

Penelope Isme

His Wife

Angry women come for me at night. The wife, gripping a nail, has long been tapping at the pane and suddenly has broken through. The window has shed its glass across my bed. In its place her ghoulish, house-worked face would curse me but cannot part her lips (the common complaint of her husband—she won't open her mouth to kiss). Already I have gone for the kitchen knife. Each with our shard we eye each other, crouched, circling; her silent, me in hysterics calling her a motherfucker get off my bed.

When he wakes me I am crouched with a fist.

Often when he comes and goes I have the feeling I am visited by ghosts. Telephones being what they are, namely, indiscrete, he arrives with his own key at his own hour. If he comes late at night as often as not he

will not bother waking me. The apartment itself I think is as much of an escape, or secret pleasure as I am; the second set of cups and plates itself an infidelity.

Sometimes he will pour a drink and listen to the low radio and smoke. Sometimes surely he watches me sleep, other times I think he reads. After such a visit when I wake, sometimes to the door closing behind him I remain convinced for some immeasurable drifting while that one or the other of my dead parents has been to see me and gone. Once it was a stillborn daughter. Once the ghost of Hamlet's father.

But why would Hamlet's father leave bills folded under the kettle? And then I know it has been him. Discrete as the dead themselves.

Being kept, I have by now discovered turns out to be



What can a person ever say about themselves that isn't a lie? That I've had more husbands than Dame Elizabeth Taylor? To wit, nine. That I was born in Bangladesh? That I like to fire guns at cans in half-darkened fields? That I like guns in general? And drinking? (And for that matter, like Marlowe, tobacco and boys). I'll say this. I dream about running across tundras pursued by dangerous animals. That is all I ever dream about. I, I, I. What is that? A tissue of quotations.

nothing like a Jean Rhys book. And that's for the best no doubt. We stay in. For a treat, a film, or one of three out of the way restaurants—never on the terrace, never for a long walk or to look in shop windows. I don't mind that. I had not wanted clothes or money or passion; only a quiet room to work in with good light and a little cash for paint and canvas. The trick is to keep a good head on the shoulders. To play flighty or insatiable would tire him. I can't go looking now for another man with a south facing apartment. I know the worth of a bird in the hand. By the same token I cannot either be too domestic. Must drink whiskey, wear clothes the wife would not, wash the dishes sometimes naked, but calmly.

Already my face in the mirror is a reproach. It would be imprudent to give up smoking altogether, but smoking as much as I do already had begun to dull my skin. I have five years maybe before I am invisible to men. That might be generous, say I have three. He might still be keeping me three years—and by then I might have sold a painting. At the end of three years, when my skin is gone, I might after all be paying my own rent and canvas. Why think about it yet?

But already I miss being beautiful for its own sake. No one would shake now when I kissed them. No one say, "You are like diamonds, clean water, bread, the sun." More than that I miss my face when it would

transfix me in the mirror, when I seemed even to myself like some magical animal who had been dipped in a pool and risen glimmering. Old people would touch my skin in conversation, absently, continuously, like children who can't stop fingering their mothers' earrings. I felt that I could see a living fire underneath my skin, as flame in the top of a candle makes wax transparent.

So much for that.

It is clear I won't age well. But what's the good of envying others; happy wives, still vibrant at 40; rich, clear-minded women who keep their bones to set them off with pearls (ah pearls!) through their sixties even until 70 when they become fine paper lanterns wearing flower dresses.

Why begrudge them? In three years I might have sold a painting and then let wives and pearls be damned. I won't need a good jaw to buy brushes. I can get fat if I want and wear dirty clothes.

But its unwise to look forward to anything (as imprudent as boozy introspection on the past). For example; in the beginning, purely as a formality, he discussed at length and often the eventual abandonment of his wife. Fortunately, I recognized this immediately for what it was, a politeness to me. One day I reached across the table to his hand and said that I would be much happier if he would remain with his wife and children. I

said I thought that all our lives could be arranged very quietly, with everyone taken care of and no one dying of jealousy or loneliness. That was how I would prefer it, simply.

This won me considerable sympathy (“my brave, generous...”) and the promise of a weekend trip. The weekend trip, another polite fiction, whittled down eventually to a new coat and a long afternoon at the Picasso exhibition. The coat fits nicely. The Picasso ended in tears. To give him credit the offer of the exhibition was both truly generous and brave. As a benefactor he received only two tickets to the show. His wife would want to go and would have to be refused. He would be bored all day. And we might run into any number of friends and colleagues.

There I was with my new coat and my new sketchbook (he had left me to read some pamphlet about the funding and lending procedures of the exhibition). Everything was fine until I rounded a partition and found the ghoul faces of *Les Mademoiselles d'Avignon*. I wanted to be sick. The slides in my first and only abortive year of art school had not prepared me. I wanted to cover them, to put their bodies back together.

Discipline. Discipline. Nice women don't throw their coats over exhibition pieces weeping. I took out my pencils.

Simply to look more carefully I started a sketch. How could he do this to them? The right half of the composition turned inside out the figures on the left—a violent pulling back of a curtain parallel to a still objectifying one. I moved closer to the brushwork—nasty. Just like a drunk student drawing magic marker on a whore for a joke. But then he must have stood so close to them; stood so close I mean to their still, dead eyes and painted those strokes face to their face, as though applying their make-up.

I went back to my sheet. The fucker I told myself. Shh, shh, work, I told myself. Calmly enough I was getting along. I had the large shapes in place and then he appeared again. “He,” let's give him a name and reserve capital, masculine pronouns standing by themselves for God. Hugh appeared, (said “Ew” in French). Hugh (Ew) stood smack in the middle of the painting, his back toward me. The jacket of his suit hung open, pushed behind his hands which jangled change in both his pockets. He rocked back on his heels. Jangled. Rocked back on his heels. Jangled. If he could have whistled in the gallery he would have. I expected him at any minute to step into the painting for a screw.

For there they were, pinned to the painting, as whores sometimes do stand like beetles in a jar behind glass windows. Before he could turn his look on me I ran out. I was going to go home, to say I had seen

someone who would recognize me and thought it would be better to leave without saying—I was just going home. Paint something and forget it. Paint and forget. And then I saw someone who perhaps did recognize me, namely the wife. She looked calm and pretty. We were wearing the same coat. She was waiting for a friend to bring something—a guidebook or wine, I don't know. She was young looking for her age, trim, with small features and intelligent eyes. She seemed at rest in herself. She was having a nice afternoon. She turned her face just slightly, and saw me gaping at her. I saw by her expression (some tincture of pity and horror the exact ratio of parts I can't say) that to her I wore the same ghoul face that she had worn in my dream. With that mask stapled to my head I fled.

After that day it was difficult to maintain the same tone with Hugh. I was more difficult after the exhibition. Moodier. Unpleasant and unpassionate when interrupted from my work for sex. I was fast becoming a handful from which he might soon have to extricate himself, had he not soon thereafter extricated himself from every human tie by dying one day in a rail accident.

Obviously, this changed everything. This is the phrase I muttered in the studio continuously during the 2 or 3 days that followed; "this changes everything," "Clearly, this changes—." Without exaggeration

Hugh was and had been for two years almost the only person to whom I spoke regularly. I marvelled at how I could have allowed myself to slide into this Havishamesque state of isolation. Yet there I was deprived in one swift blow of patron, lover, landlord, friends, and for that matter casual acquaintances. Let's not be too hasty. I had still a few phone numbers in my wallet, amateur notes on some incomprehensible rosetta stone of intertwining human lives, scrawled on the backs of receipts. Gallery owners mostly. Most recently the number of Hugh's executor, an intimate friend whom I had never met but who had kindly thought to call me, thereby saving me the madness of believing myself abandoned. It occurred to me that I might have worked myself into a state and unwittingly arrived at the home of the Grieving Widow, shouting on the lawn, demanding a scene with the Deceased. Ghastly.

On the third day following the executor's call I noticed in the middle of my mantra (this changes, obviously changes) that I was rolling a nylon over my knee. What could this mean? Where was my smock? In what an alcoholic would refer to as a moment of clarity I realized I was dressing for the funeral.

I felt as I had the first time my mother slapped me. Sitting stock still, with my mother's hand and the wooden spoon crossing and recrossing my cheek, feel-

ing her hate me and the possibility of being forever separated from her by that angry spoon, with one stocking rolled up and the other loose on the ankle. The mark of a slattern. The taxi (when had I phoned for a taxi?) blasted its horn in the street and I collected: 1) stocking 2) shoe 3) bag 4) coat and made for the door.

As soon as the door closed behind me and I stood on the top of the dim, irregular stairs, wondering had I left my keys inside? I became suddenly equally terrified of going down to the cab, or back into the apartment. It was raining which made for leaden light. I made my way—steadying against the wall—down the flight and to the cab, with the nervousness of a child prostitute who a cop has moved along from one anonymous doorway to some unfriendly other. When I checked my compact in the cab it was that young, plain, frightened girl's face I expected to look back at me.

It was raining. The black ash? aspen? branches dripped. I thought about bedraggled birds, and the holes of rats in the banks of the canal. My father once had shown me these on such a day when I was small. "See?" he had said. The taxi crossed a bridge, the water, brown, churned in the canal grates. "They drown in their holes in high water." Wet rat. raw tet. wer tat. er twat. wert at. rat. Rew tat.

What I was doing was cruel. I repeated the new

phrase diligently, hoping I might order the cab to stop and simply get out and get drunk somewhere. I need not go home yet, I offered myself by way of a bribe. In another burst of clarity I realized I was going—and going so automatically—because I was used to going to funerals. That I liked their mute sociability. I liked the heat and quiet of a bereaved house. The damp hiss of woolen coats on radiators. I liked the uncles in large chairs, with handkerchiefs removing slow moisture from their glasses or their eyes. The low muttering, casseroles, prayers, heat, slow moving death sedan, but mostly again the heat, and the muffled litany of comfort. It did not occur to me that, as the mistress of the deceased I would not be permitted to fall asleep on the couch or the thigh of an elderly relative as I had been encouraged to do as a child.

This very fact however became abundantly clear the moment I stepped through the doors of the church. Hugh had known a great many people. Many were quietly weeping. Obviously I knew no one. Hugh's wife and children sat very straight at the front. I realized the tenuousness of my connection to the dead Hugh. Irrevocably I stood outside this world of business, old friends, dinners, affectionate relatives. I realized also that the wife and I were once again wearing the same coat. This connection, and this only. The first time in the gallery it had been something of a private tragedy,

but now in repetition only farce—painful in that my coat grotesquely parodied the legitimate fatherly birthday clothes he had bought for his children, the tasteful anniversary jewels for his wife. I (in my coat) was a cut rate imitation of all the friendly useful household objects of his life (photos, china, neckties, chairs).

I chose the pew just one behind some hard of hearing aunts. With a momentary (godsent) insight into decorum I had avoided the back pew. The back pew it seemed I thought would signal me too clearly as the Other Woman. The back pew might just as well bear a plaque that read:

THE MARCREIFF MEMORIAL PEW FOR DISINHERITED OR
ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN AND MISTRESSES ONLY PLEASE

Watch yourself now, I was teetering close to a giggle. The eulogies were short, but warm and various. Hugh it seemed had a knack for disparate lives. I learned he had been prominent in the international chess world. A letter with a subdued sense of longing was read from a correspondent in Japan with whom Hugh had been playing a single game (still unfinished) for the last 5 years. He was, besides a generous financial patron, a familiar volunteer at an orphanage run by nuns. Many children sent pictures and cards. A few friends of his eldest son remembered with gratitude the almost paternal interest he had taken in them through-

out their lives. One thanked the family for a generous help toward his medical education. An editor of a financial journal to which Hugh sometimes sent letters (also a close friend) praised Hugh as the best of men, warm, loyal, with unfailing judgement and kindness.

What would I have said then had I been asked to recount my relationship with the deceased? That Hugh had been quiet, an excellent quality in a man. Always decent to me, could invoke tenderness with his capacity of finding deep rest in the most simple objects, a smoke, or a lie on the rug. That I had not, as it turns out, really known him, had judged him too much the business man. That I had been blinded by the material realities of our relationship to what had been in him (possibly) in fact a feeling of gentle, paternal care. Had Hugh been drawn to me for what I really was—namely, an orphan—the image of it surfacing to him like a palimpsest in certain lights from beneath my grown-up face?

Then I saw the whalebody of the coffin carried aloft like some ark of the Old Testament on the shoulders of Hugh's sons, his brothers. Behind it came the widow. She was so perfect, so startling in her beauty I think I made some little noise. In her black clothes, with some transparent black scarf over her hair, her skin translucent from the rain, from crying, from love, was only like the face of a saint. Or once in a dream, shortly

after her own funeral, the face of my mother who came down to tuck me in from heaven with flowers and clean laundry falling from the sky and the ceiling so bright. The wife, Hugh's widow walking behind the casket on the arm of the financial editor shone so that in a tumble came the words of mystics, pictures of star-armed hindu goddesses tipping up jugs of cleanest water and opening the heavens. I remembered as she walked toward me the lines read when they buried my mother:

Take her

—she was more beautiful than brides

And cut her into stars

—please look at me

And she will make the face of heaven so bright

—I am afraid of you. Forgive me.

Look at me.

That all the World will be in love with night

—and she looked at me with such compassion

And pay no worship to the garish Sun

—that I realized I was weeping. And this water had washed away palimpsest to bare my utter loneliness and unreturnable love for the dead. And she saw. Her brightest, compassionate face saw. She lit me.

Lit me.

Hours later when I found myself warm, laughing, a little drunk, in the last place I ever expected to find

myself invited, much less happier than I could remember, it occurred to me to wonder what Hugh would have thought. Watching Mettie yawn into her palm, her hair curling from the rain around her paper-soft paper-white face, it seemed as though I was what Mettie introduced me as, “a young painter whom Hugh was helping, and who should have come to dinner with us long before this.” I do not remember what we talked about the night after Hugh's burial, or how we came to be the last two people in the house watching a large whiskey bottle dwindle between us on the table like a thick church candle burning slowly to a stump. They were home stories mostly about Hugh. Hugh the University student always at a protest. Hugh and the kids. Hugh meeting her parents who could not speak French. Hugh and the accident with the can of spackle. He was funnier in Mettie's stories than I had known him in life. This woman who smelled like rain and the kitchen and Chanel, I could not see how anything could have drawn him away from her; especially to me, unformed and lonely in the flat.

It was only as Mettie and I stood close in the hall, and her hands ran thoughtfully across the seams and buttons of my coat, that she fixed my eyes with a look of—bitterness or commiseration or desire—and said “Hugh never did know anything about clothes.” Mettie kissed me lightly on the mouth, “or women.”