

Pavane

After the assault, she drove quickly to the tanning booth. Traffic elbowed through the enclosure of the Lexus. Who wouldn't let her weep behind the beat of windshield wipers? She shut off the radio, music would not smear the charcoal carapace of the new car and close air inside it steeped with the smell of her own drenched hair. She was more concerned about a bite blacking her shoulder, a cheek swelling, an eye that would soon purple.

She would swear they had taken the keys back from him, but returning with two sacks from the market to the dusk-ridden house, he was there. Would this have mattered? She had invited him. Her reasoning caught up quickly to what she had done to make this happen with tires filleting water off the road, but nerves squeezed thoughts out when traffic thickened and the stoplight again changed. She could see the silly smokestack ahead, painted in blue and white stripes like a giant buoy. The health club had been converted from an electric plant, giant insulators still protruding from its sides. They were painted to look like a pigs nipples in an advert for a bank. Her husband's name was painted in the advert on the smokestack. She looked at it through the windscreen and the rain.

Hair still flecking wet from a furtive shower, she clicked quickly up the steps. Drops of rain licked against sheer stockings like tears flecking clear a scrim. No one really paid attention to women who looked as she was about to. She never stared at them herself. What would one say, smiling: 'Husband?' 'Boyfriend?' An officious tissue could be offered like a kabuki actor tipping a fan from his sleeve.

She was paid judicious non-attention by the cashier presenting her card. Both of the booths were free.

“The standing one has a new lamp.”

She nodded and stepped into the dressing room.

Its basins and mirrors unfurled before her empty. Only a buzzing light. When she came in the morning, it was never so quiet and solicitous. She undressed and put on a blue bathrobe she had stuffed in her bag to hide marks the carpenter put on the territory he had decided to claim. It was embroidered with yellow tigers with rude black streaks on them. As she never took it from home, it made this mirror seem somewhat more like home. The bare lighting at full length made her notice that this pattern worn every morning and evening was the same little boys wear on their pajamas: a gift it was. She turned away from the mirror again. She could sit down for a little bit beside her bag on the long bench.

It was stupid of her to think she could deal with the man alone. He had seemed polite. Some two months earlier he came to collect the advance and they started planning renovations. She was alone then at the same time, it was also raining, but colder. He was recognized at once today. The outline of his shoulders and his very round head it must have been. Or that she had expected him to beat her home. Fuzzed insect, jellyfish, a stinking billy-goat with his oily neck smashing her nose. The things he said to her, the names he slathered over her ear. She blew nauseous air out through close lips standing and took a look in the cold mirror.

One hyperwhitened canine stuck always out a little more than the other and on that side her tongue already lolled a lump like the striker at a pinball. Now the lip had turned, purpling, rearing at the edge. Around the gulf under the thin, blonde hairs darkened where the top of the eye socket met the far left of the brow, an evil leaven soon to rise.

All this you can cover with creamy purposiveness that is good enough to avoid notice in poor light or, in better, to suppress it by the defiant effort of the façade itself. He batted her eye like a cat at a ball as she struggled under him. Wriggling away, bending up as he grappled her waist, his pants half down already, she did the lip herself, smacking against his flapping, hissing chin. The lip was pinched between the tooth and his chin, snapping her back, making him rage the more. He thumped at her not quite getting to it, not quite 'himself'. Leaning forward closer to the mirror, gripping the folds of her bathrobe, she hunched her shoulders. She could reckon with this, but she would not pull the bathrobe aside at the shoulder to see his bite reflected in that light. His barking glyph etched later – that sick poppy, that fecal prune petaled from his teeth – might bring him too close and she would be sick.

She surveyed the face again. It was not so bad, these three outside wounds. The eyebrow would not be noticed as easily. The eye would take as much as a week, the lip just a couple of days. She would not be able to hide all of it from the man. Though there is much he never notices. She pulled apart the bathrobe lower over her knickers' lace hemline, looking down where his thumbnails dug deepest to hook her trousers' waist. One long and another short were scratched through to blood, jagged like tears in thin muslin. She looked up at them in the mirror. They would make black scabs. With this she gagged or sobbed a

little and spat into the sink. She had truncheoned his beer-gut with her knee, though it seemed a mere interloper in the crime. She had broken two nails on him. The belt was pulled tight and she turned to the bench. Now restoration could begin. Though still alone, she disrobed again in a toilet stall and not in front of the witnessing mirror. A thick dollop of lotion began to encloak her legs. Even a little stinging will be welcome. Scent and placid rhythm of her palms put soothing eddies over troughs and valleys of her panic. This was the first thing she could remember doing after the attack.

Two women, honking and clucking like sisters, flapped their thongs past her stall. She put on her own pair and set her back to them unnoticed.

The key to the booth was shaped like a half-moon. She bent down to see the small hole in the dark corridor. Out of habit, she snapped the goggles on. She sucked back in a shout that blurted through the hall in a bark. The right cup of the eye guard clapped against the sore eye, pushing fluid in a pocket downward against the lid. She hung the robe to the side and darted into the small, polyvinyl tropics.

She was in a kind of darkness induced by the caps over her eyes, but her skin felt light and the mild pressing of warmth. She had never been in the standing booth and there couldn't be a better time to try it when she would not know if after lying down she would be able to get up again. Its advantage was the rays hitting you evenly from all sides. This one also had a small fan that whirred by her right foot coiling the clean smell of plastic up through the lotion's acrid fumes. This sound and smell, the even hum upon her skin, eyes stopped, and hair piled off the neck, seamed in around all of her to form the quietude of an artificial lagoon.

The obese Kazakh at the hair salon was hired just to wash and towel hair. She never spoke, her own oiled locks done behind a kerchief, her fingernails bit down to the quick whinged below the cormlike nubs that gripped the scalp like a melon. One of her chief admirers called her 'the Pianist'. Women at the hair salon filed behind her like propitiates of a magical buffalo; but men acted a little chastened to wince beneath her massy kneading and maternal breasts buffing the back of the sink. So men mock the hours we while away at personal care because they think you're there to do nothing purposively. They do not feel meditativeness working itself into the body.

He had said she would be better to negotiate with him. She had worked out the details and had his name and number on her telephone.

"You would be better convincing him. Just to wait another couple weeks."

It had been six weeks already and she had stalled as long as she could. She could only be either ruder or more obsequious; and he could neither pay nor kneel.

"You can be more logical with him. We'd start a frank exchange and end up breaking all the stuff he'd put in."

She splayed the fingers of one hand against the rounded corner at the edge of two bright panels and leaned. Had he arranged to meet him, it would not have been at home. One would not come too close to a corner the other had pissed in. They would have met in a café and he brought some of it for him. But she was to meet him at home to convince and mollify, surrounded by the nails he had driven and panels he had cut. This was the foolhardy

thing. She would then give what they thought was enough to tide him over; but less than he would have because she was so persuasive.

“Ladies are usually better at this kind”, he said, turning back her hair with his fingers, grazing her ears with his nails.

Two braces of tears, one after the other, welled up round the blinders’ bottom lips. She leaned her head on the side, one set joined to pat the floor with the dried sweat. The other slipped down round the nostril and round the knot on the lip.

What they thought would tide him over made him loud beyond any reasoning. She could sob in here, above the fan and within the lights.

She had hoped he might come home early to interrupt the insults and hollering. A little later she hoped he would not. Of course he could not be early and interrupt how her logic progressed, how her new assurances were proceeding. She shifted back on both feet, took off the goggles and covered her eyes with a hand. She could stop weeping or she could go on till they dragged her out and strapped her to a gurney.

With beams of light making apricot stripes of the flesh round the bones of her fingers, causes and possibilities squirmed to expose their pink undersides. Her man had used the same arguments with her before. This was not the first case she had finessed but the first one she had failed to. The principal sum here was greater.

With a *tchik*, the door rolled upon and her time was up. No one, thank God, was in the gloomy hall to catch her gushing in her underwear. The sound of heavy rain through the shaded window smacked against her skimpy buttocks whilst she bent to insert the key again.

No one was waiting. Let her take another turn. The surprise slackened the tears. As her rhetoric with him fissured, she fumbled for telephone in her bag. He snatched it from her and she knew how this would end. When he finds out what happened to her, he will never pay the rest. Her last attempt at mollification was to offer 18% interest.

“I think I’ll take some interest now”, he said in a low voice. In the hall he threw her bag away and pushed her hard in the chest. When he sees the scratches, he’ll never *have* to pay him. And she will still have to keep his name and number on her telephone. She began to think about collecting herself, taking breaths, making an effort to do something about this. Before, he had counted the placating wad of bills and smacked them on the countertop he had clamped and fixed together. After this, he took the money and left her struggling off her back, ankle cocked in debilitated improvisation. She was herself there inside the booth, her face dry and cheek against the white wall. She stopped and began to attune. Old spring would subside to warmth, she would exert force when it was needed, and she would be very brown. She felt lightly the sac round her left eye and she carefully held the goggles on, with the straps free to avoid lines. She felt a little of the satiny sweat round her neck, she heard the fan humming again and she lingered a little longer in a capsule full of light.