

Raw Sugar

by Karen Eileen Sikola

As soon as the young woman steps outside her hotel, the rain begins, in pummels as promised by the predictions on her cell phone. She first takes shelter inside a Halal buffet, where the food's ravaging heat eats away at her insides. She is the only patron, her waitress stowed away in a corner simultaneously listening to Alicia Keys and watching Dr. Oz explain to overweight men the benefits of a raw food diet. To cool the unwelcome burn of curried lentils, the young woman chews on cantaloupe, pays quickly, and walks on, still hungry.

After passing a Hasidic Jew on the street, his perfect curls dangling just below the handles of a plastic bag he wears to protect his hat, the young woman spots a bodega with umbrellas for sale. She picks out a green one, and approaches the register. The cashier takes it out of the packaging, inspects the wooden handle with his dark, cracked hands. He opens and closes it—open, close, open, close—then pleased with his findings, decides it is worth \$7.99. The young woman counts out eight ones, turning them one at a time to face the same direction, and says thank you.

Her goal is to make it to the New York Public Library, to spend her last few hours in the city among literature's great love stories, to stand in the same place where another fictional woman found herself abandoned and without ring, with a peacock in her hair. The young woman wants to stand there at the base of the staircase, alone and equally abandoned the night previous, in a doorway only because she begged to not be left fighting back tears on a street corner. The departing man held her as the recognition of his rejection pulsed through the new-found empty in waves, back to belly to throat.

"It was so great seeing you, sweetheart," he'd said, allowing his hand to leave the small of her back to touch the hair she tried to sweep out of her face.

He'd meant it, she knew, as he had when he joked about sending her a birthday card in three months with black hearts drawn on the envelope.

"To remind me of how you'll never love me," she'd said, as if she, too, were joking.

The rain is relentless. The young woman does not make it to the library. Instead, she finds herself inside the Museum of Sex, putting her new, wet umbrella inside a complimentary plastic sheath, checking her maternity jacket, and walking—without child—through exhibits archiving the history of penetration, acts left unrealized on this particular trip, aside from a nonreciprocating warmth she took down her throat, welcomed and without reflex.

Each device, photograph, and description on display fails to capture what she felt that first time their bodies met in undocumented space.

"That was a good night," he'd said, as if she'd needed a reminder.

Each room, each level presents visitors with the risks and consequences of joining bodies, yet fails to document the risks and consequences of the waiting, of the space between a body who takes and the one who gives, the build up that occurs from a pitied patience.

The young woman watches the other visitors, making presumptions about who sought out these artifacts and who accidentally wandered inside to avoid the downpour. Another woman about her age looks around before allowing herself to touch the synthetic breast of a sex doll. A man in a suit delicately squeezes the tip of a dildo.

On her way back to where her baggage lay stowed, the young woman passes under the tusk-like overhang of the Gershwin Hotel, where next door, the comforting aroma of coffee lures her through the door. Inside, Bob Dylan plays "Just Like a Woman."

She watches the grains of raw sugar disappear into the foam of her soy latte, leaving a darkened crystallized layer like

crème brulee with their melting descent. New York City cries outside, and the young woman—her dark hair curling up from the combined humidity of precipitation and steamed milk—tells herself its tears are due to her impending departure.

She takes one last sip, sweet from the sugar that sunk to the bottom, and makes her way outside again.

