

A Brutal Sweetness

Abby Nance

“He’s smiling,” I hear one of them say, and I open my eyes to see who is smiling. Julia, the girl in the plain yellow scrubs, dabs aftershave on my neck and I realize she is talking about me.

The other one, Lita, with the painted fingernails, smiles back at me. Her eyelashes fan open, and then close like butterfly wings. I want to say “Pretty,” and maybe I do, but I am thinking about how I wouldn’t mind coming back as a butterfly. It seems like it would be more majestic than being a sick old man. How could you not be happy if you had wings?

Julia places a piece of chocolate on my tongue and I close my eyes and pretend I am in a field of birds—wings whipping the air. I think: no wonder the Holy Spirit is a bird.

They are on either side of my bed, unbuttoning my shirt. Julia lifts my limbs carefully, cradles my head while Lita wipes me with a damp cloth. I have not eaten in seven days, have not spoken in four. For two days I have been in a state I like to think of as fruit. Last night my breath changed from quiet to labored heaving. We all wonder: will this be my last bath?

“He smells different than usual,” Lita says. I feel her hair brush my face as she leans over to wash my shoulder.

In her last days, my wife smelled this way also. It catches you off guard, the way an apple does when you bite in and discover that its core is mush. I remember my knees buckling at the brutal sweetness of her smell, and how I kept breathing it in trying to categorize it, to pinpoint its exact place between ripe and rotten. It was so fecund, so alive, I still don’t know if it was enticing or repulsive. I wish now that I asked Julia about that scent. She would have an explanation. But I forget these thoughts—they are hard to keep track of. They never seem to land. Julia rests a warm hand on my stomach and leans over me. “You are turning green,” she whispers to Lita, setting my arm down on the bed.

“I think I’m dizzy,” Lita says.

“Flex your thighs. Breath through your mouth,” says Julia. “Eat a chocolate.” I hear Lita sit down and unwrap the chocolate.

“How do you know this stuff?” Lita asks.

“My father was in the Air Force. I know how not to swoon,” Julia says. She is wiping off my chest now. I can tell because her touch is lighter, more

tentative. She covers my chest and shoulders with a blanket, and then uncovers my legs. My pants slide down and off.

“It’s okay Mr. Connolly,” says Lita, as a damp cloth works its way up my left leg. “We aren’t looking.”

They laugh, and I think, bless these lovely girls.

When I die, they will be beside me, just like this. They will comb my hair, listen to my breath. They will whisper in my ears. When I stop breathing they will hold my arms, two warm loaves, until they are cool.

There are those people who want only beautiful girls to hold their hands when they are dying, the wafer-thin girls who never sweat. When these girls move, they do not stir air. They keep their clothes immaculate despite the shit and drool they encounter. They thumb through glossy magazines while the patient sleeps, or make quiet dinner plans by phone with their boyfriends. They flip their cell phones shut silently, with the same steady hands that parse and spoon food, crush pills, and empty potty chairs. Lita is like this. Calm Carlita with her tailored scrubs and her effortless beauty. Nothing sticks to her. Not sadness, not even me.

Sometimes the dying want to be near someone more ordinary. Julia is like this. She washes her hands a hundred times a day and still there is dirt under her fingernails. She tracks in leaves and pine needles each morning. Her cheap shoes creak. She does not like to sit still, does not like silence. Her mind always seems to turn things over in circles, like dough that you can’t stop kneading. She cries sometimes when she thinks I am sleeping. She wears plain scrubs. Solids. No jewelry or makeup. She is the kind of pretty that you don’t see at first. The kind you might miss entirely, unless you got the opportunity to talk to her. I have never seen her outside. I imagine it is where she is most beautiful.

Julia feels sorry for me because I am alone. I want to tell her that my wife Delphine died so long ago that I don’t miss her any more than I miss being able to navigate my own buttons. No more than I miss sunlight or sex.

“In and out,” Lita describes me to the occasional visitor. If I am “in,” they are allowed to sit next to me. If I am “out,” the yellow nurse, Julia—she holds my hand.

If she knew I could hear her, I bet yellow scrubs would say, “How can I comfort you?”

And I would say, “Julia, my sweetest friend, I am the one who is taking off, how can I comfort you?”

I am a boy walking with a girl in a light rain. Delphine is wearing her old pea coat with the brass buttons. She walks ahead of the boy and waits for him under an oak tree. She turns partway towards him, raises her hands to find a branch. When he catches up to her, she tugs that branch down hard, shaking a flurry of droplets and leaves onto their heads.

I want to kiss her, but I am shy, so we keep walking and every once in awhile I put my hand on the small of her back. I'm not sure, but I think I feel her shiver a little when I do that.

We come to a tree and she goes around it to the left. I go right.

"Bread and butter," she says when we meet on the other side.

"Bread and butter?"

She explains that you say "bread and butter" when you know you will meet again soon. "You know they will meet again because they go together," she says. I tell her I will remember that. And do you see, Delphine, that I have?

We stop at a place with a beautiful view of rows and rows of orange trees and I sigh because I want to kiss her. But I'm terrified.

She fiddles with a button on her coat, twisting it in her hand while looking out at the gray sky and green trees. She says, "How lovely," and I lean in to kiss her, lose my nerve halfway, backtrack, change my mind, and then end up kissing her on her forehead just below her hairline.

She laughs at me, imitates my kiss, but her lips land on my chin, rather than my forehead, because she can't reach.

I kiss the palm of her left hand. She kisses my pinky finger. I kiss an earlobe. She kisses my shoulder. Necks, stomachs, eyelids, elbows. It goes on and on, this kissing, and all the while she is playing with that button on the pea coat.

When we turn to walk home, I notice the button is gone.

"It's okay," she says when I point it out to her. "I never wear this thing."

But I scan the ground around us anyway.

"Plus, look, I've got extra," she says, showing me the inside of the coat where there are three more of those brass buttons.

But the boy comes back later and hunts for that button. Hours pass. Just as the sun is getting ready to disappear, he sees a flash of brass among the hundreds of acorns on the ground.

Before the morphine, when I talked more, I asked Julia what she thought would happen when I died.

"I picture it like an evacuation," she said.

I thought of kidneys and livers, hearts and spleens battenning down, like shopkeepers preparing for a storm. Cells lining up like cars on a highway, eventually getting swept up and drowning. "The spirit would escape though, don't you think?" I asked her. "Maybe leave a sign, like a rainbow?"

"That is the million-dollar question," she said.

I reached for her hand and found the bottom button of her cardigan instead. I held onto it and she smoothed down my eyebrows with her thumbs.

"What do *you* think happens?" she asked me.

"Whatever the dead person wants," I told her. She cringed at the word "dead."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"To be set loose," I told her. "To come back as a giant cookie."

She never asked me to clarify. I remember when Delphine was dying I never asked her to clarify because I thought she was speaking in riddles that I would solve after she was gone.

You never get used to all the pills and tubes. They gave up on the IV because I pulled it out too many times. They put the rails up around my bed because I would roll out of my bed and out of my clothes and wander around until I fell or they found me. I am a baby bird, now. They deposit tincture of morphine under my tongue with an eyedropper.

"I've got a surprise for you," Julia said last week, and set a heavy, sun-warm watermelon in bed next to me. It rolled up against my side, pushed on my ribs in a way that felt good.

"I think it's a Sugar Baby," she said.

I said, "Sugar Baby."

"Yes," she said. "Sugar Babies are small and sweet."

I wanted to pick up the watermelon and put it on top of me. I thought the pressure would feel nice on my chest, but Julia plucked it from my arms before I had a good grip on it. "I found it growing in my compost heap," she said and took it to the kitchen to cut up so we could eat it.

I watched as Lita's smooth hands brushed the watermelon's dirt out of my bed.

"Sugar Baby," I said.

"I know," she sighed. "Me too." I didn't know what that meant. I still don't. But she put her hand on my shoulder and it was heavy and warm.

Lita is always on the phone with her men. She always has a man and one look at her and you know she always will. "Baby," she says. "I'll be home in a few

hours.” She toys with her hair, her shirt hem, her nails. “Honey,” she says. “I’ve got to go.” If she is angry she calls them *Sugar*, and tightens up her voice until it sounds like a little girl. When she’s done with them she throws them back. Snaps her phone shut and curses.

When Lita curses, Julia puts her hands over my ears and I want to tell her that I’ve heard worse, but I just say “Baby” or “Honey.”

“Lita and her men,” Julia says. “She’d be better off alone.”

Upstairs, or next door, there are two women arguing about whether or not you can die of a broken heart. In the laundry room there is a boy about to make love. It will be his first time. Delphine is sitting on the washing machine surrounded by piles of folded sheets and towels. We are listening to the nurses argue and Delphine is kissing my nose, my ears, my hands.

“Give me one example,” Julia says. “Nobody in history has died from love.” I can hear her punching down a bowl of risen dough. I can smell the yeast. I hear her take it out, slap it on the counter, and break open the air pocket as she kneads it vigorously.

“Not that many people ever find true love,” says Lita.

“Yes they do,” says Julia, and I wish we had talked about love before the morphine.

“Not often,” says Lita.

“You are stalling.”

“Jesus, let me think.”

I am thinking that bread is going to be tough if she doesn’t stop kneading it. I am thinking I want Delphine to come down from that washing machine.

Lita takes her time thinking. “Ophelia,” she finally says, “from *Hamlet*.”

“She didn’t die of a broken heart. And she wasn’t real.”

Delphine is kissing my neck. She drags her nose across my collarbone. I hear Lita walk out of the room toward the hall where the built-in shelves are piled high with books.

“But she came from something real,” Lita replies.

At this moment, Delphine slides off of the washing machine and down my body. She unbuckles my belt and places my hands on her hips. I unhook her skirt and it falls onto a pile of sheets. We stand there for a moment and the girls continue fussing, but as soon as that skirt lands on the ground, I stop hearing anything. I am lost somewhere inside of Delphine.

The last time I spoke to Julia I said, “Peaches. Buttons.”

Julia rubbed lotion on my legs because they were itching. They are always itching. I wanted to thank her for the flowers she brings from her house.

Always weeds—which are too good-natured to pitch a fit—and those sturdy flowers that are too old and stubborn to die. Dandelions and bougainvilleas in a glass jar. I try to count the hours it takes for the bougainvilleas to drop their petals, but this flower striptease always seems to happen while I am sleeping.

In my last conversation with Lita, I said, “When Delphine was dying, there were moments of happiness sweeter and brighter than I had ever known before.”

Lita frowned.

“I loved her. I didn’t want her to die,” I said. “But when you are that close to death it outlines everything in light.”

“I don’t feel that,” she said.

I said, “You should spend less time with me and more time outside.”

And I wanted to tell her that when Delphine died it was the part of the summer when the fruit begins to rot on the stem and the air is heavy with nectar and insects, and the flowers get drunk on the heat.

Today is like that. I haven’t been outside to feel the summer heat, but I know it is that time.

I am clean and they are here with me, Lita and Julia, buttoning my shirt. I want to tell them about the heat and how it pulls all that sweetness out of the fruit. I want to tell them about the best peach I ever ate. Delphine and I passed it between us, standing over the sink in our first home. It was almost over-ripe, the last of a flat from a neighbor. The skin was so soft it would bruise with the lightest touch. The juice dripped on our hands, our chins, our elbows. It was so sweet we were greedy, didn’t want to share, because when you are new to love you hide your avarice. You are polite and you preen. You try to be kinder than you are.

I want to tell them that twenty peaches just like that perfect one wouldn’t have sated us, that we could have gorged ourselves on that sweet fruit forever. But because there was just one peach, we halved and halved again those last bites, savored even the tart fruit that stuck to the seed, savored even the skin, because there is no such thing, would never be such a thing, as enough.

This, I want to say, is not something you forget. ☞