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Opening Extract from...

Lanark

Written by Alasdair Gray

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CHAPTER 1. The Elite

The Elite Café was entered by a staircase from the foyer of a cinema. A landing two thirds of the way up had a door into the cinema itself, but people going to the Elite climbed farther and came to a large dingy-looking room full of chairs and low coffee tables. The room seemed dingy, not because it was unclean but because of the lighting. A crimson carpet covered the floor, the chairs were upholstered in scarlet, the low ceiling was patterned with whorled pink plaster, but dim green wall lights turned these colours into varieties of brown and made the skins of the customers look greyish and dead. The entrance was in a corner of the room, and the opposite corner held a curved chromium and plastic counter where a bald fat smiling man stood behind the glittering handles of a coffee machine. He wore black trousers, white shirt and black bow tie and was either dumb or unusually reticent. He never spoke; the customers only addressed him to order coffee or cigarettes, and when not serving these he stood so still that the counter seemed an extension of him, like the ring round Saturn. A door by the bar opened onto a narrow outdoor balcony above the cinema entrance. This had room for three crowded-together metal-topped tables with parasols through the middle. Coffee was not drunk here because the sky was often dark with strong wind and frequent rain. The tabletops had little puddles on them, the collapsed cloth of the parasols flapped suddenly against the poles, the seats were dank, yet a man of about twenty-four usually sat here, huddled in a black raincoat with the collar turned up. Sometimes he gazed in a puzzled way at the black sky, sometimes he bit thoughtfully on the knuckle of his thumb. Nobody else used the balcony.

When the Elite was full most languages and dialects could be heard there. The customers were under thirty and sat in cliques of five or six. There were political cliques, religious cliques, artistic cliques, homosexual cliques and criminal cliques. Some cliques talked about athletics, others about motor cars, others about jazz. Some cliques were centred on particular people, the biggest being dominated by Sludden. His clique usually occupied a sofa by the balcony door. An adjacent clique contained people who had belonged to Sludden's clique but grown tired of it (as they claimed) or been expelled from it (as Sludden claimed). The cliques disliked each other and none liked the café much. It was common for a customer to put down his coffee cup and say, "The Elite is a hellish place. I don't know why we come here. The coffee's bad, the lighting's bad, the whole dump teems with poofs and wogs and Jews. Let's start a fashion for going somewhere else." And someone would answer, "There is nowhere else. Galloway's Tearoom is too bourgeois, all businessmen and umbrella stands and stuffed stags' heads. The Shangri-la has a jukebox that half deafens you, and anyway it's full of hardmen. Armstrong had his face slashed there. There are pubs, of course, but we can't always be drinking. No, this may be a hellish place but it's all we have. It's central, it's handy for the cinema and at least it's a change from home."

The café was often crowded and never completely empty, but on one occasion it nearly emptied. The man in the black raincoat came in from the balcony and saw nobody but the waiter and Sludden, who sat on his usual sofa. The man hung his coat on a hook and ordered a coffee. When he left the counter he saw Sludden watching him with amusement.

Sludden said, "Did you find it, Lanark?"

"Find what? What do you mean?"

"Find what you were looking for on the balcony? Or do you go there to avoid us? I'd like to know. You interest me."

"How do you know my name?"

"Oh, we all know your name. One of us is usually in the queue when they shout it at the security place. Sit down."

Sludden patted the sofa beside him. Lanark hesitated, then put his cup on the table and sat. Sludden said, "Tell me why you use the balcony."

"I'm looking for daylight."

Sludden pursed his mouth as if tasting sourness. "This is hardly a season for *daylight*."

"You're wrong. I saw some not long ago and it lasted while I counted over four hundred, and it used to last longer. Do you mind my talking about this?"

"Go on! You couldn't discuss it with many people, but I've thought things out. Now you are trying to think things out and that interests me. Say what you like."

Lanark was pleased and annoyed. He was lonely enough to feel flattered when people spoke to him but he disliked condescension. He said coldly, "There's not much to say."

"But why do you like daylight? We're well lit by the usual means."

"I can measure time with it. I've counted thirty days since coming here, maybe I've missed a few by sleeping or drinking coffee, but when I remember something I can say, 'It happened two days ago,' or ten, or twenty. This gives my life a feeling of order."

"And how do you spend your . . . *days*?"

"I walk and visit libraries and cinemas. When short of money I go to the security place. But most of the time I watch the sky from the balcony."

"And are you happy?"

"No, but I'm content. There are nastier ways of living."

Sludden laughed. "No wonder you've a morbid obsession with daylight. Instead of visiting ten parties since you came here, laying ten women and getting drunk ten times, you've watched thirty days go by. Instead of making life a continual feast you chop it into days and swallow them regularly, like pills."

Lanark looked sideways at Sludden. "Is your life a continual feast?"

"I enjoy myself. Do you?"

"No. But I'm content."

"Why are you content with so little?"

"What else can I have?"

Customers had been arriving and the café was nearly full. Sludden was more casual than when the conversation started. He said carelessly, "Moments of vivid excitement are what make life worth living, moments when a man feels exalted and masterful. We can get them from drugs, crime and gambling, but the price is rather high. We can get them from a special interest, like sports, music or religion. Have you a special interest?"

"No."

"And we get them from work and love. By work I don't mean

shovelling coal or teaching children, I mean work which gives you a conspicuous place in the world. And by love I don't mean marriage or friendship, I mean independent love which stops when the excitement stops. Perhaps I've surprised you by putting work and love in the same category, but both are ways of mastering other people."

Lanark brooded on this. It seemed logical. He said abruptly, "What work could I do?"

"Have you visited Galloway's Tearoom?"

"Yes."

"Did you speak to anyone there?"

"No."

"Then you can't be a businessman. I'm afraid you'll have to take up art. Art is the only work open to people who can't get along with others and still want to be special."

"I could never be an artist. I've nothing to tell people."

Sludden started laughing. "You haven't understood a word I've spoken."

Lanark had an inner restraint which stopped him displaying much resentment or anger. He pressed his lips together and frowned at the coffee cup. Sludden said, "An artist doesn't tell people things, he expresses himself. If the self is unusual his work shocks or excites people. Anyway, it forces his personality on them. Here comes Gay at last. Would you mind making room for her?"

A thin, tired-looking, pretty girl approached them between the crowded tables. She smiled shyly at Lanark and sat beside Sludden, saying anxiously, "Am I late? I came as soon as—" He said coldly, "You kept me waiting."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I really am sorry. I came as fast as I could. I didn't mean to—"

"Get me cigarettes."

Lanark looked embarrassedly at the tabletop. When Gay had gone to the counter he said, "What do you do?"

"Eh?"

"Are you a businessman? Or an artist?"

"Oh, I do nothing, with fantastic ability."

Lanark looked hard at Sludden's face for some trace of a smile. Sludden said, "Occupations are ways of imposing yourself on others. I can impose myself without doing a thing. I'm not boasting. It just happens to be the truth."

"It's modest of you to say so," said Lanark, "but you're wrong to say you do nothing. You talk very well."

Sludden smiled and received a cigarette from Gay, who had returned meekly to his side. He said, "I don't often talk as frankly as this; my ideas would be wasted on most people. But I think I can help you. Do you know any women here?" "None."

"I'll introduce you to some."

Sludden turned to Gay and lightly pinched the lobe of her ear, asking amiably, "Who will we give to him? Frankie?"

Gay laughed and at once looked happy. She said, "Oh no Sludden, Frankie's noisy and vulgar and Lanark's the thoughtful type. Not Frankie."

"What about Nan, then? She's quiet, in a will-'oo-be-my-daddy sort of way."

"But Nan's crazy about you!"

"I know, and it's a nuisance. I'm tired of seeing her weep in the corner whenever you touch my knee. Let's give her to Lanark. No. I've a better idea. I'll take Nan and Lanark can have you. How would you like that?"

Gay leaned toward Sludden and kissed him daintily on the cheek. He said, "No. We'll give him Rima."

Gay frowned and said, "I don't like Rima. She's sly."

"Not sly. Self-contained."

"But Toal is keen on her. They go around together."

"That means nothing. He has a sister fixation on her and she has a brother fixation on him. Their relationship is purely incestuous. Anyway, she despises him. We'll give her to Lanark." Lanark smiled and said, "You're very kind."

He had heard somewhere that Gay and Sludden were engaged. A fur gauntlet on Gay's left hand stopped him seeing if she wore a ring, but she and Sludden exhibited the sort of public intimacy proper to an engaged couple. Lanark had been impressed unwillingly by Sludden but now Gay had come he felt comfortable with him. In spite of the talk about "independent love" he seemed to practise a firmer sort than was usual in the Elite.

Sludden's clique arrived from the cinema. Frankie was plump and vivacious and wore a tight pale-blue skirt and had pale-blue hair bunched round her head. Nan was a small shy uncombed blonde of about sixteen. Rima had an interesting, not pretty face with black hair drawn smoothly from her brow and fixed in a ponytail at the back. Toal was small, haggard, and pleasant, with a young pointed red beard, and there was a large stout pale boy called McPake in the uniform of a first

lieutenant. Sludden, an arm round Gay's waist, neither paused nor glanced at his friends but continued talking to Lanark as they sat down on each side of him. Frankie was the only one who paid Lanark special attention. She stood staring at him with feet apart and hands on hips and when Sludden stopped talking she said loudly, "It's the mystery man! We've been joined by the mystery man!" She stuck her stomach forward and said, "What do you think of my belly, mystery man?"

"It probably does its work," said Lanark.

Sludden smiled slightly and the others looked amused.

"Oh! He makes little jokes!" said Frankie. "Good. I'll sit beside him and make McPake jealous."

She sat beside Lanark and rested her hand on his thigh. He tried not to look embarrassed and managed to look confused. Frankie said, "God! He's gone as tense as . . . hm. I'd better not say. Relax, son, can't you? No, he can't relax. Rima, I'll change seats with you. I want to sit with McPake after all. He's fat, but he responds."

She changed seats with Rima. Lanark felt relieved and insulted.

Two or three conversations began around him but he lacked the confidence to join one. Rima offered a cigarette. He said, "Thank you. Is your friend drunk?"

"Frankie? No, she's usually like that. She's not really my friend. Did she upset you?"

"Yes."

"You'll get used to her. She's amusing if you don't take her seriously."

Rima spoke in an odd, mewing, monotonous voice, as if no words were worth emphasis. Lanark looked sideways at her profile. He saw black glossy hair drawn back from a white brow, a large perfect eye slightly emphasized by mascara, a big straightish nose, a small straight mouth without lipstick, a small firm chin, a neat little bust under a black sweater. If she felt his glance she pretended not to but tilted her head back to breathe smoke from her nostrils. This so reminded him of a little girl trying to smoke like a woman that he felt an ache of unexpected tenderness. He said, "What was the film about?"

"It was about people who undressed soon after the beginning and then did everything they could think of in the circumstances."

"Do you enjoy those films?"

"No, but they don't bore me. Do they bore you?"

"I've never seen one."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid of enjoying them."

"I enjoy them," said Sludden. "I get genuine pleasure from imagining how the actors would look wearing flannel underwear and thick tweed skirts."

Nan said, "I enjoy them too. Except the best bits. I can't help closing my eyes during those, aren't I silly?"

Frankie said, "I find them all very disappointing. I keep hoping to see a really surprising perversion but there don't seem to be any."

A discussion began about the forms a surprising perversion might take. Frankie, Toal and McPake made suggestions. Gay and Nan punctuated these with little screaming protests of horror and amusement. Sludden sometimes contributed a remark, and Lanark and Rima remained silent. Lanark was embarrassed by the conversation and thought Rima disliked it too. This made him feel nearer her.

Later Sludden whispered to Gay and stood up. He said, "Gay and I are leaving. We'll see you all later."

Nan, who had been watching him anxiously, suddenly folded her arms upon her knees and hid her face in them. Toal, who was seated beside her, put a comforting arm around her shoulders and smiled at the company in a humorous mournful way. Sludden looked at Lanark and said casually, "You'll consider what I said?"

"Oh, yes. You gave me a lot to think about."

"We'll discuss it later. Come on, Gay."

They went out between the crowded tables. Frankie said mockingly, "The mystery man seems to be replacing you as court favourite, Toal. I hope not, for your sake. You'd have to take up your old job of court jester. Rima never sleeps with the court jester."

Without taking his arm from Nan's trembling shoulders Toal grinned and said, "Shut up, Frankie. You're the court jester and always will be." He said apologetically to Lanark, "Pay no attention to what *she* says."

Rima took her handbag from the seat beside her and said, "I'm going."

Lanark said, "Wait a bit, so am I."

He edged round the table to where his coat hung and put it on. The others said they would see him later and as he and Rima went out Frankie shouted after them, "Have fun!"