Nadja on Nadja -- an excerpt

by tsipi keller

"I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence, memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime." Francis bacon

"Feminine Psychology: It is said that the turtledove never drinks clear water, but always muddies it first with its foot so that it may the better suit its pensive mind." Journals/Katherine Mansfield

More often than not, Nadja likes to spend time in her head, a place she knows well and feels comfortable in. Right now she is at work, walking down the corridor toward a corporeal place of promise where she will steal a few moments and take what she calls a Breathing Break. The best place for a BB is the bathroom. The bathroom may not be very appealing, but it is roomy, usually free of unpleasant odors and, most importantly, usually empty. At the far end, there is a large window and that is where she is headed, having made sure that all five stalls are vacant. She plants her right foot on the ledge and, leaning elbow on thigh, she observes the street from her twelfth floor perch.

Yes, she is the small animal in the confines of its cage, albeit with certain workplace amenities, such as WC facilities and free-roaming ruminations. Looking down on the street and listening in on her thoughts, it occurs to her that she could jump. She imagines the fear catching in her throat as the wind rushes past her face—the sheer, if brief, exhilaration of giving in to nihilism and madness. In another part of her brain, it surprises her that she, of all people, would even entertain such a thought; she who, in spite of everything, is usually

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optimistic, not to say hopeful, and is always aware of what is good and what is bad for her.

In the building across the street, people stoop over desks or stare at screens, and she feels for them; like her, they may be thinking: It's so beautiful out, and we are stuck indoors.

Her particular indoors is the research library of a large accounting firm. A library of few real books, it consists mostly of computers. There are people, too, whose job it is to punch in and retrieve data for the accountants, as well as documents for the legal department. Down below is the glamour of Fifth Avenue, the business and tourist center of the new world. Men in suits, women in dresses, preoccupied and fiercely adhering to the future at hand, march onward fast in slow motion. A friendly sun beats down on their heads. Humanity, as if spellbound, is approaching the end of the millennium.

When in a certain mood, like now, kind of downcast but not severely so, Nadja, wittingly or unwittingly, goes back and reexamines the bad moments in her life, not bad-bad but kind of humiliating, kind of still wounding and perplexing when she revisits them, like the time she went away for the weekend with a new lover, or someone she thought would become a lover, even though he was older than her by at least ten years, already divorced and with young kids the wife got to keep. At one point during the weekend, she left her flimsy—she did not think it flimsy at the time, but she was young and inexperienced then—black slip on the bed, which, she reddens again at the thought, must have been some type of synthetic fabric. The prospective lover had just come out of the bathroom and, approaching the bed, he picked up the slip with two fingers, took a look at it, and let it drop. Not a word was exchanged, it lasted no longer than a second, and she, well, she instantly caught, or intuited, the whiff emanating from him, the whiff of contempt, maybe mild and bemused, but contempt nonetheless, not so much contempt for her, as an all-encompassing contempt for cheap.

The moment came and went, and she soon forgot about it, they had a nice weekend together, nice for her at least, he treated her well, took her to expensive restaurants she was unaccustomed to, but later, in bed, she apparently failed him again, and he apologized, saying he could not get hard for her. He was gentle when he said it, his voice soft and regretful, assuring her it was not her fault, it was his, hinting that he favored naughty and lewd. Still, during the weeks and years that followed, the slip had crystallized in her mind and gradually became the symbol of her inadequacy, socially and otherwise: she was not up to standard. She would never be up to standard in anything she undertook.

Indeed, most mornings she wakes with a heart that still beats, but is heavy with defeatist thoughts about the futility of life, *her* life, and, reluctant to face the day she burrows deeper into the covers, seeking shelter in darkness. Unhelpfully, she remembers that she is alone in the world, and not as smart and "with it" as others seem to be, and that her only true talents are hope and delusion. But, she reminds herself, she does have a gift: she is tenacious. And being tenacious means she wants to live. Wanting to live means she must compete, she must participate. She tells herself that these bad, early-morning thoughts are just the residue of some dream she dreamt in the night, and that the sooner she is up and running, the better, and soon she does, she jumps out of bed with sudden determination, and the mere physicality of movement alters something in her brain, and she is awake and back in the column of the living.

Jolted out of her reveries at the sound of marching high heels in the corridor, Nadja quickly shuts herself in the nearest stall. Over the years, she has managed to establish a proper, if distant, relationship with her co-workers; they know enough to leave her alone. She is dimly aware that they think she is odd, and her frequent visits to the bathroom, no doubt, are a topic of conversation. She did tell them once that she has back problems and that she comes in here to do her yoga stretches. Not that they ever saw her do any yoga. Maybe they believe her back problems story,

or maybe they think she suffers from some urinary disorder. It is also true that, in the office, she needs to pee more often, a condition she accredits to working with Jerry.

This time it is Colleen invading the quiet of her sanctum. Colleen has been sent on a mission, which she cheerfully executes. She bursts into the bathroom, calling, "Nadja, Jerry wants you."

Jerry. The Boss. Long tentacles. He always finds her. Like an ardent devotee, he needs her at his side, ever so silent and subdued.

For a brief moment, Nadja shuts her eyes, then speaks. "What's the urgency, Colleen? Tell him I'm otherwise engaged."

Colleen's laugh rings out, and Nadja imagines her primping in front of the mirror: a tall, big-boned girl of thirty. Oblivious and healthy-looking in her good skin, her thick chestnut hair, her green eyes. Colleen is engaged to be married to boyfriend Robert. Colleen, Nadja reflects, is everything that Nadja is not. "What can I tell you, Nadja? Finish up."

The door slams and Nadja comes out of the stall. She walks to the sink and slowly washes her hands, if only to approximate the real time in case Jerry has his finger on his stopwatch. She is a slave and, barring a miracle, will probably remain one for a long time. On the whole, Nadja consoles herself, things are not all that bad. As much as she hates the office and feels she is being exploited, at the very least she manages to exploit them back, appropriating precious time to do her own work. True, conditions are not optimal, she is not allowed the silent, grass-growing mood Melville talked about, Melville who slaved as a Customs Inspector in New York.

And her paycheck, too, is not to be sneered at. A paycheck, a checkbook, is a wonderful thing. When she sits down to pay her bills, when she signs checks, she fancies herself an active member of society. During moments of grace, she likes to imagine that the other elves in the office, as they huddle in their cubicles, are also engaged in illicit work, and that Jerry himself is working on a book, possibly a memoir. It is an interesting possibility, and maybe a good idea for a story, the idea that they are all complicit partners in a system that has warped them. At the same time, she also worries that working

on the sly adversely affects her brain, as well as her budding novel. It burns a hole in her, the fact that she has to do her work stealthily as if it were a shameful act.

But, not to forget: there's the weekend to look forward to. Tomorrow night, for a change, Raoul is staying over, and Friday morning they will drive out to Long Island to visit Sabine; like any normal couple, they have plans for the weekend. All she need do is erect a bridge over the gap between now and tomorrow evening and make Jerry disappear under. Jerry, the Library Director, lording over a few female elves who have become expert at filling requests and staying out of trouble.

Nadja wipes her hands and leans closer to the mirror. What a face! She used to delight in her face and easily match its reflection with a purity she felt inside, but lately, and even longer than lately, she has not been able to match the inside with the outside; something has gone missing. Or, conversely, something has been added, something intangible, and yet as real as time. The purity is still there, she hopes, but the reflection has been changing on her in small subtle ways that make her look severe, or tired. People around her may not notice these minute changes, but she does. Very possibly because her eyes are actively searching for signs that she is no longer the carefree girl that used to reside in her. If this is so, she'd better stop looking at herself.

Looking at herself, Nadja lets out a sigh. Jerry is waiting—she can almost hear the tap-tap of his fingers on his desk. But she likes it in here, AND, she is taking a break in the only private room on the floor. This is where she hides when she needs to recharge whatever needs recharging in order to endure the hours ahead. True, she spends a good chunk of her day working on Woman Ending Badly; still, it takes a lot out of her, not so much the writing as having to be on the lookout for Jerry who may suddenly materialize at her desk to check up on her. Jerry who gets lonely and restless, sitting all alone with his power, and, every so often, emerges from his office to survey the minions of his kingdom.

Nadja blinks a few times, and attempts a smile at her reflection. Okay, maybe it is not her face that is the problem. Maybe her eyes are to blame, they mislead her. They are two dark dots staring back at her, and, when tired, they prejudice the way she sees the world, including her own face. Still, when she thinks that she looks awful, she instinctively accepts the judgment and is bound to make decisions. She will stop smoking. She will drop Raoul and find a new lover. She will quit her job, she will not touch desserts, she will cut down on wine. She will drink more water, will make time for exercise, and will concentrate on breathing correctly. It is one thing to complain about your looks, another, to do something about it, short of going to a specialist and paying him to fix it.