

THE LOOK

A Short Story By Paul Sheeky

Lester Pierce braced himself for the cold and, pulling his scarf over his pointed chin and thin-lipped mouth, ventured out into the dark December evening. The brisk wind created a swirl of grime and empty crisp packets as he gazed warily around before shutting the door. He pulled on the door to check the lock had held then turned around and headed onto the quiet street. If he had happened to come across an old acquaintance at this moment, it would come as no surprise to this person that little had changed in the life of Lester Pierce since his childhood, for he still wore the same mask like look that had always set him apart. It was a look that said, do not talk to me, I am not your friend and you mean nothing to me. His dark, brooding eyes that stared right through you; his hollowed out cheeks and bony nose; his heavy brow and tightly scrunched mouth. This was the face he had worn all his life, this was the face that kept people away.

Pulling his long, dark overcoat tightly around him, Lester continued his journey along the half-lit urban streets to his place of work. He preferred this journey in winter, less people willing to brave the cold meant less eye contact to avoid, less chance of catching that disapproving look in their eyes. Even thinking about it made him angry, What right have they to judge me? Just because I'm different? Better than the scum that they are? And so the hate grew, a hate born of fear and delusion, a hate so strong it ruled his life. And now, as he rounded a corner and embarked down another nondescript street, the hate bubbled inside him, driving him on at a quicker pace. In the distance, he noticed a pair of teenage girls, obviously drunk and under-dressed for the icy weather. Christmas cheer, he thought contemptuously. As he drew closer to them he could make out their short skirts and tight tops, designed to show off their feminine physique. Such blatant exhibitionism made him feel sick so he fixed his eyes on the path in front of him. But he could still hear the clatter of their shoes and the whine of their voices.

"Oi, mate, have you got a spare fag?"

They were talking to him. He glanced up briefly. Although they were still a short way in front he was close enough to see that look he hated written clearly on their faces. He shook his head and continued walking.

"Fucking weirdo."

He instantly looked up, his eyes locking onto the girl closest to him, his face now twisted into a look of pure hatred, a look so intense the girl quickly looked away and hurried off in the opposite direction. Lester's gaze followed them for a while, then he turned away and continued walking to work.

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The job of night time car park attendant wasn't a job that Lester loved, it was the job he had to have. What other job would give him the solitude he craved. Whether through love or fear he chose loneliness as a way of life it matters not, for loneliness he chose, and alone he lived, and alone he worked. Apart from the brief human contact when the shifts changed he needn't speak or interact with anyone, except of course the occasional customer. But they were behind glass and rare enough to allow Lester ample time to stare deeply into the darkest corners of his own mind. For in the ten hours a night he worked, he did not occupy himself with books, television or radio. He merely sat and thought, and thought, and thought. And, like a grindstone crushing wheat, the wheels of his mind compounded his past into his present and his fear into hate.

It was the time of year when the days never really started, the sun always hung low in the sky like a perpetual sunset. Not that this mattered to Lester, he slept during the daylight hours. If he ever awoke during the day he would keep the curtains closed and wait for the dark to arrive. Lester's non-work life was characterised by two things: reading and writing. He was very specific about what books he could and could not read. Only books over 75 years old were acceptable. Put simply, Lester would only read the words of the dead. His writing was restricted by similar rules. The poetry he wrote, which he considered to be the best ever written, was only for publication after his death, to prevent those that hated him from redeeming themselves with fawning adulation.

These two activities occupied Lester satisfactorily for the most part, and had the advantage of requiring no human contact to perpetuate. There were, however, times when Lester had to venture out of the house to procure food and other supplies. At these times he would wait a half hour before the shop closed so as to minimise the number of people he had to see, and therefore the number of people that saw him.

One such night, Lester, locking and checking the door as usual, strode down the dim streets towards the only shop he ever went to, a small supermarket called Lacy's. Lacy's was near to the town centre, and as Lester got closer he noticed the streets getting busier and brighter with people rushing by with heads down and eyes on the ground, just like him. All except one man. This man was a homeless beggar whose worn clothes seemed scant protection against the icy winter wind. As he shuffled his feet and rubbed his hands together he scanned the crowd with tired eyes, occasionally extending his hand and asking for spare change. Lester, by looking the other way and quickening his step, hoped to avoid the pleas of the man who he regarded as infinitely inferior to himself.

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"Excuse me, sir. I'm trying to raise enough money for a bed for the night. Do you..."

The man was stopped short by the glare Lester gave him, his bullet hole eyes and razor blade lips twisted once again into a look of pure hate. Lester walked on, leaving a bemused and somewhat frightened look on the face of the homeless man. He had handled that well, Lester thought as he moved on towards the shop.

Supermarkets suited Lester. He admired their refinement of cold commerce, an exchange between humans with emotion surgically removed. Each ordered aisle an invitation to excess. But Lester wasn't drawn in by once only offers for things he didn't need, he stuck to his list; a work of art in it's own right according to his world view. He always kept them. He kept everything he wrote, supposing that fame followed right behind the grim reaper and that posterity would christen him a god amongst men.

After shuffling through the checkout without having to say a word, Lester, fully loaded with bags bulging with shopping, ventured once more into the cold winter night. As he began his journey home, he noticed a small group of people gathered on the street some distance away. Disliking crowds he decided to cross the road before he reached the group. However, he was prevented from doing so by an ambulance that came speeding past, it's sirens screaming into the darkness. The ambulance slowed and stopped near the crowd. Lester correctly assumed that someone had been hurt, maybe a stabbing, maybe something less dramatic such as a heart attack. Unconcerned with such things, Lester, keeping his head down as always, crossed the road and continued his journey. Glancing back across the road as he passed the scene of the unfolding medical drama, he paused. Through a gap in the gathered crowd he saw the victim lying on the street; it was the homeless man that Lester had handled so well on his way to the shop. Now the paramedics were around him, assessing his condition. His condition wasn't difficult to assess, Lester could see that; he was clearly dead. Lester's frown deepened and he kept his head a little lower than usual as he moved on towards home.

The door clicked then opened, and Lester shuffled into the hallway with his bulging bags of shopping. He was glad to be home. The outside world always filled him with an annoying mix of emotions; fear, pity, confusion, and of course, underlying all, hate. After pushing the door closed with his foot, he noticed something on the floor. It was the local free newspaper, a rag which he despised for it's very localness. Leaving his shopping in the kitchen, Lester returned to the hallway to remove the newspaper. Just before he put it in the bin, he saw something on the front page which gave him pause; a photo of someone he thought he knew, or at least

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recognised. It was a girl, about seventeen years old, with long blonde hair. She was smiling innocently. She looked happy. Lester looked at the article. The girl was called Marie O'Connell and she had been found dead two days ago, down by the canal. The cause of death was not yet known. It was then that Lester remembered where he had seen her before. She was the girl that had asked him for a cigarette a few nights ago, the one he had scared off with his look of hatred. A thought passed through his mind, the connection of two dark strands; in a matter of days he had looked at two different people in the same way, and now both of them were dead. It was a ridiculous thought and he would have dismissed it instantly were it not also so interesting. He could maybe write a poem about it; how his look could kill. The stupidity of it made him smile slightly, ironically. And hidden behind the smile, barely recognisable, was a hint of sadness. Snapping out of his reverie he threw the newspaper away and began to put away his shopping.

Four nights later, Lester was still thinking about the homeless man and the smiling girl as he stared at a CCTV image of a row of cars in the car park he was consigned to guard. Truthfully, he didn't care what happened to the cars, would like to see them all smashed and burned, would prefer to guard charred wrecks than these materialist trappings. But that was his job; and he could do it alone. Except when he was disturbed, like now, by a man about the same age as Lester dressed in an expensive grey suit.

"I've lost the pass thing. Do you know where I parked my car?"

It was obvious that the man had been drinking, but he was holding it together well. Drunken drivers in business suits were nothing new to Lester, he saw a few every week, had grown accustomed to the idea. Lester, frowning as usual, asked him to describe the car.

"Black BMW A-series."

Two thoughts crossed Lester's mind simultaneously. Firstly, he knew where the car was and secondly, he knew who the man was. He was Richard Watson. Lester had not recognised him straight away because it had been many years since he had last seen him, not since school. Richard Watson had been the cocky, handsome boy that was universally popular; except that is with Lester, who, even then, had mastered hate, or rather had been mastered by hate. Lester hated Richard Watson, and Richard Watson had hated that, had picked on Lester because of it, had made him hated by everyone else. And now here he was in front of Lester, asking him for help. Lester asked him for the registration number of his car.

"R1 CKY"

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It wasn't difficult for Lester to find within him the hate to try out his crazy theory, road test a look that could kill. The man turned away for a second and when he looked back he was fixed by a stare so brimming with hatred, it sobered him up instantly. Richard Watson blinked hard, and when his eyes were open again, the look had gone from Lester's face. Lester told his one time nemesis where his car was, and Richard Watson moved away from the car park attendant's bright office and into the darkness of the underground car park, thinking that he must have imagined that look, must have drunk more than he thought.

Sometimes the silence got to Lester. Most of the time he was happy to listen to the sound of the wind howling by, mixed with the occasional creaks and cracks that an old house makes. But sometimes, it was just too quiet, there was just too much dead air. For these moments, Lester kept a small transistor radio. Despising advertisements he found his choice of stations severely restricted; sometimes he tuned the radio between stations, just listening to static or to two stations drifting in and out of each other. He did this today, and as he sat in his study staring at his own reflection in the dark window in front of him, he listened to the moody classical of Berlioz's Requiem mixed with the faceless voice of a minor celebrity. The celebrity's happy chattering ceased and was replaced by the grimmer tones of the newscaster, the preacher of death and destruction. Although the news was, of course, all bad, it wasn't until the third story that Lester became interested. It was about a man who had killed a family of four with his car, a man who drunkenly drove a black BMW into a blue Ford, a man who was now dead; a man called Richard Watson.

Lester's stare intensified. So it was proved. He could, with a single look, kill whoever he hated. The possibilities jumped through his mind like sparks from a flame. He could kill, with impunity, whoever he hated. Lists upon lists upon lists of everyone he had ever hated, had ever hated him, ran through his mind. But who did he hate most of all? He looked deeply into his black, shrivelled soul. And found an answer. His face went through contortions now, twisting between anger and pain; one could almost see sadness there too, and the tiniest suggestion of a tear. And then suddenly, it hardened once more, his eyes now porcelain globes, his mouth as sharp as broken glass; once again a look of hate so pure it knew no equal. And with this look frozen on his face, Lester lifted his head and stared into his own reflection.