

Featherbedding

by Rae Bryant

He brings her water and miniature corn muffins, halved open and spread with bright green pepper jelly from a glass jar she's kept all these years. She lengthens her legs down the mattress, sets the four muffin halves side by side on the white cloth napkin that he's unfolded for her, lain over her thighs like a tablecloth.

She's not eaten today.

This is the last of their food. Nothing left in the cabinet or refrigerator or the hiding places neither of them tells each other about. The muffins are necessary now, like the moment when a child knows there are no magical gift givers or tooth fairies or St. Christophers. Only mortals and starvation.

Something pitiful in the way he holds them, as if an offering.

She sets the muffins aside, opens herself, nymph-like, mouth spread and gritty. She pulls the dirty edge of his gray t-shirt up so to show herself to him, spreads herself across the mattress like thin flesh oil over too much canvas. He moves over her, pushes her thicker sections, spreads her more thinly, more evenly so to smooth out the bruises and lines. He can see through her now, understand her better. He falls in love with her anyway.

He calls her Calliope and sings a song for her about swimming in a stream, the deep part where they twine thin hungry legs, tread water, pull back their heads and fall beneath the surface so to kiss long water kisses. They ignore the bruises.

Fill me, my darling

Pour yourself.

He digs a trench for her, forms a mote around her body, rips mattress and blanket and sheets and feather pillows to better pad the nest. He says: we can wait out the winter here in feathers and mattress springs. Then he burrows beneath her, turns his body, settles beneath her.

I want you on top of me forever.

But we haven't any food. We'll waste away.

She lays flat against him, warms her breasts and stomach, pushes her legs and arms against his. Where their skins touch, they grow moist and warm and he imagines they could grow sustenance, a garden between their skins. He tries to pull feathers up and onto her back so to warm her, but they've floated off the bed and onto the floor. They stay this way for days.

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Where are the muffins? she says.

They sit stale now, on the bedside table, feathers caked in the hardened green pepper jelly.

Pity, she says, my mother had given it to me. The jelly, I mean. She falls out over him. Should have eaten it while it was still fresh.

