

Nine Minutes

By R. W. Mosses

00:00:00 to 00:02:59

He knew he wasn't interested when she rose to greet him. For a start she was blonde. Her breasts were too large. Her eyes lacked the spark he always assumed was interest. He took her hand. It felt weak and limp, like a bird playing dead, hoping the cat would lose interest.

She knew she wasn't interested when she rose to greet him. For a start his shoes were scuffed, although he had at least tried to clean and polish them. With the suit jacket, chinos and expensive shirt it was like he'd tried at being cool, smart and casual but had failed to observe the details.

"Hi I'm Bruce," he said, looking for her badge even though he expected to get her name in a moment. It was something to do that avoided looking at the defensive barrier behind her eyes.

“Selina”, she said sitting back down and waiting impatiently while he put down his drink and shrugged off his jacket. It would have been simpler to carry it. She stared into infinity before noticing the barman, watching his muscles flex beneath the thin t-shirt. Perhaps there was some silver lining: she had a good view if Bruce’s head didn’t get in the way.

“Have you done this before?” he asked cordially, given that it was clear he didn’t have her full attention.

“No,” she said, coming back to the matter at hand. “My friend thought it would be a good laugh.” Not that she was laughing now. There had been one sweet guy who tried a couple of lame jokes. Pity he was forty with two kids and that he looked like he was carrying twins.

“I think I was just talking to her,” he said reflecting sadly on the petite brunette whose number he had noted. There was an injustice in groups of women coming to these things. They’d all chat about it afterwards and compare notes. It was hard enough to impress one girl never mind all her pals. And if two of them liked you then you would be the one who lost out to loyalty. He could handle both of them, he joked with himself. As if he’d get all his Christmas and birthday presents all at once, tonight.

“Yeah, that’s her. What about you?” she asked. Please don’t say the ‘v’ word.

“No, my first time. You could say I’m a virgin.” He caught a twitch at the corners of her mouth, he thought she was trying not to smile so pressed home his advantage. “So be gentle with me.”

"I'll try," she said, wanting to scream. Instead she sighed inside. "I should warn you I have claws." She tapped her polished nails on the table, their lacquer, catching the light, the same dark mahogany.

The chatter of her nails irritated him. "So what's your question?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"We're not supposed to talk about the obvious stuff, because you'll get fed up of answering it all night, so instead we're supposed to come up with a question. You know, 'What CD do you have in your car at the moment?', that sort of thing," he said, wondering why he was bothering to explain the obvious.

"Oh," she said, wondering how much longer they had left. She couldn't check her watch. Her arm twitched slightly. "I don't have a CD player in my car. What about you?"

"If you were an animal what sort of animal would you be?"

"I meant what CD are you listening to?"

He smiled, covering his momentary sense of humiliation. "Sorry, I thought you meant what was my question. I have an MP3 player that broadcasts through the radio, so there's like a thousand tracks on there." He stopped, realising few people liked a geek.

How hard is it to just name an album or a band? She began to play with her drink, stirring the gin and bitter lemon with her straw, the slushy clunk of the ice satisfying. "So what do you do?" she asked.

He resigned himself to answering the usual questions for the rest of the evening. "I work in security, just a small company that designs systems and software, so I do a lot of stuff. CAD, IT, bit of management, that sort of thing."

"IT, eh?" She tried to sound enthusiastic.

He hated how that seemed to be the only bit of his work anyone heard. "What about you?" he asked.

"Fine art. I'm an assistant curator at Kelvingrove."

"Oh, I've never managed to figure what Dadaism is about." Perhaps he could at least have an interesting chat.

"I can't help you with that. I'm only there while we have this Rembrandt exhibit over the summer. Its mostly filing. I didn't study fine art at Uni." At least it was paying the bills.

"What did you study?" he asked.

"Sociology and politics at Callie," she said. "You?"

"Engineering at Strathclyde," he said. "We're not supposed to talk about politics either, so I guess that leaves sociology." He tried to sound ironic. "I've always wondered where does sociology end and anthropology begin?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. She did but couldn't be arsed getting into it for the few seconds they must have left. "Seen anything good at the cinema?" she asked, hoping to deflect his attention from her.

"No," he said after a moment, having suddenly forgotten every film he'd ever seen and then filtering out all the ones that might be considered sad. "Last thing I

saw was this film with Jennifer Aniston as a wild hippy chick. She was so miscast it was unbelievable. I think it was racist too.”

“That the one with Ben Stiller?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You’re right it was awful, I didn’t even know that guy was meant to be French I thought he was Dutch,” she said.

“You know there are no conspiracy theories involving the Dutch...” A ringing bell interrupted him. “Time’s up already,” he said, “seems like we only just got started.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” she said, smiling weakly. She still wasn’t laughing.

“Good to meet you,” he said standing and retrieving his jacket, scorecard and drink. He felt clumsy and obvious. He offered his spare hand.

She half rose and shook it again. “You too,” she said, glad that was over with.

He moved on to the next table, glad that was over with.

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00:03:00 to 00:05:59

Seeing a familiar face was both a shock and embarrassing to her. She didn’t really know what to do, feeling awkward. She couldn’t remember if she had been rude or not. She could remember being bored.

Seeing a familiar face was surprising and made him panic momentarily. He couldn't remember if he had been rude. He could remember her disdain and inattention.

"Hi," Selina said assertively, and offered her hand. Selina thought he was wearing the same shirt. At least he had new shoes.

"Hi," he said, uncertainly. "Selina isn't it?" Putting down his drink and jacket he shook her lifeless hand. Her hair seemed darker. Maybe she'd lost some weight. He hoped she didn't recognise his shirt.

"Yes. Good to see you again," Selina said, wishing now she hadn't come tonight.

"And you," he said. Still it was only a short time and he could move on. "How's the exhibition going?"

"Oh, not bad." Selina said, too surprised to be evasive. "I've been press-ganged into giving guided tours every Friday afternoon. How's your job?"

"It's okay. Usual nonsense with the Boss," he said, shrugging. "I'm working on this project for a customer but we seem to be contractually obliged to design an impossible system. I guess it's not that exciting really..." As her eyes lost focus, a few beats passed, he looked at his drink. He quickly changed tack, as anything was better than an awkward silence. "What do you do when you're not at work?"

"Not much, I like to write, songs mainly," Selina said.

"Working towards that Christmas number one?" he said, joking.

“That would be nice, I’d be made for life. I did try for the Eurovision song contest once. I came fifth, I think Cathy Dennis won that year though,” Selina said, smiling awkwardly, not meaning to say anything so personal and precious. “She wrote that song for Kylie.”

“I still think ‘Confide in me’ is Kylie’s best song. Do you remember her working with the Manics?” he asked, happy to fill time with nostalgia, everyone had something to look back on.

“I must have missed that part of her career. I never saw her in that other soap either,” Selina said.

“The Sullivans? I didn’t either, even though I remember watching it everyday when I went home for lunch from primary school,” he said, this wasn’t so bad, but he could talk shite for Scotland when he got started. The down side of having a pub-quiz winning brain was the piles of trivia. He pulled himself short. “So, are you in a band then?”

“I was,” Selina said. “But the drummer wanted to spend more time with his other band, which left me and the other guitarist. I’m supposed to be meeting with him tomorrow to practice a few songs, maybe we’ll try and play at one of those open mike sessions in Sleazy’s. You know, the bar on Sauchiehall Street?”

“I haven’t been there in years,” he said. “But I don’t get out much.” He cringed inside feeling he’d committed a Cardinal sin; admitting to staying in, dull and Billy no mates.

"Why not?" Selina asked, wondering immediately why she cared enough to ask. He might do well on a quiz show, maybe he practised by watching them on TV.

"I dunno," he said, feeling vulnerable, what did it matter? "I think I'm agoraphobic."

"Oh," Selina said, and probably psychosomatic too. Not sure whether to feel sorry for him or pity him. "So how did you get here tonight then?"

"On a magic carpet," he said, trying not to be sarcastic, but his voice was thick with it and anger.

Selina laughed.

He was so surprised he laughed too.

Selina was glad he was prepared to put up a fight, so used to everyone being so terribly polite. "I'm sorry," Selina said. "I didn't mean...I wasn't thinking..."

"It's okay. I mean I'm not sure. I just prefer to stay in familiar surroundings. A bit like this place I guess," he said, relaxing and smiling easily. "Have you seen anyone else here you know? What happened to your friend?" he asked, not just to make conversation. He was hoping she was sitting at another table, they weren't all in the same room and this was the last table before he got to move next door.

"There was a guy in his forties I remember seeing, but that's it. Harley couldn't make it tonight, working late on her portfolio."

"Is she studying art?" he asked, silently cursing his back luck.

"Yeah, up at Glasgow," Selina said coldly, insulted by his interest and poor etiquette. "What do you do outside work?"

"I like to make short films. I have a digital camcorder. I've not made anything with a proper script yet. Still practising editing and framing scenes, things like that," he said.

"Have you shown anything yet?" Selina asked politely, thinking he was getting a bit dull again.

"No. Its mainly scenery. Although I did my cousin's wedding last month. They seemed pleased with it. Trick is to make sure you get at least one shot of each of the guests. Keeps everyone happy that way," he said.

"Just about everyone I know seems to be married," Selina said. "I don't mind but it makes it harder to go out without being surrounded by couples."

"Tell me about it," he said, rolling his eyes. He felt comfortable back on safe predictable ground; single thirtysomethings bemoaning the clichéd world of couples and parental expectations.

The bell rang signalling a momentary respite from social effort. "Nice to see you again," Selina said, surprised that she meant it.

"You too," he said, escaping to the next room.

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00:06:00 to 00:08:59

A thin smile of resignation crossed his face, although it was oddly comforting to see a familiar soul in the crowd. Her hair was dark, and her dress flattered her figure.

She broke into a grin at his unexpected emergence from the throng. He seemed taller, carried himself with more confidence. Maybe he'd been to the gym recently.

"Howdy stranger," Bruce said, fearing that was too familiar. Her eyes were bright. "Long time no see."

"Hello," she said. "I've been a bit broke; my job was only a contract for the summer."

"So you've got something new then?" Bruce asked, concerned.

"Yeah, there was a more permanent opening in St Mungo's," she said, pleased to share the good news with someone.

"That's the museum next to the cathedral, with the Dali?" Bruce confirmed.

"That's the one," she said.

"You still doing admin or have you moved into something else?" Bruce asked.

"No, the work I did on giving guided tours helped persuade them I could do more, so I also help arrange new exhibits," she said.

"Grand," said Bruce. "I had a look at the Rembrandt exhibit a couple of Sundays ago. I didn't realise he was Dutch."

"You missed the full display then. You know they say there are no conspiracy theories about the Dutch," she said.

Bruce grinned, his interest piqued. "I think I told you that," Bruce said, "the first time we met. I didn't think you were paying that much attention."

Selina smiled and shrugged. "I guess I must have taken some of it in. I'm sorry." Selina touched his arm. Looked straight into his eyes. They were blue. "You know how it is. After a while the parade of people just wears you thin."

"Do you want to find somewhere to sit, I feel like I've been standing all evening," Bruce suggested.

"Yeah, my feet are killing me," Selina said and followed Bruce through to the bar, the low tables familiar. "How's your job going?"

"Not too bad," Bruce said. "I feel a certain Zen calm about it all now. A few months into the project and I've been able to make it my own."

"Cool. What about your films?" Selina asked.

"Well I found a poem I wrote a few years ago and shot various different sections of scenery and buildings I thought were related. I asked some people to recite it and edited it all together. The Glasgow Film Workshop accepted it for their short film night. With luck I'll move on to a ten minute short as soon as I can find some cash and finish the script," Bruce said. "Did you get to play in Sleazy's?"

"Yeah, but I fell out with my co-writer so I just went down with a few friends and did a solo acoustic set of my own stuff. I enjoyed it so much I've been back a couple of times since," Selina said.

"Have you thought about doing some recordings or submitting more of your songs?" Bruce asked.

"I hope to, but like you I need to save some cash then I can hire a studio," Selina said.

"Maybe you could do the soundtrack to my film?" Bruce smiled.

"Who knows?" Selina said, grinning, pleased. "Next stop the Oscars."

"I think I'd settle for a BAFTA," Bruce said with mock gravity. "Small steps along the path, don't want to set my sights too high, that's not the Scottish way."

"You know, all this time and I still don't know where you're from," Selina said, sipping from her drink and looking at Bruce over her glass.

"I'm a foreigner," Bruce said. "I would have thought the accent gave it away."

"No, I can't say it does," Selina said.

"Oh, well I'm from Edinburgh," Bruce confessed. "What about you?"

"I'm a Weegie born and bred. The cosmopolitan borough of Banglashields," Selina said.

"I tried driving through there once, cars doubled parked on both sides of the road next to a traffic island. It was a challenge," Bruce said.

"Yeah, it can be," Selina smiled. "But you get used to it after a while."

"Where are you living at the moment?" Bruce asked.

"A wee place up near Maryhill Road. It's a relatively new build. Low ceilings, electric heating, red brick place. I'm only renting though, so as soon as I can I'll be out of there," Selina said. "What about you?"

"I'm in my own place, needs a bit of work, but I'm happy with it. Sounds like its not too far from you, technically its in Partick but it seems more like Hyndland to me," Bruce said.

"Not too far to walk after a nightcap then," Selina teased.

"Assuming I needed to walk home," Bruce said.

"True..." A ringing bell interrupted her.

"Looks like its time for us to take our places," Bruce said, reluctantly. "Can I borrow your pen? I forgot to pick one up."

"Sure," Selina said, perplexed.

Bruce took out his wallet and removed a small white card. He took the pen and scribbled on the card. "My number," Bruce explained, offering the card. "Just in case you don't meet anyone you like this evening."

"I'd be surprised," admitted Selina, taking the card.

"You never know," Bruce said. "How long did it take us to get this far?"

Feeling self-conscious he went to find his first table.

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00:09:00 –

Selina knew she wasn't interested when she rose to greet him, she wondered when she should call Bruce. Perhaps she would catch up with him later this evening.

Bruce knew he wasn't interested when she rose to greet him, he wondered if Selina would call. Maybe life was too short and he shouldn't wait at all.

End