

# **The Gerbil's Wheel**

by

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For weeks I hadn't been able to sleep. For weeks I hadn't been able to sit still. Then sleep had come. The alarm rang three times. My husband Giles had showered and shaved and was poking me in the ribs. "Get up," he said, and I dragged myself from bed only to find I couldn't sit still again.

All day I got up and down for a million little reasons—to put away the dry dishes, for a glass of lemonade, to bleach the sink, to check my recipe for lime rice (did I have enough limes?), and to take off my fingernail polish. For the first time in my life I was trying to grow my nails. It seemed as if each small errand was done for Giles, my husband of three months, rather than for myself. Although I couldn't sit still, I felt the need to sleep. Anything to forget who I was. Sleep was so pleasant, like floating down a jungle river, slipping easily away from the tangled growth on shore. If only time and the present could be erased.

I was bourgeois, and though I had believed myself to be free, now I ran about like a middle class housewife wondering if Giles would like lime rice for dinner, or might it be a bit too unusual for his palate? I cleaned the dingy little apartment, washed its floors, vacuumed, dusted, scrubbed the bathtub and toilet. I shopped for food bumping elbows with happy couples who shopped together. It was not the chores I minded, it was the reduction of my status from loved one to maid. Marriage had turned me into the sort of woman I used to pity. Now I had two choices: to wait and see if it got any better or to walk out. Either way I lost.

No thanks to Giles, we had become the sort of money-oriented, small-pleasure centered couple I abhorred. And my God, how lazy I'd become without hope to tease me on. My only release was sleep. I lived in dreams. Through my love for Giles I was learning to hate myself. But being intelligent, I was aware of this. The question remained: would he change or would he ignore my unhappiness until I hated myself so much that I had to leave? Perhaps he was only waiting for me to leave. Perhaps he was driving me away.

After eating lunch, I went to the bathroom. Wet towels were piled on the floor. I kicked them into a corner. I began to put a roll of apricot colored toilet paper on the empty spool when I realized that these small daily concerns of mine were the sort of details that could lead to tragic murder. I closed the toilet lid, sat down on it, and as

the leaky washer drip-dripped thought of what it would be like if Giles died and I got all his money. Certainly, I would travel. I would live in some foreign land and paint and mountain climb. I would never subjugate myself to the Money-God. A darker thought came to me—I was like a gerbil in its cage running around and around a circular wheel. I left the toilet paper behind the toilet. Giles could put the roll on, for once.

Giles was working in his office. It was off the kitchen and should have been the dining room, but the room was such a miserable place to eat—no view, the overhead light buzzing and flickering—that we made it his. He had a desk there, like an island, where he worked staring at accounting books and bits of paper while scratching his head. Dandruff flakes fell on his papers and desk. The heavily chlorinated city water had ruined our hair.

I worked in the living room in an area which must have been a porch that had been closed in. The studio had windows on three sides looking out over Drexel Avenue. It was the only place in the house that got any light, if light was to be had at all. I painted there.

I decided to go for a walk. I didn't say goodbye. It was warm and the snow was melting. Black slush, the color of cinders, coated Tasha's white paws. The starlings were chattering. Tasha chased squirrels. They had built nests of leaves and twigs high up in tree tops. It reminded me of when we had gone camping together, and I'd slept warmly in a hut built of sticks and leaves. Lambent light fell on the roofs of walk-ups, and for a second I had the feeling that nothing existed but sky and failing winter light. The wind whipped. Clouds were as black as creosote. I rang the bell and Giles buzzed us in.

"Cold out," I said. "You should go for a walk, get some air."

He nodded and went back to his work.

I walked over to the window of my studio and looked out. At four o'clock it was almost dark. At night these were dangerous streets. I had already been mugged once and, though I tried not to be jumpy, I found myself nervous whenever I was walking alone especially if a black man was on the street. The school newspaper complained that blacks attending the university were unfairly hassled by campus police. I was sure they were. All the same I felt fear every time I heard footsteps behind me at night. It would have been so much easier to have been born a man, I thought. Or, at least, I could be five feet eight inches tall and all muscle. But, really, there was no hope, being five feet two and weighing in at a hundred pounds. I carried mace for protection.

As I looked out an ambulance shrieked on its way to Mitchell Hospital. On the windowsill were two photographs, one of my father throwing duck decoys in the marsh and another of my mother riding a horse. I am a wolf running alone, I told myself. A woman shouldn't walk alone, drink alone, eat alone, make love alone in her head. I'd done all these things. Broken too many rules. Red tail lights passed by. I lit a cigarette and leaned my forehead against the cold glass. I remembered homes: home in England; home in Ecuador; in Mexico and Africa and France; home in Colorado, California, New York, and Connecticut. Home in Maryland. Home on mountain peaks. Home in the jungle. Home in concrete cities. Chicago was the worst home of all.

Dirty, grey Chicago, she was empty of life like an old woman's shrunken tit. People recognized their reflections too often here—in mirrors, in plate glass windows along Michigan Avenue—and became self-conscious, seeing themselves as others did. It was a city that had risen from the blood of stockyards. A city with a skull for a face.

I turned from the window, telling myself not to think about it. I should start dinner, I thought. My anger mixed with the hiss, hiss of the radiator. My hands started to shake. What was the matter with me? Things were out of control. Was I going mad? Was I so desperate for attention that I would have a nervous breakdown? I wished for a bottle of wine to make me forget. To make me forget I couldn't paint. To make me forget that my father had left us. To make me forget that Giles would do the same. All men did. Why did I sit here and wait for it? Why didn't I just leave and get it over with? I paced back and forth between the front door and the window. Tasha watched me.

Giles shouted from his office, "What are you doing in there?"

There was an atlas on the floor. I sat down, turned its pages and twisted my wedding ring.

Tasha came over and laid down next to me. I rubbed her thick fur. A husky meant to pull sleds, she was stuck in the city, and she hated it. Three years ago I had saved her from the dog pound, and now, like me, she was living in a different sort of prison. She gnawed the windowsills. She threw herself at the windows when I left the apartment. She chewed and scratched the bottom of the front door. I would return to find her lying on her side in a pool of saliva. Sometimes she howled when I was gone. "She misses you," the neighbors all said. "She sounds like an opera singer." At least, nobody minded. I knew it was wrong to keep her here, but it was wrong to keep me here too. Still, two wrongs didn't make a right. I would take her home to the farm over Christmas.

I got up to make dinner. Giles was on the telephone talking about future employment opportunities. "The point is," I heard him say, "to get ahead." Ahead of what? I thought. We had enough limes to make lime rice. I cut up the chicken and put it in the wok. Then I doused it with curry and added the vegetables.

"It's ready," I called.

Giles followed me to the dining area with his plate. We sat.

"I'm unhappy here," I said.

He sighed.

"You'd be unhappy anywhere," Giles responded.

"No, I wouldn't. I was happy climbing in Ecuador. I was happy in Africa. People couldn't believe how good natured I was. I can't stand what I'm turning into here."

"Why don't you try to be a little supportive? I'm the one trying to make the money around here. What do you do?"

"I cook. I clean. I paint," I said, feeling powerless and hating him.

"That's all, isn't it?" he asked.

It was all, but he wasn't making any money. Why was his schoolwork more important than my painting? Because his schoolwork was supposed to make it possible for him to make Big Money? How could he be so sure that I wouldn't be a successful artist? Because I was his wife?

"That's all you do, isn't it?" Giles broke into my thoughts. "All you do is paint and complain and barely keep the house clean. You don't make a cent."

I was silent. There really wasn't a good way to answer. After all, he had the trust fund. That's what it had all come down to anyway. He had the money that allowed me to paint, and his parents paid for business school. I owed him. I either paid the piper, or I left.

In Chicago there was nothing—no lightening, no thunder, no splicing and healing again. No we were too civilized for that. We didn't break any rules. Down the street on a wall someone had written with spray paint—Arise ye wretched. Us wretched? How could that be? We were warm. We had food in our bellies. We had a television and a stereo and plenty to be thankful for, yet Giles and I were eating each other alive. I looked at the dead hearth laid with three fake concrete logs. Was it too much to ask for a real fire?

Afterwards, washing the dishes, I thought, but I love him. It was my anger that was destroying us. Like a sidewinder snake it curled across my days and spat red rage. If I could be successful?...If I could just act?...If someone would just listen to me? These weren't my hands that painted badly. Not my hands that washed these dishes, plunking them into sudsy water and scrubbing them. This person wasn't me, a woman who couldn't paint. I had thought I would be famous. I had thought I was an adventurer. I had thought I took risks. But did I? Or was I the coward I hated? I had climbed volcanoes. I had climbed Ben Nevis. I had ridden horses at the race track. I had been a femme fatale at college, wrapping men around my little fingers like so many silken threads.

I had tasted power and I wanted to taste it again. I felt as evil as a snake. My blood had turned cold. If I loved Giles, it was the memory of him I loved, not the man he had become. I watched him from my hiding place by the cold hearth. I watched and I waited....patiently. I was patience incarnate.

But I had loved Giles. In Boston, we used to eat oysters and drink beer. It snowed outside, thick white flakes. We stayed up all night doing cocaine and drinking scotch, telling the stories of our lives, and I had thought, I'll marry this man. I had, hadn't I? I'd finally won him. But the prize didn't turn out to be what I had expected. This life was not what I had expected. My life was a photograph that had faded. The image was there, but the color was gone.

I was so tired. My hands were wrinkled from washing. But I was restless too. I took Tasha outside. She squatted on the meager strip of lawn beneath the streetlight. The wind cut itself against building corners and rattled windows. Tasha looked up at me with blue eyes then sniffed the ground. A space opened inside of me as if I was a rock split by roots. I was wide open. I felt a cool emptiness sweep into me. Nothing mattered. My anger scattered. I was inert. I could see myself in a million different mirrors, each one reflecting a part of me. And yet despite all these reflections I could not see myself whole anymore. I was shattering and splitting.

I walked up the stairs to the apartment. Were there any answers? Would I ever be able to leave? As I entered, Giles pushed his chair back. I heard the roll of its wheels. His footsteps came down the hall. We went to the living room and sat together on the sofa. He turned on the television.

"So what's up?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

On the television a woman smiled while pouring her husband a cup of coffee. "Mountain grown," the voice-over said. Her husband smiled and then went back to reading his newspaper. The wife looked pleased.

The gerbil's wheel spun around and around in my head.

—The End—