

Questionable Legitimacy

Written by

Simon Lee

simonnlee@hotmail.com

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INT. ARTIST STUDIO, BACKROOM - DAY

Early November. We are in the backroom of an Artist's studio which overlooks the south coast on the outskirts of a small coastal village in Southwest England. A radio can faintly be heard, and we hear a mixture of conversation and classical music. The camera is focused on a painting in progress depicting an upturned boat on the beach with children playing on it. We see the artist's hand as he works on his creation. We hear the sea; we hear a solitary Seagull.

The Camera pans to the window and then down to the...

EXT. BEACH - CONTINUOUS

... Beach below. We see the children playing near the boat before running off.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST STUDIO, BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

The artist, Matthew, late middle-age, bearded, somewhat disheveled. We witness his frustration with the painting's development.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

The Camera is focused on the same painting; all we see is an upturned boat, the children have been erased.

Daylight morphs into wet, windy nightfall. We now hear the radio playing Vaughan Williams 'A Pastoral Symphony'. The camera starts slowly to pan the dimly lit room as it shows more of Matthew's work.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - EVENING

Matthew is walking down the street, returning home.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST STUDIO, BACKROOM - AT THE SAME TIME

The camera continues to pan the room and paintings

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Matthew walking down the street.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST STUDIO, BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

We continue to hear 'A Pastoral Symphony'. The camera settles on one painting which happens to be close to the table lamp- the only source of light in the studio- and therefore more illuminated than the others

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Matthew walks towards his studio front door.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST STUDIO, BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

The camera slowly pushes in on the illuminated painting.

CUT TO:

INT. ARTIST STUDIO - CONTINUOUS

Matthew enters his premises. Once inside, he places his shopping bags on the table, takes his coat off and proceeds to the back room.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

Entering, he moves to the radio- which is still playing 'A Pastoral Symphony'- and turns it off.

He then turns to the window with the intention of drawing the curtains but is shocked to discover a young woman sat in the chair. For a few seconds this scenario roots Matthew to the spot.

He stares at the intruder; she stares back at him.

Instinctively, he rushes to the shelf and grabs a marble ornament/bookend for use as a weapon. She gasps in fear. Matthew's eye dart around the room to ascertain if there are any other intruders. He moves backwards and looks up the staircase.

SALMA

(trying to reassure him)

I am on my own.

MATTHEW

(with aggressive force)

Who are you?

(beat)

What are you doing here, how did you get in?

SALMA

I came in through the back.

Assuming she means the often-unlocked back door, Matthew continues.

MATTHEW

Why?

SALMA

I needed refuge, I needed to escape.

MATTHEW

From whom?

SALMA

The men who brought me here.

MATTHEW

The men? Where are you from?

SALMA

(long pause)

Libya.

(Softly but with urgency)

Please, I want to be here.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. MONTAGE

A swift, linear, possibly photographic, montage of Salma's journey to England to suggest she is explaining the story to Matthew.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKROOM - EVENING

Matthew has moved back to the shelf to replace the marble ornament.

MATTHEW

Yesterday, a migrant's body washed up near Lyme Regis. Are refugees now attempting to cross from Cherbourg?

SALMA

We were told we couldn't land on the Kent coast; the authorities would force us back. I knew the Cherbourg crossing was going to be far more dangerous.

MATTHEW

But you still took that risk.

SALMA

I had come so far.

(pause)

It was dark when we got close to Weymouth and then they said we had to transfer into two small dinghies and land on a remote beach, further west. I could see the coastline.

(pause)

I could see England.

MATTHEW

So have you been trafficked, or did you pay to be smuggled?

SALMA

(with feeling)

Smuggled! I paid to be smuggled. All the money I, and my family had, was used to get me here, to allow me to claim asylum.

MATTHEW

But instead you were being trafficked.

SALMA

Yes and they demanded more money. They said we would work for them until it was paid off. I refused. I did not come to England, to live in the shadows.

MATTHEW

Did they tell you what work you'd have to do?

SALMA

No

(pause)

But, I'm a young woman.

Silence.

Matthew moves to a chair, sits down and switches on another side table lamp, projecting more light onto Salma. She momentarily flinches.

MATTHEW

You must know that a sizable chunk of the British public do not welcome you here. They would cheerfully push your dinghy back out to sea...even if the waves were forty feet high.

SALMA

(wryly)

Then they'd drown trying to do it.

The witticism relaxes Matthew.

MATTHEW

Was it so unbearable in Libya?

SALMA

My elder brother was killed during the uprising against Gaddafi, my sister is deaf in one ear due to a bomb explosion which destroyed most of our house. My Mother and Father aren't really alive, they just exist. I was sixteen when the Arab Spring started.

(MORE)

SALMA (CONT'D)

You cannot imagine the excitement I felt that we all felt, when it spread from Tunisia into Libya. It was as if we'd been handed a key to a door that had been forever locked.

(pause)

Perhaps it should have stayed locked.

We hear the roar of the sea and the sound of rain against the windowpane. Matthew gets up from the chair passing Salma as he goes to the window. She watches him.

MATTHEW

How did you manage to land in such conditions?

He turns back and looks at her, but is surprised to see that she has moved from the chair and is inspecting part of the room.

SALMA

You live alone.

MATTHEW

Yes. How did you know?

SALMA

There are no photos. Do you not have family or friends?

MATTHEW

(pointedly)

None that I'd want to look at every day.

(pause)

I don't have children.

(beat)

I do have two ex-wives.

She looks at him quizzically but does not pursue the topic.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)

Why did you choose here? Other places are much easier to get to from the beach. There are three terraced cottages at the mouth of the estuary.

SALMA

I heard the music. It's an English composer?

MATTHEW

Vaughan Williams. You couldn't have heard the music from the beach.

SALMA

(with certainty)

I heard the music.

(pause)

(she turns her head towards

the paintings)

I saw the paintings.

Matthew's expression makes it perfectly clear that he doesn't believe her, however he refrains from further questions.

INT./EXT. MONTAGE

We See a final montage of Salma's journey.

INT. BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

Salma is now in a different part of the room.

SALMA

You are a professional artist?

MATTHEW

(sardonically)

Well that's the image I've sketched out for myself.

(pause)

I'm a retired civil servant, this is just a less than lucrative side-line.

SALMA

Do you sell any of your paintings?

MATTHEW

I sold one last year to Pat who runs the village mobile library.

(smiles)

She is rich in humanity.

SALMA

What is a civil servant?

MATTHEW

I was a diplomat in the Foreign Office. Nothing grand, just a middle ranking pen pusher.



SALMA  
Did you specialise?

MATTHEW  
(pause)  
Iraq.

SALMA  
Oh, were you there during the war?

MATTHEW  
Yes.

SALMA  
What did you do?

MATTHEW  
(Draws the curtains and  
speaks somewhat  
mechanically)  
Compile reports, offer a strategic  
analysis of the situation. Help to  
reach a definitive foreign office  
position.

SALMA  
Did you agree with the war?

MATTHEW  
(pause, then firmly)  
Yes.

SALMA  
Really?

MATTHEW  
(defiantly)  
Yes, without reservation. I was  
absolutely committed to the cause.  
As Blair said, the world was in a  
state of flux, and this was our  
opportunity to re-order it.  
(beat)  
It was our duty to prepare the  
ground for Liberal democracy.  
(beat)  
For freedom.

SALMA  
And are you glad you did?

Clearly unsettled, Matthew moves from the window and around the room as he tries to formulate a response.

MATTHEW

He was guilty of genocide and a constant threat in the region. We had defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan; we should also remove a brutal dictator in Iraq, they were two sides of the same illiberal coin as far as I was concerned.

SALMA

Do you think it was better after he was gone?

Matthew moves again in a futile attempt to exorcise his demons. Finally, he slumps in a chair. We hear the wind, the rain against the windowpane, we hear the sea. We see Matthew's paintings. Long pause, finally...

MATTHEW

What people mostly want is protection. Their homes, health, their jobs. They want to be protected from harm. Democracy, for many, is just a side order.

We now see Salma standing behind him.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)

Our ideals blinded me to that reality  
(strained pause)  
And to our deceit.

Silence, Salma looks down at him. Matthew gets up and moves again.

MATTHEW (CONT'D)

(with some bitterness)  
So, where are we now, a refugee crisis with Afghans, Iraqis, Libyans, etc etc fleeing to a secular state, from the very countries that need to have it installed.

(with real exasperation)  
Oh god, the irony!

SALMA

(with deep anger)  
What do you expect us to do!

MATTHEW

I'm sorry, I really didn't mean that as a crit-

SALMA

(interrupting)  
Have you ever had to endure what we've been through?!

MATTHEW

No, I haven't, I'm sor-

SALMA

We wanted those freedoms no less than you wanted us to have them!

MATTHEW

I know that, I-

SALMA

Don't you think that you and I are, are

(searches for the right phrase)

Two sides of the same coin!?

Silence.

MATTHEW

What's your name?

SALMA

(anger subsiding)  
Salma, What is yours?

MATTHEW

Matthew  
(pause)  
Your English is good.

SALMA

(displaying confidence)  
I have an aptitude for languages and it helped that I loved to read English literature; The Classic novels, plays, Shakespeare.  
(pause)  
Yes, very much Shakespeare.  
(recites)  
"The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from Heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;

(MORE)

SALMA (CONT'D)

it blesseth him that gives and him  
that takes".

(smiles)

I intend to use that argument for  
my Asylum case.

MATTHEW

(with grim humour)

They'll still want a pound of  
flesh.

(pause)

I'll make some supper. You must be  
very hungry.

SALMA

Strangely, I'm not.

Matthew gets up to go to the kitchen.

MATTHEW

That's just tension. You'll eat.

SALMA

You have hope in your paintings.

MATTHEW

Do I?

SALMA

Yes, the hope you think you've  
lost.

(with warmth)

Your very English paintings and  
your very English music...

(pause)

I'm glad I made it here.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

We see Matthew go to the kitchen and take pots and pans from  
the cupboards.

CUT TO:

INT. BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

Salma meditatively staring at the painting.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

We see Matthew go to lock the back door but is surprised to find that it's locked. Perplexed, he returns to the living room. Speaking as he does.

MATTHEW

How did you say you got in?

He enters...

INT. BACKROOM - CONTINUOUS

...to find that Salma is no longer in the chair. Hurriedly, he searches the rest of his home, but she has vanished. Satisfying himself that she couldn't have left by the locked front door, he can draw only one, if shocking, conclusion. We hear A Pastoral Symphony

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. BACKROOM - DAY

Daylight. The camera slowly zooms in on the painting of the boat. We see a sketch of Salma sat on top of it. We hear the sea; we hear a solitary seagull.

THE END.