

Need and Desire

by Alex Austin

Hanna sat on the patch of crabgrass beside his vegetable garden and fed apple slices to a rooster standing between her legs.

As he approached, she rid herself of the bird and turned. "Why that looks awful. Are you all right?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Put raw meat on it. That really helps."

The rooster struck out for the garden, attacking the mesh that kept the birds and rabbits out of the blueberries and tomatoes. The sun hung above the crest of the farthest hill, still spreading its warmth down the canyon. High above, a hawk circled lazily.

"How did you find my place?"

"Asked around the café. Alphonse the plumber told me he did some work for you. I walked up here."

"Now you can walk back down."

"Jesus, like I broke into your house or something."

Lighting a cigarette, she took a drag and looked around. "This is just like paradise." She took up the open penknife that lay beside her foot and closed the blade. She offered him the cigarette. He shook his head. "You going to expel me and my rooster from the garden?"

Ten minutes later, he flopped down in his lounge chair, pressing an ice-filled sock to his forehead.

"Did I tell you their names?" asked Hanna.

"Whose names?"

"My babies."

"No. I don't think so."

"Lee and Lily."

"I thought they were boys," he said numbly.

"No, I never said that."

Hanna sat down on the second lounge chair. She leaned to one side, smiled and tapped his shoulder.

She pulled at her blouse, letting the air in. "I never knew if the first one was a boy or a girl. Lee can be both. I knew a girl in school named Lily and she was the sweetest girl. How could you have a name like Lily and not be sweet? You think I'm gonna go to hell?"

"No."

"I think I am." Hanna rolled over on her stomach and nestled her head against her arms. "You think they make you work in hell?"

"Some circles."

"What's that mean?"

"Hell has circles. A circle for gluttons. A circle for the carnal. A circle for suicides."

"That's it?"

"No. There are many circles. And in some, the sinners work."

"Well, I've never worked. Never had a job."

"You're fortunate."

"If I needed something, I'd steal it."

"Yeah. You told me that."

"When?"

"On the beach."

"You ever steal anything?"

Dogs bark, boys steal, but in his father's domain, theft was not a prank. His father had never stolen anything, not an apple off a tree, a fallen apple even. Once, he and his father had been walking and came upon a five dollar bill lying on the sidewalk. As Hugh stopped to pick it up, his father said leave it, that the person who lost the bill might come back to look for it, and that person surely needed it more than he needed it. It would likely be another person who found the money and took it, Hugh argued. We can't be responsible for that person's actions, his father had said, only for our own.

Hanna slipped off her lounge chair and sat at the bottom of Hugh's. They watched the hawk circle.

"Did you?"

"I suppose...."

"So what happened?" she asked, leaning back and resting her head against his thigh.

He nudged her head away. "No."

"It feels so nice."

"I mean it, Hanna. I don't want you to." But his leg felt carved away where her head had lain. One stupid thing jostling another for attention. He was afraid that if she touched him again, he'd have her on the ground.

"You don't like me?"

"I'd rather you sat in the other chair."

She pushed against him to get up. The heat of her hand sunk into his leg, radiated to his groin.

"You read a lot, huh? What books should I read?"

"I don't know. Anne of Green Gables, maybe."

"What's that story about the guy who goes down to hell to get his girlfriend?"

"Orpheus."

"I like that story. I would go to hell to get my two babies. What's the name of the guy that runs that place?"

"Hades."

"Why did Hades not want him to look back? Why did Hades have that rule?"

"Why do you think?"

"Maybe he's like Kyle. Kyle tells me to do things all the time. He doesn't care about them being done. He just wants to see I follow his orders."

A fly landed on Hugh's arm, jumped to his neck and then his cheek. He swatted at his cheek, missing the fly and imagined queasily if he had squashed it. The fly relocated to the back of his hand and then his arm again, where he could feel each of the fly's legs snagging the hairs. He gazed at the fallen leaves of the dollar tree, pale brown and pale red. One redder. Hanna held the knife to her wrist.

"What the hell?"

She calmly handed him the knife.

"I don't want you doing crazy things like that. You can't be here if you're going to do things like that." *Be here?* Why did he say that?

“Jesus, it was a mistake. You never cut yourself? On paper of anything?” She licked her finger and drew it over the smear of blood at her wrist. The blue veins were as narrow as kite string. He would dream of her flying at the end of an elongated vein, a blue kite string.

In the days following the boys' deaths, there were several nights when the passion was as strong as during courtship. It usually started with Hugh talking about the boys, and Setsuko coming on to him as if out of dream. She would go to sleep immediately afterwards, though Hugh would lie awake, touching her hair, remembering the similar touch of his sons' hair.

One night Hugh dragged her to a support group, composed of people who had recently lost loved ones. They listened to other people's stories and they were all painful, but it had no bearing on their own loss. They were just stories and Hugh knew that this was true for all the others. But the others had at least buried their children. Even the ones that had been in horrible automobile accidents like the couple who were driving home from buying Christmas presents when a tractor-trailer that had not seen the traffic slow plowed into them. The back half of the car had been compressed to barely three feet and the two children in their car seats had been reduced to shadows. They buried shadows.

She drew up a forkful of the pasta and shoved it in her mouth. “Wow, this is good,” she said, her mouth open, the pasta gushing out, childlike. “Shit,” said spitting the pasta on her plate. She jumped up.

“What? What?”

“Pecky. I forgot about my rooster.”

He followed her outside.

“Here, Pecky! Here, Pecky!”

She dashed about the yard, looking under bushes and behind trees. Ten yards down the path, a small coyote emerged from the underbrush, holding something in his teeth, the rooster. Hugh walked to toward it. The coyote didn't move. As he came within 10

feet, the animal turned and walked away. It didn't seem in a hurry, as if it knew that this biped had no chance of catching it. Hugh walked slowly, trying not to panic the animal, which kept its distance. He followed him not because he thought he had a chance of recovering the rooster, but simply to give Hanna hope for a few minutes more. Closing to within a yard, Hugh charged. The animal bounded, quickly putting ten yards between itself and Hugh. Hugh ran after the hopelessly quick beast. In the darkness, Hugh slammed into something, tripped and found himself on his back looking up at the coyote and its dumb companion. Shaking its head, as if baffled by human behavior—does this creature really need it more than I do?—the coyote dropped its meal. The animal turned around and trotted into the shadows.

“Hugh! What's happening?”

He carried the rooster to its mistress.

In the dream, Hugh was teaching. The class was unruly and he was being officially observed, though the observer was not to be seen. He had nothing to teach. He had no lesson plans. The observer who could not be observed was taking notes. If he could get the children in their chairs. He yelled a few words in Farsi.

“Gooshkan! Book Sha!”

A young Israeli girl, perhaps 11 but younger looking, raised her blouse, revealing her belly. Another girl, Indian, turned her head and blushing cried out his name. “Please put that down,” said Hugh. “You can't do that. Cover yourself.”

The students were marching in single file. There had been a fire alarm. But they weren't marching toward the PE field, but toward the library. From which flames were shooting.

Hugh coughed up blood. The observer was angry. “Where are your lesson plans?”

A hand was moving cross his thigh, the touch hard, insistent. It was not a dream touch and he recognized the thing beside him as a body, its contours firm, but giving. The calf bone against his.

His penis had already hardened and she moved to it. He remained still as she wrapped her hand around him. Her lips were at this ear.

"Let me, huh?"

"No," he said turning away. "Go to sleep, Hanna. Just go to sleep."

