



Trio by Bel Mooney



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TRIO

Elizabeth likes to go places alone, for then she can indulge her pastime of watching. Making up stories, eavesdropping, sometimes talking, but never giving anything away about herself. On buses, trains, planes, ferries; in cafes, restaurants, bars, she will watch and listen, glad to be no longer young, when the world is a threat and the eyes of people appraise or pity.

This place is for watching. Filling up now with the buzz of serious listeners drawn to hear the Abdullah Ibrahim trio. There will be no talking when the music begins. Behind the bar is a sign which bear just four capital letters,

‘S.T.F.U’ - a cryprogram the regulars know means ‘Shut the fuck up!’ Sometimes, at Christmas perhaps or for a stag night, there is a party which does not understand the rules of the place. Noisy people who pay to talk over music, their voices rising in combat with saxophone or piano until the people around hiss their disapproval. What kind of people would come to drown Andy Sheppard, when you can blab all evening in a pub? Elizabeth’s ‘Shhhh’ is as contemptuous and assertive as anybody’s. She is not interested in watching the red-faced young office workers on an outing, leaning across the table, flirting, smoking all the more as the bottles empty, waving their hands - yet imagining that by being here they are ‘cool’. They are a collective entity, she thinks, marching to the same tune like an amateur brass band, and therefore uninteresting.

Jazz is a collection of individual stories.

‘Excuse me - are these seats taken?’

The man is in his late forties, and American. The broad blue braces are not necessary to hold up well-cut chinos; he raises a hand to his moustache to draw attention to its trim glossy statement. Elizabeth reads him, down to his loafers.

‘No - go ahead. Please’. She allows the transatlantic nuance

to creep in, and smiles. Her wave at the three empty chairs at the small round table is proprietorial as she picks up her glass of Chardonnay and sips.

This is Elizabeth's favourite table, in the centre and two 'rows' back from the stage, close enough to concentrate, far enough for comfort. Elizabeth's chair faces the gleaming black piano, drum kit and single music stand head on; the other three chairs are necessarily at less than comfortable angles to the stage.

'C'mon honey, you take this one'.

The man swivels the chair almost opposite Elizabeth's on its metal legs, pulling it slightly to the right and turning it round completely, so that it faces the stage. He gestures to his companion to sit, then takes the chair on Elizabeth's right, adjusting it slightly too, so that he too faces the stage, almost behind the woman. There is a precision to these arrangements which pleases Elizabeth. Like her, this man likes to arrange things so that they may be taken seriously.

'Nice place'.

'Yes, it is'. She pauses, 'I come here quite a lot'.

His eyes flicker for a second to the fourth chair at their table, the empty chair, then back to Elizabeth's face, his eyebrow raising a fraction. She makes a pretence of gazing away to where a waiter has dropped an ashtray with a clatter, and frowns. Let him wonder, she thinks, irritated

with herself for volunteering the small nugget of information. Let him be curious that I choose to come here, like this. Let him look at my smooth cap of still-dark hair, and my black trouser suit with the bright pink shirt, and wonder why I am alone.

‘Hi, I’m Ria.’

The woman has swivelled to face them, resting her hands on the back of her chair. She is in her early thirties - or else wearing very well, Elizabeth adds to herself, with a spurt of jealousy. Her dark reddish-brown hair twists in tendrils around her broad face, and curls down on her neck. When she gazes about the room, her profile undulates like dunes. There is a sheen down each side of her nose, and her teeth glitter in the low light. When she stretches out her arm to push up the sleeves of her tight blue velvet top, silver and navaho turquoise weighs heavy on her wrists and fingers. Elizabeth imagines she can smell the flesh of this woman through perfume, oily and salty as the Atlantic.

‘I’m Carter’, he smiles, thrusting out a hand, ‘Carter Johnson’.

Forced to introduce herself, Elizabeth wonders somewhat sourly why so many Americans call their children by surnames instead of Christian names. Carter Johnson or Johnson Carter....What is the difference? But her frisson of irritation is not about his name. The point is, he knows her

name now, and so does Ria. Elizabeth feels unsettled, but is saved from further conversation by the club manager mounting the stage and raising a hand. A reverent hush descends.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! And tonight we welcome you specially because it is a night of peace, since Jazz is a universal music.....And it is a great honour to be able to welcome our South African brothers, and our Islamic brothers, whose music is the music of peace - I am, of course, talking about the music ofAbdullah Ibrahim!’.

Elizabeth joins the loud applause. There are a few enthusiastic yelps from behind her as the musicians walk across the stage, the star in flowing white robes, his double bass player and percussionist in jeans. Ibrahim barely glances at the audience; he seats himself at the piano, stark against its blackness, and rests his hands briefly on the top as if in prayer. There is a moment’s silence, into which Elizabeth feels herself falling. It is as if she herself is the instrument, waiting to be played. The air trembles with anticipation. The shared breath of the crowd is a sigh.

The music begins, so soft at first, the whisper of a brush across drumskin, the stroke of fingers on gut. Elizabeth closes her eyes, waiting for the piano, visualising, within the warm red behind her eyes, the dark fingers poised over ivory. The first note comes, so cool it is barely audible, as if the

musician is holding back, not giving, not yet. Elizabeth thinks it wise not to give; the borders of her life are wide. In the office, she knows, others talk about her, not liking her but marvelling at her reserve, and wondering about her private life. Let them, she says to herself in defiance, once again. This is her music, her own music, slipping around her like a slow breath, restrained and distant, barely acknowledging the hushed listeners and watchers. The darkness behind her eyes is rich blue-black. She lets her own sigh of contentment slip into the air and leans back in her chair, tilting her head slightly to the ceiling where the notes hang, as chilly and aloof as angels.

Elizabeth opens her eyes at last, allowing herself to see the trio, the source. Just then a young man glides to the front, kneels, and takes a photograph. The afficianados draw in their breath at this affront, and Ibrahim stares down, the break in his playing imperceptible.

‘You’re disturbing us, man’, he says.

There is horror in the air. Heads shake in sympathy, and the young photographer slinks away to the disgrace of his table.

Ria glances over her shoulder at Carter, without a smile, then turns her head back to the front. But Elizabeth saw, and is puzzled by the complicity of that glance. Did the faint upward roll of her eyes indicate irritation, and if so with whom? Ria gleamed with knowledge. And the curve of

her cheek is more tantalising now, soft and round as a buttock, and downed in soft hair. Elizabeth stares at the woman's head, disconcerted by this break in her concentration, resenting it and wishing this couple had not chosen to share her table.

The music continues unbroken until the interval, but something is wrong. When at last the trio leave the stage, to reverential applause, and the room is filled with light, Ria and Carter whirl round towards her with an energy that tears the air, making her flinch from this urge towards communication.

'Well....!', says Carter.

'My gahd', smiles Ria.

Now Carter lays a hand briefly on Elizabeth's arm. 'I could see you were really into that', he said, 'Am I right, Elizabeth?'

'I love Ibrahim's sound,' she replies coolly.

Ria's mouth turns downwards, and she wrinkles her nose, knowing perhaps that the charming grimace makes her look even younger. 'Yeah, but....'

'But what?', Elizabeth asks, almost indignant.

'It's..kinda bloodless, isn't it?', the woman says.

'So cool it freezes its own ass', laughs the man.

'Not like real jazz - you know?' Ria adds.

Elizabeth frowns. 'I don't honestly think it's possible

to use a phrase like ‘real jazz’, she protests, feeling at the same time how painfully English she sounds, how chilly, how frigid. It is their fault. These people have made her feel like this, with their unwelcome presence, their very speech - rolling around the air in which she sits, bringing with it the vertiginous depths of the Canyon, and the damp, foetid heat of the Florida Keys.

‘I guess I mean Chicago, and New Orleans’, says Ria.

‘And the blues’, says Carter.

‘Stuff with soul’, says Ria.

‘Yeah, kinda... blood, guts and passion, you know?’, says Carter, raising a finger to stroke his moustache.

Elizabeth does not know. All her shutters close against these words. Her mouth twists as she leans back in her chair and says dismissively, ‘Not my kind of thing, I’m afraid’.

The American offers to fetch her another glass of wine but she refuses. Carter rises, and reaches out a hand to touch Ria’s arm, saying he will get two beers. The two women fall silent until he returns - not before time, as the trio is about to walk on stage again. The hubbub in the room dies to a sacred silence once again, and Elizabeth is relieved. She came for the music, not for conversation, and wishes to lose herself once more.

Piano, double bass and drums make their patterns, and Elizabeth leans forward a fraction in her chair to

concentrate. But in front of her, Carter reaches out and starts to stroke Ria's ear, almost as if his touch, her pulse, and the rhythms were all one. The woman settles back a little, leaning into his caress, which travels down to her neck, his hand moving over her skin like a merchant stroking velvet or silk. Elizabeth is helpless: mesmerised by the to and fro, to and fro.... and it is as if she has entered a black room, one spot only illuminated, with the sound of skin on skin replacing the music and the subteranean beat of blood adding a new percussion.

The man's hand trace the curves of neck and cheek like a life artist's charcoal, dwelling on one spot for a while, then moving on, fingertips exploring the little nubs of bone. Briefly Ria glances back, brightening the air with a smile of promise, before allowing the dark lash to bat on her cheek for a second. As if in answer he drops his hand to her back, stroking, exploring, kneading. Then round to the side, where the curve of her breast is visible beneath her arm, to touch, and weigh - cupping with gentle fingers. His other hand begins on her neck again.

Elizabeth's mouth is parched. She looks at the golden beers and craves the wetness on her lips, the rolling of liquid on the tongue, the relief of swallowing. But there is no hope for it. She has said no, and remains imprisoned in the desert she has chosen - forced to sit watching as Carter touches

Ria's soft waist and buttocks, and his fingertips walk her spine. And time and the music stop.

And Elizabeth knows she will watch these hands moving over their instrument, until the music is finished. But not finished. It will not be over then. For within her mind she will follow them from the club and walk with them to the hotel, laugh with them as the elevator door closes and they are free to embrace. Then, within their anonymous room, Elizabeth will witness the trail of clothes, hear the sound of water, and watch his tongue on her body and hers on his, fingers touching, exploring, entering.....moving on and on, with a darker and more intense rhythm, until they move together in the perfect duet, and she aches to lie down besides them, to feel their skins on hers - and learn at last.



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