

PATRICK O'DUFFY

Watching the
Fireworks



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Smash and the drawing room's regency antique mirror (it was a wedding present from *her* mother and she really didn't think a lot of *him*) breaks into a shower of silver-backed glass. Falls, falls, falls, and if you had good eyes (maybe a *dozen* good eyes), you could see it all in the chunks of mirror in the .86 of a second before they hit the ground. You could use that eagle eye, that freeze-frame vision to pull out the biggest pieces, snapshots on display amongst the spray of micro-shards and slivers, find the images frozen for an instant inside.

One the pre-Raphaelite prints on the wall in an artfully constructed crooked line bent at the most appropriate angle, a selection of the full set that was another wedding present, this one from his brother. Everyone lined up for the photos at the reception and talked turkey over drinks, champagne, beer, whiskey whiskey whiskey. Everyone felt it necessary to confide in everybody that *he* was shifty and from a not-overly-respectable family, *she* had a bad history of mood swings and everyone *knew* she drank too much and yes, yes, of course darling, darling, they were just *perfect* for each other.

Two they divided the bookcase into two early on in the piece, maybe to avoid the worrying possibility of cross-pollination between his John Clancy thrillers and her Booker Prize nominees, Cosmo fighting GQ to a TKO. It used to be that they never read at home, too consumed with each other, but that was long ago, might as well be another country, and lately they'd rather read than talk. He messed up once, used a motel receipt as a bookmark, but she never bothered to look beyond the top shelf, never suspected a thing (not that *that* lasted long). Lucky.

Three of course it was the phone's fault, always is, venerable cliché that keeps on keeping on. If a strange woman's voice hangs up on you once, it's a wrong number, but she found there were just too many wrong numbers, too many dead pauses on the answering machine, and no-one ever really believes in coincidence. Sometimes she thought she could smell the lipstick wafting out of the handset, subtle pink vapor against ivory white... perhaps not. She did try to place the voice, but when it became voices, three then four then more, she boycotted the phone in protest.

Four not *completely* sound to own a purebred cat these days, but the Persian kitten had been so perfect, and for Christ's sake, why doesn't *she* ever feed the bloody cat, off in a tantrum again, pain in the arse isn't she puss? No comment. The mirror knows the cat of old, narcissistic animal curled up before the glass in permanent worship, ignores *their*

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dreadfully dull problems to concentrate on the pursuit of beauty and truth, like a Victorian novel. Now she sits beneath the coffee table, watching the fireworks as they develop, no comment, can't be reached. Inscrutably Oriental.

Five most people have never laid eyes on crystal-steel wine racks, but the Europeans don't skip the necessities, know the worth of a good bottle of plonk better than most. Bit out of place in the lounge, but too many arguments, no compromises, he lost interest in caring, she lost days to hangovers. Cab Savs and Merlots, genuine French champers and Chardonnay, but more and more it's the Stoli, the Glenfiddich, the Jack Daniels she turns to, feet curled beneath her on the couch, shotguns her drinks in an empty house, while the cat's away the mice will pass out.

Six she used to wonder if he'd had girls here on the couch, tubular wonder conceived in Italy, born in Japan, back too uncomfortable to ever relax on, cushions that radiated style down to the molecular level. Did he ever screw them here when she was away, frightened to mess the bed, wooing them instead on the lounge of love? Once she investigated closely for a clue, a scratch, a smell, but European perfection proved impenetrable to her best Sherlock Holmes glare, never giving anything away. In the end she decided a lack of clues was a clue in itself.

Seven polished wooden floors, naturally, but the rugs are *very* thick and *tres* chic, you just can't get that kind of this quality in this town darling, *obviously*, delivered from a boutique down south, they went through the catalogues together (back when they did *anything* together). Some nights, three fingers of scotch inside, she thought about pacing the room, wearing a groove in the rug, but it was too much a 50's sitcom sort of thing, Dad's got a pipe, Mum's in the kitchen, zany hijinks ensue. *Thank God we never had kids*, she thinks, *small mercies, pass the vodka*.

Eight coffee table, more ultra-moderne of course, the fashion police might raid you if you didn't co-ordinate properly, weighed down with magazines and coffee-table books (what else). No-one ever puts a coffee cup there, leaves them in the kitchen; last action this baby saw was when he went through the hotel catalogues, finding a place for him and Claire from Accounts to stay during the alleged 'Sydney conference' (close to the Cross – I love the nightlife, I gotta boogie...). He should have hidden the booklets better, didn't realize that she'd started checking out the second shelf by that stage. Whoops.

Watching the Fireworks

Nine you can't have too many speakers for a good stereo, and as if they'd have anything other than the best, five-spinner-turntable-karaoke-function-etc.-etc., all mod cons. One night she punched the volume to ten, played that music with too much bass and danced around with a bottle of Jack in hand, windows shaking, tears in her eyes, hit the door and bruised her shoulder, told him she'd slipped playing tennis. He was thinking about Claire (and that babe redhead in the bar last night), grunted and nodded, got a *hell* of a shock when he put the Beatles on after breakfast.

Ten thirty-six inch television (can't say ninety centimetres, just doesn't work) and VCR in one elegant cabinet, and it might be the only thing here he'll miss (maybe the cat) when he's gone, fond memories of fiddling and tuning and fighting over what shows to watch and videos to rent... wait, never mind. She thinks about the videotape she got from the private detective, too much acne to be glamorous in that job, live footage of the two of them in a Sydney hotel. She still can't bring herself to watch it - the evidence gathers dust behind the telly.

Eleven his open briefcase, soon to be closed, locked, carted away for all time. A frenzy of papers and documents, and in the midst of lawyer's numbers and raised voices there was a calm in the hurricane, moment of clarity, possible last-minute repair, but it passes, past, no chance to say WRONG WAY GO BACK, so she grabs his mobile phone (small these days, penile enhancement no longer in style), does a Bradman overarm straight at his head. He dodges just in time, squashplayer reflexes, and the black base looms large in the reflection to hit the glass with a

Crash and it's all over, reflected memory hitting polished wooden floor and bursting apart, tiny remnants to lodge between floorboards and work their way under the skin later on, a few big pieces to be swept up and disposed of eventually, reflections consigned to the recycling-bin. Take one last glassy Polaroid, both locked up tight in angry indignation, show him gather himself back to himself and head for the door, zero to divorce in under five seconds, slam it on the way out, never seeing her wilt like a plastic flower in a microwave, stiff drink, show's over, goodnight, goodnight.

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Afterword

I wrote 'Watching the Fireworks' back in... I think it was 1997, but I'm not 100% sure.

I wrote it for a local fiction competition where the main restriction was the 1500 word limits, at a time when most of my short fiction checked in at the 5000 word mark. But I really needed the prize money, so I tried to write around the core idea, cutting out dialogue and focusing on images to tell a story with abbreviated, staccato language. Each paragraph is exactly 100 words long, and I tried to get a beat happening behind the text, like a metronome ticking out the story.

As it happens, the story won the award, the prize money paid my rent for about six weeks, and my writing style changed significantly afterwards. I've come back to this messy, run-on style again and again over the following years, mostly leaving behind the detailed, dialogue-heavy style I'd used until that point. And I tend to write shorter stories as a result.

Although I have stopped using italics so heavily, which is probably a good thing.

So that's the story, and the story behind the story. If you liked 'Watching the Fireworks', you should check out my other ebook titles; if you didn't, well, at least it was free.

The cover image is a detail from Joseph Furttentbach's painting *Feuerwerkh, welches Herr Johann Kouhn, den 26. Augusti Anno 1644 in seinem garten uff dem word, hat abgehen lassen*, which I then clumsily trimmed and added text to in Photoshop. It's not entirely appropriate, but I couldn't find a public domain photo of a cat looking at fireworks, and art is all about compromise.

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