

CLAIRE DONATO

The New Father

She opens her eyes. The duvet is covered in blood.

“Redress,” he says.

And thus she redresses.

She redresses. But perhaps not. Perhaps she leaves the room to shower, to release her brain from the confines of her skull, which contains a multitude of images that prey upon her mind: one small rodent trapped in a vent; an urn containing only a handful of ash; and a flowerbed in which he sleeps, sleeps inside her mind. “Redress,” he says, and should she speak up, show a sign of resistance? Or should she redress, dry-clean the duvet, make white again the duvet, the duvet covered in blood?

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and she envisions herself in a shower—light hail—sleet, snow, or dust sprinkles her face, cleansing her mind, and, in her mind, she is holding a bar of ivory soap, she is cleansing her mind once again with his ivory soap, washing away the blood, the duvet covered in blood, now soiled by her blood.

“Let me explain,” she says.

There are a number of logical explanations for the blood. First, she explains, it was the second time. And to diminish the significance of this fact—the fact his mind represses—is to deny her virginity, which was not virtuous or chaste. No, there was nothing chaste about it, and now she too is gender-specific, her mind cleansed of its dust.

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says from the doorway, holding the duvet. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Dry cleaning should fix it.” But to cleanse the duvet, to make it free of dirt and grime, of blood and dust and glass and sleet—at the very least, she will invent an untruth, explain away the stain, and string together words as one might compose a sentence. “The scab on my knee ripped apart,” she will say. “The cuticle along my thumbnail was bleeding.”

And he is so indifferent in the doorway, holding the duvet to his chest. “I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and her brain is consumed by the image of flowers. One flower appears in her mind,

although it is impossible to tell what is contained inside. Thinking of its reproductive organs, her mind redirects her body someplace else—could it be? Is she walking away from his house? Is she entering the forest, sliding open its door with her palm? *If the forest is open, I will step inside it*, she thinks. I will plant myself inside it. The forest is soil; her tail's root is bone.

*

The view from the porch is a porch, and above the house hangs a row of clouds, palpably nimbus.

I am beginning to accept my body, she thinks.

I am beginning to accept that my body is not my own.

She is sitting next to him on the porch swing, holding a cucumber sandwich. The duvet is now in the trunk of her car, concealed in the alleyway that conceals her car. At one end of the alley stands the food cooperative, a grocery store where the cucumber sandwich was purchased.

She looks at the clouds. *Palpably nimbus*, she thinks, and the clouds hover over the house in a row, a line, a long band that extends from one side of the sky to the forest, and the clouds—the palpably nimbus, long band of clouds—make grey the sky, the sky grey with clouds.

“Do you think it will rain,” she says.

“It always rains,” he says.

She looks into her sandwich. He stares ahead.

“Would you feel upset if I died,” she says.

“Buddy, why would you ask that,” he says.

“I need to know,” she says.

He stares away.

*

To take advantage of an object, one must hover outside one's own gaze. One must hover outside one's own gaze, and one must accept that the object is no longer merely an object. No, it is a person, an animal, a living creature composed of a mind that feels emotion, makes plans, and composes responses to questions including “What happened?”

What happened? First the bed sheets were white, then they were red. First he was one person and then, in bed, he became another, and another and then another, until soon his original person was unrecognizable, was simply no longer.

He is composed of pieces, she thinks. Two eyes, lips, and a pair of birds that freeze to death in winter. And although their feathers are as sharp as ice, the true weapon is his voice, which repeats directions sans affect. “It always rains,” he says. “Buddy, why would you ask that?” he says. *Dry-clean the duvet*, she thinks; *make white again the duvet*, she thinks; and his face appears inside her mind, that cool nut, that dumb fuck, that little harbinger of blood who inserted his finger, made unclean his finger and, considering his finger, who or what is truly to blame for the duvet’s destruction? *Not me*, she thinks, closing her eyes. *Not me*, she thinks, repeating the phrase to herself in a soft, muffled hum. *Not me*, she thinks, and the moment she releases the thought, the thought leaves, and she is kneeling outside of the bedroom, blue at the knees.

*

To begin, he appeared: his eyes, lips, and body took shape in her mind, and she became unable to release it from the grasp of his details—his elegant, tall stature; his smell—ivory soap—and his cadence: even in the most crowded room, his cadence would cause a crowd hush.

To begin, he was born in Illinois in 1980. Two years after his birth, his father passed away. Soon, the new father moved in.

The new father inhabited a vast, incoherent space in his mind. He embodied a form, an external manifestation of darkness that obliterated color, moonless and black, but to point out the new father’s darkness is to point a finger towards what? Compared with the old father’s tangible form, the new father seemed abstract, concrete only when held up to the light, at which point he would seem alive yet inorganic. At which point the atoms inhabiting things in the house could never be seen, felt or touched: pressed into one’s palm but never perceived.

No. He was too young, too formless to regard the new father as a replacement for the other, and, as he grew older, memories of his old father began to fade. His new father respected his mother; that is, until

he threw a bowl at her. “I remember he threw a bowl in her face,” he said, growing white in the face.

The new father was not the old father. The old father would not have thrown objects to make known his rage, to cancel out his rage, to intimidate the family into taking seriously his rage. No. The old father would raise his almighty voice, make known his deep, ugly voice, and the family would hang on, overcome with hush like a corpse.

“He threw a bowl in her face,” he said, revealing some small morsel of emotion, more than he had previously shown. “It shattered on the floor.” In the midst of the story, he paused for breath. “My mother said she was sorry.”

His breathing felt shallow. The bed’s sheets felt warm, though his skin remained cold to the touch.

And thus, in bed, against the warm sheets, she tried to comfort him, although she could not comprehend the new father’s distress in her mind. She could only experience it first-hand, viscerally, by touching his skin, which grew colder every time.

*

He always made a comment like “I can’t wait until we’re lesbians,” “you’re such a lovely lesbian,” and “I can’t wait to be your girlfriend.”

*

The pink and black dress in her closet was covered in stains. She felt no penchant to clean it, to make clean the pink and black dress. After all, the dress was old, and she would never wear it again unless amnesia took hold of her brain.

“What a lovely dress,” he said, eyeing the clothes in her closet, a feminine look on his face.

“That old thing? You can have it,” she said, not thinking twice, not thinking this dress—this ugly, pink and black dress—would soon correspond to loss, and to the soiled duvet which would cause her distress.

*

Now he is wearing the pink and black dress. He is lying on his back, and she is lying on his stomach; which is to say, they are perfectly compressed: he on his back, and she on his stomach, the two flush up against one another, merging into one another in the fashion of a pair of lovers on display.

He is wearing the pink and black dress, and the string ties at its neck hang below his collarbones—(she has unlooped the knot, made loose the knot)—and his eyes are shut, his lips separate, and his hands are clenched into fists.

“You feel tense,” she says, kissing his ear, his neck, his collarbone, and then she loops the string around her finger. Which finger?

“Sex makes me upset,” he says. “Though I do love the dress.”

And without a moment’s hesitation—no wait, stop, cut, or delay—she feels weight pressing down on her shoulders, as if to say.

*

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and as if with new eyes, she is able to see through his body—his hollow, dark body—as she sees through his heart, which consists of four chambers, each containing punctuation marks—a period, a comma, quotation marks, parentheses—all of which signify the separation of his heart from this sentence. “I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and does his statement end with a period? Or does it continue across the page in the shape of an ellipsis, trailing towards the next thing, which does not end abruptly?

All things eventually end, she thinks, although thinking of cessation causes her mind to grieve, to compose a little obituary in his honor—‘R.I.P.’ she thinks, she thinks, she grieves.

*

Months later, he writes. “One bird is dying,” he writes. “I still have your dress.”

“I’m sorry,” she writes, then erases the sentence. *A lie*, she thinks. Did she ever wear the dress?

“Nothing I love loves me back,” she reads.

She thinks, *A lie*.

“A lie,” she writes.

She erases.

She writes.

She leans forward.

She erases.

“How strange,” she erases. “It seems to me you’ve always had the dress.”

*

One day she meets a new body and discovers that what is at stake inside her own body is the retention of another, former body’s nervousness.

She desires to still contain the former body’s nervousness—a significant amount of nervousness—but she is unsure how to measure exactly how much nervousness the new body contains.

And even if she could measure the new body’s nervousness, she would not know how to safely extract it, to concentrate it inside her own body, mind and brain.

She has perfected anxiety, just as her body has perfected someone else’s nervousness.

And thus she begs to ask the new body just what it feels: how it experiences its day-to-day life, how it perceives itself outside itself, and how unsure it is of its own nervousness.

At the very least, she thinks, *I might cancel the old body out*.

*

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, folding the duvet, making neat once again the duvet, and the duvet—the bloody duvet—becomes compact in his hands.

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and the room becomes dark, thick, and black.

“I would appreciate if you helped pay for this,” he says, and the

transaction will not be complete until the dry cleaning is done.

And thus she realizes what this has been all along.

And she is unable to separate herself from this fact.

“I’m sorry,” she says, standing in the room.

Meanwhile, the forest is covered in rain.

The windows are covered in rain.

And her heart—her stupid, once-open heart—has grown impossibly shut.

What has she gained?