

EXTRACT: DAN FOX

She reads a page and as she reads, she finds she is thinking about a great many things all at the same time. She is thinking about *Brighton Rock* and *The L-Shaped Room*, about Jean Rhys and Henry Green and Stevie Smith, about London and about home. What were the great London paintings? It all seems so far away now none of them seem to fit right. Sickert? The Kitaj of *Cecil Court*? Carel Weight or Jeffrey Camp? Oddly, more than anything else, those drawings by Madge Gill. Maybe she was the true *genius loci*. The text itself is written specifically from the point of view of the woman in an Edward Burra painting: *Snack Bar*, from 1930, the really lovely one in the Tate.

‘It’s five o’clock in the West End. One of those damp, lonely-cold London days that can’t be bothered to move into daylight, because it’ll be night again soon enough so what’s the point. By five, people are knackered from work, shopping, errands. Exhausted at the prospect of a long Tube ride home. They will be swapping places with the nocturnal set, who are now emerging from home to begin work. The night shift at a hospital, a restaurant, a club. Cleaning an empty office block. Working on a theatre stage, on a street corner. Beginning or ending, a little fortification is needed. Not a big meal. Just a snack. To get you through.

She decides on a cup of tea and a sandwich at that new Italian cafe on Dean Street. They make good sandwiches there. They call them tramezzini. Soft white bread with the crusts cut off. The man behind the counter is slicing a large ham. Delicate, thin slices of pink meat. That’s what she wants. A ham sandwich. The coffee’s good here but they serve it such short little cups. She would prefer a large milky tea in a tall mug. That way she can sit with it a little longer and not feel rushed to leave.

She perches at the long marble counter-top and hunches over her drink. Not as busy here as she expected. Only one other customer, a man wearing bottle-thick glasses stood near the open door. He appears flushed, anxious, like he’s not used to London. Maybe it’s all too

much for him and he's come in to gather himself, have a cup of tea, see how much farther Charing Cross Station is on the map. Why he's stood by the door she's no idea. There's such a cold blowing in. She keeps her smart hat and big winter coat on. The coat is sheepskin, dyed a luxuriant green, with a fur trim all around. To be honest, it's that new faux fur, but it looks just as expensive and nobody would know the difference. It goes well with her yellow top. She corrects an imaginary, less sophisticated companion. "Actually, it's a 'Venetian gold chemise.' Yellow top indeed."

She eats her tramezzino daintily, nibbling at the edges with her teeth, careful not to smudge her lipstick. It's a funny business, she thinks, how a pig on a farm gets turned into a ham then ends up in a London snack bar, squeezed between bread, then chopped up in her mouth. All that slicing, cutting, dicing, and other business at the end. Must be how that man by the door feels about visiting London; all chewed up, wishing he was back in the countryside. She watches the chap with the meat. The Ham Man, she's nicknamed him. He's right in front of her. Too busy to pay her any mind though she's sure he's given her the eye once or twice. She observes how he holds the knife and fork to cut the meat, with the handles resting on top of his hands, rather than gripped in the palm. It's how you'd hold a pencil. As if he's drawing the ham into existence. It's also how a jazz drummer balances his sticks. Like her fella does when she sees him play the clubs. She's been noticing hands a lot lately since he gave her the ring. There's something satisfying in the sound of it clunking against her tea mug, against the marble countertop. A pleasurable weight. Not "weight" as in being dragged down, more a sense of gravity, of being serious and grown-up.

Ham Man is young, not bad looking. Mouth's a bit funny; he's got one of those jaws that jut forward. They say it's the result of malnutrition. That's what her sister, who's a nurse, tells her. She can't imagine how anyone could eat badly, working in a place like this. Occasionally she comes in just to stare at all the food in the glass cupboards on the wall. Cheeses and jars of olives. Italian confectionary in beautiful pastel-coloured boxes.

The staff all wear a uniform here: pink shirt, dark brown tie, white jacket with black trim. It might only be a snack bar, but it gives the place a bit of class. Of course the jackets get

filthy with stains before the day's even started. Still, it's the idea that counts. It makes Ham Man look professional, like he knows what he's doing.

She enjoys watching people out on the street. She half-hopes she might see a friend stroll pass and imagines calling out, and the friend coming in, and the two of them having a nice old chin-wag and catch-up. You'd be surprised how often that can happen in a city as big as this, though the surprise probably says more about how lost one often feels here than any sense of belonging. Her attention fixes on the large lamps that hang above the counter. They look like her pearl earrings. The lamps don't give off any heat but sight of them helps fight the chill. The light smooths out the shadows. She imagines the lamp being given a promotion to a new job illuminating a more glamorous, more exciting kind of eaterie. The Café Royal. The Savoy. After the lamp has shown her the faces of the rich and famous, it will expand to the size of the sun, beaming over a warm beach she'll one day go to on a holiday. Then the growl of a taxi or commotion out on the street will dump her back in the 5pm gloom of a Wednesday in February.