

Winter Butterfly

Ninotchka Rosca

Go with the rhythm of the brightliner, one of the few stainless steel subway trains still plying the tracks from borough to borough, backward, forward, this side, that side—constant motion signifying – well, nothing really, only making the stillness of her brother, wedged between two men burly in dark padded winter coats, even more remarkable. She'd lassooed him with a sidelong glance but hung fire, studying instead the men's hands grasping the horizontal bar which had replaced passenger straps – two hands which, were it not for skin color, could've belonged to one man. Having traced whorls and folds and wrinkles on those hands to boredom, she eased her head to the right for a full look at her brother. In his blue-green-yellow plaid short-sleeved shirt, blue jeans and white sneakers, he was an affront to the season. She acknowledged him with a half-nod; he glowed even more—briefly— but gave no other response. She was not surprised. He had been dead, after all, for fifteen years, lost somewhere in the waters between North Africa and Europe, sometime during his fifth run around the world aboard a cousin's ship. He had not been found and was likely body-surfing the waves still in an imitation of life. He came to her periodically, for no reason at all. He brought no message, no wisdom from the other realm. His presence was message enough.

She envied the dead their ability to make mere presence a message. Exact and precise, needing no elaboration.

*Salt-bleached asphalt
and a lightning-shock of cold
Spearing brine scent
from snow dunes
through immobile air
Warning -- of that
From which we came
To which we return.*

The sea shall have it all.

She managed to push through a seemingly impossible crush of people, made even more impossible by the girth of heavy winter coats. Identical specters in black or dark blue, rushing together for the elevated platform lit by yellow mercury lamps, and then rushing down the stairs to the city's gray topography. It was a clear night, the cold a concise blow from the deep black of the sky overhead, At the start of each winter, she would consider heading for a place of relentless heat and blue skies – but her soul metamorphosed inevitably and became one with the season, half-hibernating and singing to itself with the creak of icicles and the whistling of the snow.

He followed her, this specter whose name had become submerged in the label brother. She never caught him moving. He was just there, six feet away, never too far not to be caught by a single glance over her shoulder. She should be grateful, she supposed, that he had not shown up water-logged, hair plastered to his brow and with eyebrows, eyes, nostrils and mouth rimmed by salt crystals, his cheeks sliding off bones. She thought she heard him laugh. He wouldn't; he had been vain while alive; why would he be different in death?

*Two imitation Riding Hoods
Step into the gray path
Cleared through the snow
By a man who pauses,
Shovel at rest as snow drifts*

*Erase his work;
The young women, crying
“Coooie! Cooooie!” at passing cabs,
Trail the scent of chemical roses.*

He had been vain and merry, though only 5 feet 5, lanky and slim like a ballet dancer. He had been mistaken or taken for a pushover since grade school, bullied – casually and cavalierly – in the endemic violence that had been their home country. Bullied, beaten up, his lunch money stolen, his books messed up until, without saying a word to anyone, least of all to her, he enrolled in every dojo in the neighborhood, earning four black belts. That did not stop the bullying, since the constant exercise made him even more lissome and graceful, much like a girl as the bullies said. Good-looking, light-boned and always happy, hazel eyes twinkling from contained stars. Broken bones – collar, ulna, thigh, even a finger or two – had attended the trail of his journey to manhood and his peregrination around the world, until that terrible winter storm met the ship somewhere between North Africa and Europe and he was taken. His fate, as the song went, was still unlearned.

It was unfair. He who had set himself to find a rightful place ended up in a place that was no-place. “Safe winds” had been her words to him at each departure; “interesting paths” had been his reply – mockery from both of them, since they knew each other well, being only eleven months apart in age.

She had to smile, even though the memory was sharp as a dagger; she had not said those words nor heard his reply in sixteen years. But the pain had to be shooed away because she was already passing through the lobby doors of MJ’s apartment and had found/pressed the buzzer button. Where others used their cell phones to announce their arrival, she preferred the buzzer. It was a salute to tradition.

She had been here before and many other places like this, in the course of her days as a city social worker. MJ was in a fourth floor apartment, reachable by an elevator paneled in faux wood and smelling forlorn, the scent of the city’s underbelly. In the corridor, she told her brother to stay and to behave, much the way she had done when they were children.

He had been the youngest, the first to go among her siblings who, without fanfare, had followed him one by one. She had long concluded she would be the last of them, because of her penchant for safe winds.

MJ was her usual chirpy self, long hair tied back from her round face, looking younger than her thirty-one years. She had an apron over jeans and t-shirt and almost by rote, helped her out of her coat, brushing snow flecks from her hair, showing how working with the infirm and the young had become almost second nature. MJ offered coffee, tea and even soup she had managed to whip up in the tiny kitchenette her slum landlord had managed to carve out of a bigger apartment, turning what was a bed space with a water closet into a residential studio for which full rent could be charged. MJ worked seven days a week to feed the rent, herself and her brother with five children and a land that seemed to have been created to swallow money, what with the flood, the drought, the earthquake... Disaster land—that was what MJ called the slope of mango trees and a wooden house her mother had left to her and her older brother.

She, the social worker, had helped MJ escape a diplomat employer who had brought her to this country and then set her to work twenty hours a day at half the salary he was charging his own government. It had not been too bad in the beginning; MJ was used to long hours of work. But the diplomat also had a penchant for getting drunk periodically, during which he would conclude that his wife, children and the household help brought him nothing but misery. When he began trying to beat them up, including MJ, – well, that was no longer tolerable. One day, MJ had had to lock herself in the servant bathroom and call for help finally. It had been a minor scandal.

She accepted soup and three pieces of the dolmades MJ loved to make—grape leaves stuffed with ground chicken, rice and spices which she had learned to prepare for a Lebanese employer. MJ let her take the lone chair and she cradled the tray with the soup bowl and plate on her lap while MJ herself sat on the bed. Their knees were almost touching. MJ rested elbows on thighs and said her older brother had sent her a letter, saying an irrigation system had to be built for the land, which meant more money needed, and that his daughter, her oldest niece, was graduating from high school and the family would like to host a party for relatives, friends and town mates.

MJ said, “Imagine that? My oldest niece, graduating!”

She would seize on the good news, of course. They spoke of how her papers were going through the bureaucracy slowly; soon she would have proper documentation. “I would like to be a cook,” MJ said, “when I have papers.” At the moment, she was working as home care person for two – a young man who’d been turned paraplegic by a motorcycle accident and an octogenarian in the first flush of senility. Two days for one, three days for the other and on weekends, she cleaned four apartments, half a day for each.

And was this fine by her?

Oh fine, fine; the senile one was not yet a bother, just forgetful; sometimes she would forget the comb in her hair and leave it there, hanging like a pink bat. The paraplegic was okay, too, except that ... MJ frowned a little and said the paraplegic was behaving strangely.

What did that mean – strangely?

MJ smiled, dimples on both cheeks deepening; her eyes widened a little. “I have to bathe him, see? I help him into the bath tub and take a washcloth and lather him down. Today, he said he didn’t like the wash cloth down there; that I should soap him down there with my hands. He said he would pay extra.”

MJ’s voice had become as thin as a girl’s.

“Yes. So I did. Then when he was dressed and I was preparing his lunch, he called me to come and look at his computer screen. He had some porn movie in there. Why was he doing that?”

What did she do?

“Why was he doing that?” She repeated. “I didn’t know what he was trying to do. I couldn’t know what was going on.” And MJ raised guileless eyes to her face.

She wanted to retort that of course, you did, MJ did; you had known full well what the man was after. But MJ would wait until someone else labeled what was happening, denial being the first defense one learned in a lifetime of servitude. She wanted to say, ah, MJ, pretend-innocence can only get you this far and no farther.

Instead, she said carefully: “This does not seem like a good job for you.”

MJ wondered aloud then how she could get a cake to her graduating niece. “She likes chocolate.”

“Who doesn’t?”

But in her was this mantra: you know, don’t you, you know what it is; this is how it begins; you know, you do know...

Later, in the foyer, her brother watched impassively as she stopped walking, turned toward the nearest wall and leaned her forehead against it, overcome by the impossibility of it all. She had thirty-two “clients,” as they were called in her world; five had been raped twice that she knew of – once as girls and once as they wandered strange lands; a dozen had discovered themselves to be supporting not only children and husbands but also the latter’s mistress or two; six had children who had been targeted by meth-amphetamine dealers; all had had to respond to ever-increasing demands for subsidy from relatives to the nth degree of consanguinity. She could however swear on the Bible and every other religious book in the world that all remained cheerful, finding that straw of good news in a haystack of bad.

“They are clients,” her supervisor had said, back then when she was hesitantly starting this career. “They are not friends. They are emotionally invested in their need. You are simply part of that. They come and they go. Detached compassion is the best way to deal with them.”

Detached compassion. Her supervisor was one of the little people, only four foot four but had managed to get herself through college and grad school and was licensed so thoroughly in something like twenty-one states

that it had been extremely risky for the city to deny her employment. She had risen through the ranks, as she was fond of saying, sometimes clasping her hands over her head in a gesture of victory.

This morning, though, she had seemed terribly imposed upon. One of her clients had returned to her boyfriend who had left her badly bruised twice. Supervisor had said, “that’s that; he will likely kill her one day, I assuredly hope not but in any case, she’s only eighteen years old and by the time she’s twenty-five, her life will be over. Or something like that. Seen it before. Still can’t understand it. Maybe she took Florence Nightingale literally, that pain’s better than paralysis. I did all I could and she didn’t even have as heavy a disadvantage as...” She’d broken off, flung hands into the air in gesture of surrender and had walked in that rolling gait of hers to the ladies’ room. It was an hour before anyone noticed she had not come out and they’d knocked and pleaded and finally called 911 and four wide-shouldered men had broken down the door. There she was, soaking wet, before the lavatory sink into which water poured from the faucet and slopped to the floor. She was using her coffee mug to scoop water from the sink and over her head, while muttering, “messes, messes; gotta clean up the mess...”

And all she could think of, while watching the paramedics subdue Supervisor – it had seemed brutal, as the tiny woman had tried to slither through the gigantic men’s grasp and resume her quaint bathing– all she could think of was how Supervisor was now a client. She had found herself stepping away, sidling between desks to the wan square of sunlight wrestling its way through a dust-encrusted window.

They come and they go. Much like you, she said to him who was in his summer clothes, though you never asked for anything. And now look, you have become a golden sea lion.

Brother glowed briefly. She heard him say, you have become a winter butterfly.

*Wings woven of ripples,
Antennae of icicles
Eyes of reflected starlight
The winter butterfly
Hovers over sunken boats of
Golden leaves embedded
In packed snow, sipping
A cocktail of sadness*

“Safe winds,” she said to him. “Interesting paths,” he replied.

There was the familiar tree, stripped bare and dark now, in the front yard of a building midway to the brightliner’s station. She hardly recognized it from the green and orange beauty it had been in spring. Snow blanketed the ground about it. No one had been shoveling there. A blackened branch, with six serpentine twigs, had broken off and lay on a snow mound near the sidewalk. She picked it up, wrapped her right hand about its thicker end and wondered if the warmth of her flesh would entice it to sprout cherry blossoms.

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