

Out of Dust

He'd appeared out of nowhere. Out of dust. Out of the first rain drops pocking the dust. Out of the dry flowers—were they dead?—that topped the dusty succulents that soaked up the rain as it fell harder and harder. He came up from behind and opened his umbrella over the two of them, so close she couldn't really see him. To have turned to look would have felt intimate—shared intimate. What she felt, shoulder to shoulder with this stranger, was intimate, but privately so, as if she could keep that to herself: safe, invulnerable. She could barely hear him above the rain: "Monsoon." It was California, not Bangladesh; a walk-through display at the zoo, not a wilderness, but she felt transported to the exotic. The rain glossed a pair of tortoises. A two-foot long lizard turned its diamond head to consider them before gliding under a boulder.

Just like a Victorian novel: all paths wide enough for two to promenade, she thought and let him usher her into the zoo coffee shop. Sitting opposite, she assessed: some twenty years her senior, maybe more, a striking monument of years, graying and furrowed but seemingly ageless—his hands used, rugged, but his face youthful despite weathering, the opposite of careworn, eyes full of spaniel happiness at a new pursuit. When he said he'd drunk from the fountain of youth and his heart was young, she wasn't sure which heart he meant— physical or abstract—but she nodded. Then remembered to smile. She was a little preoccupied—half listening and absorbing *him*, half constructing *her*: new plaything.

Who? What? Where? He'd be asking soon.

She nearly knocked her coffee over she was so busy.

The place was bursting with sheltering tourists. They shared a table with a couple from Indonesia who were speaking to each other in English, but nothing seemed intelligible to—? Well, let's not rush her, she was constructing, remember? Her coffee teetered, slopped. Should she call herself Kate?—a Jamesian name, teetering into the Twentieth Century, so not so reassuring as the Victorian path they'd started on. Or not as clear cut, anyway, as a decorous promenade. Good and evil, regardless plausible explanation, muddled in one character, and not some Dickensian eccentric, but someone whose skin might feel all too familiar.

Perhaps *Camile*? A nod to the postmodern, good and evil of little account, just weather, really, observed. Her tongue found the top of her mouth in a silent trial-run of *Sabine*; soft met hard, talking with their nerves.

His name—she couldn't fool with *it*— turned out to be Art. A disarming thing to reveal over coffee. She decided she would be Madison. She relished the effect of its debutant sound—how he tried to cover his initial dismay, how reassured he was when she said she sometimes went by “Maddy,” but most often simply, “Mad.”

And maybe she really was called that. Or Kate, or Camile, or Sabine, or B., or K.

The coffee was good. Hot. Subtle. *Even a zoo makes good coffee in California* she remarked to herself, noting that it seemed she was not from there. Coming up with a name had been exhausting enough, but now she would have to come up with somewhere to be from, as well, and any minute he would be asking what she did, too. She took too big a swallow of coffee, a precautionary measure against further slopping under such duress, and when she tried out a silent mouthing of *Ohio* and *secretary* she was grateful the scalded parts of her mouth didn't meet. But would he want innocuous? Or daring? *Tazmania, Pilot*. They both hurt.

Her view over his shoulder took in an elephant under an ancient live-oak, its head hanging out in the full onslaught of rain. She wondered out loud if it had the option of an elephant-sized shelter someplace, and Art turned to look, exaggerating his interest. Later, remembering this first meeting, she was able to recognize a slight irritation manifest in a tightening around his mouth. His preference was to turn the focus of their conversations himself, imperceptibly, as if steering a superb car. Had she noticed this in the beginning, she would have found it off-putting. When she did notice, on down the road, she acknowledged that she found it mesmerizing, a passenger spinning along the lane of his charm. And he'd led such an interesting life—only hinted at in the coffee shop: he'd once seen an elephant in Africa with its tiny offspring sheltered under its belly. "But that was a terrible storm," he said, "We had to help the villagers rebuild."

This *we* was the first of the many vague *we*'s that peppered his reminiscence. Over the first idyllic month they were together, she grew acclimated to them. She knew there was a woman who'd left on a Fulbright, her patchouli smelling skirts and smocks stranded in his closet alongside his minimalist wardrobe: linen slacks, two shirts, a second pair of sandals, a hotel robe, souvenir from Jakarta.

"We were supposed to attend a banquet with the governor, but at the last minute they told us we weren't expected, after all." No one had pursued the robe or attempted to retrieve its value, though it was made of something that managed to be heavy and light at the same time, luxurious. He intimated they wouldn't have dared "after the way they treated us."

The *they*'s in his stories were nearly as vague as the *we*'s and *us*'s but were sometimes easier to sort out via context. And *they* didn't worry her as much: *they* were always ancillary, either snubbing him in some way—for which he somehow repaid, or planned to repay them—or in a position to aid or embarrass Art with accolades which he brushed off as jejune—sweet, but hardly of account, though sometimes efficacious to his work.

Whatever that was.

He said he couldn't share the details with her, not because he didn't trust her, of course, but only that something might slip out in casual conversation, and he didn't want to put her in a position of accidental betrayal that would jeopardize what-they-had-together. All he could reveal was that he'd figured out a way to make money that no-one-would-ever-dream-of.

Whatever it was took him places, often on such short notice that she awoke to find him gone. At first, it didn't really bother her much. She didn't mind lying with what her body retained from the night before: still slightly feverish, anxious for—but certain of—a return to the well between his ribs, pressing close, closer, everything she wanted distilled there, seemingly perpetual.

And after the first few times awaking alone, she ceased looking for a note propped on the nightstand or stuck to the refrigerator, and, when he showed up, hours or days later, stopped teasing him in an attempt to procure an apologetic kiss for not leaving a note, for not replying to her texts because he was so busy or out of range of service or left his phone at the security at the airport. "So absent minded sometimes. Babe, if I could take you with me, you'd keep me on track."

He'd asked permission to call her Babe. She'd wanted to ask what he'd called the patchouli oil woman, what he'd called his first wife, his second—but he wanted to start fresh, clean slate, no dredging up drama from the past. This was different. She was the real thing. She waited for disclosure to unfold naturally, honoring his attachment to his privacy, his reticence. He rewarded her by telling her about his son that *she*'d turned against him. How sad! Mad would find out which *she* later, surely, no need to pry.

Mad told him everything about herself. That first meeting, she finally decided to be a glasswork artist from Michigan, and had sighed in relief when this mingle of unconventional and mundane seemed to satisfy him. Later, she chose a father who had been raised to be the strong provider and couldn't show the little girl Mad the affection she craved. She made her mother softer, so pliable and amenable—weak, really—that Mad explained how this all-important figure's vulnerability

had made her anxious. To help focus, she pictured them as a family: her mother, hand to forehead, fending off another headache, the father pressing on as they vacationed in—the Badlands? The Grand Canyon? Okefenokee?— sometimes it was the insignificant details that were the hardest to settle on. Art listened so patiently, seeming to drink her in, and she was stumped, a little panicked, before landing squarely in Chattanooga. A Civil War buff, her father carried cannon balls back in the trunk. In Mad’s mind’s eye her father secured his cargo while her mother tried to point out a hawk, circling in the sky above the battlements, but Mad couldn’t see it.

So the parents got her glasses. She’d been awkward enough, but the glasses finished the job. And too smart—should she tell Art that?—so she had to skip a grade, yet another social blunder.

She was more or less the Fulbright scholar’s size and tried to launder the patchouli away because the clothes were wondrous: patterned and embroidered cotton jackets and tops, lined silk skirts in colors she wanted better names for than purple and green. He encouraged her: it was a shame to let the things go to waste. She wanted him to mind the other’s signature smell on her, but it was such a small thing in those first heady months—and it wouldn’t wash out no matter what she used. Art commented on the box above the washer—she’d moved in by then—the twenty mules laboring in the borax-laden desert reminding him of when “We were exploring in the outback and our full-blooded Maori guide dreamed of me. He told me I was lost in a cave that was filling with the tide.” The guide was frightened for Art’s future, but Art saw opportunity. “Sure, we could drown,” he explained, “but the tide could carry us deeper, so much deeper.”

Could this lost we be them: Madison and Arthur at the brink of discovery? Mad and Art on the ultimate journey? She’d hoped to have gotten more out of the way those names played together—a social ineptness left her craving conversation starters at parties, something she could count on instead of looking in from the edges, perusing book shelves for clues to intellectual proclivities, a creepy habit—and so often disappointing.

Art laughed. He liked her dry asides and often set things up so that she got the punch line. Such a duet, also, would have washed well in public, but they didn't get out much.

He'd named a figure for her share of the rent and she'd written him a check.

Bluish sky followed bluish sky, though sometimes a dense fog crept into Art's neighborhood, and the tiny window that had been left in the closed-in porch where she worked went white, featureless.

She'd decided on being a glass artist because she loved the colors and their evocative names: plum, scarlet, jade. She found she had a knack for the combination of precision and improvisation that the craft required. She chose a school out east to have studied at, somewhere sufficiently broadminded to open her up to possibility before she'd crossed back over Lansing to settle in California, imagining it the sort of place she could sell her work. She explained to Art how she'd visited as a teenager and been entranced by the ocean, the redwoods, the bustle of diversity. She pictured her fifteen-year-old-self with the San Francisco Bay looming up from below the plane as it landed: a sudden reminder of mortality and opportunity combined—the heady careen of adolescence.

Art offered his up past in tantalizing generalizations. “Oh, I lived here and there, never any one place in particular.” Once he was on his own, he had so many interests, he'd never channeled himself into one career. He wasn't into possessions, so never bought a place, hence the shabby, half-furnished apartment he said she was free to transform as she pleased. He waited until some months into the relationship he'd-barely-had-the-nerve-to-even-dream-of before revealing the exact rent breakdown, her three-quarters to his one.

He'd explained during their usual breakfast preparations. Art's coffee was even better than the zoo's, forged in an elaborate hurry-up-and-wait arrangement that took up half the counter space. During his waiting parts, he turned to watch Mad as she made failed omelets that he endeared as “Mad's Scrambles.”

It was a sort of scramble as she moved from refrigerator to sink to cutting board to stove and back.

While not exactly tidy himself—she'd occupied a number of spare hours 'transforming' grubby corners since she'd moved in—he believed in tidiness, so she tried to clean up her mess as she went along even when he was totally engrossed in sharing whatever was on his mind. How he'd studied economics briefly and understood what was going on with China long before it became fashionable to talk about it, or how he'd broken his arm in the 3rd grade not falling out of a tree like a normal kid, but in his aunt's circus act, riding a unicycle with a torch balanced on his nose.

"Wow, where was that?"

He couldn't remember. A short-lived vocation. He moved on to how it tripped him out that they were still finding planets because he'd seen an extra one looking through a telescope when he was in the Andes, but he'd kept his mouth shut because his astronomer friend was one of those science types who held themselves above the rest of us.

Or—this time—how his mother's brilliance in math had been wasted on housewifery, but, armed with memories of her tutelage, he'd come up with an elaborate formula to figure out their—Mad's and his—shares of the rent: percents for shared areas, percents for her studio and display storage, a ratio for the risk he entailed since his name was on everything, plus consideration that his security deposit was fattening in his landlord's coffers.

"I figured it all up before you even moved in. But I don't want lack of communication to jeopardize what we have, Babe, even if it's a little anal, a little OCD. I've learned openness with each other is key. Totally."

She stopped in her scramble to give him a kiss and reassure him that if he was hopelessly OCD, he would have noticed that the coffee had dripped through and was ready for the next step in its perfecting process.

The studio was closet-sized, the window a dusty porthole on an alley. Art's adventure equipment hung on the ceiling and walls, notes for a memoir he was working on were stacked in one corner, a folded exercise bike in another. Rationalizing his disclosure of the divvied rent as a healthy communication consumed the width and breadth of her mental facilities. But even while she worked to reestablish his harmlessness in her poor, besotted mind, a subterranean frisson ran through her, as if she was water he'd dipped his toe into and ripples were going through her, cell to cell. She snuck a look at his dusty life's notes: *Near miss, Bermuda Triangle, 1979; earthquake, South America, 2001*, surely, she'd found the real thing.

As spring came and went, there was no further use for Art's umbrella, and when they went back to the zoo for their half year's anniversary, the flowers and tortoises had dusted back over; the lizard rested, sun-lazy, observing them with a slitted eye, a pulse rippling its semi-translucent white underside.

Art disappeared more often, for longer stretches. Telling herself it was something she needed to get used to, she still worried a bit: had he been in an accident? Was his secret job dangerous? It distracted her when she was working, but she doubled down nevertheless. She needed money to pay her rent, and groceries were expensive, too, especially the roasted-in-fist-sized-batches coffee Art preferred—when he was there--so she worked hard. He always wanted to see what she'd done in his absence, waving away apologies for the every-day-ness of her creations: lamp finials, letter openers, spoon handles.

"Mammon will extract her dues."

Then she won a prize at a craft show, and another. A gallery in town wanted to know if she would like to join a mixed media showing in September.

Art told her how proud he was and pulled her close. She couldn't quite bask in his supportiveness, though, because there was something else there, too, twinned and blurry as his up-close eyes. Might he feel a little envious? He was only human.

At the opening his whispered criticisms came out more like an aside in a play than concealed. She wished she could tell the others he was just like that—pointing out their flaws could even be seen as a sign of recognition, a willingness to take in someone else’s work as if it was his own. To move from *them to us*.

He told her the brass worker was flirting with her. “You really didn’t notice? Jesus, Mad, he couldn’t take his eyes off you!”

The brass fellow *was* good looking and talented, but Mad hadn’t noticed him. She was too busy watching Art run his hand over the leaded glass woman’s centerpiece, wishing he would point out how the colors were too primary, too church windowy. Mad wanted to mention this failing on the way home so he would pick at it like the rest, but she didn’t, fearing he wouldn’t. She had to be satisfied with, “Your stuff was head and shoulders over the rest. You’ll need to look for venues that really speak to your level.”

So. He was proud.

So. She had her work cut out for her to be all that she could be. All that he envisioned for her.

If only. If only the damned omelets would stop sticking. If only her pop-up display would fit better in the studio so the door would latch and he’d stop pushing at it with that look on his face. If only she didn’t have the vague feeling she wasn’t enough in bed, or—later—too much.

Much that went wrong seemed too complicated to pin down to remember so that she could avoid it the next time, crazed as the bits of glass she melted down into new things: cufflinks, earrings, pendants, pen handles.

How clever she was! How creative! Putting things back together, come what may: shattered, melted, reworked.

The days grew shorter. She bought a special lamp that pretended daylight.

It was the first thing he broke. They were having a fight, but it could've been an accident. He said it was an accident. He said he didn't like fighting. They sat together afterward, he on the stationary bike, she on the potential memoir, agreeing that they didn't like fighting. But was it a fight? Or a habit they shared?

Likely there was something in her childhood she hadn't the energy to unearth that accounted for this incompatibility. Some root to her compulsion to do and say things that set Art off. If she was honest, he wasn't difficult to predict, she ought to be able to come up with a reasonable explanation. But what with getting ready for the next show—an invitational—she was tired and frazzled and distracted. She felt the pressure to shine, to live up to Art's pride in her. But some days went better than others, some glass seemed to ask for her guidance, her coaxing, a last daring flip till the piece—as if by some other hand—became itself, or nearly itself. Other days were blobby, broken, stubborn. Either way, it all took up a great deal of energy, so her problems with Art got sidelined, pestering like bad light even in the best of times, blobbily opaque as bad glasswork when they'd had another flare-up. She knew she should root around in her past and figure this out—if she could only stop and focus!

Or, barring that, could she, well, sort of *delegate* her examining, her constructing, her root-causing? If only there was somebody handy to talk to. Handy and objective, with a long perspective--20-20 hindsight, so to speak.

But who would remember how it was for her, growing up?

Or, failing memory, be sufficiently inventive to keep up?

What with navigating Art and art she could have used some assistance. Shards of the five fingered, sun-mimicking bulb were crunching under her feet. But to be fair, she'd been wearing shoes in the studio already, because the crunch might have been bits of her own mistakes. *There. See? Everyone makes mistakes, don't they?* she told herself.

She couldn't find a replacement bulb and regular incandescence left the colored glass she'd learned to trust flat and unresponsive, till tears dripped off her nose and brightened her work temporarily. Greens, blues, purples—even the black shown wetly, making her yearn, making her hope, pulling her to her feet to find a handkerchief.

She got a cat to keep her company. Art told her the landlord would require a 300-dollar deposit. She held the orange, half-grown tabby in her lap and wrote him a check.

It turned out Art was allergic to cats—something he hadn't mentioned when she floated the idea of getting one—and he was especially triggered by Thomas. He pointed out there was fur in the bed even though Thomas didn't like Art so he didn't sleep with them. She shut him out of the bedroom, but at night he mewed and scratched, and often she relented at 3 am. They awoke to his reproachful stare from amongst their cast-off clothes on the floor.

“I told you,” Art would joke, “cats are assholes.”

But when Art was sneezing he didn't joke. He sulked and was gone even more. Mad began wondering if he was sleeping with someone else as often as she wondered if he had been run over by a truck or that some deal had gone bad and he had gotten the wrong end of it. She didn't imagine him dealing drugs or involved with some underworld mob, but instead envisaged some prohibited research he was crucial to, like in a sci-fi plot. Her daydreams engendered visuals of his scientific colleague who transformed from nerd to beauty when she took off her lab coat and glasses and let down her hair. Was it possible that she, Mad, loved this scientist? She even named her, like a pet: Fern. She gave her different hairdo's like a favorite doll. She fell asleep thinking of her. All those hints Art dropped about how no one was smart enough to understand whatever it was he was doing, but Mad was sure Fern understood, Mad had faith in her.

While she waited and imagined, she ate too much and felt sorry for herself, revolted herself—there was some satisfaction in that, an explanation for his abandoning her.

One day, she came back from grocery shopping to find him back again. He sat facing the door with Thomas held down on his lap, the cat's ears flattened, tail twitching. Art used his free hand to open her latest text on his phone—so he did get them!—and held it up to show her, as if it was someone else's he was sharing: *what do u think?* and a snapshot of her latest piece, an ocean of color melded to a scrap of brass from her gallery admirer. "Fantastic," he said, watching while she struggled with the door and the bags of food, smiling. "God, it's good to be home, Babe."

The next day, gone again. Weeks passed.

"At least you're getting your rent money's worth," she told herself.

Her work suffered, then flourished. Inspired by the brass piece, she found a junk shop with interesting castoffs, and experimented with various substrates after cleaning, polishing, imagining. Then one morning she awoke curled on the studio floor with the gray dawn at the window illuminating her latest piece on the floor beside her, and her doubts about it fell away. Thomas was perched on her hip, purring. Groggily, she ran her hand along its edges, celebrating.

She was not proud of herself, she was astonished. She couldn't coherently think about how it had happened, this thing she didn't have to ask Art about to know its worth, its weight, its value. She rubbed the cat's ears the way he liked and he purred louder. She closed her eyes and slept again.

So. Now.

Can *you* remember? Does Art ever see it? Or does she sell the piece for the price of the cat's deposit before he gets back? Is it the brass fellow she sends a snapshot to?

You want her to pack her things, cut her losses and go, don't you? But—remember?—Art has her car. He totaled his running into a truck—she'd had that fretting all wrong! And there was that

money he owed her, too. He'd reassured her it wouldn't be long before this thing he (and Fern, let's give credit where credit is due) had on the burner paid off, and then he'd get another car and let her have hers back and pay off what she'd invested in the project.

Did Mad write that check without insisting on knowing more about what the investment was? Or had she told him she didn't have that much in her account till he looked at her register and shook his head? Did the check—he says he's learned not to let it bother him when she cries—have tear stains on it? Did Thomas leave that scratch mark on Art's shoulder? Or was that a mistress?

Or her? Mad?

Tell you what, let's not make her wonder about the scratch. Not now. Let's hoist her on her elbow to admire what happened: a crushed copper kettle with tongues of glass licking along its valleys, rising like waves over its ridges.

The studio was chilly, and Thomas, feeling neglected, walked back and forth between her and her creation. Not a big, splashy, fashionable piece—just a few feet long—still, she's there, looking at it, not looking away. Not till an hour has passed and the fog rolls in does an inkle of doubt arise: should she have been more careful? Or should she have cared less, let go and let things fall where they would?

What was she afraid of?

Art had told her *his* greatest fear. Death.

But everyone fears death. Don't you? And likely you fall into the category of people he always said were just fooling themselves, thinking they'd rather die in their sleep, or in a sudden, unannounced moment. "People think suffering is the worst that could happen, but, man, I just think, give me a grace period, a warning, a sign, you know, so I can get my shit together before I go. Babe, if it ever gets so bad you need to off me, skip the hatchet and make it arsenic, would you?"

Of course, Mad would never dream of killing Art, and even joking about it makes her queasy. But her anxiety about him getting run over by a truck might mask a yearning, a desire for freedom she doesn't have to acknowledge, or even know is there.

And you? You wouldn't go that far—borrowing a milk truck, for instance—to set her free, would you? Still, you'd like things sewn up tidily, I'll bet, some daredevil activity that the *they* or the *we* used to be obsessed with—bungee jumping in some exotic, unregulated locale perhaps, and he doesn't get his shit together, doesn't even have time to soil himself before he's gone.

The thing is, she does love him, right? I mean, so what if, sometimes, she'd listened to his heart's faltering and fantasized his deathbed? So what if, deep down, she indulged a desire to immortalize the love she still declared so tenderly? Not murderous anger, just a realistic reckoning that closure would have to come soon or there would be nothing to close.

And why not through a satisfyingly inevitable succession of events and factors not the least of which was her accepting and utilizing the fellow artist's cast off brass which may, or may not, have contributed to Art's feeling he had to prove himself and disregard the mumble and stumble of a hungover guide on work holiday from Denmark, shuffling through neglected bungees lying about on the jungle floor where, as it happens, some salt-starved creature had taken to gnawing on grips sweated by tourist hands? The guide further lightheaded from the cheroot bummed off the bus driver, and Art—so shrewd and yet so gullible—negotiating a discount by reason of his previous experience, allowing the guide to sleep it off in the shade of a Jacaranda while Art fastened his own harness and started toward the edge.

How splendid the sky, the tree tops, the circling buzzards! And it's all right that you can't remember. There's really no way of knowing, for sure. They—Art and Mad, both—could have been orphans raised by teenaged monks at the base of the Himalayas or foundlings at a dysfunctional utopia in upstate New York. Who knows what might have led to the lip of the cliff and the yawning sea of trees

below. Or to the floor, with the cat, art finished for the moment, a satisfying completion, not to say arrival—the most anyone can strive for: momentary, fleeting, but permanent and lasting at the same time, like a life hurling itself off a cliff, trusting we will break its fall.

The End