



# Sundae for Lee Miller

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In an imaginary diner, I sit opposite Lee Miller. I eat her Marshmallow-Cola Ice Cream<sup>1</sup>, made from the ingredients implicit in its name and she eats my Sundae for Lee Miller, made by collaging photographic prints. I'm worried about scales falling into the drink from the fish tail that protrudes from the top of the sundae or that she'll rip her lip on the pink, spiky chestnut casings that fill in for cherries. Mine is delicious; it slides down my gullet like silk. I'd like to ask Lee some questions but I realise that neither of us have mouths and much as I'd like to believe so, we cannot communicate telepathically. We can't touch either. We just look, and eat, and look.

<sup>1</sup> From Lee Miller: A Life with Food, Friends and Recipes, edited by Ami Bouhasanne (published 2017)

I take a photocopy of her Tanja Ramm Under a Bell Jar, 1930 into the darkroom with a small, inexpensive bell jar from IKEA and a length of black velvet. I sit the empty bell jar on the cloth and focus the 5x4 plate camera on its gleaming edge; my back pushed up against the wall, another length of black cloth covering my head. When I'm ready, I load the darkslide, turn off the light and in the total darkness open the shutter. I set a timer for 8 minutes and slide on the torch attached to

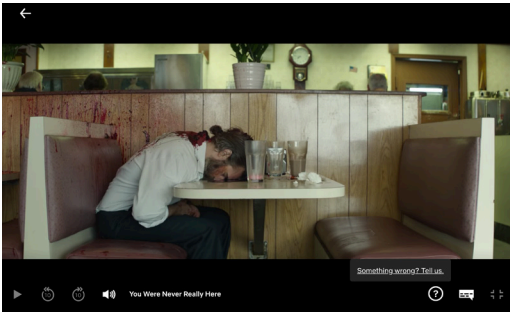
my I-Phone: I sway the light backwards and forwards over the empty belljar and listen to Wild Swans on Audible (it's the bit when Communist soldiers are being gruesomely tortured by the Kuomintang army but I can't turn it off because one hand is waving the torch around and the other is holding open the shutter with a cable release that won't lock!). When the alarm bell rings, I close the shutter, turn off Wild Swans, replace the darkslide's cover and turn on the light: the bell jar is empty. Without much care, I slosh some chemistry into small trays, turn Wild Swans<sup>2</sup> back on, turn the light off and dip the negative into the developer (11 minutes) then the stop (1 minute) and then the fix (5 minutes): a pile of Communist bodies accumulates. I hold the negative up to the light and a bolt of electricity runs through me: inside the bell jar, a woman's body has appeared. Lee?

<sup>2</sup> Wild Swans by Jung Chang  
(published 1991)

In the imaginary diner, she frowns at me, fishscales flutter down onto the blue Formica table top. Ok, so you're not a romantic then. I was hoping she'd agree with me and join in the hair-raising pleasure sensation that can occur when we believe that the spirit world and this world overlap. I was hoping she'd agree with me that this figure in the bell jar is her ghost, sent to me through that powerful spirit-conductor we call photography. Whose is this body, floating in the deep, dark shadows of the negative?

I think of her photograph Dead SS Guard, Floating in Canal, Dachau 1945, the overcoated body not yet bloated, framed by a shock of spiky grass on the left hand side of the image and the diagonal, bright white edge of the canal's walkway. I can't look at it without thinking of John Everett Millais' painting of Ophelia: the grasses, the flowing garments, the water. The madness. I look into Lee's bright, blue eyes as she sits opposite me, secret as the ocean. I look around the imaginary diner: why did I summon her here? Lee glitches. We watch as a man sitting alone at a table on the other side of the room puts a handgun under his chin and pulls the trigger. A spray of hot red blood hits the back of the banquette seat, his head falls onto the table and a pool of blood oozes out from under his face. He wears a crumpled white shirt, his beard and ponytail are dirty and tousled. There's a small amount of bright pink milkshake in the glass nearest him and ¾'s of a chocolate milkshake in the glass opposite him. Everyone keeps chatting and eating, a waitress with a blood-splattered face walks by, smiling as she puts the bill down next to his fractured head. I look around bewildered; Lee smiles and takes a sip of the purple cloud that sits atop her sundae. I know I've seen this before but I can't remember

when and I can't recall how it ends. Another of Lee's images appears in my head and I close my eyes to see it better: it's *The Burgermeister's Daughter*, Leipzig, 1945. The young woman reclines in death against the firm patina of a Chesterfield sofa, cyanide providing an immovable barrier between her and the advancing Allied forces. I recall that Lee wrote about this image, demanding we remember that even pretty girls with nice teeth participated willingly in the de-humanising ideology and actions of Nazism. The detail of the photograph that pierces me, the punctum as Barthes would have it, is the lone button that has worked itself loose and hangs limp by its thread. It is deeply photographic, almost beyond language... something vertiginous in the button's fragile, untethered state in relation to the bulk of the body and the starch of her nurse's uniform, bound tightly together within the photographic frame. What was it like to open the door to that room and see the bodies of the Nazi Mayor, his wife and his daughter, arranged like figures in an allegorical painting? What did it smell like? Was it a relief to raise the camera to your face; to concentrate on framing, focus, exposure? Click. Step forward, lean in closer, breathe in the stench of rotting flesh: framing, focus, exposure. I look intently at her from across the table but Lee's face is unreadable: like polished marble or mountain ranges or death.



A young girl with a white-blonde bob and sad blue eyes comes back into the imaginary diner from somewhere and sits down opposite the man; she touches him lightly on the head. She could be a young Lee. Hey Joe, wake up. The man lifts his head slowly, like Lazarus: the blood is gone, his head intact. Let's go, the girl says, it's a beautiful day. He puts his lips to a straw and sucks up the last of the pink milkshake, the raking gurgle dispelling the dream-like atmosphere of the imaginary diner. A 1950's recording of Eileen Barton and the New Yorkers plays in the background: if I knew you were comin' I'da baked a cake, baked a cake, baked a cake. If I knew you were comin' I'da baked a cake, baked a cake, baked a cake...<sup>3</sup>

I look up, and Lee is gone.

<sup>3</sup> description from *You Were Never Really Here*, dir. Lynne Ramsay, 2018