

Bird on a Wire

“Why is it,” she asked, voice thick with approaching sleep, “birds don’t get killed by power lines. I knew once. But I forget.”

“Something to do with ... I’m not sure,” I said, stroking, ever so gently, her left breast and letting the sound of her breath fill my blood. Wanting this moment to last, knowing that it was the last we would have. “We’ll look it up together tomorrow. Goodnight love.”

“G’night ...”

And she was sleeping. We never did look it up together.

The problem with Adoptive Body Research is that using the subject species body always limits your intelligence and memory. Additionally, the body’s mechanics, the hormones, the glands, the neurochemicals, etc., all create their own feedback systems, effectively making you “go native.” There’s nothing that can be done about it. Form is function and function is form. For example, when researching the *G’tk* I was unable to resist the physiological imperative to drink the blood of their virgins in the monthly ceremony. It appears that the young of that species produce a chemical necessary for the elders to survive and because the reproduction rate is so high, twenty five percent of all children are, well, sucked dry. Literally the old feed off the young. Then, with my chitinous head and pincers, scarred thorax and antennae, I felt only the mildest of moral revulsions. After my research was complete and I had returned to my own body I was sick for days, unable to sleep for the nightmare sounds of slurping insects. It was a bad one and only my life long friend Qw’lIkn was able to bring me back from the brink of madness. Sometimes I still wake with the coppery taste of blood in the back of my throat.

That was bad. But this time was worse.

Her name was Tracy. She had long, dark brown hair as soft as sea-foam and grey eyes that could flash like whitecaps on a winter ocean or go as dead and still as slate. She used her body like a weapon: all edges and hardness in order to pretend that she was not a scared little girl. The smile she gave strangers was pretty but cold. The smile she gave me three times in the six years we were together was the most beautiful sight I’ve seen. It burned pure and clean like the death of stars.

We met at the end of my third year as a human, at a mutual friend’s birthday party. I was living as a graduate student, studying theatre (my specialty, as you know, is ritual and performance and what better way to study a species than to study their studies). My support team had scattered that particular summer: Jk’KKI was in Rome and Fl’ktm was in Tibet. It’s always risky to have that much distance between Research members because the longer you are in a host body and without others to reinforce

your primary identity, the easier it is to slip into the role of participant too deeply. I realize now, as I zig and zag away from recounting our first meeting, that I am not ready to share that moment. Nor do I want to share one of those three smiles. But I will tell you of the other two. Starting with the last.

It was winter. We were walking a boardwalk by the ocean. A place called Atlantic City. The steel grey of the sky leaching into the water and sand, turning the world to monochrome. Seagulls cried out and circled. Flecks of grey on grey. She picked up a shiny black stone.

“The rocks always look prettier here, shiny and wet. When you take them home, they dry off. Become dull. Thrown out. But here ... ”

Her voice was soft, barely breaking above the waves.

“When I was a girl, I would take them home. Put them in canning jars of water on my windowsill in order to make them stay shiny, stay bright. It was a piece of something vast and huge brought back into my bedroom.”

She was silent for a long time after that, taking my hand as we walked the grey sand by the grey water under a grey sky. But the rocks on the beach still sparkled somehow, in spite of everything. Holding the rock she had picked up earlier, she looked at me. A tear peeked out from her eye.

“See.”

The rock was grey, flat. It had dried and the luster was gone. She threw it to the sea.

“I’m glad I’ve learned when to throw things back.”

Then she smiled and it warmed me. To this day I can close my eyes and see her face before me, smiling that smile. It was, and pardon the synesthesia, a smile that smelled of citrus and blue skies, tasted like spearmint and tickles. I wondered then, as I wonder now and will probably wonder long after she has died, if she knew or had some sort of premonition of our ending.

The extraction team had a difficult time getting me off planet and out of body. I begged, I pleaded, I cursed, I flailed, I attacked. I cried. I tried bribery and threats, tears and invectives. They were kind, if frustrated and would not listen to me. Extraction teams are like that. They understand, more than you do in that time and place, that you are not, in a very real sense, *you*. The host body and life has, by this time, infiltrated your mind to such a degree that the truth of yourself is lost. Not gone, but lost. You always come back to yourself in the end. And so, they never leave a researcher behind.

Yes, there have been, on occasion, suicides before the process of reintegration has completed. Sometimes for love, sometimes for fear, sometimes for madness. But it is rare and the psych evaluations before being accepted to Adoptive Body Research are extensive and work well.

At the time of extraction though, it feels like you are being forced to dismantle all the things that go into making you, well, you. It's like tearing skin, epidermal layer by epidermal layer until you are raw and bleeding and the pain seems to envelope you. Then the body reversion begins and you pray that you will pass out, but the pain only lasts a few seconds so you don't have time really, yet it feels like you are being turned inside out for thousands of millions of years. There have attempts to create a less painful process. They have all failed. I guess it is a price that we pay for what we do, the skins we assume, the lives we create.

You hate your extraction team for a long while after. Irrationally and blindly. I still hate them despite the fact that I know they were right. Or perhaps I hate them because of that knowledge.

A hot, thick night. The air was still and saturated. My bedroom was lit yellow by a streetlamp cutting through the blinds to slice our naked bodies into bands of light and dark.

"My Tracy."

It was an offhand murmur, an outbreath of desire. I heard her breath catch and her body seemed to still beyond all possibility. Then she rolled over, took my face in her hands, a tear rolling down her cheek but smiling so deeply and fully that I could not breath. But in a good way.

"Yes," she said, "Yes please."

That was the first time I saw her true smile. The night stayed still and hot, but we moved like supernova light.

Of course I tried to be reassigned to her world. My research proposal was a barely veiled attempt to reconnect with Tracy. Of course it was denied. My species has been doing this kind of research for a long time. A very long time and the rules are there for a reason, as everyone insisted on reminding me. CrI'Bbk, my advisor, understood exactly what I was doing. She had seen it happen dozens, if not hundreds of times.

"No exceptions," she said kindly, if a bit mechanically. "You'll get over her."

The arguments I presented about love and destiny and fate were, while heartfelt, tedious to say the least. There is no need to bore you with them here. We have all said those words. Many of us have said them any number of times about any number of lovers. They demonstrate quite well the principle of relativity. Make no mistake, they were true and real. It's just that truth and reality are never static, never still. We live our lives like leaves in a river. I swore that I would never take part in Adoptive Body Research again. It was unethical. It was a lie. It was callous and irresponsible. I'm afraid I turned into quite a bore around my friends and colleagues about the subject. I threatened to drop out of the whole program. Again, CrI'bbk tried to talk to me:

“Go. Take some time. I took three long sabbaticals myself over the years for reasons that were just the same ...”

I banged her desk with my tail—a habit of anger I still lapse into occasionally. She paused, kept herself from smiling, but just barely.

“You are right,” she continued, “Perhaps I should say reasons that were similar to yours.”

I glowered like a petulant child, but let her finish.

“Take two cycles. If you still want to resign I won’t argue.”

I took the two cycles.

She was sleeping. It was Saturday and she always liked to sleep late on Saturdays. I wanted to wake her. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to somehow explain why I was about to betray her and simply disappear from her life. Disappear like all our time and promises were nothing. I was making it all a lie: the soft taste of her belly, our laughter when she tried to teach me ice skating, the feel of our bodies inside out within each other, the tears and misunderstandings when her mother died, the whispers in moonlight and the silent dances held within each other’s eyes. Worse than gone, dishonored by my disappearance.

I walked quietly to the living room, body convulsing with self-hatred. Did a web search to find that electricity is always trying to find the ground. As long as a bird doesn’t touch one of the poles or another power line, the power ignores it. But birds do die, quite often, on power lines. If they touch a pole or another power line, the electricity surges through, crisping their feathers and smoking their eyes. I wrote the letter I had been composing in my mind for the last six months. It doesn’t matter what I said, I’m sure it made nothing less painful. I went to the bedroom, touched her hair, kissed lightly her cheek. Went back to the living room to plan how I would fight the extraction team, knowing all the while I would lose.

My book on her world is done. Obviously because you are reading its Preface. I have already scheduled my next Adoptive Body Research assignment because my friends and colleagues were, of course, correct in their assessment of my grief and guilt: it would pass and it did. The leaves drift on. Yet, re-reading this account, I am struck by two thoughts.

Despite conventional wisdom, sometimes being grounded or making a connection is exactly what kills you. Like a bird on a wire, isolation may be the only safe choice. Then again, this is not the safest of universes and as much as I might play at the notion, isolation seems to me a defeatist strategy. Make of that what you will.

Also, it is only now that I fully comprehend this fact: Tracy’s true smiles were always connected to tears. And so, my dedication:

*To Tracy,
my first true smile.*