

Terraced Worlds

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The slow breeze sets the pace and the designers set the style. Some browse in the summer sun, others float in and out of carpeted boutiques and culturally subdued art galleries. She sits in the terraced cafe; from her familiar stage she observes the movement below her. Her chocolate-mousse nails lightly tap the frosted glass of orange juice. A gold chain around her neck brings attention to two lines of encircling wrinkles. The health spa could do nothing about them. Perhaps surgery. A pale-blue, 100 percent silk blouse created for casual wear sits on tanned shoulders and a maroon alligator belt gathers the generous folds of material around a slim waist, made slim by endless sit-ups and twists and bends. Designer jeans hug her crossed legs and her high-heel sandals swing to the rhythm of the early-afternoon crowd.

He is already an hour late. He must be trying to make her pay for the angry insults of yesterday. To apologize for the latest outburst she will buy him a brand-new Italian linen suit, the one he had admired the other day. The last suit she gave him had resulted in a long afternoon of passionate reconciliation. She smiles at the memory and continues to wait. The lunch crowd comes and goes. Boutique owners wave to her as they pass. She finishes her third glass of orange juice and addresses the waiter with familiarity. Over the years they have almost become friends. He has seen her with various lovers and has heard the stories of break-ups from both sides; he has even introduced her to a few young men himself. She regularly tells him her problems and asks after news of old lovers. His contact with them provides her with a continuing link, giving her the feeling that they are still a part of her life.

She once brought her eighteen-year-old daughter here for lunch and introduced her to the waiter. The daughter, studying economics, is not interested in clothes. Over lunch they had tried to talk as friends but only ended by arguing. The next day the waiter told her the daughter did not have half the style of the mother. She was pleased to

hear this, though she could not help wondering why she seemed to have a better relationship with the waiter than her own daughter.

Another time she proudly introduced her twenty-three-year-old son to the waiter. Her son was forever travelling and studying languages. The terraced world was his natural home, whether in Mexico City, or Rome, or Paris. He was born to them with the well-worn silver spoon which he now uses for sniffing coke. She was anxious to show that she too belonged here, that they were one of a kind, but he hardly noticed. He had sat on her stage with nonchalant ease and spread his legs in front of him as if the whole world was for his stretching comfort. All possibilities lay at his feet but he was just browsing, stopping temporarily at the main attractions. The waiter liked the son, would have liked to get to know him better.

The waiter has also met the husband. A man with a hearty laugh and little patience, a businessman whose real home is the mahogany desk littered with memos and files, numerous extensions and telex numbers. The daughter is his favourite. She constantly fights with the daughter; the once-emotional battles are now reduced to rituals – her only form of contact with any of them, perhaps even with herself.

She dreams with sleeping pills and wakes feeling like a fugitive till she has consulted her mirror. She closely examines her skin, then proceeds to apply the right cream from the right lacquered jar – first the day cream, then the base, the autumn chestnut to just below the cheekbone and a touch of autumn chestnut to each nipple. Then come the eyes and the lips and the scent to lure. When done, her face shimmers with a perfect look. After the laborious application, natural daytime make-up covers her entire face, but there is seemingly nothing there. And finally the mirror reflects self-confidence; her passport to the outside world.

Her stylist has revived the memory of her once-youthful blonde hair and regular massages stimulate her nerves, just as her young boyfriends stimulate her skin, allowing her constant response.

Her desire for physical arousal has become more and more intense, needing more and more contact with flesh. Two lovers barely satisfy her. She needs to be overcome, to have every part of her completely covered, to have every cell of her brain screaming with greed, bursting with fulfilment, completely obliterated, only to feel drained and empty right after.

She sits in the terraced cafe, looking, waiting. Her high-heel sandals swing to the rhythm of the crowd which has now become more excitable, more eager to find the prize. He is several hours late but she continues to sit. There is still time to find someone else. She searches her memory, crowded with bits and pieces of information. Nothing comes into focus. She wants to talk to her friend, the waiter, but the terrace is filling up; he has no time. He will soon finish his shift and she will ask him to join her. What will she say? She wishes her daughter would be pregnant or her husband would go bankrupt so she too can see a psychiatrist, pour forth her troubles, empty out this emptiness, have her primal scream, and start afresh.

The waiter accepts her invitation and sits in the opposite chair without his uniform. She has nothing to say. She covers her discomfort with questions about his life. He answers, at first reluctantly, then the questions are no longer needed. He talks freely. She hears nothing. She sees his hands, the well-manicured nails. Perhaps he will do. There is still half an hour left before the family supper, time enough to take him to her private apartment.

A young man approaches their table and the waiter suddenly rises to embrace him. She reaches out her hand to shake his, at least that much physical contact, but he is already gone. She sits back on her stage, now crowded with strangers. She takes out her small oval mirror and places it on her lap. Piece by piece she examines her face, barely visible hazy sections. It is now dark and she is still wearing her daytime make-up. She must step off the stage to repair her self-confidence, to keep herself in readiness for that perfect moment when life will start.