

Abroad

By Sharae Deckard

She should throw the curtains open again or the light will not come in. The light is shy in the morning, and gone by midday. Across the way they will not look in at her, though she watches them, the bartender and his sometimes girl. That red dress slips down the girl's body like a tomato soup dream. The girl must taste of soup too, thick and sweet and creamy, leaving an acid taste. You can see it in the way she stretches, her shoulder blades jabbing out like daggers before folding back into flesh. Their windows are a little higher, and veiled with white sheers that make ghosts of their bodies at night, colored shadows moving queasily.

It is better to look at the night, standing high and shattered above the oval windows, framed by chimneys. The nights are strange here-- blue, never black. The moon seems lost, straining to keep afloat. She imagines that her eyes save a star from extinction, that watching makes it flash a little longer.

On the corner, beneath the oldest tower of the city, St. Michael's, the flute man has come, in his poncho and felt sombrero. She will have to get up soon, put on a record to drown out his swarming of flutes and pipes. No one knows how he busks enough to live. The street hates him. His music is like a nest of snakes, biting their own coils. He is there always, without fail, until late afternoon when the light has grown afraid and the day has taken on a metallic cast, when it is too late for her to get anything done, so she may as well not work. Then he puts the three pieces of his flute in a shabby case, and empties the change from the felt hat into his pockets and trudges off god-knows-where in his awful poncho.

She could not stand there, with the morning in her eyes, her fingers frozen on the metal flute, and the reverb coiling in her head and stomach, and the smell of coffee from Barista's making her mad with hunger, and missing the Andes, the mountains where the cold is cold and not damp and where they do not need coffee only its smell in the air to wake them up and turn their senses electric. If he is even from the Andes at all, for all he calls it Andean flute music, chalking it on the cardboard sign above the money hat. You never know where people are really from. Most often, they don't know either. Beyond a name and a picture. They don't even play silver flutes in the Andes. It ought to be wooden. Though it would probably be soggy from the damp if he tried to play one here. Notes dropping out-- splat, squosh-- like overripe plums.

It's getting to be now or never. Time to let in the afternoon and the flute man's first notes, and put on that song, which keeps ringing in her head. It is right that it should hurt in this way, that the sky should break, and the earth should shake. As if to say, sure it all matters, but in such an unimportant way. As if to say-- The words don't make much sense. They seem significant without really meaning anything.

She needs to get up, the springs of the bed are sprung and becoming one with her ribs. Thomas is waiting at the hospital. No doubt cantankerous by now. "Why has no one come, where is my mobile, o my lost planners how I miss you!" His cell phone, she translates, his datebooks. His little idols. She sighs, stretches, feels her compressed ribs opening up like an accordion. She is sorry for him, really. Terrible. He might even be contrite, and not cranky at all, logy with the medication, even weepy. All that rushing around, sleepless nights, frantic days, then infection. The body in revolt. It is scary that it could happen to her, not that she has a mobile, or planners, or even initiative. Rushing around, initiative, proactivity, is for those who have no time to dream, whose sleep is a long black unknowing, whose days consist of words without brightness. She is afraid that her words have lost their own brightness, become waterlogged like everything else.

Is it spring or winter, or will it be April forever? She wonders if she is lost without the seasons, the clear demarcation of the passing of time, the extremity of the world's moods. Is it even April? Does she need the cold, as Andes man needs his flute? She hated it before. The snow, that was the only thing she liked. Filling Poplar Street, rising to the roofs so that she could jump from her window some winters, and sink, down, down, a whole story into the snow, and thrash a wet passage out of the drift, before jumping again. The cold though. Dry cold. Stern. She doesn't miss it. The damp cold works as a substitute.

What should she wear? He shouldn't care. It's the hospital after all; they're hardly going to give him a tweed jacket to sport over his backless gown, even if it is the Radcliffe Infirmary.

That flute man! He must be mad, to play the same thing over and over

She thinks the green skirt will do, with her red hair and all.

Thomas doesn't open his eyes when she comes in, draws the curtain.

She says "Tommy," because he hates it, but he doesn't move.

The i.v. snakes from his nose, twin and gorged. His breathing is loud, and damp like the air. She finds a chair and sits listening for a while. In and out. In and out. Loops. Endless. It seems to be getting damper in the room. She imagines she can feel tiny droplets of his saliva descending on her skin. She wishes she had brought her sweater. Pullover.

"Thomas." Louder this time. "The flute man was there again this morning. As crazy as always. I couldn't even sleep in that late because he started playing so early. I called that number you gave me but I don't think they really cared. The city has got enough loonies to look after, they don't want to tangle with would-be musicians. You awake?"

"Yes. Working on it. Hey! Redhead. What are you doing here?"

"That's a nice reception."

"I thought you had work. Too busy to see old friends anymore. Or should I say too busy with that boy of yours to care about us."

"He's not a boy. And I'm here, aren't I?"

"Well, he looks like one. An Englishman too. Like that will work. You deserve someone better."

"Like you? You must be recovering."

"My temperature was so high last night the doctor said I almost died."

"Great. Now you'll have a story to tell everyone. We can hold the party again, with a new theme. St. Thomas' Confessions. We can be your captive audience."

"Aren't you always? Hey. Did you bring my planner--"

"No, of course I didn't, you fool."

"The doctors say it's rare, this infection. Has nothing to do with stress."

"Sure. You keep believing that. I brought your mobile, but against my better judgment."

"Bless. Give it here."

"Can I call a cab first? I have rehearsal in an hour."

"Stay a little while-- I've been going crazy, nothing to do here but lie in bed thinking all day. There was a famous guy in the bed across from me this morning. He was in some touchy-feely movie you've probably seen, and he has no legs."

"Famous guy with no legs. Great."

"No really, he was inspiring. I've been lying here planning out my life since they took him away--"

"They took him away?"

"--summer travels, grad school, politics, Parliament, and finally, ruler of the new global economy-- Yes. I guess he was cured. He seemed jolly enough. It's people like him, you know. That make you think."

"Well, Tim was worried sick about you. He rushed out the minute he heard the message. We all felt responsible somehow."

"Don't worry about it, baby. I'm going to be fine. I bounce back. I have plans. I am going to be something. Someone's watching over me."

"Yes. "

She makes her call. The cabman can't understand her. She has to repeat the address three times. A nurse passes, seems to smile at the accent. She is still a little paranoid. What they must think of these brash intruders into their private sanctum.

Their halls of the ill. The nurse comes back, enters the room.

"Time to change your i.v., Mr. Evans."

The liquid, or medication, is clear. Unsparkling, like vodka. He says he can feel it easing its cold way into his veins, that he feels like a heroin addict. He says they are giving him morphine.

"Thomas."

"Yes."

"What do you think we are doing here?"

"You are entertaining me, like the sweetheart you are. And I am getting high on morphine. And it is brilliant, baby. Though I still feel the pain. Behind everything, all the time. I will someday be a better ruler of the people for knowing real pain. No more of that angst you are always going on about."

He smiles. His lips are white. But his eyes are pretty bright. She doesn't think she needs to keep feeling guilty about him.

"You know that's not what I meant. Not here in the hospital."

Funny that when he collapsed in her room he wasn't drunk or playacting as usual. The last party, he kept falling down, moaning, "I'm Bacchus in the winevats. I'm parched! Pour on more libations!" It annoyed her how he referred to drinking as "the partaking of libations." She tried to explain the context for the word. And he told some guy, studying Greats, that she had a marvelous vocabulary, the best he had ever encountered and of course the bloke leaned back with his wine glass and squinted his eyes and furrowed his brow and spat out "Haruspication. Parallax. Opprobrious." She couldn't think anything to say. He smiled at his dark-haired friends who came up beside him, scenting a kill, and they stood there in their blazers and their public school sneers, hurling words at her and laughing very lightly. She had wanted to kill Thomas.

"Come on. Hubris. An easy one. You must know it. They do teach Homer over yonder, or are you poor colonials so completely abandoned to your pop culture?"

"Hubris would be your failing, not mine, I believe. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like another drink."

She turned on her heel. She was rather pleased to have actually done that. New heels, silver and tall, smooth on the floor. How awful if they had skidded and she had fallen, mid-turn. The rest of the "guests" were fine, though. Drank up their beer obediently, introduced themselves to her, to each other, disappeared into the night in random pairings, staggering home to dark-panelled rooms and the porter's glare. No men allowed in college rooms past eleven. Rules broken, rules ignored. They were fine. They didn't care. They belonged here; no one could touch them.

The cab pulls up outside the entrance of the ward. She can see the Pakistani driver, climbing out for a smoke. Thomas shifts in his bed.

"We are here to learn. Look. Taxiiii."

Cabs and endless couples, in dinner jackets, in evening gowns, leaving in pairs, staggering home, under stars, in fog, stumbling into black cabs, disappearing. Tommy disappearing into the ambulance. Strangers disappearing into the night. Will she see them again? Does it matter? She never had her second drink. She clambered up the stairs into her own room, without panels, yellow-painted, tiny. In the room across the way, the girl performed her striptease in reverse. Slithered the red dress up her belly, over her breasts, pivoted slowly, teasing the zipper upwards, with a tightening of her stomach, a sucking in of air. The girl slid a strap over her left shoulder, a strap over her right. Turned to her boyfriend. He stared, hot.

"Hey. You dreaming? Your cab is here. You'd better go, right? Leave me to the halls of misery."

She imagines the red fabric tight against her hips, the compression of her breasts, her shoulders graceful in their straps, the carmine against her white skin. She feels the bartender's eyes like a warmth, moving along her body. She does not take it off. She puts mystery on.

"Take care of yourself, Tommy. "

"Don't worry about me. Thanks for coming. "

"You knew I would. Make sure you get out of here soon."

"Don't worry. Now go on. Get out of here and go have some fun. Here's cab fare."

"No, I'm cool.

"Take it. "

"Tommy!"

She doesn't even like him that much. At least she didn't at first. She's not sure why she clings to some people. One thing she knows to care about, though. She wants to stay.

There's a message on the machine for her, for once. Rehearsal's off. She looks for Tim, but he's not around. She rings her boy, but he's not in either. Joyce is upstairs on her bed in his aquamarine cover, rigorously loquacious as ever, but she's not in a working mood. Not that she ever is. She's tired of listening to all that talking and having nothing to say back. There isn't anything left in the broken refrigerator that improvises as a liquor cabinet but an almost empty bottle of Absolut. The house doesn't look so bad, considering. Even the bathtub only faintly smells of beer and vomit. Someone's been busy scrubbing. Well, cheers to them. She would have been pretty furious if they'd left it all to her, as usual. She pours some vodka in a mug with flower-encircled faces of Charles and Di on it, a real commemorative beauty. It swills around, clear. She puts it to her lips, at a careful angle, so one drop at a time slides into her mouth. She imagines her veins, tries to feel whether they are warm, or cool. She wishes she could go to bed.

Where does Absolut come from, Sweden? She knew a Swedish guy once, with a perfect accent. American, that is. She had known him rather well. Rather swiftly. Is the air there sharp in the throat? Does it soothe or torment? She asked him strange questions, because he liked answers. He left of course, to go home, to his sharp air with its power over silences, to his clean, clear world. She knew him four days. He couldn't stay for her. She didn't ask him to. He didn't believe in absolutes. She doesn't know when she will leave her boy. He doesn't know about the Swede. She will leave soon. She wants to stay, but is not sure she has the right. She wishes she could be sure. About something-- this boy, or this country, or herself.

Across the street, with the failing of the light, the pub fills. She can hear the usual assortment of schizophrenics collecting on the steps, mumbling and singing to themselves, carrying on incoherent monologues, their only communication when they clink their brimming pints. The tourists must have been generous today. She wonders if Andes man is there. Maybe he will play the flute for them, so they can croon along. The crazy chorale. He will play and they will all miss the Andes, the mountains which they've never seen; they will mourn with him. She has done nothing today. This happened again, so easily.

Soon she can sit on the edge of her bed, with the curtains open, in the dark, with the light of the moon straining in. She will sit staring into the gauzy windows of the rooms above the pub. The tomato soup dream flick will play, the girl will put on her red dress and the boy will take it off. The schizophrenics in the street below will shout and cry, and recite King Lear. "Only in Oxford," say the tourists, "do you find the bums reciting Shakespeare." "Beware," reads the sign in New College, "Pickpockets and vagabonds are known in the vicinity." But the madmen are the real actors. They are not acting. Their minds are many-selved, tiny stages. Although their faces are blank and weary, passions rage in them. She would like it if one of them knew her, recognized her in the street, and not because she once gave him a pound for drink. They recognize each other. They seek each other out, like a murder of beatup old crows, cawing and beating at each other with worthless wings. They are out there now, a raggedy mass in the darkness. Above, the girl in the red dress squeezes her shoulderblades together. He takes off her dress. She takes flight. The crows are screaming. Rooks in the tower proclaiming the oldness of things. She thinks she hates that girl. She cannot tell if she is waking or dreaming. She cannot tell if she cares.

Soon, she thinks. Soon. Tim will come home or her boy will ring or she will have an idea, and brightness will descend upon her.