedium of my work, my failure to exist, was illustrated this morning when I came in early to complete online fire awareness training. To ensure I passed the test this time I made notes on the

various extinguishers and the different kinds of fire they came with and the colour codes that would mean survival for the block. Tomorrow I will have forgotten. Nevertheless, so that this is not wasted time it is possible to think that tomorrow if there is a fire alarm, on the way down the stairs I can start a conversation around the theme of fire and discover what others know and remember. There was a fire alarm once and somebody panicked, unusually. It's not very often, either, that you see pictures of people scarred in fires, from wars. Another childhood memory is the scene in the film *Great Expectations* when Miss Haversham's wedding dress catches fire. I tremble now.

V

The effort to unravel the mystery of the mysterious woman is some days too great. Because I had come into work so early, so alone, this morning, by mid-afternoon I would not have surprised myself if I had fallen asleep, nap-style, lacking the energy to bring to mind the mystery woman. When I was thinking this Melissa came in. One of the dangerous things about Melissa, one of the great things, is her lack of respect for authority, not lack of respect so much, rather the lack of fear in telling everybody what she thinks and going straight to the top when necessary and not through the necessary recommended channels. She had a light brown motif enlivened by patches of purple in a neck veil and oversized material handbag, and says 'you're not the boss of me' to somebody in the office. Her husband is a musician, plays viola for the City orchestra. Beyond that, he is an uninteresting mystery, and perhaps seen as such by Melissa, for it is well-known to me that for five years her love is outside marriage, with the family's agreement. Melissa is the boss of her soul. The scar, then, if it is to mean anything, must mean this shiny tissue of spirit that is Melissa. Having understood that, having returned something to her in the way of speech before she leaves us or me, the fascination falls into desuetude for the remainder of the week.

VI

There is a thin veil between me and the city. The shadowy figures are not just at the far end of the corridor, in a building that houses a small city, they are everywhere, seeking out other shadows, other living wraiths. Their arms do not move in silhouette, dark shapes leaning out of doorways, half-free from the machine. As to Melissa's whereabouts outside the building, we now have the clue of the grocery store, about a mile from my own place. As if the planets are suddenly in alignment, today is the day I make *Parmigiana* for which I require six aubergines.

The image of her descent from the carriage, bearing the scar. I make my way to a seat, not realising it had been her seat, still warm (everybody rushed on, heading for Leeds and beyond), rummaging my poor noggin for any reason why she should be getting off a long-distance train from Penzance, totally alone, bearing the unrelated scar. I pick up the rubbish somebody has left behind, very annoyed at the rail company and the person with slovenly habits. There is a crumpled large polystyrene cardboard cup, an envelope, a half-eaten pie. All on the seat. The company has dispensed with bins. The rubbish goes underneath the seat as I glance at the address and am jolted out of my turpitude (off to some performance of *Lear*, headed off, out of duty, half-wondering why I have proposed to marry Inga on the floor below. She bears nothing). There are no mirrors on these trains, never have been, and I would want to see the look on my face when I apprehended the import of what I held in my hands: the life of Melissa.

VII

Decidedly effortless with Inga's family, decidedly. The day went well and here we are, installed. I try not to think of Melissa's life.

VIII

I woke earlyish, about 6.45, had a shave. Inga didn't want a coffee and barely spoke, so I got on with my own morning, the television, that thought about death, sitting in traffic, waiting, full of sloth. Would she be there? All I had was the grocery store bill, and that was now receding for her as it stayed live for me. The thought about being in the lift with the others from the other floors. We were not all in the same business, we were not all thinking about Melissa's life. If Melissa had a scar and an aubergine? The lift opened and Melissa walked past without vegetables and I got out and walked in the other direction. Was Inga sick? Wouldn't she go to work? Since our wedding day there was little motivation for her to come to work and my thoughts turned to being with Inga at home. Why work? What was the point? Perhaps the whole point of work had been a confluence with Melissa, whose life remained unattainable, and once realised, I should now cease working, I should cease producing, I should be more like Inga. Melissa had more purpose than ever, and this was not to be borne by the slothful ones. Really, no, really, what was the point? Do not work! I put up the sign, the symbol of the newfound lassitude, this paradoxical infusion of excitement at the possibility of being at home with the wife and doing fuck all. We should get to know each other in a way we hadn't already, since we had signed up to be in each other's life. It was just not possible to be in

Melissa's life, I could only do it with Inga. The gift of the *aperçu* had produced nothing beyond the initial *frisson*, and I was left *frissonless*. Fooking frissonless. The very thought of it enraged me, it was all Melissa's fault (I saw Melissa get into the lift with a handbag with a broken strap, carrying it like a sick animal, and my heart went out to her, broken, it was all broken, the whole of life, hers, mine, Inga's).