

Michael Cartmell

Limelight

I have this theory that if you die in a dream, that's it. You just die and don't wake up. It's my biggest fear. One day I won't wake up in time, or won't see it coming. Then that'll be it. Termination. Finality.

I used to have this recurring dream, about this man.

Well.

More of a leopard, really. A guy with leopard skin, and tail. And head. He has some human attributes. He can stand up straight. I never got to hear him talk. I don't think he spoke.

But he's pure, unrelenting evil. An envoy of danger. I know this much.

He stood at the front door. Didn't ring the bell. He didn't have to. Just waited for me to come downstairs, as I always did, in these dreams. I could see him through the window. His leopard pattern, softened through the frosted glass. His hunched neck. Blurred face pressed against the door. That was the only way I ever saw him. The unobscured version was too much to imagine.

I never turned back. Couldn't. My fate was inevitable. It was like a slope. Sliding to my death.

I always saw death coming.

It was just a case of going through the motions. Playing out the dream to a point where danger got too close. That was the alarm. The wake-up signal.

I got downstairs and turned around. At this point I'm in slow-motion. I call it the astronaut walk. I get it in some dreams, when I need to run away. So I just bounce away from the door. But it opens. The leopard man is unaffected by the slow-motion. Just takes his time. Deliberate steps.

He pushes my face down hard against the banister, and whispers to me. 'Don't move.' This is all he says. All he ever says. 'Don't move.' Like it won't hurt as much if I don't move. As if he doesn't have a choice. Maybe he doesn't. He could be just a pawn, from the empire of leopard people.

He takes out his knife. His claws could do the job, but he prefers the knife. It empowers him more than using his own tools. Gives him greater pleasure. That's how I know he's a murderer.

I don't wake up yet. I'm too busy trying not to move. I don't realise I'm in a dream.

He carves my back. The pain is so sharp and intense. It's as real as anything. I clench hard.

I know if I move, I'll die.

The leopard man pants and slobbers like a dog.

*

We're at a posh gallery in France because of my sister. She's an artist, but I'm feeling a bit out of place. I mean I've been to art galleries before, but everyone here is so tall and intimidating. And it's really busy, I'm feeling a bit claustrophobic and I'm terrified of bumping into someone and spilling their champagne. The champagne is free. I'm just not having any because I don't want to embarrass my sister.

She only paints in black and white. That's her thing. No grey, just black and white in every painting. She says that's how ideas come to her, that's how she thinks and sees everything, so she doesn't understand how they could be expressed in any other colour. I don't understand how someone can think in black and white, so it doesn't really make sense to me, but then I don't really get art.

I've lost my mum for the moment, so I duck under some elbows. It's quieter here. One of the artists is standing next to her work looking awkward and shy. She's very pretty, but her expression is so sad that I start to feel sorry for her, and look away without making eye contact.

Her paintings are beautiful. They're all of the same scene, painted from different angles. It's an alleyway at night. There's a single streetlamp and it's raining heavily. A woman in a green dress is sitting down, and everyone is watching her. There's raindrops running down, glaring light obscuring the view. None of the paintings have a clear view. I find that very sad, somehow.

I count the raindrops for a while. I'm stood right next to the artist, but she's just staring at nothing and shifting her feet. She seems really distant. I want to talk to her and tell her I liked her paintings, to make her feel better about herself, but nothing comes out so I just walk away.

I make my way back into the crowd to disappear. Some people are eating now. I see scraps falling to the floor. It looks like everyone is having cheese. The whole place smells of cheese, apart from the occasional waft of perfume. I can't believe how tall everyone is. It's like I'm somehow walking on a lower platform, a step below everyone else.

I switch off for a moment and drift into a queue. It looks like the queue for the toilets. I don't need to go but I follow it anyway, because I'm curious. I want to see what kind of toilets they have, and use the hand-driers.

They're just regular Airblades. I crouch down and insert my hands sideways, just up to the tips of my fingers. They start to get warm. I smile and close my eyes, but I want more. I roll up my sleeve as far as it will go, and push my arm in. I hold my head to the side of the rumbling

machine and listen as the air caresses my arm, transferring its heat to me.

*

I go back upstairs. It's a bit quieter now. I can walk more freely. People are finishing their wine, discarding their plates of cheese crumbs. I see my mum and walk over to her. She's talking to a smartly-dressed stranger with slick black hair and earrings. He's grinning in a way that makes him look slightly crazy, insane even.

I stand next to them. I don't think they notice. The grinning man is talking. I don't catch everything.

'That's the thing, you see... The thing you've got to realise... '

'Really?'

'Everything changes when... from that one single concept.... you see, what it comes down to...'

'You're saying it's an illusion?'

The man just laughs at this. He spills some of his wine. It pools on the floor, deep burgundy. My mum seems troubled by this at first. Then she laughs too.

There's another girl here. I didn't notice her before. She's with the grinning man, laughing with him and stroking his arm. I realise it's the girl with the street paintings. She must have left them behind to join the party. She seems much happier now, but still spaced out. Kind of dreamy.

The girl has wavy blonde hair and really pale skin. Glittering blue dress. She's only a little taller than me, but much thinner. Her shoulders are bony. I wonder what it would be like to touch them.

She must have walked over to me, somehow, because she's standing in front of me.

'Hey you,' she says, winking and throwing her hair back. 'I'm Evelyn,'

She shakes my hand. I play it cool. 'I really liked your art. I counted the raindrops on every painting.'

She smiles. 'I know. I was watching you.'

I smile too. She's mesmerising.

'I love it when people say they like my art. It's like... knowing I can connect with someone like that. I put so much emotion into every painting. To know that it's touched someone else the same way...'

I tell her I know what she means.

'There's no better feeling. It's better than watching the sun rise, or a first kiss, or the best sex I can imagine.'

I blush and look away. I can't see my mum's face anymore. The grinning man is leaning over her, whispering something.

'So are you an artist too?'

'No, I'm... I have a boring job. My sister paints. She's the one over there.' I point to a crowd of people. I'm not even sure it was the right direction.

'The black and white paintings?'

'Yes, that's my sister. How did you know?'

'She's brilliant. I really like her work. It's so passionate and... genuine.'

I look over her. The grinning man is holding my mum. Doing something to her. His head is pressed against her shoulder. She looks distressed.

'What are they doing?'

I step closer but Evelyn puts her hand on my shoulder and giggles.

'Tell me more about your sister. I'd love to meet her.'

I want to know what's happening to my mum. He's hurting her and I don't know why. But Evelyn is blocking my view. I think she's distracting me, deliberately.

'I don't really know my sister,' I say.

'You don't know your own sister?'

'Well I do, but I don't see her that much. I don't live with her anymore, and our dad died recently and...'

I realise I shouldn't have said that, but she doesn't say anything. Just winks at me and sways on her feet. I wonder if I said that at all.

She's still smiling. It's strange to think that she was so sad earlier. Maybe she's drunk too much wine. But I don't think so. I think she really likes the grinning man. Maybe they're going out.

I push past her. I see now that my mum is in pain. Her hair is all messed up and she's crying, but she's not trying to get away. She doesn't scream. Just lets him do whatever he is doing.

'What's going on?' I ask them, finally.

The room goes silent. I wasn't even that loud, but they heard me.

The man lets go of my mum. He's not angry, just keeps grinning like it's a big joke. Like he's my friend, and I should be happy that he's hurting my mum.

He grabs my neck.

There's total silence now. Evelyn is still there. Watching. Smiling. Trying to reassure me. My mum has her back to me, hunched over, holding her chest.

I struggle but the grinning man is impossibly strong, immovable. I try to grab his neck, reach behind it. I feel a hair. A single, thick hair. It's more like a wire than hair. But it is attached to him. Coming out of his neck.

I can't breathe. He tightens his grip and now he's choking me. I'm going to die. Nobody cares. They just watch. Enjoying it. It is giving them pleasure. They want to watch me die.

I close my eyes.

The man lets go.

He walks away, turns his body but not his head so I can see him grinning, his fixated stare, until he takes the girl's arm and they walk away together, laughing. The background noise returns to normal. The crowd return to their conversations, their drinks and their art.

I'm not standing for this.

I go after the man. I don't care who he is, or what's going on. I want to know why he attacked my mum, and me, in front of everyone.

I find him. I lose control.

'Who the fuck are you? Why are you fucking with us and fucking grinning about it, you fucking weirdo?'

He turns. Silence again.

Then he stops grinning.

Evelyn isn't smiling anymore either. She's lost the party mood. She looks really vulnerable, really fucking *afraid*.

There are gasps from the crowd as they realise what's happening. And I realise I shouldn't have done that.

The man takes off his coat, passes it to a bystander. He extends his arms and gestures with his fingers, calling two more men over. They come and stand either side of me.

I can't run. I look for help. Most people look away. Those that make eye contact shake their heads. An elderly woman looks at me in disgust, and spits at me. They can't believe what I've done.

They're not going to help me. They're with him.

My mum appears, next to the man. I call out to her but she doesn't respond. She's grinning now too, vacant eyes. She looks drugged up. I know she's lost.

She should be protecting me.

The two men are both pointing something at me now. Some kind of device, or weapon. It's not gun-shaped, more like a big, rectangular control pad. I start to feel it immediately. Tugging.

It's like my body is being torn apart. Pulled apart by both of these men, from the inside. They're emptying me out. Taking my soul and giving it to the man.

Evelyn is crying now. She's completely lucid and aware, but afraid. The crowd too know what's happening, but they fear this man. They know they can't save me, even if they wanted to.

The man starts to applaud. His henchmen - whoever they are - do the same. My mum grins.