

SUSAN FINLAY

LA COUPOLE, BOULEVARD DU MONTPARNASSE, 1933

FLASH 500

A small white woman (Nancy) and a big black man (Henry) sit at a medium-sized table. The brasserie is vast, a thousand square metres built to grace the presence of all the artists of all the nationalities that make up the Left Bank and, as if to illustrate this point, Nancy waves at Joe, a Russian author who she recognises, while Henry simultaneously nods at Jo, a cabaret star who is ordering cognac in French, but spoken with a strong St. Louis, Missouri accent not dissimilar to his own.

'The grilled lobster looks good', says Nancy, in the voice she uses for reciting poetry, which is the voice she always uses, and Henry, nodding obligingly, holds one elegant pianist's finger up in the air – an attempt to catch the waiter's attention – and calls, 'Garçon!'

The waiter, being, in the style of French waiters, inattentive, walks straight by, and so Nancy, whose consistently eccentric dress-sense means that she has always been, and has always liked to be, stared at, is compelled to raise her own, bejewelled from wrist to elbow, arm. The clatter of bracelets – primarily African and Oceanic, as Nancy aims, in all respects, to appear worldly – and her clipped, educated, good-for-reciting-poetry voice, are difficult to ignore:

'Oui?' says the now attentive waiter.

'The curried lamb', says Henry with a strong Atlanta, Georgia accent. 'Merci.'

'The grilled lobster', says Nancy, 'with the flambéed whisky sauce.' And holds up her glass to be refilled:

*The waiter waits, he'll wait all night
And when you're tight he'll set you right*

Why, if Henry set those words to music, piano music, to be played with his elegant pianist's hands, and if Nancy then spoke/sang over the top of it in her clipped, educated, good-for-reciting-poetry voice – well now that really would be something!

'Oh Nancy', says Henry, 'I do want you terribly.'

'Oh Henry', says Nancy, 'I feel just the same.'

Aware that her delicate bone structure resembles the statuette of Nefertiti currently on display at the Louvre, Nancy delivers her line with regal poise, and as she parts her painted lips, Henry is duly reminded of this exquisite piece of ivory, which he now wishes to see defiled – smeared red with the blood-red lipstick on which he's placed his kisses...

All the others (meaning all the other great and literary men with whom Nancy has, in the biblical sense, also known) have tried to summarise her, to write her as a 'modern woman' and a 'temptress', 'independent', 'aggressive' and so on – and yet Nancy is a fan of jazz. Why adhere to someone else's tired and well-worn composition? Why pause politely when a blue note could instead take up the empty space...? Nancy holds out her glass and the clink of her bracelets meets the wine's fizz and tinkle in a conflict of tonalities:



The waiter finishes pouring their drinks then leaves, marvelling at the peculiar innocence of tourists.