

Jacob

It is not enemies who taunt me... It is you, my equal, my
companion, my familiar friend.

—Psalm 55. 12-13

On his arrival, Jacob, strode purposefully towards the counter. Much to her astonishment, the typically taciturn priest greeted the waitress behind it genially and by name: ‘Leah’, he recalled. His attire was unusual, in that it was unremarkable – no clerical garb in sight; even the collar had been forsaken. Instead, he wore a simple buttoned shirt and formal trousers – hardly unbecoming of his sacerdotal status, but nor drawing attention to it as had been his habit. After some initial pleasantries, Jacob enquired after the whereabouts of another patron; information in hand, he set off across the tearoom at pace – though not before ladening his bemused host with thanks. Cautiously, he approached a booth at which sat a young woman; having introduced himself, he asked whether he might join her. The woman’s expression conveyed a febrile uncertainty, but a hesitant nod of the head indicated assent.

There was something unsettling about the two of them sat together. Jacob had retained many of the youthful features – and some of the charm – of a callow, idealistic curate. The effect was one of fraught incongruity with the jaded glower that he now wore heavily, like a greca. But for the sullen countenance, he might even have seemed approachable – though his brusque speech and inattentive demeanour tended to curtail any unsolicited exchange. Battle lines had been drawn along three deep furrows on his otherwise unblemished brow. His precisely partitioned hair had begun greying at the roots.

He was difficult to age by appearance. She was decidedly otherwise. On entering the tearoom, she had carried herself with a certain dignity, maturity even – belying the vulnerability of her youth. Yet, by the flickering of her gaze from one point to the next – by the guarded curiosity with which she surveyed her surroundings – it was clear that she had not yet dispossessed the world of its capacity to surprise her; she might have been scarcely more than a teenager. One could easily imagine something in this worldly and enigmatic gentleman to provoke curiosity in one so many years his junior. Jacob's sunken eyes, usually downcast and vacant, now met hers intently. His scowl softened.

I am uncertain as to how much time passed. There ensued some commotion: shattered crockery, a scalded arm; such nuisances are to be expected. No one could recall having seen the pair depart; yet, when my attention returned to that distant booth, the good father and his companion were gone. A Mass had been scheduled for the following morning, at the Church of Our Lady; on arrival, I was given to understand that there would instead be a 'celebration of the Word and Communion' for a handful of expectant parishioners. The reflection on the readings was compelling, if short, and clearly composed in haste.