

the tonic

When I'm in the presence of a very good looking guy I always bring out my voice. I have a rich baritone, and I can modulate it, change the pitch just a little from what you expect, so as to put the stress where I want it, or get your attention, or sneak under your intonation in conversation and leave you feeling that you sound indecisive or uncertain. I don't have to use it much. It's enough just knowing that it is ready, and that the person who may be in equally good control of his looks knows it without knowing that he knows. So I saw at once with my sister's boyfriend that I had to have it ready. He looked at me across the table and smiled, closing his eyes very slightly in a way I couldn't try without looking ridiculous and began probing for problems in my opinions about the coming election. So I gave a warning shot. I replied noncommittally, while wrapping his thin little voice in a dark velvet layer of mine, held together with barbed wire.

To my amazement he understood. He wasn't confused, or anxious, or angry. He looked me in the eye and said "How I wish I could speak like that, let's talk about something different." So we discussed whether sports were good for colleges, and political scandals, and whether there were still good movies to come from big studios. When I said something he would often seem to taste the opinion, repeating to himself exactly what I had said and then either nodding or asking a question. When I asked him a question he would reply with another, usually about the same length and shape. When he came out with an opinion of his own he did it with a number of little interjections, each coming just after something I had said.

My sister arrived, and they had to leave. "Well, thank you", he said, in a resonant and confident way. "I'll always be grateful for that." I began to reply, but couldn't find the right tone. It was as if the harmony had disappeared, and all I could do was to move my mouth and make a sound, accepting whatever came out.

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