

Truth

The days before her lover arrived were a tangle of anticipation and anxiety. He never said he would come, never called her between visits, and yet she always knew he was on his way. He would always arrive late, after she was in bed, after she was already asleep. He would never ring the bell from the street but would wake her with his persistent tapping on her door.

She never knew how he would be - as she remembered, or with something else missing, from his mind or from his body. As usual, she tired of her other lovers, tired of her friends, wanted to be left alone, preparing for days for his knock.

She sat quietly, watching the world pass by on the street below her window. She never knew how to prepare. She would start, then change her mind. She thought to wax her legs. She took the kit from its place beneath the bathroom sink, plugged it in, watched the wax melt, watched the hairs float to the surface. Before she filtered the wax, she changed her mind and unplugged the heater. She dipped her fingers into the wax and watched it harden. She rolled the false skin into a ball and dropped it back into the liquid. He wouldn't mind that her legs weren't smooth; he probably didn't notice anyway.

As the wax hardened, she filed her nails. Of this she was sure, her lover liked to have her nails dig deep into the muscle of his back. She liked to put her nails in his flesh, liked the feeling that she could hold him forever. She filed her nails so she could dig but not draw blood. He had already given enough of his blood; she didn't want to take any more. Sometimes, when he arrived, he looked almost empty, almost drained of life. She wished she knew how to fill him again, how to transfuse some of herself into him.

During these waiting days she lost interest in food. Perhaps she wanted to weaken her body, to know something of the way his body must feel. By the time the wax had hardened it was late afternoon. The thin autumn light made her room glow as the rays cut through the dust and smoke.

She knew her lover was near, perhaps already in the country. She shuddered, realised that her fear was now stronger than her longing. She remembered their first meeting.

She was young and running. He was resting from running. They met on a tired old ferry groaning its way from Paros to Piraeus. They met on the stern rail, both gazing back to the island, both still saying goodbye, neither ready to look forward. Before she knew his name, he told her he needed her, needed her to help him through the night, maybe would need her still tomorrow when the boat arrived.

No reason came to say no and she followed him down to the cabin which smelled of burnt diesel. In the darkness of the room, he asked her to take off her clothes and put her body next to his.

She discovered the first scar before she knew his face.

Her fingers fell into the place as she explored the mass of his back, as she lay beside him, in the way he asked her to lie. She knew intuitively to say nothing, and yet the curiosity of her fingers drew her back again and again, to a place where something was missing. She was fascinated by the dent, by the way the skin curled up at its edges, by the shiny surface inside, thin and stretched like cellophane. She longed to know what was missing, what took this piece away from him. Time and again her fingers returned. Time and again she forced her hands away until, at last, she was able to hold him the way he asked. In the comfort of her arms, he fell asleep.

She lay awake and watched over him. Somehow, she held this massive man, made it safe for him to sleep. As he slept, she felt the tremors run through his body. Many times, she heard him call out, calling a name that she didn't have the tongue to say. As the ferry droned and shuddered its way to sunrise, she learned to love him. She loved him for the way he trusted her with his body, his fear, his dreams.

As the first light entered the cabin through the tiny porthole, she eased her body a little away from his. She moved his head away from where she held it all night against her chest. She wanted to look at his face as he slept. It made her smile to see the peace that her holding had brought to his features. She forgot that she could have been anyone. She forgot that the only reason she was here was because she didn't say no. She felt a love she had never known before. She felt like a mother, giving simply because asked, needing nothing to justify her being here. She felt her desire, present but satisfied just by his presence. She wanted to say his name but she didn't know it yet, wouldn't know it for another year. He woke as the ferry slowed to enter the harbour. She watched as the fear returned to his face.

He sat up, unsure of where he was, not knowing who she was. He said he had to leave. He thanked her for being there. His language was simple; it was not his language. She couldn't tell which language was his. He asked her just to let him go and she agreed. She wrote her number down, overruled his hesitation, forced him to take it before he left, made him put the paper in his pocket. She forgot to write her name. When he left the cabin, she waited. She wanted him to get away. She wanted him to know he didn't need to run, at least not from her.

When she returned to the deck it was empty but for the crew. She walked ashore. She felt serene and tall. Two days later she was home again, back with her familiar home and friends and work. Her past was now the past.

She felt stronger for her night with the man. She felt freed by her night of holding his body. Her fingers longed to touch the hole in his back but she was unable to call his face to mind, just his hair - long and black and bedraggled into dreadlocks by the sea and sun.

She didn't miss him, was even surprised that she didn't miss him. With a new sense of herself, she restructured her life. She no longer felt the need for a man, but learned how to choose one when she wanted a body to hold for the night.

By the time he called again he was already forgotten. His call came in the middle of the night. His request was as simple as the first and she didn't say no. She despatched the man who lay sleeping beside her. He left quietly, without argument. He already knew the way she was.

She dozed in the warm pool of the bed until, just as the sunlight broke through the trees into her room, she heard a tapping at the door. It was a slow persistent tapping. It could have been her heartbeat. She felt the resignation in the sound as if it didn't really expect an answer. She opened the door and let him into her life.

She knew no way to welcome him. She showed him into her living room. His size made the room look small. She made coffee and sat across from where he sat. She was just looking. She wanted to know how he looked. She could see the fear, but she knew he felt safe here, with her. Her fingers wanted to touch the scar, wanted to be sure that something was still missing. His hair was still long, no longer matted but still thick and coarse. His big face, framed by the black of his hair and divided by the thick line of his brow reminded her of a bullock. The shape of the bones was clear beneath the dense layer of his brown skin.

As she looked, she could see his features soften. The transition was clear, just as it had been on the boat when she had watched the fear return. She knew that her being here, quietly watching him, was enough to make him feel safe. He could let go of the tensions that kept the world at bay. When he finished his coffee, she took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

It was only then that she noticed the missing fingers; she hadn't seen that before. Perhaps it was because his hands were so big that it wasn't obvious. She had the urge to inspect, to raise his hand and know for sure what was gone. She restrained herself, waiting until she had undressed him, waiting until she had laid him down onto the crumple of her sheets, waiting until she had removed her clothes and put her body next to his. Now she could see, as he lay there, brown skinned and massive in the morning light, his little finger was gone. The scar extended down into a hand which ended abruptly, incomplete, in a ribbon of shiny pinks and purples knotted together along the edge. The next finger was only half a finger, ending in a twist like a sausage skin - tied off, sealing the entrance to his body. She interlaced her fingers with his. She liked the feeling of incompleteness where her little finger rested in space, alone and unheld.

Suddenly she was filled with questions, hungry for answers, for details. When she looked at his face, now passive and innocent, gazing up at the ceiling with eyes so rich and brown in the yellow light, she knew this was not the time. She knew that she would have to know, but not yet.

Now was the time to gather his face and press it to her chest. As she did so, her fingers stumbled upon another aberration. They found a ridge, hidden beneath the mat of his hair. It was a solid ridge which her fingers followed into a circle. There was no hair, just shiny skin and the ridge. Her fingers wouldn't keep off it, wouldn't stop their journey round the ridge.

Without lifting his head, without moving his eyes, he told her it was titanium. A piece of titanium had been carved and shaped and rounded and bonded to the bone, covering the place where bone was missing. A piece of his thigh, a hairless piece had been cut free and

shaped and stitched to cover the metal dome. He told her how, along with the bone, he had lost a piece of his brain. More had been taken by the surgeons. He said it took a year before he knew what he lost with that piece of brain. Even now, he still discovered new things lost, names displaced, memories mislaid, words that no longer knew where they belonged. She wanted to look inside, wanted it to be glass and not metal that kept her out.

As he spoke, he fell asleep. She remained awake, holding his face to her chest, sure that in his sleep he knew she was watching over him. He woke again as the sun was going down, woke to the bedroom bathed in shades of reds, woke to the woman watching his sleep. This time his face retained its calmness.

She said she'd be back, returned to the bed with coffee and toast and cigarettes. He wanted to talk. He wanted to talk of his wounds. He knew she would listen with the same care as she watched. He told her of his childhood, of the family whose home was taken by fire and crushed by bulldozers into the earth. He told of his people whose land had been stolen. He told of the strangeness of walking on a land where his family had walked for hundreds of years, a land which was no longer his. He told of the guns and soldiers, of the curfews and beatings. He told of the daily violence which became a war, of losing his family and losing his friends, of the people cut from his life while his eyes were closed.

He told of the night spent in a hole in the ground while the world exploded and burned around him. He told of the man who slipped into the crater beside him, the man who said he came from America. He told her how, in the midst of the inferno, the American talked about truth, talked about photographing the truth, believed that the world could be changed by the truth, that truth would stop the violence.

The American gave him a camera, a pocket full of films, a telephone number in New York. As the war raged on above them, he learned about light and frame and distance. He learned how to translate what he saw into numbers so that the camera could see what he saw. He learned how to use the camera with his eyes closed, or held with his hands behind his back, how to see what the camera could see without having to look through the lens. He learned how to capture the truth.

As the sunrise exposed the vulgarity of the night, the guns and rockets fell into a shameful silence. He took his first picture, of his mentor, the American caked in dust and blood who helped him keep his soul. His second picture recorded the moment his mentor was ripped apart as he ran into the sights of a sniper who had no soul.

He fled the country by foot, running and recording, gathering the truth until his films were full. When he finally called the number in New York he spoke to the American's wife, entrusted her with the memory of that pure and gentle man and, later, his photographs which she promised to show to the world.

And so, began a life recording other people's wars, other people's tragedies and losses. He had nothing left to lose but himself and he lost himself piece by piece. He showed her his wounds, told her their stories, told the story of the truths he collected in return for those wounds. He let her touch the scars and dents she hadn't yet discovered. There was no pride

in his stories. He didn't need her sympathy nor appreciation. He only needed her to listen, to watch when he returned, to let him go when it was time.

Over the years, he brought her less and less of himself. Piece by piece she saw him cut away, perhaps by a bullet or by a white hot metal fragment like the one that divided his leg at the knee. Sometimes, simply by what he had to see. She told little of this to her friends. All they knew was that when he came to her, she was entirely his. They didn't know his name so they never knew his work. They watched her grow older, childless, this, the woman they all thought would raise a family long before them.

Deep in the night, deep in her dreams, she heard the tapping, a hopeless tapping, first as a tree branch against the window of the cottage where her dream had taken her, and then as the feeble call from her lover at her door.

She awoke filled with fear, didn't want to answer, didn't want to be there. She searched for her courage, slowly moved towards the door, found just enough courage to open it, to let the grey and lifeless man in, to help him to the bed. He was asleep before she finished laying him down. He slept on as she rolled him back and forth, peeling away his clothes, washing him down with a warm flannel, inspecting his body for new wounds, renewing contact with old wounds.

There was nothing new to alarm her, his body was as complete as it was when last she saw him. And yet he was emptier than ever before. He slept for four days. And for four days she watched over him, sometimes raising him to the edge of his coma to pour warm soup or honey water down his throat, sometimes rolling him to change the towel filled with brown urine that leaked uncontrolled from his body.

On the fourth day he woke a little, just enough to tell her he was leaving, just enough to tell her he had lost his soul. In a whisper, fainter than the breeze outside, he told her how he killed a man, how he smashed his camera into the head of a soldier he found raping a young girl, how he rolled him off and held him as the girl fled into the woods. He told her how, as he held the dying man, he watched him briefly return.

He saw that who he held was just a boy - a boy suddenly aware that he had killed, suddenly aware that he had raped, racked with despair at what he had become, filled with fear that it would end here, alone, despised by the stranger who watched over him. He told her how, as he watched the life seeping from the boy, he realised there was no truth. What he thought was truth, captured by his camera, was nothing more than his way to hide from that which lurked within him.

Now he saw how he used his pictures to make himself neutral, as if it were possible to be free of being human. Now he saw how, given the right moment, given the right conditions, he too could kill. He decided, in knowing that, he could no longer live. He left his soul with that boy, unable to let him go alone He brought his body back to her to say goodbye. He closed his eyes. She held his face to her chest. She felt the warmth recede, the tensions settle, his weight drop into the bed. She smelt the acetone of his last breath. She no longer needed to watch over him and fell asleep beside his empty body.