

Dorotea on her balcony

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That morning Dorotea opened the rickety door to her diminutive balcony with an unusual force, and gulped down a draught of air that she could swear was crisp, despite the mounting canopy of yellow-brown smog over the city.

Behind her, the hissing of the coffee maker on the stove only accentuated the silence in the rest of the two-roomed flat. The silence that death leaves, Dorotea thought, and took another sip of the morning air.

Yesterday her sister had been laid to rest.

After the funeral, she had thrown away what could respectably be thrown away, and kept what a caring sister might be expected to keep.

Twenty-four years, Dorotea repeated to herself. She leaned over the wrought iron railing, not too far in case the thing broke free of its crumbled moorings. Yet far enough to allow her head to scan the street up and down, pigeon-like. Her street, like the whole city, had gone down. Holes in the street dug by the municipality had remained just holes. Beyond murky and cracked cafe windows stood tables and chairs that hadn't changed in two decades. That's where the cafes hadn't become windowless greengrocers. Graffiti remained the only sign of any paint being applied to walls.

Not that she had minded much. There was comfort in knowing that one was not decaying alone.

But now that would have to change, she thought, with an unfamiliar sensation of exhilaration, mixed with the less exotic feeling of apprehension.

She would have to tell Ricardo. But how? She was pathetically ill-prepared to take decisions like this. Should she just tell him? Or was this the point at which one weighed one's every word, balanced each sentence delicately on its fulcrum, for on this rested the course of the remainder of one's life? She was not accustomed to thinking practically about the rest of her life.

Ornaments and trinkets in the flat, all inherited from Mother, rattled and chimed as the subway train passed deep below ground level, like some eternal beast.

Against her better judgement, Dorotea found herself contemplating the possibility that a cosmic system of justice indeed existed. That the judges of this system were observing her at that moment, perched on her balcony, had already decided that she was undeserving of happiness, had conspired to place a beast, or just a ponderous boulder, in whatever tunnel she decided to enter. Usually she was not religious, despite Mother's crucifix that adorned the wall above the bed she and her sister had slept in. But today she couldn't help considering all the possibilities.

Of course everyone would say she did her best. The bottles of bad wine were an act of kindness, given the circumstances. Even a simpleton yearns for relief from life's burden, must ultimately choose its own path. That's what they would all say. But then again killing slowly is allowed. It's not like taking a saucepan and crashing it through wispy hair and pockmarked skin and into the decisiveness of skull.

Society will forgive you anything, as long as you draw it out long enough.

Was it not with the fastidiousness of the assassin that she had removed every wine bottle, scrubbed at every burgundy stain on wood, even thrown away the corkscrew? Just the previous night.

Oh, she was being so silly, Dorotea berated herself. She, a murderess? The idea was laughable. No-one had as much as turned an accusing eye on her as they packed the coffin away into its hole in the earth. It had been all sympathy. They even had a name for it. Cirrhosis. Like the name of a pretty flower.

Yet so unsettled were her thoughts at that moment that she committed an act that was as close to murder as she would ever get.

She looked down, witnessed her foot, in its slipper, nudge, as if with a will of its own, a potplant up and over a gap in the railing.

A delay, then plop.

It had been a plastic pot. Yet the soil and its green shred of life lay scattered on the flagstones below.

'My God! What the hell are these people doing?' came a voice from below.

It was Eduardo, the fat owner of the little cigarette kiosk.

'Oh, Eduardo. I'm so sorry. It was an accident. I was cleaning.'

'Oh, it's you, Dorotea. That's alright. I'll pick it up. I thought it was perhaps that maniac on the sixth floor.'

Dorotea chuckled briefly with Eduardo for the maniac on the sixth floor.

She then fled the exposure of the balcony for the shadows within her flat. My God, I am mad, she thought. But the act had also filled her with an indescribable resolve.

She served herself coffee, and went to the phone, sat down on the telephone stool. She rummaged around in the drawer, found the slip of paper with his number.

She had never called him before. The next appointment was always arranged in the current meeting. Cafe so-and-so at such-and-such a date and time. Neither had ever missed an appointment.

She put her finger in the dial and was appalled at the thought that crossed her mind. The act seemed sexual. She withdrew her finger instantly.

No, she would wait.

They would meet at their next appointed time and place. She would let him order his croissant with ham and melted cheese. His glass of hot milk. She would have her Russian salad. And tea. She would let him retell the stories he heard from officers off the ships. One of the perks of working in maritime insurance, as he would say. They would talk politics. She would not tell him immediately. Instead, she would wait for an opportune moment. She would observe him with new eyes, speculate how he might take the news. Take in for a while the picture of his innocence.

August 2008