

Perry and Maud

by

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A cat crossed, its soft fur hugging the window outside. Perry watched the tiger-striped animal as though watching a movie. He was downstairs in an oyster bar. The bar was called The Blue Point. It was sunk halfway into the earth, allowing patrons to look out the windows which composed the top half of the walls. Perry had been there for two hours. During that time he had seen people's feet and calves as they crossed the outside mall. He had been playing a game, trying to match their bodies and faces with their feet. He had also been drinking expensive Heinekens and eating oysters, and avoiding the eyes and conversation of anyone who might sit next to him at the wooden bar. Fortunately, no one had. For that reason he was feeling lucky. It was windy outside and the temperature was three degrees. Closing his left eye and bending his head sideways to the window, Perry made out the indentations of cat tracks in snow. He should be outside. If he weren't so warm, if the bar didn't have a roaring fire (Perry felt its warmth on his back), if he were a *real man*, he would be making tracks in the snow. He envied the cat who had not discovered the immobilizing property of alcohol.

The bartender cleared away the oyster shells sloshing the melted ice water they were nestled in onto the bar. "Another Heineken?" Perry nodded. The green beer bottle was placed before him and next to it a long frosted beer glass. He shouldn't have another beer. He really shouldn't. Perry eyed the beer as if it were an adversary. Maud would be angry if he was late again. But, he thought, his eyes flickering across the now darkening mall, I could use the snow as an excuse. He poured the beer carefully, so it didn't foam. He pushed from his mind the thought that he was displaying signs of alcoholism --if you listened to all the warnings nowadays you would diagnose yourself as too sick to function at all.

Maud hated snow. Perry hated the name Maud. To make it palatable he reminded himself that "Maud" was the name of Yeat's love—Maud Gonne, ... —Maud Gone Away. He laughed. She was...she was without title now being also without employment. He marveled at how much she enjoyed her daily freedom. "I have money enough to live for four months," she had told him over their first cup of coffee together. "I intend to do as I please." Perry didn't ask for her telephone number. It was all fine and good to not be working, but he couldn't erase the feeling that she should be worried about it.

Ironically, Maud wasn't Irish. She wasn't even European. She was Kenyan. She was black. No, not black, but blue-black. He had run into her again quite by chance: he was sitting on a bench in Faneuil Hall. The enclosed market was jammed with shoppers. It was a week before Christmas—almost a month ago. He'd been watching the people as they jostled for cheese, and pate, and trinkets, feeling rather sorry for himself amidst the holiday cheer, considering going to The Blue Point for a drink, when she swooped down on him and placed a salami in his lap. "This'll brighten you up," she'd said. It had. He couldn't stop laughing, and he'd got that funny feeling inside -- that feeling of being choked up on...(it had taken a while to register)...happiness. She was buying presents for herself, she explained. They went to her apartment and made love. Ever since she had been his "girlfriend", though he felt uncomfortable with the nomenclature, and he didn't dare to write to his friends to tell them he was seeing a black woman. They would have found it out of character.

Memory of the salami and what ensued roused Perry from his barstool. He paid his tab, tipped heavily to preserve his luck (one gets what one sows), put on his thick down expedition parka, and weaved ever so slightly out into the night. The snow was hurtling past him. Flakes clung to the red nylon of his parka. He looked for cat tracks, but they had vanished beneath the millions of snow crystals. The street lamps lent a sick orange hue to the ground, lighting up and shadowing his fresh prints until they appeared surreal. He wondered if the cat was a stray or had a home nearby. It would be nice to bring Maud a cat. She loved animals. She disliked children. An unusual combination, he believed.

But when he reached Maud's (only an hour late—he noted by his Rolex, a public relations gift from his last climb), he found a note taped to her door --GONE FISHING. Perry considered ripping the note off the door, then decided wisely that it would be better to leave well enough alone. He would decide later whether or not to admit he had come by.

Maud didn't call. Perry didn't call her. Time passed. More snow fell. In summer he went to Chamonix to instruct mountaineering and kicked about with a blonde American, who was hot in bed. This woman, who was so generic he'd forgotten her name --though Jill sounded right, spoke of having traveled in Kenya. She hinted that she had slept with a Maasai warrior who had given her beads and a tuft of lion's mane. He had pretended to be dually impressed and promptly bedded her. One night after acrobatic sex she had spoken aphoristically: "Once in your blood, your soul, call it what you will, you can never dislodge a Kenyan; it's their animistic beliefs, you see. They know how to get inside you and stay." Try as he had to forget, Jill dislodged something he had hidden away. He became obsessed with Maud. He wrote. No answer. He called. No answer. Had she moved? There was nothing to do but return to Boston when the summer finished. The American said she understood. Her sister owned a place in Boston and was going to Greece for a month to dig. Would he like to use her apartment? Unfortunately, she, herself, would be in San Francisco, too busy to visit. Perry accepted her offer.

Returning to Boston Perry was shocked by the humid heat. He wished he was back home in Betwys-y-Coed. He went to Maud's apartment. A Vietnamese family

lived there. They did not know where the previous lessee had gone. Perry changed. He began to hate America. He wasn't busy lecturing as before. The great mountains he had known faded into the background leaving him alone with a sense of unfulfilled urgency.

Two days before the month was up he saw Maud. She was standing at a fish counter in Faneuil Hall. He watched the fish-man hand her a white package over a high glass counter in which he could see the reflection of her face. Perry stood still. Now that she was here he didn't know what to do. Should he walk up to her? Hadn't he come to the States again to find her? Hadn't he? Yet he made no move. Other women passed, their gazes turning back, he believed, to rest on him. Maud turned from the fish counter and began to walk away. He took three cat-like steps forward, opening his mouth to call her. No one bumped into him as he stood there in the middle of the grand hall, light falling from the sky light around him. Something was wrong. Maud faded into the crowd. Passer-bys walked through him. It was as if he wasn't there. A low buzz flew up from the hall and grew louder. His body felt light. He was floating, looking down at the arcade, rising higher, ever higher, passing through the roof, through the clouds. He had seen the world from such heights before --wasn't he a mountain climber? The snap of the rope. The rush of the wind. The ground spinning. And he knew that his tracks had vanished quietly, like those of the tiger-striped cat.

—The End—