

Outside the Window

by

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There were roses on the desk. I'd moved them in from the dining room, so I could stare through their heavy red blooms, through the window and out into the garden, which was sunny and wet. At one o'clock I lit the four candles on my desk. In the garden: a white bench, its paint cracked and peeling; back further: a tall, leafy tree, a rope swing hanging down from one of its branches. I sat facing the window feeling hot sap run through the tree's roots to its leaves. I remembered Africa--I don't know why. The neighborhood was overrun with cats. They liked to skirt the edges of the houses slinking silently from garden to garden shaking moist earth from their paws. They would cross before my window hugging their soft fur to the glass, eyes staring in--not seeing me, and I would stare out, motionless in my chair, and envision a lion or leopard. Africa. Fire-flame burned four rose leaves. I moved the candles to the right side of my desk--banished to the company of pencils, pens, dictionary, and two thin poetry books. Flame heated air until it shimmered and through the shimmer, I saw the tree.

That morning I'd woken up to David stroking my back and shoulders. The bedroom was full of light. The alarm had rung, and I'd ignored it, falling back to sleep. I pretended not to wake up, knowing David knew I was pretending and waited for the moment when I would have to pretend to wake up. How odd, I thought. With my lover, the one before David, I used to smell the scent of apples as he made love to me. I counted them, picking them up off the mown grass beneath the tree, placing them in a basket--one, two, three--bees trying to get at their sugary, white meat but never stinging me. It was always autumn. One, two, three. But with David it was different--I climbed mountains in my mind, put in pieces of protection, made tricky moves on small handholds, balanced my feet on invisible ledges. I thought hard and moved fluidly up rock much as water runs down it when it rains. The weather varied: snow, humid heat, hail, sunshine, brutal winds. Sometimes I wondered why I dreamt awake. Was it bad? Should I be paying more attention to David? What is the proper psychology of sex? They never tell you in the manuals.

Other times I did worse things. I played with his energy fields; at least, I believed I did. I used my hands as a monkey does, as if they were extremely sensitive appendages. As he lay on top of me, I stroked the air up and down until I could feel pressure build up. My hands would flutter through the thin, less pressurized pockets

onto his back. These were the negative spaces, the black holes of the energy field. Or sometimes I pushed the thick white-heat until its pressure against my palms was leaden. One strong push through it, my hands hard on his back, and the energy would pulsate between my body and his.

I don't think he used any tricks on me. Would he have disapproved of them? Did he restrain himself, or was he lacking in imagination, unable to figure them out? When he loved me, it was good. When he didn't, I would keep my mind very silent, far away from him, and climb clumsily, wanting only to get to the top, trying not to be bored, trying not to hate him. He was the man I was going to marry.

He didn't like it when I pretended to be asleep. I'm sure he didn't like me climbing rocks in my head either, his hands on me, never touching my face--I was far away. I tried not to think of him. I visualized finger jamming a small crack, but the work was too delicate. For a few moments I thought about how selfish I was, then rolled away from him. Neither of us worked now. He slept very late, blaming it on jet lag, but I worried it was depression. I'd get up, make coffee, take it with me into the living room and spend an hour writing down my dreams. Then I'd change into my old, grey sweatpants and do yoga. After that, I'd shower. He usually got up then. He'd come in and sit on our bed drinking black coffee while I dressed. I hated that--I'd gained weight, and I'd be hungry by that time too. He never spoke later as I ate two slices of toast with honey for breakfast, but I could feel him wishing I was someone else. The toast tasted burnt, yet his staring forced me to go on eating it. At those moments I'd wonder why I was going to marry him. --He'll never travel with you, or climb with you, or go on an adventure with you. You'll run to fat or vanish with a mountaineer. You didn't want to make love this morning. It's all your fault. In the end there is always only yourself to blame.

I stared through the roses. Rain began splattering against the window. Wind shook the leaves of the tree. The candles burned down. It was hard to get started. We'd had a fight: the phone rang, one of my writing teachers. She was angry, saying I'd insinuated she wasn't professional. I replied, "Of course, I didn't say that," although I'd thought it. She complained for fifteen minutes, while I repeatedly apologized, her words like waves, a litany. If I had cared about what she was saying, I would have argued rather than apologize. Perhaps she sensed this. I hung up the phone, put on my coat.

"Glad we got up early," Dave said, angrily thrusting his arms into his coat sleeves, "so we could get another late start."

My ears heard pounding surf. I covered them with my hands. I couldn't breathe. "Stop it. Stop it. You're driving me crazy." It was the ocean swallowing me. Not now, not this time, I thought. Don't go crazy. I could hear them all laughing at me. I swam through white foam struggling for shore, but couldn't reach it. "Don't say that to me. I won't go with you. Not if you're gonna be like that all day." I stood still.

"Go ahead, go on your own," he shouted.

"Come on, get your coat. Let's go," I cajoled.

"Get out of here."

This is too silly, I thought. Not now, let's not fight now. I took off my coat.

"Aren't you leaving?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I will." He threw his book on the floor.

Like a child, I thought. He put on his coat and walked out.

There was a bottle of scotch in the kitchen. Two inches left. I mixed half of it with water, took it to my desk, sat there, lit a cigarette, watched the smoke curl among the rose petals. This isn't unusual, I told myself. I could feel my belly under my skirt. The waist band was tight. I stared out at the tree and hated myself and cried. I hated myself for letting people upset me while they complacently went about their lives untouched. I remembered as a child being sent out to pick apples from beneath the tree, so the lawnmower wouldn't choke on them, the whirling sound of sharp rotary blades. It was my chore. My father believed in chores, assigning them to each of us. We were a family team, he told us. How I hated that concept. So I sat and thought about that for a long time, then I went and got the roses from the dining room and placed them on my desk.

Light flickered as the sun set. The desk was soon eclipsed by shadow from the great tree. Outside the African landscape melted as it does at dusk: red hues consuming the earth. The scotch was gone. I poured a glass of burgundy--red, the same color as roses. He still wasn't back. He'd be furious to find me drunk. He'll come back, I thought, and if he doesn't--I'll call the mountaineer. The damn mountaineer was, however, recently married. Everyone was married or almost married now. Africa was past; Mexico, Ecuador, all my travels left behind, all gone so fast. And now England, but England always felt old and stale. Would marriage lend any immediacy to life, or was it just another rite of passage? "Never let anyone convince you that love and marriage are synonymous," a friend once told me. "Love beats you down, takes you up--it makes no demands; it just is," she explained. "Marriage is nothing but restriction and property rights." I lit another cigarette. I felt my bulging stomach. The alcohol didn't soothe me. Perhaps I'd develop an ulcer. Perhaps the mountaineer would call me. Perhaps I'd find the courage to chuck it all and fly with my sad, silly dreams to Nepal. It would be fleeing again. A fortune teller once told me that my life would be interesting and that money would always be a problem. I laughed then. I never felt poor. "You will," she said, "when you're older and your dreams begin to die."

The tree swayed gently undulating like a naked Morani warrior next to a campfire. Once when I was very young, strong, and happy, I wrote a poem about a naked necromancer. He was out there now beneath that tree, leaning lightly on his javelin. A key turned in the door. Was it him? Had he come? David walked in with packages in his arms.

"I bought the stores out," he told me, showing me three new suits. "For business," he explained.

My head buzzed. It wasn't the young warrior. It was the businessman, my soon-to-be-husband. There was no Africa. There were no illusions. One fulfilled one's function. Time ticked on. Sometimes dreams are too big. That's what they all told

me--TOO BIG. I wasn't serious, walked around in a romantic haze. Well, God, didn't everyone else?

"What's for dinner?"

"Dinner?"

"Yes, what have you been doing all day? Get any writing done?"

"Yes," I lied.

"The place stinks of cigarettes. I thought you were going to quit for climbing."

"When I know I'm going climbing, I will. How about vegetable curry?"

"Again?"

"If you didn't go around buying--" I stopped. "Yes, again."

The kitchen was alien. I thought of the warrior out by the campfire, the man with power under the African tree, but that was gone. The vegetables shrieked as I cut them. We sat down to eat. I felt the bulge beneath my skirt. I smiled. "I missed you."

"So you're alright now. Jesus, you were a bitch this morning."

"Now I'm fine." And I was fine too. After all, cowards choose their own punishment, and I loved him most of the time, I really did. "I moved the roses from the dining room to my desk," I told him for no reason at all.

"That's alright."

And we went on eating, while outside dark smothered the earth and all that had been red faded to black. I cleared the dishes. In the other room David put on some music. We were home again, yes, we were home, and the garden was hidden by night.

—The End—