



LIFE AND SOUL
Alison MacLeod

after Sam Taylor-Wood

We met in the uncompanionable darkness of Sam Taylor-Wood's Third Party.

I knew no one. I had not been to the first party or to the second. Had there been a first or a second? Or was time trapped on Taylor-Wood's flickering video loop? I was about to leave – I wanted daylight, air, I remember that – when I turned and found myself standing before the oracular, wall-to-wall face of Marianne Faithfull.

Her lipstick was wrong, make no mistake: a burgundy matte gone dry. Beneath it, her lips were a fissured landscape. Her mouth – how many feet wide across the wall? – was parched and lean. An abandoned place. Badlands. Not a wellspring. No wonder she did not speak. No wonder she kept her own counsel.

She knew better. She watched. She sipped wine. She gave up appearances, almost. On her chin, I could see the tiny pocked scars that crude electrolysis had left behind. Might it have been then that I noticed you (heard you, smelled you, pricked like a gleaming snout to the sense of you)? For already you were there, an inadvertent party-goer in the humming, chattering expanse of the room. *Toujours déjà*. It is difficult to think back. I remember the dark gravity of Faithfull's gaze, its ancient pull. And I remember she stared through me, as if it were I, and not she, who wasn't really there.

Modern art, eh. Snort, snort. Or sheesh, as the Americans say. Sheesh.

Overhead the lenses of the many projectors stared into the darkness, unearthly as the myriad eyes on an Old Testament angel's wing. I tried to look above, beyond. The ceiling was low. Too low. (And getting lower? Why hadn't I noticed?) Which is why the air was stale. Which is why my breath was shallow. Could I ask the gallery attendant for a paper bag?

The party. Return to the party. There is every reason to celebrate. To be part of something and not nothing.

The girl with the swingy hair who – famously now – would not stop dancing would not stop dancing to a music I couldn't hear. It has to be said she scared me, like clockwork toys and escalators and the spinning wheels of fallen bikes had scared me as a child. Yet I persevered.

Like you, I was drawn to the familiar haunt of the smouldering ashtray. A video mirage, like everything else. We were among ghosts, and here the ghosts were bolder, more self-possessed than either you or I. You were no good at small talk. You should have talked about the Millennium Bridge, like everyone else on the South Bank that day; how it had swayed in the high winds like a ramshackle fairground ride on your way over the river. Were they going to close it again? you might have wondered. You should have wondered. But commonplace decencies eluded you.

—Or the Eye. Why did you not ask me if I had been up on the Eye? Perhaps I had seen the advert with the car in that pristine capsule at the very top of London's night sky? We might have mutually conceded its sixty-second glamour. One of us might have mentioned Baudrillard, the loss of the Real.

The other need only have nodded. Paper-heart kindnesses. We might then have gone our own way.

Instead you told me how the universe might suddenly turn inside out, how a black wave might sweep over the world. I could barely see you. You had to be either a paranoid depressive or a fundamentalist. But I listened anyway. Your voice had a discordant music in it, and here, at the party, there was only the usual, urgent futility of spent words. Literally, a soundtrack already familiar.

It was unimaginable, you said. You'd read about it in *The Independent*. News out of CERN. 'The electrical force of the world that we take entirely for granted,' you said, 'might suddenly give way. The whole universe could just switch off.'

'Wonders never,' I said. Next to you, I was cool, composed. I needed you to stay.

'You don't understand. Everything – Big Ben, the sun, the moon, me, you – could go dark.'

'But not before the Jubilee, surely.' At a party, I was the urbane woman in the little black dress, like the one behind me who wanted to have it off with that ginger-haired actor whose name I could never remember.

'You think I'm off my head.'

'You don't have what my mother would call a sunny disposition.'

'I haven't explained things very well.'

'Perhaps not.' I reached for a cigarette resting on the ashtray's brim. My hand came away, disappointed, as it does when your Tube ticket is eaten by the station's exit machine.

'Every matter particle has a heavier 'dark' counterpart. Try imagining yourself re-cast in pure darkness. I'm not joking. A swap could happen at any point in the vacuum of the universe.'

'And spread.' I wasn't stupid. That much I'd have you know.

'Exactly. Like a rip in the fabric of matter.'

I wanted to grab your hand. Where had matter gone? I wanted to say. Had you noticed too? Is that why you were talking like a social misfit? In here, in here we were no longer solid. The Third Party was a slow, inconsequential death but a surprisingly easy one, and I realised I didn't want to leave. Chit-

chat and half lies made small rubble behind us, and I wanted to pick my way through it. To mix. To mingle. Was the dark, brutish man on the Conran sofa staring at me? Was it a Conran sofa?

You were still talking, I realised. You were saying you didn't have much longer. Here in the gallery? In London? No more parties for you, you'd laughed. Time was running out. I'd missed something, a transitional sentence between the cosmos and you.

You were terminal.

Suddenly I felt drunk. I assumed cancer. I had to ask you to repeat it.

'I won't see another party.'

You were gauche. Burdensome. Who would do this to a complete stranger? 'My God. I'm so sorry,' I said. I wanted to go back to the party.

I was the first person you had told. Yet you didn't know my name. You couldn't have sworn to the colour of my eyes or hair. Was the woman in the black dress actually with the brutish man on the sofa? Could she be? Good God. I blinked. I tried to focus. You were telling me how you struggled to believe it wasn't a failure. You knew it wasn't down to you, yet you felt you'd let yourself down. You'd realised too late, you said. For treatment, I said. It was the knowing, you said. That was the hardest, I said. Completing your sentences like this, like a lover, made me brave. I touched your sleeve. A gesture from a film.

You were still coming to terms with it all. That's why you'd come here, to the party. That's why you hadn't been able to leave. 'Couldn't death be to life,' you said, 'what negative space is to any piece of art? Do you see? Couldn't it be something and not nothing?'

I glanced over my shoulder. I needed a glass of wine.

'The space is the thing, not the art. It's obvious, but I've been so slow. Here, it looks like gallery floor space. Right? Of course, it also looks like standing room for this unbearable party, so we the viewers are also, we are to understand, party-goers. There is an immediate ontological collapse of the textual and the extra-textual. Which of course we are wise to.'

I forced a smile. I'd been trapped by the party bore. Yet I didn't leave. I didn't lose myself to the shadows. In the dark, you smelled of roll-ups and Persil.

'But all this emptiness is about more than that. It's a visual reminder of something beyond; of a place the art is always reaching after but never filling; of a meaning too big for any work of art to frame.'

'Precisely.' You needed affirmation. You were a dying man.

'It says there is a beyond, something beyond, not only the work of art, but by implication, also the art of life. It says there is something beyond our futile efforts to know the beyond. Do you see?'

You were ransacking your intelligence.

'Sshhh,' I said, 'sshhh,' because it sounded vaguely maternal. Because I didn't know what else to say. How could I tell a dying stranger, this is it, baby? This is all there is. Get used to it. Stop talking. You don't have much time.

You had been here all day, in this room, at the empty heart of this eternal ten-minutes of party. No one had asked you to move on. No one, you said, even seemed to know you were here. And, almost in spite of myself, against my better judgement, against type, my hand found yours. My hand found yours even as Faithfull raised her glass – not to us – her eyes smudged and inscrutable over its rim.

As we lay down to make love, I worried fleetingly for the many coats that were not, in fact, beneath us.

'Is she still watching?' I could feel the buttresses of your ribs yield to my breasts and breath. Did I weigh too much? Did you like a woman on top?

'She watches everyone.'

'Have you always wanted that? You know – someone watching.'

'No.'

'A public space then?'

'No.'

'My breasts are small.'

'Yes.'

'Schoolgirls? Britney? That video? My white blouse? Is that it?'

'Why are you so nervous?'

'You've taken off all your clothes.'

'It's dark.'

Men. 'There's probably an infra-red camera somewhere.'

'Then Sam Taylor-Wood is probably behind it.'

'Fucking marvellous.'

'Sadly, not from where I'm lying.'

'Sorry.'

'...That's nice.'

'Why are we doing this?'

'Because I told you the world will turn off?'

'A line. I've heard better. Art gallery folk, you know. Seasoned.'

'Because I'm terminal? Because there's a first time for everything? Because no one's said we can't? Shift down.'

'I mean, do we even like each other?'

'—Better. Couldn't say.'

'Oh.'

'Disliking someone, however, is, arguably, a neglected form of intimacy.'

'You dislike me?'

'Is that nice?'

'Yes.'

'With my hand or just my fingers?'

'With just the heel is better.'

'Take off your skirt.'

'Now?'

'When if not now?'

'Almost any time, I'd suggest, we don't find ourselves on the floor of the Hayward Gallery.'

'You're so wet.'

'I've never really been one for the play-by-play.'

'Sorry.'

'No need.'

‘You’re beautiful. Can I say that?’

‘You can hardly see me.’

‘Inside. You’re beautiful inside.’

I didn’t want to ask. Did you mean beautiful inside as in beautiful in spirit – had you gleaned something rare in the darkness between us? Or did you mean inside inside? Did you mean the negative space of me?

I didn’t know then that the distinction was a false one. Surface, spirit. Spirit, surface. I am not used to an undivided world. There is so much I must unlearn.

We fell asleep in a far corner, under the shifting blanket of your clothes, under the concrete roof of the world, the projectors’ hum a thin memory of some music of the straining spheres. ‘Ssshhh,’ I said to you once more, ‘ssshhh,’ though neither of us in fact spoke. Though you, by then, already understood: that, too soon, we would renounce even language.

Life, a full life, is arrived at by a series of small deaths. This was the first. The coldness of my skin. The jack-in-the-box jolt of you. Love, the old seizure – I had to remember to breathe. And you dying in me. There aren’t the words. There are no more.

I’m restless in my sleep. I thrash. I tell you, it was like touching the skin of the world.

You awakened to the vision of me sitting upright, somnolent, my arm outstretched. Nothing was different. The party was not over. The dancing girl still danced. The couple still flirted. The voices of the other party-goers were like the ocean in a shell. Yet I couldn’t move.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ you were saying. ‘It’s okay.’

You knew. You had always known. For the first time, my eyes were accustomed to the attenuated dark. I was staring at my own hand, its palms and fingers flat against the membrane of nothing. ‘Dear God.’

I was touching some kind of screen. I was touching the wrong side of a screen.

Behind me, your voice, as if already lost to the past: ‘I’m so sorry.’

Betrayal. And profound kindness.

You would never have told me that the vanity was mine. Not the flirting woman's. Not the ginger-haired actor's. Not the girl's, dancing for all to see. Not the brutish man's, so assured he deserved sex this long night. How could I have known it was, not I who beheld them, but rather they who'd simply never noticed me?

And how could you have told me? How could you have explained that I was the woman who was invisible? The woman at the party whom people look past. The woman who had long ago ceased to turn heads. And you, for your sins, were that woman's lover.

You'd been waiting for me. Were meant for me. It was Fate. Destiny writ large. We had everything but the carnations on our coats. On my own, a single woman of a certain age, I was a loose thread. A flaw in the design. An asymmetry. Together, on the other hand, you and I were that necessarily unremarkable thing: the couple people would never remember. Extras.

Except now we were naked. At a house-party. From somewhere, I could make out a barely suppressed joke. The ginger-haired actor was laughing. Even I knew: none of this was supposed to be happening. We'd broken with Fate. We'd been noticed.

I wanted to shout at everyone, 'Leave us alone! He's got cancer for God's sake!' as if that explained anything. But you stopped me. You held me fast in your arms. Knowledge was snapping at my heels. Of course, you didn't have cancer. That wasn't it at all.

'That feeling,' I started, 'that feeling that I'm not quite— that I can't ever remember feeling real—'

'Is real,' you said.

And you smiled, gently. I could just see the line of your mouth, the glow of your teeth. You wanted to comfort me, but your teeth frightened me. Were they false or did they only look false?

You were pulling your jacket over my shoulders, covering my nakedness, as Adam might have done had he found Eve in a patio garden in London instead of Paradise. I had gone so cold. 'Ssshhh,' you said. 'Ssshhh.'

'We're nothing.'

'We're not nothing.'

'What is not nothing? What does "not nothing" mean?'

You got hold of me. Your thumbs hurt my shoulders. 'It's me, it's you. It's the memory of me in the space of you. That was not nothing.'

'When did I arrive? When did I join the party?' I was egotistical as a child.

'You were always arriving.'

'Yet I never learned?'

'It's hard.'

'You did. You knew.'

'I always know. Each time. It's just another loop. It means I'm the perpetual kill-joy, the one nobody wants to find themselves in a corner with.'

'So just as I'm always arriving, you're always leaving. You're always on your way out. Always terminal. Which means – my God, do you see? – which means you're not really leaving me at all. We're okay. You're right. We're okay.'

'Things are different this time.'

'You're always saying that. You always feel that.'

'Things are different, and that's not just the pessimism talking. Which is precisely the problem. The pessimism is gone.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Everything's changed.'

'Not everything. Never everything. Don't go hyperbolic on me.'

'You took my hand.'

'No one saw. No one was looking.'

'Can't you see? I love you. I'm happy. For the first time, I'm happy.'

'You're not happy. It's not in you to be happy. You're glad. You feel warm. You feel temporarily comforted. A little light-headed. This is a good spell. Believe me, you are not happy. It won't last.'

'I'm happy. I have been since—'

'—Since I took your hand.' I scanned the room for exits. Where were the exit signs? 'I'm afraid,' I said.

'Me too.'

'You won't be back.'

'I can't be back. I'm no longer that man.'

'I can't bear it.'

'You'll know no different.'

'Something in me will.'

'We'll see— You'll see.'

'What's going to happen?'

'You always ask me this.'

'All that stuff, about the world turning off. It wasn't chat-up, and it wasn't just the paranoia talking, was it?'

Your eyes gleamed. You were crying.

'Don't,' I said.

'Don't what?'

'Despair.'

'Why not?'

'Because I can't comfort you. Everything's changed, except me. I'm as weak, as frightened as ever. You shouldn't have fallen for someone like me. All I can really think about is myself, how much I'm afraid of the dark. How, at home, wherever home is or was, I have night-lights in every socket—'

'I'll hold you. When it happens, I'll hold on.'

'I have to tell you something. If the brutish man on the sofa had noticed me, I might have gone off with him. Do you know that? I don't deserve your love. Do you remember Julia and Winston? At the end, do you remember how—'

'Sssh...'

We were quiet for a long time. We did not bother to dress. We adopted the carelessness of exiles. I said I was worried I'd forgotten to unplug the iron before leaving my flat that afternoon, and we laughed. I said I could tell you the brand name, and we laughed harder. If Faithfull hadn't suddenly looked up, her seer's eyes trained on the beyond, her sibyl's mouth taut, we would not have known. We did not hear the footsteps. We did not see the technicians in black.

We watched the eyes of the projectors go out, one by one, like dying stars. 'Wish', you said. 'Wish.' You didn't want me to see the other party-goers as

they blinked into unbeing: first the dancing girl, then the flirting couple, then the brutish man. I thought he looked relieved, glad to be released from the weight of his own unhappiness, from the undertow of his drives; glad to be no more.

I saw the ashtray disappear.

My last glimpse was not of you, I confess, but of Faithfull. She yawned. All of a sudden. Did you see it too? Her mouth gaped into a hole, and I understood. Here was the first rip in the fabric of the world.

You took me in your arms. I pushed my face into your chest. I heard the humming of the spheres go quiet, I felt the crashing of your heart go still, even as the light went out in me, cell by cell, photon by photon. The Old Testament wing had come down upon us, dark and vast as love.

I speak to you. In the wide ocean of my thoughts, between the black waves. In the quietude that has no horizons.

Will Taylor-Wood throw another party? A Fourth Party? (Was there a first? Was there a second?) You will not be there to take my wrap, or pass me a glass of punch, or light my cigarette. Do not worry. I have no illusions. I am no longer afraid.

Hear me. I'll be the one alone at the ashtray, the life and the soul.

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