

say yes

A response to Patrick Reynolds' *Muse Variations* by Maria Majsa.

She couldn't have been there long. A minute or two at most. Last time he'd glanced up, the landscape of partygoers mingled and flirted on in its loud, confident, disorderly way; friends of friends, acquaintances, the odd stranger. Perched in the black leather V of a fancy chair with a glass of champagne in one hand, she fell into the last category and the longer he stared, the more perfect she seemed.

Perfect didn't have to mean beautiful - he wasn't looking for that. Exactly what he was looking for, he couldn't say, but he'd know when he saw it. And on that second glance he'd seen it. In this sea of psychotic chatter she was quiet and still; long legs crossed at the knee, sleek black hair framing her cheekbones in dark splinters. Spare, not fleshy, but so tangibly near.

He lost track of how long he'd stood there staring. Time had a way of sliding around all over the place at important moments like this. He looked away, took a sip of his drink and tried to think things through. He needed to approach this carefully - too much brio could scare her away, but then too much hesitation might seem creepy. Every line he practised in his head sounded cliched or vaguely sinister and the last thing he wanted to be was predatory; but the longer he stood there examining his intentions, the more appropriate that word became. He had been hunting for a subject and here was his prey.

He almost hadn't come tonight. Maybe she'd tagged along with a friend at the last minute. Was that fate? People reached for the F word at the drop of a hat. It dressed things up, turned them into something grand and inevitable rather than everyday and accidental. Where was the romance in that? Shifting his weight he let his gaze wander, sending out feelers into the crowd. Did she come alone? Was she meeting someone? He fervently hoped it wasn't a boyfriend or husband. Please let it be a friend - someone who wouldn't be jealous or cynical. Or try and talk her out of it.

She reached down and put her glass on the floor. As she sat up, their eyes almost met and his stomach pitched, as though he'd slipped and just managed to catch himself from falling. That lazy, lanky grace made him even more sure. If he didn't act now he could lose the possibility of her and right now that thought was unbearable. Swallowing the rest of his drink he braced himself for the interminable journey across the room. What was the line in that song? "swimming to the table of an unknown girl". It was more like drowning and only she could save him.

As he eased himself past a clump of drinkers loudly sharing a joke, a dark thought shadowed him. What if she didn't save him? What if she sat there and let him drown? He dodged a few aimless strays and tried to gauge how receptive she might be by the look on her face, which was turned slightly away. She had an inbetween expression, as though someone had just asked her a complicated question and she was arranging her answer. It told him nothing.

Clearly the only way to find out was to walk over and ask. He stepped around a couple mauling each other as though they were already in a hotel bed together. Shoved off-course, he managed to push his way back and suddenly found himself standing in front of her. When their eyes came together, his breathing went all bumpy and strange. He opened his mouth, but she spoke first.

"Yes."

"What?"

She watched him, an amused ghost-of-a-smile on her lips. "I said yes."

He frowned, "I haven't asked you yet."

She shrugged, "saves time."

His mouth felt like a dried leaf, but his heart had almost stopped racing

"I'm in a hurry," she confided. "You?"

He felt himself starting to blush, "it's not ... I was going to ask if I could ..."

"I'm nearly six foot in these," she stood up. "Is that too tall?"

He noticed with mild surprise that she was taller than him. Just. She looked down at her platform shoes and back up at him.

"For what?"

"You tell me," she said promisingly.

He'd only had one drink, but he felt suddenly drunk. Drunk on the moment, perhaps. Things were moving fast. In unexpected directions. He needed a minute to clear his head and she was already glancing around the room, looking restless. Say it now. Go on.

"It's perfect."

"What?" she dragged her attention back.

"Nearly six foot is perfect."

"Only with shoes on."

"Keep your shoes on then."

"I will."

"Good."

"Okay."

Someone bumped him and his drink sloshed over his hand. He put the glass down and shook himself off, wiping his hand on the back of his jeans. He looked up, "I've been looking for almost a year for someone to ..."

She cut him off. "Don't."

"But I want to explain, see I'm a..."

She reached over and pressed his lips closed with a finger. "I like to be surprised."

He nodded quickly. She released him and picked up her purse, "let's go then."

It was insane how three small words could make you lose all reason. The whole nature of their exchange was exhilarating and unnerving, like some dodgy fairground ride that made you scream and laugh and wonder if the whole thing might suddenly fall apart and fling you to your death. Every cell of him was ready to grab her arm and run. He hesitated, "I'll just get my jacket. It's over on the couch."

As he wove in and out of tangled bodies, someone cranked up the music and he found himself doing an impromptu hands-in-the-air dance with a jiggly blonde. It was distracting for a few moments, then just annoying. He made the international 'I'm a bit late' sign - pointed to his watch and gave a hopeless shrug.

His jacket didn't seem to be where he'd left it. It wasn't draped over the velvety black arm of the couch and it hadn't slipped to the floor, but the inconvenience of this was small when compared to the prospect of the girl waiting across the room. He smiled secretly to himself at the thought of the girl who was in such a hurry. Who even now was leaving with another man. And who (by the time he'd stumbled back through the crowd) would somehow inevitably be gone.

the end

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