

Josepha Gutelius

Revenge

She was sitting in the armchair by the window, someone he'd never told me about, her voice ebbing out of my bedroom and then returning when I opened my eyes, her nurse's whites so perfectly crisp she looked made of stone. She was here to nurse me, but I think she was mostly here to have someone to complain to. She was complaining about him as if that was exactly what I had asked her to do. A succession of words selfish-lying-inconsiderate -- and my thoughts lagged behind. She wore a silver chain similar to the one he had given me, a delicate thing that I had ripped off my neck and thrown to the ground. But why, where, when had I done this? There were no specifics I could remember. Her very presence belittled the reality of him. Champagne, rapture, tender looks: trite memories, generalities anyone could recall. But his face? His face was for some reason replaced in my mind by a large potted fern. I couldn't remember any particular conversation with him either, just some soft hissing between us. But sometime in a puffball of anger I had slammed the bathroom door. Why? And he had pounded on the door so loudly or I had done something so embarrassing we could never show our faces in that hotel again.

A bastard on the run -- she kept saying that, so I assumed he must have left her. But then again he also traveled a lot -- I never quite knew why, and apparently she didn't either. The few times we managed to

be together, I never had the chance to pry into his life, or perhaps the real reason was, I didn't want to muddy our lovemaking with too much reality. I had questions that I supposed she could have answered but nothing mattered now, except that she stayed. She was a professional, she wasn't afraid of contagion. Her hand was parked on my forehead, Wow, you're still so hot. Her eyes, more angry than friendly, shifted around my body, as if she were looking for missing parts, or perhaps for some emotional payoff. In my not-yet-conscious state I didn't wonder what her intentions were. If I got better, I was going to tell her how wrong she was about him, how lucky she was to have him. I would set things right. Or I wouldn't say a thing, and excuse my silence as a lapse of illness, more an omission than a secret. This was my weakness: If I'd had the strength, I would have told her to shut up.

It couldn't have been pleasant for her to sit by my filthy body. I was getting smaller, rotting and dissolving into the bed. And my memories of him? Rotting and dissolving, too. You know things are getting bad when your memories actually stink. She was torturing me with her complaints about him and I couldn't help but get more and more delirious, disoriented. Dehydration and hunger made me euphoric. Every breath I took felt like a milestone. I was in bed, I wasn't going anywhere, and yet I felt the thrilling dislocation of traveling, the same torture, the same tedium, as if I'd spent hours on my feet, plodding through miles of a foreign city. I needed a sip of liquid, a scrap of food. My simple requests, which she refused. No, no, no, what's the point? You'll just vomit it up. I was feverish, I felt as if my skin was flaking off my bones. I discovered I liked begging -- please just a lick -- and with great fanfare she gave me a shot glass filled with a chunky ice cube. The room turned gray toward evening, yet her face gleamed -- proof to me that she could surpass the ordinary. After she left, I felt as if I'd pissed in my pants. My body truly stank. But I felt worse being alone, sure I was dying, and I longed to hear anyone's voice, even hers.

She was good and faithful, came every day. But a sign I was getting better: one morning I managed to make tea for myself before she came. I took a shower and put fresh sheets on my bed. I opened the front door before she could slip her key into the lock. Surprise: You're up? But are you sure you're not overdoing it? She pouted in disappointment, Don't rush things, you could get a relapse. We lingered by the door. It couldn't have been later than eight in the morning, but already it felt like the end of a very long day for me. I couldn't wait to crawl back into my bed. I didn't invite her into the house. She said I looked almost-healthy, and I said she looked unearthly, and she laughed. We both laughed. Loud enough, that we caught the attention of my neighbor who was getting into his pickup and gave us a friendly wave, which seemed to remind her: Oh, your key! And that settled it, she gave me back my house key: She wouldn't be coming anymore. We watched my neighbor drive down the street, and I noticed both of us were shifting from foot to foot, almost in unison, as if we were gearing up to walk together somewhere. At that moment I wished so much to do that, to walk with her somewhere, and talk. But the next moment I couldn't wait for her to leave. My feelings for him were still a work in progress, so whatever I had planned to spill -- a heartfelt confession, an apology -- were stuck like odd bits in my throat. If I studied those odd bits in any literal way, this was what I would see (and actually all that was left of him to recall): a jaw sitting awkwardly in a face; a gentle hand prepared to thrust and gauge. Images she would have undoubtedly been pleased to hear about.

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