

Mark Burrows

Fragments Of Another

1: Nicholas Fisher

So I was at this party in North London. Not a very interesting party, it had to be said, the friend of a friend who I didn't even know very well and it had reached that point in the evening when I was starting to feel tired and more than a little drunk and had to decide whether it was worth drinking more and staying for the long haul or leaving in time to get one of the last tubes home. I was just readying myself to go when this woman approached me. I'd seen her a little earlier and I remember that she kept on glancing at me in a peculiar way. Well, the point is she came over and started talking to me straight out as if we knew each other. She was quite drunk and the party was rather loud and I'm tall, you see, and she was quite short so it wasn't that easy for me to hear what she was saying. At first I thought I must have misunderstood. I have a habit of assuming that I'm the one at fault on these occasions but after she kept using the words "redundancy" and "scapegoat" I had to interrupt. I didn't understand, I said. What was she was talking about? Certainly, I hadn't been made redundant. At that point the woman, well, she gave me a strange look and blushed. She apologised a few times and said things like "I could have sworn" and "mirror image." The woman – by now I'd ascertained her name was Carol – said she thought I was an acquaintance of hers called Nick Fisher. "He looks just like you," she said again. Curious, I pressed her for a few details about my alter ego. To my amusement she said Nick Fisher was a stockbroker for a big City firm, I think they were called Balls Brothers or something similar - I have a terrible memory for names - apparently her "ex" had been much better friends with this Nick character than she was but she had heard from someone or another that Nick had recently been made redundant. She'd heard rumours it had something to do with insider dealing but then in the current climate - or so she said - a lot of the big brokers had taken heavy losses and were letting people go all over

DRAWINGS © Laurie Lipton





the place. At this point I was starting to zone out and caught myself saying “I know” a lot although I know very little about the City or economics or anything like that. As we talked a little more she conceded that Nick and I weren’t quite as similar as she had first thought. Different mannerisms, apparently, and a slightly different tone of voice as well. His voice was deeper, she said, but in terms of looks – our height, our build, our hair colour, our eyes – a dead match. She even used the word “uncanny” a few times. I asked what else she knew about this character. He was very good at his job, she said, and he’d been something of a star performer at the company for many years. A ruthless trader, she added. She went on to say Nick had gone to ground since he lost his job and no-one had seen or heard anything from him for ages. She thought he might have gone abroad, she went on to say, but she didn’t know where. Unsure how to respond I made some lame joke about how he must have earned a lot more money than I did. By this stage our conversation was starting to flag. I thought about telling her I was a writer but sometimes it’s just too complicated to explain. Thing is, I’ve always affected a bit of disdain for these City types and I like to think my values are diametrically opposed to theirs. Carol picked up on my reticence and started to make her excuses, withdrawing to get more wine. Shortly after I saw her stuck in conversation with a couple of Fulham types, you know the sort, with pink shirts, pink cheeks and booming voices. With time still to get the last tube I made a few hasty farewells. I didn’t say goodbye to Carol but I no

Mark Burrows

ticed her watching me as I left as if she didn't quite understand who I was supposed to be.

Of course, I never told her my name.

2: Fazel Muhammad

I was detained at Luton airport shortly before boarding as Easyjet flight to Pisa with my girlfriend. We were looking forward to spending a few romantic days in Tuscany but instead I found myself in a windowless office surrounded by stern faced men with cold eyes. One of them asked me if I was someone called Fazel Muhammad. Of course I wasn't and said as much. After all, they had my passport. It wasn't a fake. The whole thing was ridiculous and I thought that might be the end of it but the questions continued. Are you Omar Khan? Are you Abdul Khail? Are you Assadullah Islamu-Idin? Are you Waheed Zaman? Are you Ibrahim Omar? Are you Ramzi Ahmet? Are you Nawaf al-Hamzi? Are you Wail al-Omari? I was none of these people and had no idea what they were talking about and told them so several times. They seemed to have an endless list of Middle Eastern sounding aliases to paint me with. I decided I'd had quite enough and started to kick up a fuss. I demanded to be released or charged. The men with cold eyes said they didn't have to do that. "Don't get shirty mate," one of them cautioned. Then they left me alone for a while. By this time I was feeling very agitated. None of this was meant to happen. I was particularly worried about what my girlfriend must think. She isn't the sort of woman who tolerates being left alone for hours in an airport. Then the men came back. This time they had photos. The questions continued, much as before. Are you Ramzi Ahmet? Are you Assadullah Islamu-Idin? Are you Nawaf al-Hamzi? With each name they produced a photograph. Not all the pictures were very clear, that was obvious, but I have to say what I saw shut me up. I mean, I'm not an Arab or a Muslim, let's be blunt. I wouldn't say I even appear remotely Arab, whatever that means. I've always thought I looked like a fairly typical white English bloke but I must have some double in Afghanistan and Pakistan because, minus a few details – stubble, length of hair, clothes – the pictures they showed me were of a different man who did indeed look very much like me. I saw a version of myself, swathed in a thick blanket surrounded by Jihadi types on the back of a truck. I saw another version of me sitting cross-legged before a black-turbaned mullah. I was shown pictures of myself in a desert brandishing an AK-47 and grainy photos of myself arriving and leaving from airports in Syria and Pakistan and Morocco. I had to agree, it didn't look very good. They asked me more questions. They showed me maps and transcripts with most of the information blacked out