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Julia Thacker

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A CIVIL CAMPAIGN

JULIA THACKER

Sex, at first, was not even considered. When they flew him home from Vietnam, the bullet still lodged in his spine, the doctors weren't sure he would live. Then the question was, "Would he walk?" He would not. Then, "Would he have bladder and bowel control?" He would not. Leah was afraid he wouldn't recognize her in his delirium, but before the last operation he opened his eyes, looked at her, and whispered, "On fire." Only since he had become fully conscious did he no longer seem to know her. Beyond polite answers, he seldom spoke. He lay there, a black, hulking mystery, like the god to whom she had tried to pray as a child. As an offering, she watered the philodendron in his ward. She believed the silences between them meant something.

With the disability checks she rented a first-floor apartment near the hospital, overlooking a city park. The resident psychiatrist said Gus should be made to feel useful, so she spread swatches of purple, silk, denim, and white velvet on his bed in a ceremony of color and said, "Choose, choose." The man without hands in the next bed suggested a fake fur sofa for the living room. Gus said, "Whatever you think is fine."

The psychiatrist continued to speak to Gus's stony face about his "adjustment." He said the relationship with Leah would not be easy now, especially since they didn't yet know if Gus's injury resulted in impotence; but there were many ways to express love and affection. He gave Gus a book, *Sex for the Elderly*, with "useful information." In Physical Therapy Gus learned to lift himself from the wheelchair to the car, so Leah only had to fold the chair and put it in the back seat.

"You'll like the apartment," she said.

"I'm sure I will." Gus could not remember if it was Leah or a bar girl who said, "It tickles my nose, like wood burning?" Perhaps it had been a nurse while he was sick. "Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"No, please, go ahead."

That Leah might leave him was a possibility that occurred to neither of them. She had not even the address of her mother, somewhere in the South; Gus, no one else.

Gus knew her walk first. From the picture window of the bar where he was manager, he used to watch her step off the bus in her waitress uniform and disappear around the corner. It was a fast, proud walk with a model's twist, but somehow natural. Sometimes he stood in the doorway and called, "On fire!" She turned and smiled. One day he came out into the street and pulled her into the bar. "Why you late,

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Sunshine? You my watch, baby. I don't admit the birds awake till you walk down this street."

"Phone for Gus," someone yelled.

He gripped her hand, and they did a half-Watusi across the floor to Stevie Wonder. "Not bad," he laughed, "for a little white girl." She struggled free of him while he was speaking on the telephone.

"I'm already late now."

He clapped his hand over the mouthpiece, "Like, a, would it be ap-pro-pri-ate for me to call you sometime? You're really attractive. I'd really like to get into," he looked the the length of her, "your head."

Usually they stayed in his room above the bar. She told at once how her mother had thrown her out of the house when she found out Leah was sleeping with her husband, Leah's stepfather.

"I guess he was somebody to care about," Leah said. "But all he wanted was *two* women in the house."

Gus held her hands above her head while they made love.

"I don't know if I ought to rape you or protect you."

"Which do you want to do?"

"I want to do both."

She circled him with her legs, drawing him nearer. He talked in time with his moves in and out of her.

"We gonna go to Paris, gonna go to Portugal.... Forget about that daddy of yours, you got me now. He don't know your rhythms like I do, does he, baby?... We gonna get a Cadillac with diamond hubs." He went deeper into her. "You can be the moon too, tell me when to give up to darkness, that old bastard. He the one been fucking with my baby." She got on top.

Their new Colonial brick apartment was framed by trees the unreal, deep hues of Indian summer.

"Can I fix you some dinner before I bring the things in from the car?" she asked, as they stepped in.

"Not hungry," he mumbled. Nor did he seem interested in the decor, the baskets of orange paper roses that filled the living room. "I hate to mention this," he said, "but could you help me in the bathroom with these plastic pants? I haven't got the hang of getting them on and off yet."

"Sure, come on." Leah pushed him into the bathroom and helped him off with the pants and a diaperish contraption. She could not quit staring at his familiar body, thinner now, and his limp cock, which, curiously, she expected to harden, grow magically. He had looked important and heroic in the hospital; the nurses and doctors ministering to him in their white gowns; but against her shower curtain, the plunger, her bottles of talcum and cologne, he was merely pitiful. She switched on the fluorescent lights, and Gus squinted against the glare. It was like the rockets at night, what he hated most in Nam. When in the bush, where there were no electric lights, he could wipe out everything in the black sky, until the rockets began their yellow designs, the noise of

distance, reminding him who and where he was. He hated them because they were so beautiful, death's fireworks. He didn't want to die.

"You go out," he told Leah. "I can handle the rest of this." He shut the door, so she wouldn't see the way his hands shook, and turned out the light.

While Gus napped in the evening, Leah brought in his valise, then sat down at the table to make lists of things that would make him more comfortable, each new column with a different color felt-tipped pen: cantaloupes, avocados, berries, walnuts; games, colored pencils, magazines, records, handkerchiefs, coverlets; until she had surely thought of everything, freeing herself to fall upon the sofa in blankness, where, later, she felt his shadow pass over her face.

"I can still eat you out," he said from the doorway, a toneless fact. "You used to like it."

"All right."

He turned his back while she stripped, removed his terrycloth robe and folded it neatly on a chair. As he came closer, she was sick from the stink of wet plastic. He touched her all over, his hands skillful as a watchmaker's. But she was someone else. *I'll think of a black box within a black box* who didn't even recognize her own voice. He put two pillows under her, bending from the waist, and cupped her ass in his hands. When he brought his face down her foot brushed a chrome spoke on his chair, but he thought her cry was because of his tongue. He wanted to remember the last time with Leah, as a way of being true to her, yet he held only the image of a young girl who, one night when he was high, told him she was pregnant. "It could be anybody's," he told her. "When it's born you see," she insisted. "Oh, wonderful, what a mixture," he said, "nigger and slant-eyed cunt." He listened to Leah's moves and sighs as to a cello, and when they reached a certain pitch he stopped and rolled into his room. Leah put on her gown and straightened the bedclothes, stuffing the sheet in her mouth to keep her crying from the bedroom, where he lay quietly.

There was an unspoken agreement (she supposed because she did not work the next day) that he would come to her on Tuesday and Saturday nights, fold his robe, and wait for her to strip. Their lives were a set score, a familiar record one puts on because he knows the lilt and crescendos and can listen without particularly feeling anything. They passed each other in the house with polite remarks, the music echoing off the walls in empty rooms.

Each day she rose at seven. In the bathroom she could hear Gus's clock radio as he did his twelve-minute barbell exercises. By the time he was ready to shave, she had applied her make-up and dressed. She laid out the lace tablecloth and napkins for coddled eggs and the Melba toast Gus liked. When he came in, the three newspapers she subscribed to were on the table, and they ate and read in silence. "Will you sit in the park today?" she would call from the door, and he would say he might.

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One morning in late November there was an overnight frost and, because the landlord had not turned on the heat yet, Leah woke up early. She opened the curtains and stood in the sunlight to warm herself. She placed two logs in the fireplace and lit them, but still she could not stop shivering. The newspapers hadn't arrived; it was too early. On the front stoop there were only two bottles of milk, which Leah took into the kitchen. She decided to get ready for the diner and tried over and over again to draw a steady line under her eyes and around her lips, smudging every time. Gus was awake too, rumbling around, waiting to get into the bathroom, so she gave up and rinsed all color from her face. She set the plates on the table, started the percolator and toast. Gus wheeled in and sat fidgeting when he found there were pieces of ice in the bottle. When she shook it to release the liquid, Gus's glass overflowed on his hand.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Please, don't worry about it. It's all right."

She got the toast and coffee, and they began to eat, forced to look across at one another. Slowly, she saw her own strain mirrored in the rings under his eyes, the hollow cheeks, until she wanted to scream, wanted some noise to fill the vacant room and this man, just as hollow.

"Are you going out today or not?"

"I don't know," he said. "The park is always full of kids. They get on my nerves."

"Why don't you spin your wheels and scare them off?" Leah asked. Her voice rose. "Why don't you yell at them, throw breadcrumbs, anything to show you're still a man? I'd like to be there to see it." And she giggled in relief.

He rolled over to her. "You'll see it, bitch," he said, raising his hand to strike her, but the wheels locked, throwing him forward. It was not the arc he made in air, nor even that he did not put his hands out to break the fall which moved her to him; rather, it was that he said her name *Leah*. She sat cross-legged on the floor, running her hand over every part of his body in search of a bruise, a broken bone, or simply to confirm his presence, where he lay, one knee in the east and one in the west, his palm flat on her face. She unzipped his pants, pulling the layers of underthings to his knees.

"Make something happen to this dick," he said. Her mouth rose and fell, a soundless O. There were only the ticks of the clock, the dry wood popping, and his sighs, punctuated with her name, *Le, Le, Le*. He came like a hole in the garden hose in her mouth, spilling the warmth down her throat and through her. Her face next to the carpet, she noticed a white spot.

"I'll have to move and get cleaned up," he said.

"Yes."

They tidied his clothes, and he gripped the table, as he would get into a car, to lift himself into the chair. As Leah pushed him into the bathroom, she touched the wheelchair, its sharkskin back, shiny, which held a kind of beauty for her now, because it belonged to them, it was intimate, like a sadness no one speaks of.