

Stillness

by Jamal H. Iqbal

her

She had coral for eyes—porous, dotted, changing shades depending on the amount of light she sought—swishing like the ends of hand-woven blankets when moist; although she wouldn't lower that shutter until much, much later. Until those points of steel had been tempered to moist vulnerability by the touch I showed her pale skin. The warmth that touch held. The sincerity that warmth faked. Much, much later.

As of right now she'd just met the god of carnage and come out bored. As they debated the necessity of fake vomit, aimed by a straw haired osteoporotic diva at a balding legobrick mason, she insisted that these modern day thespians were only actualizing adolescent tinsel dreams left far behind, when they crossed over, post pubescent, into the city of gold. "Draftboards be damned," she postured in her lilting affected scoff, as the tight sunflowers she wore punctuated every curve of her modest breasts, hips backlit by the glare reflected off the bruised white beast she rode, fondly named Andromeda. The old Irish anti-leprechaun I'd chauffeured to the theatre listened to her with equal impertinence, his ego as brittle as hers. He'd had an audience with the god of carnage too, and had left wowed. His highlight? The macerated projectiles that gorgeous blond had hurled at the dapper gentleman, patterning his Oxbridge pocket square and dotting his houndstoothed jacket-front with an impudent apple and artichoke boutonniere. Meanwhile she, she couldn't bear hearing him sermonize so; in that grating goatlike voice of his slurring the R's like that other bearded Scotsman she believed was as overrated, if not more. The one they called Bond. ("Almost as overrated on celluloid as on paper!" she'd later decree, sprawled on the ottoman one movie night. "Only ol' Irish Anti-L wasn't Scot," he'd refrain from voicing aloud.) But that would come later.

Much much later.

For now, on and on they went, back and forth for what seemed like a few chapters in the 7th life of pi. "Rumi was quite inconsequential when it came it Nietzsche's theorem of postulated understated metaphysics," said she, only to be cut off by vehement proclamations of the adversity Dunne faced before the angry young men finished waiting for Godot. "But don't you think you ar-sh mish-quoting to your-sh convenience," old anti-leprechaun ceaselessly repeated, only to be reminded one final time that she never pretended to be righteous anyway. With one last swish of the sunflower stalks she stepped confidently inside Andromeda's white belly. Starting to leave, she finally focused on me as I stood patiently waiting for ol' Irish Anti-L to get a move on. Very briefly she looked me in the eye and said, "Goodbye ____, nice meeting you again."

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i

"She knew my name? SHE KNEW MY NAME?! Sonofagun this hotwhitehouseofsunflowercoral KNEW MY gaddarned NAME!" While I knew nothing about her. Nothing. Not even where I'd met her before. Damn you ADD. "AAAArgh!" I turned to ol' Irish Anti-L and asked him if he knew who she was. "I know I've met her-sh somewher-sh but I cannae quite figure-sh. Should we be taking off them, the missus must have fr-shozen the icicles to fall on me head by now."

* * *

you

You were sitting on dark leather meringue, wearing slit ivy, epilated thighs sliding provocatively through, roots showing beneath your anaemic skin, fighting with the pale bluegreen of your veins. Around your right hand were porcelain tumblers, full of mildewed rosewater, sparkling ever so slightly by the murk light. Quills extended from your left hand, bent about 10.2 degrees or so anti clockwise. Your neck extended 12.4 degrees clockwise, as if to compensate. Your dark mane covered one coral and the part of your earlobe I'd wanted to nibble the other evening, when you bobbed your head in annoyance at ol' anti-leprechaun's lame defense. Your

other coral was glazed, almost sedentary as you scribbled the white slate with your quilled digits. Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed, keeping tune to the turning vinyl some daft punk spun. Applauding the siren was a gigantic butt crack, extending below a melting beige candle. You seemed oblivious to both, the siren and the scent emanating from the wick end. I hopped across to where you were, puckering my dimples to their deepest as I extended my aura towards yours and said, “Hey, fancy meeting you,” only to be shot down halfway between the ‘o’ and the ‘u’ by a “Careful I don’t want you to fall over me, that is expensive vine and expensive mildew.”

“I won’t” I said a tad too firmly. “I will not fall over you”.

* * *

me

From the moment the siren stopped wailing and your three and half tumblers of mildew induced confessionals—“Do you know I’m writing about the candle and how she needs silcobotox fillers?” / “Hey you are quite a good egg but the chicken, she was scrawny!” / “That anti-leprechaun is such a boorish beard, how can you stand it?” / “Your po e t ry...”—ended, you had me in a hypnotrance of my own supply. All I remember between staring at that dark brown coral iris and still trying to gauge what you really thought of my poetry is asking you over to the batcave. And you insisting, “Only if you wear clean underwear over that suit (don’t like too much intimacy). And please try not to save me.” I swore a spit oath combining your mildewed breath and mine that never would I ever, evvvverrr try to save you.

* * *

we

We painted with rings of cranberry flavored shisha smoke, patterning against risotto canvases. As I cooked our dinner you would keep pouring that liquid nitrogen until it froze and then tastefully remark, “Uff, you call this truffle? It’s frozen gelatin and oil and nothing else. And by the way I’m pescatarian except when it comes to oxtail.” As we waited for the scampi to uncurl, Andromeda

would sleep in the basement of my batcave, twice bruising her flanks the next morning, as she took off harder than my narrow parking exit arterials would permit. Time went by, on and on, back and forth for what seemed like a few eons in the 7th half-life of infinity. We found ourselves comfort in pattern. By day I would punch letters, faking realities behind promises of manna for the masses. While you would letter punches, realising fakeries in front of violations of poison for the bourgeoisie. I would scream in anger at my ability to do enough each day, to finally kill those I reported to. You, at your inability to ever save enough of those that submitted reports that you would read—labs, radiology, nuclear medicine. I wanted to be you, saving lives clad in jasmine, latex turning rose as each howling ante-natal came spouting out. I suspect all you craved for is my rainbow tapestry, with its penchant for penmanship and the flair to snap jaws shut via vintage cufflinks. By night we would meet, every alternate night. You at the batcave (where your caviar shampooed locks now had a polymer brush in attendance), and I at your turquoise crystal palace, 400 knots away, where whey jars now lay patiently waiting for my post travel beverage intake, measured out precisely to the ounce.

Come morning we would play noughts and crosses with rays of streaming mountain sunlight, debating who had the greater right to Ghalib's poetry. You had the advantage of Persian cognition, the language his words were chiseled in. I, the benefit of cognitive dissonance, that complex emotion his verse was jeweled on. Whenever I called a sickie to match the end of your 36-hour shifts, our afternoons would be spent teleporting to planets made of celluloid. All except one. The one I spent fixing that darned steel rod in your harissa encrusted Moroccan bath, making sure not one squeak woke you up as you REMd. On Sabbath you would take me to the city your parents raised you in. Deliberately avoiding any ghosts of their existence, making sure you changed even the color of your skin. As I reined Andromeda through, you would watch for me watching you from the corner of my eye pretending not to. You would then show me your seas, us sitting thigh by thigh on the

public bridge to nowhere, bringing in sunrise even while the crescent shone. And I would chide you for having flown you here late the previous night, all 67 kilos of you, dragging your size 37 burgundy soles, even as you insisted on not passing out, on not making it any easier for my stretched whey fueled sinews. "I'm going away for a few days, you'll be quite all right" you would tell me on the bridge one night, "I could tell you where, but you'd only follow me there."

You made me swear. A spit oath combining your intoxicating breath with intoxicated mine. "Never would I ever, evvvverrr try to follow you."

* * *

us

They wondered who I was, as I walked into that grave room. A pair of pink bulbous helium filled orbs with a smilie drawn on each greeted me from the windowsill. You lay whimpering on the steel and cotton trampoline, electronically sprung. "Who told you I was here," you managed to wheeze out, accent still lilting, voice still affected. "I've a high pain threshold. I'm cold"/ was all I allowed you before holding the palm once quilled, now freezing and bare. Your face a Venetian mask, just where they'd repaired the bridge on your nose. Each day as they stared at me willing your palms warmer, they'd try and unmask you out of your pleas for more morphine.

"You will no longer feel that shooting lightning strike, when you breathe too hard. We've rejoined the compound that ogre hammered through your childhood, whenever he found you hidden in a nook, holding that book." they'd tell you, but your coral would give nothing away. "This silicon will add a C# to your Bm. He will no longer tease you for being flat toned, that ogre your mother loves." they'd tell you but your coral would give nothing away. "Who is this creature? He refused to leave the hallway for eight and a score sunrises until you sent us to let him in, have his way." they'd tell you and your coral would finally sway, like the ends of handwoven blankets.

* * *

he

It took him the patience of a comet and the stubbornness of a moth to make her believe she could leave that coral permanently unshuttered. And just when god was in his heaven and all was well with her world, that's when he decided to jump time. Confident in his own belief of her innate strength, he decided to rip open his own skin. Let her peek inside that sarcophagus he'd worn over those light years, day in and day out, on and on for what seemed like a few editions of warp speed to the power 7. Switching on the bat signal he had summoned her to the cave, late one night. "Come." was all he'd said. Still not healed enough to gallop full speed, she'd given Andromeda a rest, deciding instead to summon more conventional public high beams. What she saw when she entered; she neither anticipated nor ever accepted. Definitely not on this scale, definitely not the shattered grace she saw inside.

He was torn, scratched in places, delicately carved in others. He started a long take telling her of his travels, his travails and his travesties. She let him spin, offering him swig after swig of the fast emptying, burning honeyed hops. Slipping into routine delivered out of practice she lay him down. The dermis she efficiently stitched. The epidermis she efficiently bandaged. The scars, she efficiently wiped clean. Along with every memory of ever having touched his palm.

* * *

she

She nursed him until the red orb rose. Ran him a sulphur bath and patiently watched him brush his teeth with the remains of golden peat he'd emptied off the ivory bottle through the night. "They made me do it", he muttered. Over, and over, and over again. "Come, come. No one made you do anything." she cooed.

Having scrambled him some whey she asked him to walk her to a cab. He insisted on waking up his own grey steed and dropping her to the where the carriages left. Her coral was still. Bright. Dark. As they air kissed goodbye without feeling, he spotted a pair of strangers stop by. They'd been priority once, before he'd reprioritized, his foggy memory chip ironically computed. "Is that

her!" the softer of the two exclaimed, lips conspiring, eyes elated. Churlishly he turned, and headed back to the cave. The corner of his eyes catching one final glimpse of the frozen coral. She pretended not to notice his gaze as he wilted, knowing fully well he'd misread her ability to heal, and his own inability to shield. The caviar shampooed mane moved haughtily, in tandem with the black seaweed she'd draped over herself today.

* * *

ol' Irish Anti-L

"Perfect stillness, that's all I'd ever asked of him. Was it too much? Was it too soon?" she'd said amused, rolling her eyes at him a few months later, as they mock debated another bit of classic theatre, only just the two of them this time. She has specifically, and politely enquired whether 'he' was attending. 'He' that had melted through the cold, he that had turned latex into coral, he that she had amputated from her system, sliced and cauterized. He that ol' Irish knew was slowly, stubbornly, draining the last vestiges of his warmth away, at the bar next door, just 50 feet beyond.

Perfect stillness, that's all ol' Irish ever found in her now. A requiem their stubbornness had brought alive that night, quickly, slowly, over whatever caused their ghazal to lose its rhythm. Perfect stillness he dreaded they had found a way to make permanent. Scars turned to scabs.

Perfect stillness. Eyes coral. Dried. Frozen. White.

