

Lives*

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1.

She is the one who crunches numbers and traces the arc of company progress till midnight, when there is nothing in the fridge, and her eyes give way. She is unabashed about being a right-winger, about her two-minute attention span, about her preference for airport bestsellers. She is skittish and demanding, terrifies both men and women. She is also not scared of being hated. For this we respect her.

This is because in a lot of ways we want to be her. Hers has been the sort of post-college release into the world most people dream of—an effortless unspooling, into the best in the best of possible worlds: a seven-digit salary, upward mobility, and a doting but relaxed family. OK, so that was the 90s, when the word “manager” was one’s ticket to anything from hotel discounts and round trips around the world to house mortgages and marriage proposals, and we’re always around twenty years behind anyway.

The problem is: we are wrong about her. The only thing that she has going for her really is the doting but relaxed family bit. Rather than the best in the best of possible worlds, it is more her dogged single-mindedness, a quality whose success has been proven across time and cultures. In this she is like Singapore, that peculiar island state whose trees, so methodical, so in place, are almost put-on, whose sky is so formal that its structures of light and dark might as well have been concocted indoors: the loneliest set-up on the planet. And now we’re five years into the new millennium and people are cheating the system right, left, and center, collecting a paycheck while staying at home. The true rent of life being the one that lies between your job

and your children. Yet she has chosen her mold and for this she has to do away with any illusion that the fierce, singular fire that keeps her ablaze will not burn her one day. Having your cake and eating it too may be our currency *du jour*, but not hers.

Take yesterday: it was two days into the New Year, and while the rest of us were sipping G and T's in some island resort, she was talking about having five episodes in the can, shouting down all four corners to winnow down the long list of topics. “Stay on message!” I told them,” so she told us, failing as usual to see the irony. But it was all there: television, PR, marketing, competitive edge, all those 90s buzzwords. She talks in terms of what is appropriate and what is not while batting nary an eyelash at spending nine million rupiahs on a new Manolo that would “knock ‘em dead.” And the tube is not even her field – it’s just a *spinoff* of the *core business*.

But sometime just around midnight the voice that called out from the other end of the line was stricken. She told me, as anyone who appreciates fruit knows something is off when handed a mango by the moon, she has always known what to expect. The age difference. What people think. What the boy really thinks. But it's not as if she knew how to keep them. Not like the adeptness other older women who have been nabbed demonstrate so effortlessly: the seduction without demand as they please both their conquests' erections and their nurturing warmth, and never, never lecturing them about such things as personal hygiene and having life goals. She has no cunning to keep her boys in sweet suspense, nor to rout other females. She has no children to sell off as she was once sold. She has nothing else to call green, not pea, not olive, not viridian.

The next morning when I called her, though, she was at the gym. “All they want, these boys, is your body,” she said, with no trace of last night’s vulnerability. “Like black soldier flies, you know. In Week 28, after they have had enough of you, they leave their pupa casings and disappear. So I have nineteen weeks left in which to recuperate my losses which is really not so bad –three weeks to whip myself into shape, give and take a week for the imponderables, and another sixteen to even out the balance sheet.”

2.

In his last pic he was upstaged by the chair. It was large and curly, jutting behind everybody's crown like a giant cauliflower, or a massive Jell-O head. As though the chair had claimed him and his family. Not that his family seemed to mind: it was as if they had concurred on the details, in half-whispers, when he was looking the other way, with his back towards them, blowing a cloud of smoke into the dank February air ...

But he is at heart a reasonable man. He thinks, okay, there comes a time when a grievance, shapeless as it often is, comes even to the most well-oiled family, one should not fight it. The same with age. But what difference does it make now? He has taught them how to breathe, how to think, how to chop garlic and flick its parched skin into a plastic bag held up on one side by the cutlery drawer when there is no bin around. He has taught them how to avoid trouble and clean up good, how to plot and plan like a German. They cannot go far without him. They never have.

He is after all, pushing seventy, and when you grow old, you are no longer in control of your sea. Friends perish in the storm, wife takes over the ship, children rise like ghosts of dead pirates, suddenly assuming voices and forms. Even the domestic help seem to be real, actual people, and for the first time, you call them by their names.

But he will play his part, for all is not lost. You might even say that the portrait is the perfect anti-mask, and its accidents are well earned. At fifty-five his wife is goddess-glorious and at last becoming her own person. Of course everybody knows that deep down she is a dull person, merely padded and adaptable, biding always for the ultimate pose that would unleash her into the world. As to the rest of them, well, it may be time to assume other children, take up new families. Children he does not have to sire, protect and mold into adults. Ready-made families: supple, generous, undemanding.

But o how foolish of his family, to think that he has no wiles. For he is still the master of the false dusk, isn't he? Attractive stubble on still-taut flesh, eyes hiding a mania he can trigger on a whim, a certain patrician witheredness that photographs of his youth simply do not impart.

And over such craft are shirts crisp and well pressed, the mark of an assiduous household. At five paces you could already smell him: an elegant, subtle, worldly musk. The desirable women always fall for his sort, a man well-cared for, because they know that at his age it is a good system, not necessarily the burning love of a wife, that does it. A good, affluent, effective system. Order has nothing to do with passion. Even children of the tenderest age know that.

3.

Even as a child she was fascinated with the form of things, as much as their possibilities. She did not only stare things out but also saw them, saw them until they became something else: guilt in the fish-scales of someone's eyes, lack of love in tongue ulcers. She would zero in on something: an aftertaste, the particular slant of an eye, the exact interval between the smell of bile in someone's breath and the moment it carried none – like a surreal emptying out, a sudden odorless air after hours of hard rain. She poked into things for the red-rimmed, the glassy, the soft and the blind; she pondered wrinkles, brown spots, what the flare of nostrils might actually mean shaped this way instead of that. Told of the death of a relative, she wondered which came first: the maggots or the vultures, which of them would the deceased prefer. She saw the thing not as the thing itself, instead she saw the eddying, the scurrying, the vanishing acts, the crowds thinning into tiny rivulets, night's ingress, glib but full of doubt, secrets obscured or revealed by buildings, streetlight, tears.

People remember her as the one who, at an early age, discovered not just Eliot and Hardy, but also words and meanings: the glance between the prince and his princess is “hauntingly ethereal,” the manner of the man who swindles money from the unsuspecting traveler is “braggadocio,” wafting from the kitchen is the “seraphic” smell of fried cassava; the little cat that curls up on her master’s bed is displaying “divine complacency.”

In high school, she thought Hamlet meant that words were just that: words, words, words, but it did not take her long to realize that it was all meant in irony. No, as William Gass the Wise Man says, there is no difference between news and idle chat, poetry and autobiography, history and psychiatry, pimp and virtue. She stands in awe of transformation: the snowman’s carrot

and two black cherries are never merely carrot and cherries, but possess all the intimacy of nose and eyes. Seriously now, how many people remember the Yeti of myth? Or the Stalin of school days?

She dreamed that one day the work she was born to produce would not merely be written, read or recited, but *talked about*, yarned as the tale of everywoman testifying to a million little things known as “life,” letters not merely strung into words but into poetry, myths, eternal truths: so familiar and universal that no woman should ever have to feel alone again.

No wonder then, that she had broken down to the point of disrepair when the award for best young writer of the year went to someone else. Someone whose first and only line suggested that all of us are nothing but waves of icy air, without blood, or lymph, or flesh; flowing only along this canal towards a final pallor.

4.

She is the one you have found for the last thirty years bent over the same desk in the corner of the salon. No fear, she does own the place, including the paint jobs (eleven times in total) and all the hopes and memories, big and small, coagulated in the white curds of its wall: hide and seek, thwarted desire, the closet political. And of fun times with Gia, best dog there ever was, maybe her life’s only real forever. But one does wonder, looking at her, what feelings does she wake up to, rising every morning to the same universe, greeting the same people, their lives taking a blessed pause in the folds of her hands – only to depart again without her?

Lately she is grayer, slower, but not a day older in her hopes. Some people still remember a time of uncustomary bravura when she had suddenly flowered, like a magnified signet typeface, into a magazine size working mum celebrity. For a while, she took her pleasures at a tilt, letting her reticence go for the frills of slo-moing herself through the minor excesses of fame: the occasional parapraxis, the fluty, distracted greetings, the oversalted dishes three days in a row. It is evident she had once been attractive, if not exactly a dish then certainly not plain, yet it was those shy cat’s eyes, well-accustomed as they were to the swift disjunctions of life, that plunged her back into the normalcy that was her lot to bear. And here she remained.

And so others come and go, all shadows of what they once were, and she feels for them all, absorbing without growing, taking their sorrows away without a gesture of thanks in return, not even for always being there on everybody else's watch. She sees them all, the best and the worst of them, the flaws they're trying to hide from the world. Yet nothing, nothing about her seems released or altered, even when the child within, the same one who at six believed she knew everything, just keeps growing, and growing, and growing.

5.

She was the woman no one paid attention to. But she was there, as much as everybody else, cowering in a corner and the only one in black. That cloudy day in February she looked frumpy and defeated, dark lace deepening the gaudy charcoal of her eyes. The half-light of the courtroom shattered not so much body as soul. Everything about her was ever so slightly too sharp, ever so slightly too dark. ~~dark~~.—But in a different light she would turn heads: her eyes were golden brown, at once playful and sensual. On a good day, in the warmth of a considerate lover's bed, she might even be called beautiful.

Right then, however, she felt nothing, not about herself nor about the drama that unfolded before her. She could not see what others could. The sweet, aching, wobbly feeling in her womb, that had lingered months past childbirth, was gone. No one looked at her, accorded her some part in this new season of lives in the drama she created but was not credited for. For to create is to stain and white is a color easily soiled.

That night, she dreamed of a girl, around ten years of age, with brown eyes shaped like almonds. An ace at school, a hit among family and friends, she talked back to adults, was funny and fearless. How she was loved, the girl's mother told her, the minute she and her husband laid eyes on her, months before they were able to bring her home, and called her theirs.

After a downpour the city is always moist in the night, its edges thick, like paper cutouts. So pronounced are things during these times that they say you can see the comings and goings of all nocturnal creatures, marking out the incubus from the succubus, tipping the proper balance.

When she managed to fall asleep again, she saw the little girl already a young mother, except that she was lying on a bed in the middle of a room, dead. She looked so grown up as to be outside anyone's purview, but in that jaundiced light of death, she was the ultimate Other. Meanwhile, people kept streaming in with the harsh sunlight, people who had bored the girl to tears, people she had avoided, people who had so asserted her difference, people who had come to her wedding, all 1,400 of them. Their bodies bent low at the door, as they shuffled their way to the coffin.

When she woke up, she thought, if the soul is the 'form' of the body, where is that girl now, where has she gone? She didn't want to wake up. She wanted to stay with the girl, go wherever she went.

The next day's afternoon sun strained the shutters of her room, trying to push itself in. She was still in bed; the melancholy of her own jaundice, something she had recognized in that dream, had given way to a more generic pallor. It was the pallor of deflation and demise, a heart run aground. It was likely she would stay this way forever, framed in more ways than one, she herself the frame.

6.

They call him The Cicada.

In fact, since he left the prison camp, it has become his only name.

With the exception of the termite queen, the cicada is the longest-living insect. Having spent seventeen dormant years underground, the cicada dryad emerges and sheds its skin. As an adult, it flits around in the sun for five weeks before it dies. A swift death row, in human measurement: living only to hunt death down and hold it to its word.

Nobody quite knows how he came to be this way, not even himself. But once, there was a life he knew of, something that had to do with a piece of land, a slanting slice of green just off the main road where there were children and bees flitting around a movement of water. Hints everywhere, of something about to happen; a river too briny despite its autonomy.

And then this thing happened, and then there was nothing but the dense mass of his prison, this twisting and turning virgin foliage with nary a footpath to use as a guide. Seventeen years of knowing only one sure thing: that the river is the center of everything, so central it projects its fears and prejudices like the brashest of propaganda. But how he had pinned all his hopes on it: washing away to a new beginning like Prince Karna¹, leaving hardly a trace, only later prompting questions for all time. Watching, from a ruddy patch on the embankment, heaven opening like the ticket counter at a train station: one way or return? Goat-class or rooster-class? Smoking or non-smoking?

Some say he used to be a painter: charting involutes of clenched forms, knots of gully or tree or flower imposed upon a wombed setting that may or may not be a belly, a casket, a Pandora's Box. Others recall pictures of him as a nine year old, standing beside his parents and elder sister. The posy in his sister's grasp seems to have flown out of her mother's russet kebaya², and this russet can be found on all of his subsequent canvases: his skies, his garrets, his intestines—the duty of his memory. But one day it all stopped.

Now, whatever is left of life he sees through her eyes. She certainly remembers how she has lain beside him at least twice a week for ten years watching his face settle to sleep, the peaks and the hollows, the dots and creases. She would trace the rims of his eyes, his nose, his lips of shale, and rest her forefinger on the black flecks crowding his cheeks as if to heal him from the wear of memory. She would whisper to the walls and to the silence shrouding them to please love and preserve this face, for it has seen everything.

¹ Prince Karna is a noble warrior in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. Even though his allegiance lies with Duryudhana, the eldest of the Kurava brothers, he is actually the son of Surya, the God King, and Kunti, the mother of the five Pandawa brothers. Through a cruel twist of fate, he finds himself fighting his own brothers in the Great Battle of Kurussetra.

² A kebaya is a traditional dress worn by many women in Southeast Asia. It is said to have originated from the court of the Javanese Majapahit Kingdom, and has many variants around the Malay archipelago.

“Did I ever tell you?” he asked her once, “of the time this man from Unit 4 – Landung I think his name was – ventured as far as Wanayasa one day and ended up floating in the very same river, his head almost sliced off his torso? They say he’d been executed by the villagers for debauching one of their women. Some say it’s for honor, others say it’s because the likes of Landung simply failed to give the women’s owners the proper recompense. But you can hardly blame the poor guy for trying. Or the water for allowing all this to take place without a fight.

There was a similar incident in the same area years later even though we’d been forbidden to go there ever since, for fear of stoking old fires.”

She remembers how warped and wilted and weary he looked in the deepest hollows of such sharing, his features indistinguishable from his hair of uncertain color. But remembers too how he could hold captive a room full of strangers as if trailed by Providence’s light, a giant among men.

But all men go back to the same spots, inevitably. Everybody has to have a story. The faces accompanying them do not have to be the same ones, indeed they cannot be the same. Either they’re older, with eyes that have seen different scenes and different realities, or mildly similar, with hopes more intense because they are at the tail end of a long chain of precedents. Trees too, he always told himself, do not always stay faithful; kids chasing butterflies have long since snapped twigs on which certain hopes were carved. Even if he is no longer a vagabond, charged with stealing the future from the children, the trees, and all the fish in the ocean, he has forgotten how it feels to feel.

Many years later she was to admit that yes, it certainly seemed that he was in fact courting nature for a while, wanting it for himself the way the old suddenly want what is never meant for them; only to have words fall flat in his brushstrokes like an impossible union.

He stopped painting until he died one day, alone and just as surely not in her arms. The morning before she was to leave him for the last time the sun was sluggish. He kissed her between her brows in a way she knew was to be the last time and whispered, “I am too much of a real lifer to allow canvas to intercede between history and its victims.”

At last, she felt herself redeemed, even though his death rattle shook her to the core with its silence.

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