

The Nightingale

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. UNIVERSITY STREETS - DAY

A sunny street in Oxford lined with beautiful old structures and tiny cobblestone walkways. Students, bicyclists, and too many tourists jostle among the tight space.

Out of one of these wooden gates walks ART, 20, lanky and sartorially aware, a bulging backpack slung over his shoulder, copy of *Lyrical Ballads* in hand.

He pulls out his phone, starts tapping away as he weaves through people on the street.

Art puts his phone back. As he walks, he looks up.

Spires built of Headington stone rise above the quaint streets. Small shops are crammed between massive churches and college grounds.

EXT. WADHAM COLLEGE ENTRANCE - DAY

In front of one of these college grounds, Wadham, a motley group of students awkwardly stands around in clumps.

Art stops next to them.

ART  
(American accent)  
Why's everyone standing around?

One student, PATTY, turns around.

PATTY  
(British accent)  
We're waiting for the Oxford Imps  
improv workshop.

ART  
Oh shit, I forgot that was today!  
Mind if I join?

PATTY  
Not at all.

Art puts his stuff down and enters one of the makeshift circles of people, including Patty and two other students.

ART  
So what do you all study when  
you're not waiting for improv  
groups?

PATTY  
PPE.

OTHER STUDENT  
Anthropology.

OTHER OTHER STUDENT  
Classics.

Art's eyes widen.

ART  
Oh really? Me too. Well, not  
officially, but I love that stuff.  
Roman history, particularly.

MARIA (O.S.)  
(German accent)  
Are you talking about Latin?

From another part of the group excitedly enters MARIA, 23,  
red-haired and eccentric. Art is momentarily taken aback.

ART  
Yeah. Do you study classics, too?

MARIA  
Yes! I'm here for a Masters in  
Latin. Virgil, Ovid, Horace...

ART  
Sure, sure.

MARIA (CONTD.)  
...Catullus, Callimachus --

ART  
Okay, now you're outpacing me a  
little.

MARIA  
But Catullus talks too much about  
kissing.

ART  
I dunno, there's that one poem  
where he threatens to sodomize his  
critics.

Maria laughs.

MARIA  
I forgot about that one. What's  
your name?

ART  
Art.

MARIA  
Like "art," or short for Arthur,  
or...

ART  
I know. It's silly. Yours?

MARIA  
Maria.

ART  
Well, it's really nice to meet you,  
Maria.

MARIA  
Nice to meet you too, Art. Are you  
an exchange student?

ART  
How could you tell? In all  
seriousness, yeah, I'm abroad for  
the year. Figured there was no  
better place to study sappy poetry  
than Oxford.

MARIA  
Oh, what sappy poetry?

ART  
No, I'm embarrassed now.

MARIA  
Please?

Art sighs.

ART  
Romantic poetry. Like  
eighteenth-nineteenth century  
English stuff.

MARIA  
I've been meaning to start reading  
English poetry. That's great!

ART

Really? Oh good. I was starting to think I was the only sap here.

MARIA

You definitely are not.

An older student comes out of the college gate to address the throng.

OLDER STUDENT

You guys here for the Oxford Imps?

Assorted nods. Older student gestures toward themselves.

OLDER STUDENT

Right this way.

EXT. WADHAM GROUNDS - DAY

Through a small campus with lawns, benches, and tidy gardens, the group walks, Art and Maria near the front.

MARIA

Ah, everything here is so pretty!

ART

I know. It's overwhelming.

MARIA

Have you been here before?

ART

I should hope so, I go here. To Wadham, I mean. It's a little tiny, though.

MARIA

I think it's nice. Though at Worcester we have a lake.

ART

A lake?

MARIA

A lake.

ART

Like an actual --

MARIA

Lake, yes. It's a small one, there's only one bridge, but it is a lake.

ART

Jesus.

INT. WADHAM CLASSROOM - DAY

The classroom has been cleared, desks and chairs to the side of the room. Different students pack up, as the improv session is clearly just finished.

OLDER STUDENT

Great workshop today, guys. If you enjoyed yourself or want to work with us more, there's a session two weeks from now, same time, same place.

Maria puts on her coat, gathers her things. Nearby, Art taps his foot and looks back and forth, hemming and hawing.

He makes up his mind. He quickly opens his backpack, pulls out a notebook, tears out a small section of a page and scribbles his phone number on it.

He puts his things back and looks at the number. He looks at Maria, who is about to leave. He shakes his head, takes a deep breath.

*I can't believe I'm doing this.*

He walks over to Maria.

ART

Hey, Maria?

Maria turns, sees Art, smiles.

MARIA

Yeah?

Art pauses for one more second, bracing himself.

ART

Listen, I don't usually do this -- in fact, I never do this -- but I know I'm probably never going to see you again on this huge campus anyway, and if I don't ask you now, I never will.

ART

I know we've only spoken a grand total of five minutes or so, but if you want -- and no pressure or

(MORE)

ART (cont'd)  
anything -- I'd love to get coffee  
or lunch with you sometime.

Art hands Maria the scrap of notebook paper.

ART  
Here is my number. You can call it  
or not call it, no biggie. I just  
know I'd kick myself if I didn't  
ask.

MARIA  
If I wanted to go out sometime?

ART  
That's the idea.

Maria smiles.

MARIA  
Yeah, sure! Why not?

Art lets out a big breath, relieved. He smiles back.

ART  
Yeah?

MARIA  
Yeah.

ART  
Awesome! Well, I guess I'll see you  
soon. Call me whenever.

Art starts to walk away, then ducks back for a second.

ART  
And again, I don't really do this  
often. It's just, you're great, and  
uh... yeah, I'm going to stop  
talking now. Bye!

Maria laughs a little.

MARIA  
Wait.

Art turns back.

ART  
Hm?

MARIA

I have no classes for the rest of  
the day. Want to just get coffee  
now?

Art's taken aback.

ART

Sure? I mean, of course.

MARIA

Great! I just need to go to the  
restroom for a second.

ART

I'll be right here.

Maria walks away. Art politely smiles as long as she's in  
view. The moment she rounds the corner, he bites his fist,  
paces around in a circle with his head on his hands in  
disbelief.

*Did that actually just happen?*

He pulls out his phone and starts typing again. Waits a  
second. Gets a response.

Text superimposed on screen as Art has a text conversation:  
"So wait, you just asked this girl out?"

"Um, yes?"

"Like, OUT-OUT."

"What else?"

"Who does that? That's so quaint. What are you going to do  
next, hold hands at a drive-through movie theater?"

"Oh, shush."

Maria comes back around the corner. Art hastily puts his  
phone away.

ART

Shall we?

MARIA

Yeah!

They walk out.



EXT. UNIVERSITY STREETS - DAY

Maria and Art walk down a crowded shopping street in silence. Art awkwardly hits his hands against each other.

ART

This is a little weird, isn't it?

They blurt out an awkward laugh.

MARIA

It is, yeah.

ART

Okay, good, it's not just me.

MARIA

I enjoy a good deal of awkwardness, truthfully.

ART

Well, you're talking to the right guy, then.

Pause.

ART (CONTD.)

Alright, let's get the basic talking points out of the way. What brings you to Oxford?

MARIA

I just finished studying at Heidelberg, my university back in Germany, and I thought I would get a Masters here before starting my PhD. Might as well see different parts of the world, right?

Art is a little flabbergasted by the casual nature of that sentence.

ART

Yeah, might as well. Your English is really good, by the way.

MARIA

Oh no, it isn't. I don't know it nearly as well as my other languages.

ART

Which are?

MARIA

German, French, Spanish, Latin, and Greek.

ART

Well, I feel grossly inadequate now.

Maria laughs.

MARIA

What languages do you speak?

ART

I took six years of French in middle school and high school and promptly forgot all of it. Besides that, I'm your classic American.

MARIA

Aw, vraiment?

ART

Oui, vraiment. So it sounds like you're going pretty hard down the academic track with all those degrees.

MARIA

Yes, I just love poetry so much. I can't imagine many other professions with it.

ART

What about writing?

MARIA

I mean, I write poetry for fun, sometimes some songs I sing while I play the guitar, but I couldn't do it professionally.

ART

You really do all of that? That's amazing! Especially the poetry, I can't write verses for shit.

MARIA

I'm sure you can, you just have to try it.

ART

Nah, I'm only really good at prose, myself.

MARIA

Well, what do you like so much about Romantic poetry then?

ART

Honestly?

Art pauses to think.

ART (CONTD.)

I think it's how much they value imagination. Like, Coleridge writes *Kubla Khan* about this beautiful paradise he imagines in his head, only to see it fall apart in his mind over and over. But he ends the poem on a hopeful note, because he knows he can build it again anyway.

Maria smiles a little.

ART (CONTD.)

It's a totally futile thing they try, but it's fascinating. And it also makes me think I can do the same. Like, escape myself a bit. If that makes sense.

MARIA

That's really cool.

ART

Really? Because to me it sounds more than a little pretentious.

MARIA

Look around. I don't think "pretentious" exists here.

Art and Maria look at all the old buildings and preppy students.

MARIA (CONTD.)

Or we're all just pretentious.

Art laughs.

ART  
Probably the latter.

They turn a corner. There's a bakery with a line that goes to the end of the block.

ART  
You know, I was thinking we would go here, but now...

MARIA  
Can we go anywhere else?

ART  
Yeah, exactly. Sorry about that. Didn't mean to force you to walk with me any more than you already have to.

MARIA  
I don't mind.

ART  
That's good to hear.

INT. COVERED MARKET - DAY

Maria and Art sit at a table outside a coffee shop in the Covered Market.

Maria takes a sip of coffee.

MARIA  
Why did you get hot chocolate?

ART  
I don't really like coffee. I just asked because it's what people say.

He shrugs and sheepishly smiles.

MARIA  
I know what you mean about poetry and writing, though. I love exploring these different worlds. Though, I don't know, this one doesn't seem too bad these days.

ART  
You mean Oxford?

MARIA  
And any college, yeah.

ART  
It is its own little bubble,  
though, isn't it? I love it to  
pieces, but it's not the real  
world. If that makes sense.

MARIA  
That's true. But I never met  
likeminded people until university.  
It must have some value.

ART  
Hm. Maybe it can just remind us of  
what can be?

MARIA  
Like your Coleridge.

ART  
Like Coleridge.

Art finishes his hot chocolate.

MARIA  
You're only here for the year?

ART  
Yep. And I'm guessing your Masters  
only lasts for a year or so.

MARIA  
Yeah.

ART  
I understand if you don't want to  
keep seeing each other, I mean it's  
a sword of Damocles just hanging  
there right next to the elephant in  
the room --

MARIA  
Actually, I was wondering if you  
wanted to see that lake I was  
talking about?

Art is surprised.

ART  
At Worcester?

MARIA

Yeah.

ART

Absolutely.

EXT. WORCESTER GROUNDS - LATE AFTERNOON

Vibrant, late afternoon sunlight streams through the trees onto a small lake. Along the lake's surface float swans.

Art and Maria sit on a bench next to each other.

ART

You even have swans. Unbelievable.

MARIA

It's beautiful, no?

Art smiles.

ART

It really is.

He looks over at Maria, who is looking at the scene with pure joy.

ART

You know, I wasn't even supposed to be at improv today?

Maria turns.

MARIA

Yeah?

ART

Mhm. I auditioned for a random acapella group on a whim and had an afternoon to kill on the way back. I'm not even a good singer. But if I hadn't gone, I wouldn't have run into you.

Art twiddles his thumbs.

ART (CONTD.)

It's just cool, that's all. If any of this makes sense.

MARIA

You keep saying that.

ART

What?

MARIA

"If that makes sense." It's cute.

Art blushes.

ART

Aw. Thanks. I just ask because I'm used to not making sense.

MARIA

I understand. Who do you think listens to me gush over Latin poetry?

ART

Fair.

Silence.

ART

You sort of cut off my rambling back there at the coffee shop.

MARIA

I know. Because the time doesn't matter.

ART

Really?

MARIA

Really. It might matter later, but not right now.

Art smiles.

ART

So you want to see each other again in a few days?

MARIA

I'd love to.

Maria takes Art's hand.

ART

I'm going to remember this fondly.

MARIA

Me too.

They look out at the lake.

FADE OUT