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The Sleep of Reason

It is a good thing that these creatures do not allow themselves to be seen except by night.

—Goya

The Garden was around here, he felt sure of it. Unless they'd razed it. On both sides of the empty street slum buildings loomed, every window dark. Garbage cans, dented and lidless, stood by the stoops, exhaling odors of rotted apples, stinks of deliquescent lettuce, bourbon-soaked coffee ground aromas, and the gray rot of egg-damp cigarette ash. Alfred wrinkled his nose, unconsciously licked his lips. Even spoiled air excited his hunger.

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They couldn't have torn down the best restaurant in town. Unless this damned neighborhood's wiped it out. We'd taxi down this street—some girl and me—and climb out of the cab, then saunter lightly past the doorman into the Garden. Amazing . . . the chandeliers, the velvet draperies, bone china, the jazz and frenetic swing. God, it was sweet. Original. You'd never figure it was here in the midst of these ruins. *Is*, I mean. *Has* to be. Maybe I'll run across a phone booth, then I can check. Bet there's nothing like that,

though. Damn kids would probably rip it out, just for the change. Where *are* the kids, I wonder. Where is anyone?

*

Pull your pants up, his father said, voice ragged (it seemed he felt almost sorry). Alf eased off the bed, belt-stung buttocks quivering, skin ribboned with welts. The waistband of his briefs made him wince as he slipped them on, and his tear-drenched lips were salty and slick when he licked them. He'd seen a movie and come home late, broken curfew. Look here, son, his father said and held out his left fist (the pale knuckles naked as the shells of eggs), tapping with one ink-stained finger the glinting crystal of the gold watch shining around his wrist. A man without time is lost, he said. Nothing matters more. You understand? His son sniffed and nodded. Oh yes.

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Alfred checks his wrist. Bare. Underskin soft as a girl's belly. He stares at it till an image surfaces in memory: the watch laying on the dressertop, the tiny knives of its hands glowing green in the dark. An Omega. Burnished gold. In his rage he left behind one of the few things he truly loves.

*

Pull down your pants, boy, his father barked. Alf pulled them down, and then his father shoved him onto the bed took off his wide leather belt (Alf heard it hissing as it slipped the loops), raised it higher than the ceiling (or so it seemed), then drew a long, deep breath. Alf could hear the faint *tick tick* of the watch above him in the dark.

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Meetings tomorrow. Appointments. A few minutes lost might lose me a client. Like Dad always told me, a good accountant keeps one eye on his watch and one on the books. Hell . . . I'll have to go home and get it after dinner. Maybe I'll have a wife and not an *ar-teest* by then.

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Well, said Alfred, clearing his throat. Your work shows 'tremendous promise.' He handed back the latest *Art News* to Eva. She shrugged. Who knows? Kohl's a respected critic, though— for what it's worth. I like your college paintings best, he said. Eva smiled thinly. Well, I guess they have a certain—she tossed the magazine down onto the coffee table— innocence. Are you upset? She sat across from him, in the straightbacked chair. No. It's just I've been invited to show my work in a traveling gallery. Traveling? Alfred said, the word trembling on his breath. The Arts Council's given a grant that'll pay our expenses. Four other artists and me. We'll work with kids in schools to earn our keep out there. Out there, he echoed. On the Coast, she said. Five cities on the West Coast. Alfred leaned forward on the couch . . . elbows nailed to his knees, fingers laced together so tight their knuckles whitened. Just how long will you and your, he swallowed hard, fellow travelers be gone? Three months. Her eyes narrowed and aimed at his. He laughed. Well, I just can't allow, he began. Allow? she growled, suddenly angry. Who do you think you are? I'm your husband, he said with force, voice ragged. Which gives you control of my life? I'm sorry, she shook her head, but you're fucking mistaken. Eva. . . . His eyes widened. You're an accountant, a soulless accountant! She stood up, pacing back and forth. You come to me nights with those ludicrous ink-blue fingers—she reached down and grabbed his clenched hands apart—and *I allow you*. I *allow* it! He hit her then, hard. She toppled backward, struck the edge of the endtable and lay on the carpet, arms cradling her head against whatever fresh blows might find her. But Alfred only swayed over her, panting and sweating. You're my *wife!* he roared. You hear me, Eva? *My wife!*

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Off to his left a cat shrieks, wails like a baby. Crashing glass. A trashcan lid rolls its tin thunder into the street and falls *whongk* against the curb. Stopped dead, Alfred breathes shakily, eyeing the cat as it scoots under a wooden stoop. *Uraaow*, it cries from its hideout. *Uraaaaow*.

*

Mama, why can't I dream? Alf whispered. Summer. Bedtime. You don't remember them is all, she answered, stroking his brow. Tony Lopez always dreams, he said. Every day at lunch he tells them to all his friends. She shook her head. Dreams don't count. They're just pieces of the day time your mind sets aside to practice on, to keep it sharp. It's like exercise. Alf frowned. But Tony says there's this lady that comes to him in dreams. She's looking for her lost child, and she's always crying because she knows her child's dead, drowned down in the river. Alf's voice grew very small. Tony says she drowned the child herself. His mother sighed. Hush! Why those foolish people fill their children up with pagan lies I'll never know. She leaned down. You get to sleep. Her dark eyes glinted in the night-light's weak shine.

*

What's that damned cat crying about? Jesus, look—I'm shaking. Heart in my throat. I feel it pounding. It chokes me, even after I swallow. Like a trapped bird or something. I swallow harder. It's still there.

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Little Alf dreamed the Mexican woman came to his window. Then into his room. The bed began moving . . . turned to a river the white sheet foaming up from under the dark blanket. *Mi niño*, the woman moaned, bending over him, her lips too close to his face, *mi niño!* Her voice rose wild and lonesome, but Alf didn't answer, didn't answer. He pulled the river over his head and held his breath. Held it. Then he woke gasping, kicking back the blankets damp with his sweat, heart pounding sore against his ribs. He

found the room empty, heard his parents speaking low in their bedroom—very private—then his mother’s throaty, intimate laugh. And he laid back heavily, sank into sleep like a black stone. The wailing woman did not return. She was the only dream he would ever remember.

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The cat’s shut up. The silence tastes like virgin air. Odd . . . the idea this might be a dream. Ridiculous, of course. But the street’s too perfectly empty. Okay, this feels foolish, but who’s to know. I roll up a nugget of shoulder flesh between forefinger and thumb and pinch it. Nothing. Squeezing a blob at the base of my neck—the same nothing. Okay. Okay. I reach in my pants and through the pocket pinch the tip of my penis. Jesus Christ! It’s dead. Jesus. Heart’s in my throat again. I touch my left wrist, the white shadow the watchband left there—and from where the word *Omega* should be, I pull up a bit of tender skin. I pinch it. Hard.

*

He knelt by Eva on the floor, but when he hissed his half-sincere apologies, she wildly shook her head—clutching it, guarding it—her weeping so savage it sounded like laughter. He stormed out of the house a few minutes later, kicked the front gate open and stalked the street an hour or more . . . until the thought occurred to him that he was making a spectacle of himself (his mother would have said). *Yes, he thought, the neighbors must be putting two and two together even now: There’s a man who can’t control his wife. The bastards.* Then he swerved toward the city center—tired, angry, hungry—to find the Crystal Garden. The restaurant had never failed to help him woo the girls in college, the ones he most wanted to fuck. They loved its elegance, even down to the waiter, a handsome, dark Mexican who spoke exotic Spanish—a tongue that always seemed to make a soft, compliant mood descend upon them. Nights after the Garden, Alfred seldom slept alone. But Eva—Eva was the first and only girl who’d

ridiculed the place (All this pointless pomp, she said), laughed at the waiter's affectations . . . then gently sneered at Alfred's tux. And yet, when Eva spoke of art—Goya, Van Gogh, Da Vinci, Caravaggio—he fell in love with her lucid passion. How vividly he imagined introducing her to friends, envisioning their charmed faces, smiles tight with envy. Alfred, from that first meal they ate together, thought of Eva as his wife. And later (two or three long weeks later), he seduced her.

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Aah! he coughs through his teeth. The red mark on his wrist fades slowly, stinging. Less fiercely, he once more pinches the spot . . . winces . . . smiles. Then he starts to walk quickly . . . more and more rapidly, black shoes ticking on the concrete. With fresh firmness he strides toward the dark at the street's far end, feeling completely awake. Faint wind moans in an empty stairwell.

*

Seduced *me*? Eva laughed one day (they'd been married less than a month). *I seduced you!* He laughed along with her, swallowing his panic. But the thought haunted him. Again and again he relived the scene, each step clear in his mind—clear and simple as a bookkeeper's entry: he on top . . . Eva arching beneath him. Again and again he'd almost break the grip of doubt.

*

What the hell? A fence. A damned fuck-it-all fence—I could've killed myself. Christ . . . my lip's bleeding. . . ? So dark I can't even tell if there's blood on my hands. Fucking street's a dead end. Not even a stinking streetlamp. . . . Calm down. Take stock. Jesus. I'm good and lost now.

*

When the woman saw the tree was good for food, a tree to be desired to make one wise—well, just what do you suppose she did? The pastor eyed his congregation. Of course, she took thereof and ate the fruit!

Alf sat pinched between his parents on the pew's hard, varnished wood. The pastor droned on, his voice lacking the dark timbre that gives voices true force—and yet it seemed somehow more terrible for being so bright and clear. Alf knew he'd soon make them kneel. Then there'd be Communion when he'd murmur *body . . . blood . . .* the plain words making Alf giddy with excitement. He glanced upward at his mother, whose eyes (fixed on the preacher) looked dim and serenely empty. Alf's father also watched, but his eyes looked jewel-like—hard, tiny crystals of attention. So He drove out the man, the pastor cried. Drove him out! His fist boomed loud on the lectern. And naturally, the woman went with him.

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I lean against the fence, glance at the white shadow on my wrist. Shut my eyes. Jaw-muscles working, stomach full of dry thunder. Wait . . . there's music. I stare down the narrow alley curving away off to the left. A glow's spilling out from somewhere, and I start toward it. The lopped torsos of buildings loom, their windows like mouths frozen open on a cry. A tin can *clinks* nearby, rolling hollow for a few feet . . . and then I'm running—heart in my throat, I'm running. Rounding the corner, I see light streaming from two grimy windows flanking a wide metal door, and over that a sign: CRYSTAL GARDEN SUPPER CLUB. I stagger toward it, panting thickly, trembling. A shadowy cat crouches on the windowsill, watching with wide, shining eyes. A leisurely forties' tune is raining gently from beyond the door. I can feel it washing over me, calming me. . . . I step toward the door and knock. It creaks back slowly—or did the cat meow? I hesitate . . . then step through into the darkened kitchen.

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Those first two years of marriage, Eva used only her spare time to paint—and grew bitterly restless. A local gallery showed her work, but it drew indifferent reviews, all noting her skill with safe color and

line. The faint praise hurt her into a sullen, bleak anxiety. I need to get out, she said one night. Get out? he echoed. Where? Here, she said, and spread a page of Classifieds between them. There's a cabin for rent. "Ideal for artists"—see? The headline read: DREAM ESCAPE. Why do you need to escape? he said. From what? From me? I need some *Eva* time. Otherwise, my art is going to die. I feel it. Look, he snapped, I married you to have you with me. Well why I married you I'll never know. She snatched away the page and turned her back. But *Eva*, Alfred breathed and touched her arm. I love you. *Eva* shrugged free. You smother me, she said. You drown me in your narrow love. Oh Christ, I can't imagine why I married you! He gripped her wrist, shaking with rage. Security, he hissed. I underwrite your painting. Hell, I'm your God damned patron! Yes, she spat, my little Medici. And you, he paused before he let her go, you use me quite freely, don't you. She began to cry, softly at first, and rubbed her wrist. I've had no choice, she murmured. Alfred—don't you see?

*

The kitchen's a wreck. Dustladen pans and strewn utensils, spiders resting in webs woven in the cold ovens. But Alfred scarcely notices. He walks on toward the music, through the round-windowed swinging doors.

*

A sort of a tolerance installed itself between them, then. Forgiveness—that was what they called it. Still, *Eva* began to spend more and more time painting. She grew intense and broody. Her work—yellows, greens and chocolates composing graceful, pure abstractions—turned to heavy nightmare shapes, purples, carmines, sulfurous whites . . . until Alfred started fearing for her. Most days, he came home from work to a house dark and cluttered, *Eva* shut up in her room with some stubborn canvas. She often went without food, falling into a kind of fever that scared him when he saw it at work. They seldom

fought, but even in their few, brief moments of closeness both were tense. At last he began to imagine ways to win her back from art, dreamed of making her totally his—the wife she'd never really been for him.

*

A hand on my shoulder, and I whirl. It's him. Alfredo, he grins. It ees good to half you back. The same waiter, the Mexican. Eess been years, he says, and I say, Yes. He says, Seet down. Perfecto. Here ees a menu. Then he's gone. I feel slightly faint or drunk and sink down heavily into a chair he must have slid out from the table. I'm the only customer, it seems. A long, long time goes by while I struggle to remember the Spanish for chicken. Then he's back, asking me something. I can't understand.

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Que quiere usted, señor? the waiter repeated. Sweat broke out on Alfred's brow. Then he noticed something odd and shook the menu meekly at the waiter. What's this? he said, regaining the offensive. This menu's blank. The waiter shrugged. I will bring you, he grinned helpfully, whatever. Alfred stammered, I—I'm not sure. The waiter leaned down too close to his face. Listen, he whispered, I remember you. Your tastes. He draped his dark hand on Alfred's shoulder. I will have them cook you an *unforgettable* meal! Alfred nodded. Yes. Do that. I mean, *sí*. The waiter grinned again. Trust me, señor.

*

Trooss me, señor, he tells me, you will luff it. Then he disappears. Jesus . . . after all these years he knows me. Settling back, I prop my feet on the opposite chair and try to relax. The orchestra's playing something very soft and slow . . . it makes my eyelids heavy. . . .

*

He closed his eyes, absorbed in listening. Hours flowed by at a distance. The trombones and clarinets converged like two rivers, weaving current to current . . . a dark rush that carried him away toward a cataract, the smooth rock-lip of a cliff. And he drifted backwards in a long long fall until his first evening in the Garden stood before him again. He remembered the girl—that first one—but not her name. She was slender and pale, with watery blue eyes and dark brown hair cut too short for her angular face. Alfred knew her from a class they shared in Bookkeeping. He remembered how she idolized his facility with numbers and his upperclassman wit. I'm a virgin, she told him when he got her up to his room, and a thrill went through him like wind through a close-leafed hedge.

*

Turn around! Eva shouts. Alfred turns, seething. There is nothing more, he starts—but now his breath's knocked back into his chest. Eva's holding up a hideous painting as if it were a shield: an ape (it seems) wearing a suit, his thick crimson cock exploding from the crotch. This is a mirror, she drawls, her voice hoarse as a ragged note stroked from a slack string of catgut. Alfred stares at the nightmare face, the hairy jaw, the blistered lips. Then slaps it from her hands, feels the razor's blade flash in his fist, sees her throat gape like a blood orange slashed open in his mind. In his mind. He gives a push instead, and Eva staggers back, collapses. You God damned bitch, he spits through clenched teeth. God damned *woman!*

*

It was Lily, by Christ, he remembered. The orchestra's clarinet glissanded upward, Gershwin-esque . . . and suddenly that distant night came back to him— that original fuck . . . Alfred's first, and Lily's. Oh yes, he remembered jabbing into her gently to start with, then harder, deeper while she held her eyes shut, her tear-slathered lips trembling until he broke through below, and a cry like a baby bird's or a

kitten's forced its way between her teeth. She was all sweat, all delirium; he could feel it quivering inside her. . . . Then a saxophone moaned in the ballroom like a beast, and Alfred shivered.

*

The saxophone's throaty wailing floods him, a resonating voice in the cavernous space between his groin and his skull. With a breathless, delicious shudder he remembers the scribbles of blood and semen on the bedsheets after Lily had left . . . inscrutable as a smeared ledger entry. Then a hand on his shoulder—

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Eva was shaking me.

*

He starts up in his chair. *Perdóneme usted, señor*, the man breathes, smiling apologetically. On the table before him Alfred finds a huge platter, the oblong cover silver and shining, the waiter's face a distorted egg sliding on its surface, the lips moving. *Este es la substancia que usted siempre necesitaba*. The voice reaches him, spirants drawn out to a hiss. What? Alfred asks, staring at his own reflection ovaled in the shell's convex mirror. *I am sorry, señor*, the waiter says. His voice is at once servile and strangely insistent. *I forget you do not understand everything. It has taken a long time—I apologize. But this dish is rare, and we had to get it special for you.*

*

Alf! she said, shaking me. Wake up! Alfred—you're dreaming. It didn't feel . . . my heart was throbbing wildly in my throat. . . . And when I'd settled down, I couldn't speak. My bitten tongue fluttered, birdlike. What *is* it? she asked. As always, I couldn't remember—although it seemed I could still hear a clock ticking, or a knife-tip pecking at china. A nightmare, I told her. Just another nightmare.

*

The waiter lifts the ponderous lid, and there she lies: Eva— or that portion from the bottom rib up, well roasted, bleeding steam. The wrinkled lids are caved in where her eyes have burst like fat blisters, and some artful cook has wedged an apple in between her teeth. Alfred stares, trembling. Hunger's moist thunder rolls inside his stomach. He lifts a gilded fork, touches her cheek; the fangs sink easily in, making juice drip from her slightly blackened chin. The waiter bends and whispers, *Ya es hora*. Alfred answers: *It is time*.