

The Closet

It was the second of June, and all seemed well. The day got off to a good start with the distant clanging of the church clock, whose bells rang out in metallic mirth, and the smell of a new summer hanging thick in the air. Susan Swain climbed from bed quietly, careful not to waken the man beside her, smiling to herself at the innocence of his sleep, slipped into her dressing gown and out of the room. It was only 6 a.m., and most of England still dreamed of former glories, pints of beer and Fish and Chips—and well they should. Downstairs, Susan opened the curtains and the sun streaked in, a soft warm benevolent light of early morning that meant harm to no one. The garden without was still, wind holding its breath as if afraid to upset the peace, and a solitary black bird hopped about on the lawn, digging with its yellow beak in search of worms.

In the kitchen, the coffee began to drip drip drip into the decanter, toast turned a golden brown and was smothered in a thick layer of raspberry jam. Susan sat in the dining room to feast and watch the world, with its air of confident restraint, oblivious to the truth of its intent, of the sad joke it secretly cradled to an ever youthful breast. For now though, there were no tears in sight, the sky was clear.

The silence was. The black bird flew away and the garden became as a still life, of delicate brush strokes and famous plays of light. It seemed like it should last forever, though she knew, of course, that it would not.

Susan opened the back door and stepped out into the day, which welcomed her, invited her to partake of its riches, its bounty, and silently became her eternal friend. She was

bare foot, and the grass, still laden with sparkling dew, felt cool, necessary, found its way between her toes, tickled her and made her smile. As she stood, quietly, listening to the nature's secret breath, the black bird came back and perched upon the fence at the foot of the garden, watching her and twitching its tail, twitching its tail as if nervous of something, twitching its tail. Susan, happy to see the bird back, remained still, wondering why it watched her so, waiting for it to fly off, to take to the sky. But it would not. Could not. She turned and walked slowly back to the house, glanced from the doorway to see it still there, twitching, watching.

The moment, out there on the grass, with the cool damp under foot, with the black bird, had been brief, like a fleeting, improvised melody, a unique refrain that can be played but once; was special because of that, because it was a moment, and to have continued it would have been to destroy it; worse, to have mocked its ever existence.

And so she left it and returned in doors, took a cigarette from a pack which had laid untouched for two days or more and sat smoking, her feet up on the couch, smoking.

Tom, the husband of sorts, climbed from bed just after nine. It was Saturday and the day was still unspoiled. Within a few minutes their son Everard showed his tiny face as well.

"What's for breakfast, mum?"

"What do you want?"

"I want snack cackle pop."

"All right, go get washed and brush your teeth while I do it."

"Okay," he sighed and turned on his heels.

"Hello, don't you say good morning to your old dad then Ev'?"

"Morning daddy," the boy exaggerated, glancing back on his way out. Tom turned back to his newspaper.

"I don't know, that lad's a real scally-wag," Susan said, smiling. "Want some coffee, Tom?"

"Wouldn't mind."

"It's a lovely day. I've been up a couple of hours already."

"Mm."

"I woke up and saw the sun was shining."

"It would have waited for you, you know," he offered from behind the page.

"I know, but I couldn't wait for it."

Tom and Susan, despite all things being equal, have called a truce. Years of opposition are done with. The barbed wire has been locked away in a large dark closet, where it gathers dust, though the spikes stay sharp.

Perhaps it is the circumstance which has changed, and if indeed we are all products of that pedantic force, then who can tell, Susan and Tom may not be as before, may have learned to be otherwise, became something utterly different and seemingly idyllic. But I think not.

Nothing much happened during that day, but with the fall of late afternoon, with Everard out and about, playing with his friends in that incredible world of childhood summer, Susan and Tom set about doing what married couples do, only they didn't. The light in the room, diffused by the thin cotton curtains of rose and leaf, lent a deceptively romantic quality to the proceedings, which were called into order by Tom, who, as they continued, watched himself in the large dressing table mirror. It was like watching some

one else, like watching another man have sex with Susan. It was, he thought, a fine sight. He studied his acting abilities, gave himself an Oscar. There she lay, penetrated by a stranger, some one she never knew, submissive to his will, doing all the things he desired; but it was the man he most liked to watch, was fascinated by, the man with the muscles and the power and the penis. The big penis.

When all was done they lay together, watching time slip by. The silence was long, but came, as it must, to a sudden end.

"I love you," she said, her head against his chest, speaking into the flesh.

Tom closed his eyes.

Early evening came.

"Hurry, the baby sitter will be here soon."

"Hello, am I the one we always have to wait for?"

"I'm almost ready, me."

"Good, so am I." Tom left the room and went into the downstairs bathroom to shave. He heard the door bell ring and muffled voices in the hall.

"Tom," Susan called. "Are you coming? It's almost eight. Diane's here."

"Yes." He spat into the sink.

"Help yourself to the food or whatever." Susan offered.

"Thanks, I will."

"Now listen, Everard," Susan said turning to the boy. "Bed at nine. You can keep your light on and read for a while, but not too long. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, mother."

"And be good. If Diane tells me anything bad, the whole world will be in trouble tomorrow."

"The whole world?"

"Yes, and you'll be the one in the middle of it all." Tom came in and she turned to him. "Are we off then?"

"I suppose so."

"All right. Bye Diane."

"Bye." Susan nudged her husband on the way out.

"Bye," he said, and they were gone.

"Do you want to play with me?" the boy asked.

"What do you want to play?"

"I don't know. Will you play with me?"

"What?"

"I don't know."

"I've got a teacher at school," Diane began. "Do you know what he does?"

"What?"

"When there's a test he makes me make up my own questions. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"That's the hardest part. Just answering questions is easy, but when you have to make them up for yourself, well that's tricky."

"So?"

"So, if you want to play, you have to make up the game."

"I don't know."

"Think."

"I don't know." Everard began to whimper. Diane's desire to teach the boy to think for himself was a lesser one than her want of a trouble free, a cry free evening.

"We could go into the garden and play football," she suggested.

"That's a boy's game," he told her scornfully.

"Who told you that?"

"My daddy."

"Well go up and get one of your games. Find some thing you like."

"All right," he said, and went up the stairs.

Curiosity must indeed be a synonym for intelligence, for the baby sitter of that eve was both intellectual and intensely curious. When the clock struck ten, and nothing on T.V. interested her, she allowed herself the liberty to wonder about the house in search of the searchable. Perhaps you find her actions deplorable, rooting through drawers, delving in cupboards, leafing through private papers, though I would have you know there was no malicious intent; no, nothing more than a desire to seek out the unknown, to learn, to understand. Diane was a girl captured by the intensity of youth, possessed by its harmless chant, who has been granted the gift of wisdom that we pretend is the sole province of the elderly.

She pulled open the sideboard drawers, found a photo album and glanced through it. Letters, she read. There was nothing of great interest, though the interest was more in the looking, and not the finding. Diane wandered into the kitchen, opened up the refrigerator and took out some ice cream.

"Mmm", she thought, and ate greedily.

Upstairs, she glanced in on Everard, who was nestled in his bunk, sleeping innocently, as surely only the very young can do. Diane slipped quietly into the main bedroom

where she opened drawers and searched carefully through the underpants and clothing, slowly, patiently, drawing out the pleasure of the search, careful to leave no signs of her activities. It was not right to pry, she knew, but it was unavoidable.

Inside the built-in wardrobe, beneath the rows of dresses hanging about, waiting to be worn, three suitcases stood, side by side by side in the corner. Ahead of them a cardboard box with its upward mouth shut. Inside she found Christmas decorations, plastic holly, glass balls, fragile and frosty, trimmings, twisted and torn, shreds of wrapping paper. It was strange to look at, in the middle of July, for it all seemed like a peculiar lie. She closed the lid and pulled one of the suitcases out. By its lack of weight she knew it was empty. The second proved likewise. The third promised otherwise. Its zip insisted on loudness, seemed to have decided, arbitrarily, that it should be the loudest zip alive, louder than any zip should naturally desire, and she feared, as she pulled, that it might cry out and alert Everard and he would come in and catch her, red-handed. The loudness of that zip was magnified by guilt, giving its rasping sound a sinister malevolent bent. The zip then, raspingly loud, was of a bag, both blue and flimsy. This, as it turned out, was most appropriate.

"Oh my God," she thought, and pulled out the contents hurriedly. A stack of magazines. That she could at the moment see only the top one was of no matter: she knew they should all prove similar. A young man looked up at her, handsome, muscular, well groomed, offering his glossy penis to the world.

"Mrs. Swain," she thought. "Mrs. Swain, I never would.." What she "never would" I cannot say, though it was, in any

case, not quite as true as she believed it to be. She turned the pages slowly and found more young men looking up at her with their inky eyes. Some held onto their erect organs as if they might drop off, smiling foolishly, others seemed fond of themselves, others still, proud. Was she shocked do you wonder? Did she find the images in bad taste, abusive, dirty? No, she was intrigued, interested by their very strangeness, though she knew that, like the Christmas decorations, they were nothing more than cleverly told lies.

Diane was watching T.V. when she heard the car pull up in the drive.

"How was Everard?" Susan asked coming around the door.

"Good as gold."

"That's good. Off to sleep all right?"

"Yes, fine." Diane looked up seeing Mrs. Swain now in a new light, knowing what she knew, seeing what she had seen. She imagined her leafing through her books when Mr. Swain was out, looking at all the young men that she could never touch. Wanting. It did not seem right, and of course it was not.

The very next day, during the quiet of a Sunday evening, the truth presented itself. Susan and Tom lay in bed together, laying apart in the aftermath of sex, each lost in the silence of the moment. There was nothing to say, and they both said it, a constant stream of emptiness filling the room for half an hour or more. He began to toy with her breast, to wind it up and watch it go.

"Mmmmm," she offered, feeling excitement return. Susan, her eyes closed, began to fondle his half hearted erection,

moved down on him and slipped it into her mouth. He watched her for a moment, but his will proved insufficient, closed his eyes and imagined. Now it was another he saw, someone else altogether. The lips were those of a man, two men together, he and another, the hardness became harder, the desire more desirable. The man was glossy, shiny, like those in his magazines.

It was not easy to face the truth. Tom had worked hard at the lie, living it daily, and even now there was a definite guilt laying about the place when he confronted it. Perhaps he was not quite so detestable as I would have him be, though beside the Angel of Susan first impressions suggested that his soul had been plucked out at birth.

Orgasm came and the strange man went away, to come back another day. Who he was is beside the point, though his features were familiar to all.

Did Tom love his wife? or was it more habit, familiarity? Was it like his sex: pretend? At any rate, he felt imprisoned by this thing inside, this dark beast, and making love to her seemed like incest—though he did it anyway.