Veronica

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Alison had not slept right for days. She would wake after two hours, then spend the rest of the night abrading herself with her thoughts as she turned from side to side. She usually slept again at dawn and then woke at 7:30. She became furious at not sleeping and, eventually, furious at everything.

On the fifth day of inadequate sleep, she decided to take a walk. Her cottage was part of a California neighborhood located in a canyon where redwood trees grew with such abundance that the main road had been built around them. The neighborhood ended when the canyon fell into a ravine that bordered the foot of Mt. Tamalpais. Alison decided that she would walk through the neighborhood to the ravine and then as far up the mountain as she felt like going. It was raining, so she took her red umbrella.

Rain danced on her umbrella and into dark puddles, disturbing their rippling eyes of reflected light. Tree bark seemed puffy and spongy, the pavement was like soft marble gone porous with age. White and yellow recycling buckets stood bright and utilitarian at the curb, green moss rose vividly through cracks in the sidewalk. She began to forget that she was angry because she couldn't sleep.

She reached the ravine and walked down into it at an angle to avoid slipping, her umbrella closed at her side so she could poke it into the ground if she needed to catch her balance. On reaching the small bridge that crossed the creek, she unfurled the umbrella again and proceeded into nature under its fussy flamboyance. The umbrella was imprinted along the edge of its taut nylon with four stylized white sheep and one black one along with the words The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The decoration added to its double statement of silliness and propriety. Fussy flamboyance, silly propriety, the museum and New York all made her think of Veronica.

Veronica had loved anything with those qualities, be it Oscar Wilde or small intricate toys or absurd photographs in tiny, precious frames. She had loved the MoMA and she had loved New York. She had worn shoulder pads, prissy loafers and thin socks. Crisply and symmetrically she rolled her trouser cuffs. On her glass-topped coffee table she had placed filigree ashtrays, miniature gift matchboxes and expensive coasters decorated with smiling cats. During Alison's last visit, Veronica had served her rich brownies in pink wrapping paper, fancy cheeses and sliced fruit. Veronica had been too sick to eat any of it. Alison had spoken haltingly, her words inadequate for her thoughts and feelings. "I don't feel like you love yourself," she said. "You need to find out how to love yourself."

Veronica was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “I think love is overrated. My parents loved me. And it didn’t do any good.”

Alison crossed the bridge and arrived at the base of the mountain. The landscape appeared reposeful, but its stillness was infused with dynamism. Before her was upward motion coming right out of the ground; the skyward thrust of young redwoods, the strong diagonal strokes of winding madrones, everywhere was bursting rich green.

Toward the end, Veronica’s natty shoulder pads had sometimes come detached from their stations and wandered down her arm or back without her knowing. Alison had been sitting with her in a good restaurant. The man next to them said, “Excuse me, there’s something moving on your back.” A year and 3,000 miles away, Alison felt a little pang of embarrassment. The embarrassment drew her into other memories and became intertwined with sadness and futility.

She and Veronica were leaving a movie theater after watching a film which had been critically debunked as pretentious, and Veronica was declaring, “They don’t want anything challenging. They’d rather see Pretty Woman. Now, with me, if it’s bizarre, I’m interested.” There was a little strut to her gait as she said it, her voice was showy as a feather in a hat. “She’s not like that,” Alison had wanted to explain to the people around them. “If you knew her, you’d see.”

In the locker room of the gym they both went to, Veronica regally addressed a consternated aerobicist: “If you want me to move, just tell me—you don’t have to poke me in the bottom. Fist-fucking went out years ago, didn’t you know that?”

She sat across from Alison in a coffee shop. Grayness pressed up from just under her skin, sclera showed around the tense iris of her eyes. Her fingertips seemed numb against her coffee cup. “I’ve just got to get off my Jewish ass and stop feeling sorry for myself,” she said. The brio of her words was contradicted by the fear on her face. The waitress, a middle-aged black woman with a circumspect air, glanced at her with what looked like surprise, curiosity and vague pity. Alison wondered what the woman’s glance at Veronica had told her, what she had heard in her words.

Veronica had died of AIDS. She had spent her last days alone. Alison had not been with her, even though she had been one of her few friends, possibly her only friend.

She walked uphill breathing heavily, her jaunty umbrella tipped forward, dropping rain on her neck from behind. The unhappiness of her memory fell from her mind into her body and filled up her muscles. At the top of the hill was a grove of madrones thickly covered with wet chartreuse moss. She stood, panting and admiring. On some trees, it was so thick it grew away from the trunk in long, green hairs probing the air like sensory organs. She took off a glove and stroked the moss, then sniffed her hand. It was faintly rank and wormy. She put her hand on it again to examine her pale skin against the green fur.

Veronica had come to the office as a temp proofreader and stayed in a semipermanent position. She was a plump 40-year-old with bleached blond hair, single strands of which stuck straight out from her head in the dry office air. She wore tailored suits in mannish plaids with matching bow ties, bright red lipstick, false red fingernails and mascara that gathered in intense beads on the ends of her eyelashes. Her loud, strangely inflected voice was fulsome and rigid at once, like plastic baubles put together in rococo shapes. It was deep but could become shrill quickly and abruptly. You could hear her from across the room, addressing everyone, even those she loathed, as "hon." "Excuse me, hon, but I'm very well acquainted with Jimmy Joyce and the use of the semicolon." She carried an "office kit" which contained a red plastic ruler, assorted colored pens, Liquid Paper and Post-Its. She proofread like a cop with a nightstick. On her desk was a framed, embroidered sign, embellished with musical notes, that read "Still Anal After All These Years," and she was. When Alison complained that tension in her scalp was giving her an uncomfortable sensation of tightening and release across her forehead, Veronica commented, "No, hon, that's your sphincter," as she smartly utilized her ruler and red pen. "The supervisor loves her because she's a total fucking fag hag," complained a word processor.

"That's why she's here all the time."

"I get a kick out of her myself," said a temping actress. "She's like Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings combined."

"My God, you're right," said Alison, so loudly and suddenly that the other girls stared. "That's exactly what she's like."

Alison and Veronica began to be teamed together on the weekends and late evenings when Alison worked overtime. Alone with Veronica, Alison was inwardly reserved, while outwardly she was cordial and accommodating. The connection between Veronica's outer self and her inner life seemed like a communications wire that had gotten so twisted up it was cutting itself off; it was too complicated for Alison to follow. This lack of congruence, together with Veronica's eccentric, outward volubility, made it seem—if you didn't go out of your way to look further—as if she had little or no inner life, and Alison didn't want to go out of her way. Veronica seemed to her like a cuckoo clock; all baroque display and banality. Alison was not interested in her, but she was curious in the way she might be curious about any elaborate object. She felt as if she could regard Veronica opaquely, without being regarded. It was this sense of invulnerability that eventually made her draw closer to her unexpected companion.

She felt herself sweating under her jacket; she unfastened her top buttons and loosened her scarf and the air chilled her. The internal heat that had made her sweat recoiled into her abdomen, sending quivering tadpoles of hot against the intruding cold.

"You've got to decide whether you want to live or not," she'd said. "Because if you do, you're going to have to start fighting for it."

“Yes, I know hon. Frankly, I’m not sure it’s worth it.”

“Look,” said Alison. “I know it’s shit. You’ve got insane parents and your friends don’t know what to do. You’re lonely and you have a crummy job. And you’re not going to beat the disease no matter what you do.”

Veronica stared at her as if she’d been slapped out of a crying jag.

“But even if you only live five more years, even if you only live two years or one year, if you use that time to really, to really…” She fumbled stupidly.

Veronica looked at her like she felt sorry for her.

“To really find out who you are, and understand…things, and to love yourself.” Her sense of inadequacy rose in her throat. Her words were empty; she did not know those things any more than Veronica did. “Come on, Ronnie,” she said. “Don’t just lie down. Stand up. Please stand up.”

“Allie, dear.” Veronica spoke gently. “I understand what you’re saying. But it’s just that…it’s not my personality.”

“OK.” Alison took a deep breath. “I know that sounded drippy. But still there’s the regular physical stuff. Doctors, herbs, acupuncture. There’s GMHC, there’s Shanti, there’s support groups—women’s groups. Medicine won’t cure you, but it’ll ease the pain. It’ll let your body know you’re caring for it—”

“I don’t have insurance.”

Alison stared. “But I thought you got insurance a while ago.”

“I did but it lapsed. It was lousy insurance anyway.”

“Fucking hell.” Alison sat back. “Shit.”

Veronica shrugged. Silence fell as slowly and incrementally as dust.

Alison felt too many things to say any of them. She moved so she sat next to Veronica. On impulse, she put her hand on Veronica’s breast bone and rubbed her there. She felt her subtly respond.

The rain was a low drizzle. The fog was still very thick, but it was moving. She sat on the wet ground and put her head between her knees. Her cruelty had been pointless. Her kindness had been pointless. She remembered Veronica’s surprise at being touched that way, the slight shift in her facial expression, as if she had just glimpsed an unconsidered possibility. The subtle muscles between her chest bones seemed, incrementally, to open. Then Alison had left.

“I never should’ve touched her like that if I didn’t mean to follow through,” she thought. She imagined Veronica, her chest opened and defenseless against the feelings that might come into it. Feelings of love and friendship awakened by Alison’s touch and then left in the vacated space. She fantasized herself giving Veronica a full body massage, with oil, with warm blankets wrapped around the limbs at rest. Drops of sweat would roll from her arms to melt on Veronica’s skin. When she was finished she would hold her in her arms. Except Veronica would never have allowed that. She only allowed the chest touch because Alison had taken her by surprise.

She stared at the clay dirt before her, stupidly mesmerized by it, as though she could see through it. She saw a murky coil of dense blackness in which twisted the white phantom shapes of all matter disintegrating in a slow maelstrom of dirt and roots and bones. Her spirit distended from her, groping the air in long fingers, looking for Veronica. The air was cold and bloated with moisture. Veronica was not there.

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