



SCRIPT

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Worn

Women bend over dazzling pins,
dynamic trees.
Teatime is fellowship.
Maple Leaf china
graces a worn oak table.
Orange tea and raisin
bars fill the room.

Cramped Position

The woman is impeccable.
Her weary

hands sew garments
of approval.

The lure of Egyptian
forms glitter in her crown.
Her naked
eyes mirror this mystery.

I have tried so hard;
I have vanished.

The moon has secrets
up her sleeve,
in her policing-coat
of stone.

Vic Bobb

When The Birds Stopped Singing

Maugre eased around the canted pole of a gatepost which hadn't seen paint in forty years, and let gravity drag the patrol car to an inconclusive stop. He let his eyelids droop, but it didn't do any good. When light came back into his head, the yard and the shack and the fat woman was still there.

The woman was on the porch in an ordinary kitchen chair. Her skin was bone-pale, billowing with bulging fat that was baggy and wrinkled even while it swelled like the lumpy curve of a ring of sausage. The corncob pipe made her look like some immense old Mammy who had been blanched and desiccated, then decanted back into a dress so worn at places her flesh seemed ready to crawl outside the cloth. The thousand prancing unicorns of the dress swam in Maugre's eyes till he was dizzy.

Maugre pushed himself out from behind the wheel like a man crawling up a rock face. The car door chunked shut with a sound of a silenced pistol shot and Maugre found his gaze riveted to the corner of her mouth. The lips seemed punched by a dark hole, a slot left behind ready and waiting for the stem of the pipe. The smoke crawling languidly up her arm and past her head seemed pale, even bluish.

"Ma'am," he said. His thumb bumped the curve of his cap's bill. The down nod of his head turned the movement into a gesture which felt, somehow, old-fashioned and ludicrously graceful.

"Sir," she said. "Officer." The pipe smoked more than an unsucked pipe ought to smoke, as though it was loaded with October leaves, or hay.

"Ma'am." He didn't want to do this, he didn't. Whatever momentum from the car that might have been born in him had leaked out through his feet and left him soft, boneless, vulnerable on the packed dirt of the naked little yard. Behind the house a peacock squalled, the noise like bricks dragged along a blackboard.

She slid the pipe back into its niche and her eyelids fluttered in a spasm of bliss as she drew. *She must have sucked that stuff all the way to her liver, to her legs*, Maugre thought. He stood with his arm welded in a curve, half descended from his quirky salute, and time stopped, the old lady frozen and filled with smoke like a balloon. Then the haze began to trickle out, the balloon leaking, her head like a rock in a river of smoke as the currents swirled upward. He expected to see smoke leaking from her joints, her seam. The long slow turn of the day flipped over in his stomach and he stood half-paralyzed, as though he were a machine with most of its battery power gone.

Madame Beaulaid pushed herself up out of the chair with a whistling sigh which sent swirls of smoke eddying and groping around her. Maugre watched the pale marbling of the tendrils fade into the lance of light which sliced across the porch to splash against the paintless boards of the wall. Bent half over, the old woman rocked at the edge of the searing shaft of sun. Her body seemed to move inside the dress, independen-

dent, unconnected, even rebellious.

She pushed herself through the final arc to uprightness with a gurgling groan. Once she was erect she stood immobile for a moment, and Maugre couldn't escape the feeling that she was seizing control of her own flesh as a plowman would yank a recalcitrant mule around a turn and down a new furrow.

"In here," she said. The smoke swirled again, the puff of her words like a comic-strip speech balloon. She was turning, pushing her bulk towards the dark mouth of the house. Maugre moved, knowing the porch could never sustain the six or seven hundred pounds he now seemed to weigh. Two concrete blocks, a river stone bright with mica, and a grease-clotted jack held the boards free of the baked dirt. A cat exploded from under the far end of the house as his boot hit the single step, and from his left the scratching squawk of the peacock stabbed through his ear and gouged into his brain.

Madame Beaulaid let the door bang against the wall, and she moved into the dim belly of her own parlor with a rolling waddle which made her look twice as large as she actually was. The dress clung to the surging pulse of her flesh like some obscene space creature trying to engulf her mountainous body. The peacock screeched again as Maugre pushed his face into the thick fetor of the house. The smoke from the old lady's pipe provided a moment of feeble struggle against the smell, then gave up without a whimper.

Oh what-at can ail *thee, kni-ight at arms?* It was the voice of an angel, a clean soprano with a wonderfully controlled quaver rising from the corner of the shadowy room and driving even the stench into the background. Before the fifth word had been sung, Maugre's eyes overflowed. *Alo-one and pa-alely loit'ring.* Maugre had never heard such a sweet voice, such clear tones. The tune was unfamiliar, simple as though in keeping with the extraordinary innocence of the voice. It sounded vaguely related to "When I Behold the Wondrous Cross." *The se-edge had wi-ithered from the lake* —Madame Beaulaid had wrested her flesh to a halt, the top of the pipe now glowing orange in the faint light, the smoke swirling unpredictable as she breathed, wavered, and panted from the exertion of walking twenty feet.

And no birds sing. He saw her, finally, as the last line swirled up to fill the room as no smoke could. She was crouched in the corner, her weight borne by the same naked boards on which Maugre stood, her pack pinched in the angle of the peeling plaster, her face a pale oval in a thicket of wild hair which tumbled most of the way to the floor. Her knees were flexed, one up, one sagging outward. A line glimmered along the inside of her thigh, as though she had hidden the moon up under her skirt.

Maugre swallowed, feeling like a man pushing a doorknob down his throat. His eyes were adjusting to the dimness and he wished they were not. He wished he was blind, blind and insensate, nothing but an ear to soak in the sweet flow of that indescribably beautiful voice. Nothing but an ear. No eye, no nose, no tongue already revolting at the thick ooze of the air in the room. Oh God; what if he fainted? He jerked suddenly as his imagination blazed with the bright speeding picture of his body hitting the bare boards of the floor in a loose tumble, of her lean hand quick as a snake to seize his shirt

and drag him towards her...

Her face was gaunt. Not starved looking, not skeletal, but gaunt, so the line from her eye to jaw looked long. Elongated. *Oh wha-at can ail thee, kni-ight at arms?* Her mouth and chin and cheeks were smeared with darkness, but her teeth glistened with unmarred and unmarked whiteness. She rocked slightly as she sang *So haggard and so woe-begone?* and Maugre saw the stick in her lap, like the shattered end of a broken bat. Like the haunch of a butchered pig. The boards beneath and around her were discolored, as though she sat in a puddle of darkness.

His legs pulled him another step towards the young woman in the corner, the wheezing bellow of the old lady's breath fading into the background as his eyes and mind adjusted to the dark. From the cascading thicket of the girl's wild hair the next words quavered out and up, filling the room, filling the policeman's ears and head and soul: *The Squi-irrel's gra-anary is full* and Maugre felt his stomach claw in his chest trying to erupt from his throat. The woman behind the waterfall of hair tipped her head back to shoot the twin blackness of her eyes into his skull. *And the harvest's done*, she warbled.

Quiet flowed into the room as the song fled. During three, ten, twenty galloping thumps of his heart Maugre stood in the rank swirl of everything which was not the song, and then the girl bent her head and raised the stick to her mouth and he heard the tearing sound of her teeth dragging the flesh from the bone, and for an instant the blackness gulped his head.

"It's her pa," the old woman said. "My boy, Jack." Maugre heard the crepitant rattle of the pipe firing high, then Madame Beaulaid's flat voice. "It's been three days, now. It ain't right. But everytime I go near her, she tries to bite me."

Rita Beaulaid's head came up and sideways in the feral motion of a dog feeding from a dead rabbit. A goblet of her father's flesh darkened her lips and chin. She sucked the meat out of sight with a flick of her head.

Maugre took another step towards the darkness in the corner of the room. The girl tensed, the motion of her jaw stopped. Jack Beaulaid's swollen body rocked beside her, the glimmering whiteness of radius and ulna a parenthesis around his daughter's chin. The screech of the peacock scraped the boards of the shack. The old lady's pipe gurgled. The girl's lips came up, the arc of her snarl baring her canine. The peacock squalled, but in the house no birds sang.

Just One Question

I have often wondered,
did the snow move
six feet outward
from the house's foundation,
or did it just not encroach
upon the perimeter closer
than six feet?

I have felt the sea
lifting and falling,
no apparent reason
for the moon suspended
in the sky.

I have worn
the black coat, and have turned
to walk away.
Therein lies the pain,
the unreconciled past,
mounting to a hill.

PLACING THE BALL

Close? As I came to the net I could see the ball landing just inside the baseline, raising the dust on the hardcourt surface. I could not have put that ball in a better place.

"Out," he called. "Landed about two inches outside of the baseline, I can see the smudge on the court here." I spun and walked to the deuce court. No matter, this was one game of which I was going to beat him. I turned and set myself for his next serve.

The door to the elevator opened up and I squeezed into an already crowded cubicle, reached around an I.V. stand and pushed the number three. Dad had been put in the hospital the night before, as he was having trouble breathing, an advanced case of emphysema. Some guy next to me was humming "Cats in the Cradle." The chime indicated that we had reached the third floor and I stepped out.

"You'll have to sit in the waiting room for a few minutes," said the charge nurse, "your father is being given a eucalyptus treatment." I sat in the waiting room, shut my eyes to the soap on the T.V. and thought about how I had always wanted Dad to hold me when I was a kid, like when I was playing in the neighborhood football game and got my glasses shoved onto my face as I was tackled; I wasn't all that great in

sports, and all that he could tell me was something about learning to place the ball. And then there was the time that the kid around the block kept calling Mom a bitch and I was too small to kick his butt. But what got me the most was when I had finally made a place for myself on the school's tennis team and I challenged Dad to a game... and he thoroughly beat me.

I was psyched up, tense, confident. I threw the first ball into the air and served an ace across the net. Here was my Dad, the guy who had paid his way through college on basketball scholarships, played professional hockey, and now participated in as many amateur events as he could, but I was going to beat him at this game. What a day! Thirty - Love. All I had to do was to keep the man running, charge the net, play the corners, and just wear him down. Game. I think Dad was smiling out of the corner of his mouth as we exchanged sides of the net, but all I could focus on was to work the corners, keep the ball moving low and fast.

Dad's serve. I rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet, my calf muscles tightened as Dad tossed the ball into the air. The ball didn't come across the net fast, but it did come with pin-point precision to the far corner of the service square. It caught me off guard, but I hustled over and returned the ball to the center of the court only to see it returned once again to the opposite side of the court. I wanted to get to the net; that was my game, my strategy, but Dad hung back at the baseline and kept hitting the ball from one side of the court to the other, slowly, methodically, and I was the one caught running to the corners.

The first few games were tight, and Dad was staying just a bit ahead of me. Then he hit the lob—my favorite, and I drove that ball to the baseline without his having any chance to return it. YES! No more playing around. I wiped the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve as we changed sides of the court. Tied, and Dad's serve again. Dad bent over to move a stick out of the court. I saw him through the net as he turned his face towards me and smiled. It was then that I knew he was going to beat me. Relentless, he came back, and scored point after point, wearing me down with constant running, chasing his shots back and forth across the court. It was all over, his victory,...Game...Set...Match. I stood at the net, unable to move. Dad approached me, reached his hand across the net and spoke his same old line, "It's not how hard or fast you can hit the ball, but it's placing the ball that makes all the difference."

A plastic plate hit the floor, splattering squash and sending small green peas rolling down the corridor. A white-clad nurse walked into the waiting room and turned down the T.V.

"You can see your father now," she said. "Sorry about the mess, you'll have to step around it."

The signs read, 301, *NO SMOKING*, *Oxygen In Use*, *Quiet Please*, on the door of the room. There was also Dad's name and his problem written on a chart, and hanging

in a plastic sleeve; this was all they knew about my Dad, it seemed. When I entered, Dad was leaning over onto the bedside table, moving his head back and forth across his arm. Tubes were hanging out of his arms, and tubes were resting inside of his nose, held on to his head with more tubes. My shoulders dropped as I looked at him.

"You awake, Dad?"

"Uh-hunh." Dad spoke into the table. "I just can't seem to get comfortable." He raised his head to look at me and began to speak again. His chin quivered side to side and his chest rose and fell, restricted to shallow inhalations.

"You just get out of school, Sam?"

"About twenty minutes ago, how you feelin' anyway?"

"Like hell, and it looks as if I'll be in here for awhile too."

"You are getting out before Christmas, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah, hope so. Your sis' is coming over, you know."

"No, I didn't, that's great. So, has the Doctor been in yet today, or will he be in later?"

"SHE'LL be here in just a bit I'm guessing," said Dad. "I'm probably getting a woman doctor due to some cut-back in the hospital budget, you suppose?"

"I thought you were seeing that specialist Dr...."

"Matthews? yes, for most things, but he's assigned this gal to drop in on me periodically. She's some sort of resident here. She's supposed to listen to my chest, what can be heard from it anyway, but I don't know about lady doc..."

"C'mon Dad, times are different now. She's probably going to be really informative, something Matthews hasn't always been."

"Well, our old family doctor would have never approved."

"Say, Dad, looks like maybe you could use a shave. You look a little rough to be entertaining guests."

"Yeah, well I can't seem to hold a razor to my face with all this shaking."

"Here, let me help."

I went to the cupboard and took out the shaving gear and set it on the table where Dad was leaning. I kind of slowed inside as I thought through this process—I had never shaved anyone else before. Walking over to the sink, I thought about shaving this shaky face, a face I don't ever remember even touching before. Why did it take so many years to get close enough to the man to touch his face, and then it had to be under these circumstances? I filled the kidney-shaped bowl with hot water and went back to the table. Dad was trying to spread the shaving cream around his cheeks; it was quite depressing that his hand was in sync with the shaking of his face.

When the doctor walked in, I took the towel from Dad. He had finished wiping off his face, except for the spot in his left ear that he always missed.

"So, you're getting all spruced up. Not too many patients look forward to seeing me," she said.

"No...my boy came in here and said I looked like hell and needed a shave, so..."

"I didn't say you looked like hell, but you weren't much to look at."

"Dr. ...unh...Burnes is it? This is my boy Sam...Sam, Dr. Burnes."

"Nice to meet you," I said while I shook her hand.

"Let's just have a listen to that back of yours, Mr. Parker."

I need to see if these medications are clearing your lungs up or not. Take a deep breath and hold it...now exhale. Breath in. Okay, let it out. Well, it's sounding a bit better, but you're going to have to put up with me for a couple more days, I'm afraid."

Dad just looked at her and nodded. There he sat, unable to take in a full, deep breath, Christmas coming on, and family traditions shaping the year-end calendar once again. I wished there was something I could say.

Dad went home on the morning of Christmas Eve. My sister arrived about noon and started fussing over him being hooked up to an oxygen machine. He sat in the lazy-boy next to the fireplace, smiling. I gave her a poem to read that I had written for Dad. That evening the rest of the family arrived; excited kids ran through the den to the living room to look at the names on the tags of the gifts to be opened. The cold-cuts had to be placed on the dining room table along with the nuts, Nanaimo bars, and cheese balls; it was the only time in the year that the dining table was used. Mom always fussed to make sure the candy dishes were full and that everybody had coffee before we sat down to watch the little ones open gifts. They would try to untape the ends of the packages, give up, and finally tear them open however possible, and when that was accomplished, scream for another, not knowing what it was they opened on the first attempt.

The kids finished with their gift opening and ran off to play with all their new games, and stuff their faces with cookies and Caramel Corn. The adults settled back for a moment's silence. It was then that my sister asked me to read the poem that I had written for Dad.

"No Jenny, I haven't really finished it yet, I mean, it's still in pretty rough shape," I said.

"Oh go ahead and read it...Unh Dad, Sam's got a poem to read to you. Go on Sam, read it."

"Well, alright." I pulled the folded paper out from my back pocket and began to read. The poem spoke of the memories that were built in our family traditions, that in some ways they would always be the same, yet...

...yet this year a male child weeps

*with knowing that he cannot give,
the one unspoken wish of his father—
the refreshment that is found
in a single deep breath of fresh air.*

The room was silent except for the sounds of sniffles and clearing throats. Dad sat in his chair, unable to move. I approached him, reached for, and held his face to mine, felt the warmth of his tears on my face, and thought about his insistence upon placing the ball. The fire burned with crumpled wrappings, ribbons, and bows.