

The Woman in the Wings

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Abstract

This short story takes place over the course of one evening, wherein a woman, who is seethingly jealous of her novelist boyfriend's recent enormous success, and her boyfriend are the dinner guests of an eccentric, millionaire elderly couple who live in Costa Rica. The couple are a world-famous artist who built his career after being blinded forty years ago and his German ex-actress and concentration camp survivor wife. The woman and her boyfriend who are their guests are left feeling uncomfortable when their hosts bicker shamelessly in front of them all night long. As the elder couple recount their life stories, the younger couple begins to see things they'd rather not see about themselves and their relationship, as well as the dismal future ahead they may be helpless to prevent.

True, I'm jealous of my genius boyfriend, true, I resent him at times and at times it must show, though I don't think he notices, I really don't, for a great novelist he's not that perceptive, but to see her badger her poor blind genius husband all through dinner—it was horrible, it made me swear I'd never treat my genius like she treated hers.

It was a shame she had to ruin our ex-patriots' Thanksgiving dinner in Costa Rica. I was excited when my boyfriend told me about the invitation to dine with the famous artist and his famous wife—she was as famous as he was, he'd made her so in hundreds of paintings over some forty years—I was sure they'd both be fantastic personalities but what letdowns they turned out to be. It was a shame our Thanksgiving dinner had to be so miserable, I had only a few days with my boyfriend and I wanted to make the most of them. He was staying at an artist colony in a village not far from the famous artist's mansion, Costa Rica is so small nothing is too far from anything else, and I'd flown down to see him. I hadn't seen him in two months, that's how long he had been there (and he was staying one more), slaving away on his second novel but to him such work is not slavish, to him novel-writing is the easiest thing in the world, it makes me sick, at the same time it's what I admire about him most.

The famous artist had invited us himself, or rather had invited my boyfriend, being a famous writer or a writer well on his way to fame gets him all kinds of invitations I don't get. I was just his tag-along, I could only hope they'd made allowance for a guest in the kitchen as they hadn't at the table, when we arrived only three plates were set. Apparently he hadn't told them I was coming, on the drive there he said he couldn't remember if he had or not, it was a stupid thing to do but typical of him, geniuses are always preoccupied with the grand or grandiose ideas constantly streaming through their heads, they can't help it. I don't hold such thoughtlessness against him, they're innocent enough, my boyfriend loves me and I'd hate to distract him, any one of those constantly streaming grand ideas could turn out to be a masterpiece and I'd hate to be responsible for depriving the world of it. The last thing I want is to go down in history as one of those women in the wings who bitched and bullied and badgered her genius into obscurity if not the grave. I'd hate for the literary anthologies to say of me in my boyfriend's biographical paragraph "she was the only thing that stood in his way" or "he could really have made a contribution had it not been for her constant bitching and selfish demands." I don't want to go down in history like she, Grete Grausen, the artist's horrible wife, will. Still sometimes I can't help it, I resent my boyfriend and it's gotten worse since his novel made such a big splash, now he's getting all this attention and making all this money (he's proven that even novelists can make money, it's incredible) and I'm still slaving away on my anthropology doctorate even though anthropology really doesn't interest me anymore, I'm sick of analyzing goat's hair death masks and I'm sick of being the woman in the wings. The worst thing is that my boyfriend deserves the rewards he's reaping, he *is* a genius and I'm jealous of him—that's natural enough, those with mediocre talents always envy those with extraordinary ones.

Who knows, maybe Grete Grausen was sick of being the woman in the wings too and that's what made her so mean, maybe after forty years in her husband's shadow she had had enough. Grausen, a fitting name, it

means “shivers” or “horrors” in German, she gave me the shivers all right, when we see what we most detest or fear in ourselves taken to grotesque proportions in someone else it really puts us on edge. She’d never taken Lind’s last name—that’s the artist, you’ve probably heard of him, he’s one of the most famous artists in America and in Europe since 1950, then again Americans don’t know anything about artists, very few can name a single one since 1950, it’s a shame if not a tragedy—and that was unusual for her generation, perhaps she thought taking his name would interfere with her own fame or perhaps they agreed together it was the best way to market her. She’d become quite a celebrity in her own right, that is, his paintings had made her one, and doubtless her movie star face helped sell them, her eyes were now shriveled and her skin shot but she’d once been stunningly beautiful, blond, blue-eyed, tall, strong-boned, and photos of her in younger days were always printed alongside Lind’s paintings in magazines and coffee table books or exhibited alongside them in galleries. The two of them knew how to make money—Lind had been a successful developer on Long Island before being blinded by a flying hammer on the construction site he was strolling through smoking a cigar like the lord of the manor, the hammer’s blow shot the cigar out of his mouth like a torpedo, incredibly someone caught it on camera and the photograph later became famous. The flying hammer hit him in the head or rather the brainstem, severing the optic nerve and plunging him into permanent darkness. And yet his curse turned out to be his blessing, at the same time he was struck with blindness he was struck with the artistic gift, the outer eye of the ordinary man replaced by the inner eye of the genius. It was like an anointing from God, like Paul on the road to Damascus, before being blinded Lind had never picked up a crayon. Some people luck out, their curses turn out to be blessings, others are just cursed but worst of all is to be neither blessed nor cursed but so mediocre fate hardly bothers with you. Maybe Grausen wished she’d been anointed by God instead of her husband. Maybe in the twilight of her life (and his, they were both well in their seventies) she was coming out of his shadow, out of the shadow and into the twilight—we often wait until the end of our lives to do things we should have done in the beginning, but we always eventually do them, we don’t have as much control over our secret desires as we like to think, our secret desires always get the best of us, it’s only a matter of time. The artist met us at the door of his mansion himself. It’s a pretentious word, even old-fashioned, “mansion,” but it’s the right one. The front portico was raised at least two stories high on marble pillars, a Henry Moore sculpture sat in a fountain on the front lawn amid tropical plants with huge, geometric blooms, the cut Venetian glass doors were twelve-feet high and five wide. Inside the architecture was Spanish style, they were tasteful ex-patriots or wanted people to think they were, their choice of architecture suggested their respect for the native culture: narrow corridors cut with delicate arches, white adobe walls, mosaic floors, a tiled central courtyard (where dinner was served) populated by tropical flora and exotic birds stuffed into antique brass cages. Lind’s art had really done him well or rather his blindness had—that flawedness was what made him so famous, not that his work was mediocre, it wasn’t, his natural talent was obvious, but a blind painter is fantastic if not unexplainable. The public, especially the American public, loves the fantastic like nothing else, they’re bored to death with rational materialism and it’s at the root of the psychological malaise of our time (my boyfriend’s words, I agree). The American public loves novelties like Jacek Lind, you must have heard of him, he’s actually been on *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*, that’s the only kind of artist the American public pays attention to, the flashy, oddball kind. Lind was Polish-American but not Jewish, thank god, that would have been too much, we would have been seeing a Hitlerian re-enactment right before our eyes, the Aryan goddess heckling and humiliating the helpless Jew, they made an odd enough couple as it was.

The blind artist led us inside, his fingers trailing on the narrow adobe corridors, he didn’t carry a cane, his fingertips must have grown their own eyes through years of guiding the brush over the canvas. I’d expected the mansion to be plastered with his paintings, indeed I’d looked forward to seeing more of his work, but the million-dollar walls were bare, perhaps he’d grown tired of snagging his fingers on them and had them removed, sometimes practical considerations outweigh lofty ones. He didn’t strike me as a genius, he struck me as an old man in house slippers, though they were leather, probably Italian, millionaires favor Italian shoes. He wore a green silk robe loosely tied but I didn’t find it sloppy or off-putting, beneath he was fully dressed in dress shirt and trousers (but no tie, in the tropics dress along with everything else is more casual). Lind’s most distinct feature was not his glassy, ghostly gaze, but the monstrous hump rising from his back. A mound the size of a small pumpkin swelled between his shoulders, making his head jut forward and his gaze fall to the floor, where it was nearly impossible to meet. Of course in his case it didn’t matter, it was even a relief not to have to meet that gaze, no one wants to look into blind eyes, it feels like a

breach of privacy, like accidentally glimpsing someone's private parts when their clothes slip, it feels perverse.

Lind led us to a sunlit room with a wall of glass doors that opened onto the courtyard in which I could see the dinner table set for three but Lind couldn't and so wasn't embarrassed by it. After my boyfriend introduced himself by all three of his names and me by only one of mine (the first, though it was preceded by my prestigious title, that is, ". . . and this is my girlfriend, T—a"), we stood in an awkward triangle. There was an awkward pause. My boyfriend brought out his novel, when things get tense he brings out his novel. He held it out to Lind (uselessly, the blind are hard to get used to). 'There's no braille version yet,' he said, 'I'm hoping they'll do one, but for now I'd like to offer you my new novel' ("new," he might as well have said "latest," he was obviously implying he'd written others when in fact this was his first). 'Oh,' said Lind pleasantly, his lizard head jutting forward, 'I'm honored.' 'I meant to bring you my book of short stories too, another time, or I could mail it to you.' 'Oh,' Lind echoed himself. 'Thank you. I'm honored.' His voice was thin and scratchy, his aged lungs running short on air, and his words emerged slowly as if they had picked up the cautiousness his feet had learned from years of stepping through darkness. My boyfriend nudged his book at Lind's curled fingers, you could almost see the ghostly brush they'd clenched all those years, they uncurled and took it, lucky for him he couldn't see its creepy Norman Rockwell cover. 'Bryce tells me you're the finest writer at the colony this year,' Lind said. Bryce was the American director of the artist colony where my boyfriend was staying, he had hooked the two geniuses up. It was not a necessarily kind thing to say, simply protocol for the greater artist to flatter the lesser or the proven genius to tip his hat to the potential one, the other way round would have been too obvious and both of them knew it. My boyfriend laughed. 'I'm sure he hasn't read me.' Lind smiled dimly. 'Well, he may not have. But he says you're getting a lot of attention in the States.' 'This one has gotten some,' my boyfriend said, gesturing at his book (the blind are almost impossible to get used to). 'I mean—my novel, this one'—he gestured spastically—'Ahem,' Lind cleared his throat—'It *is* getting some attention. I'm pretty happy with the reviews. But I try not to think about public—or critical—opinion too much, you know?' His boyish brow furrowed as it does when he's trying too hard. 'I don't think you can, after all you never know what they want. You certainly can't write to it.' Lind smiled serenely, he wasn't too concerned about public opinion either.

Suddenly we heard a shriek: 'Jacek!' It was her, the other half of the legendary couple, the movie star death camp survivor herself. Framed by the arch of the corridor to the kitchen, Grausen stood iron-straight in her big German bones, she had excellent posture for a woman in her seventies, perhaps she learned to stand so upright in the death camps, where if you slumped you were shot. We could hear pots and pans banging behind her, apparently she'd been supervising the cooking of the German Thanksgiving dinner for American guests by Tico servants (she served sauerkraut and sausage as well as turkey and sweet potatoes and plantains). 'Such look like you roll from the bed, Jacek!' she screeched. 'And your hair, ach! Well, it suits your pajamas.' In truth the artist hardly had any hair, what whitened strands he did have lay slicked over his brown-spotted skull, I didn't see what was wrong with it. She clapped her hands on her wide hips and looked at my boyfriend. 'Don't expect such like talk from him. Talk of art, talk of books,' she said, scowling, clipping the English words with her sharp German tongue. 'People expect he have something to say, but *never* he have.'

My boyfriend looked at her, his mouth slightly open, obviously at a loss for words, a rarity for the genius writer of a thousand and twelve pages. He was constantly pointing out how long his book was, I never pointed out it was actually a thousand eleven and a bit pages, the thousand-twelfth page only contained a paragraph. 'It's not the cause his old age, he *never* talked,' Grausen went on. She shook her head violently and tusked her teeth. '*Nein*, you can't get such like one word out from him.' My boyfriend shifted on his feet, uncomfortable, but he wouldn't meet my gaze even though I met his or attempted to, I was rolling my eyes in disgust at Grausen's incredible behavior and I wanted him to see me roll them, he should count his blessings I didn't treat him that way. All evening he avoided my gaze, I couldn't figure out why and it was enough to drive me crazy. We'd been getting along fine when we arrived.

Grausen: 'Offer our guests to sit, Jacek! Their legs must be tired after climbing on that rotten hill.' Her English was heavily accented, she probably held onto the German sentence constructions and accent deliberately, a perverse form of national pride or a way of making herself more exotic. As for our legs, it's

true the mansion set atop a hill or in Costa Rican terms a mountain, it overlooked the rain forest and village below, a fantastic view for a painter who could see it, but we'd driven right up to the front gates, the walk up to the marble-pillared portico was less than fifty yards. She pointed a long red fingernail at a white leather sofa: 'Sit, sit! Will you take champagne?' She smiled generously, a smile that cracked her wasted face, powdered white plaster of Paris face, she had switched roles from badgering wife to world's greatest hostess. She crossed the room, took Lind's arm, snorting (not uncouthly, it was the German version of a laugh or chuckle, what was amusing her I don't know), waited for us to sit and then sat down next to him on the second white leather sofa in the room, the furniture was more American millionaire than Spanish style. She crossed her legs and smiled at her husband, too bad he couldn't see her good will. '*Mein Dios, Jacek,*' she said, combining German and Spanish, it sounded ridiculous. She elbow the blind old hunchback in the ribs. 'Cheer up. You look such like your best friend is dead.' As far as I could see, he was wearing the same dumb smile he wore all evening.

He wore that silk housecoat all evening too, apparently even she forgot about it or didn't really care in the first place. By dinner's end, its lapels were stained with the oily tracks of the peas he spilled, a shame, I doubted they'd come out, then again millionaires have whole closets of silk robes. As for Grausen, she wore the complex, fabricky dress "such like" aged women favor, a gold and cream linen, chenille, and silk pantsuit-sari draped with several glittery beige scarves. Aged women think such abstract concoctions distract from their shot looks, their wasted skin and sagging jowls, they forget or are in denial there is no distracting from the wasted face, no clothing or jewelry can resurrect the maiden in the hag. I can't blame them, for women looks are very important, some are convinced it's all they have. I've always felt attractive enough to get the men I want but I'm not so beautiful I intimidate men as Grausen must once have done. She must have survived the camps, I thought, by giving sexual favors to the soldiers, a perverse or irreverent thought, I couldn't help it, maybe I was jealous of her good looks even though they were clearly shot, her thick golden hair now yellow-white puffs that showed her bluish skull, her sky-blue eyes now shriveled in watery mucus. Still I'd never have the movie star looks she'd once had and I'd never be the star subject of a world-famous painter. Grete Grausen had had a hard life, I knew her story well enough before that miserable dinner, had I kept it in mind I may have been more inclined to forgive her, then again those of us who have never been through such traumas secretly think they're exaggerated, it gets out of feeling guilty for having had it so easy. Her husband had made sure we knew her story in his portraits of her in the Nazi death camps. It was uncanny if not eerie how without ever having seen her—he'd been blind when they met, it was another of the fantastic details of their story and couldn't have hurt in making them famous—he captured in the shape of her face or the slant of her eyes something unmistakably her own, it must have been that genius inner eye God had anointed him with. He painted her behind glass-topped barbed wire, garbed in rags, skeletal arms stiff at her sides, starved body flat and masculine, typical enough portraits of a death camp prisoner, what made them unique (aside from being rendered by a blind man) was the beauty queen glamour girl face he always topped her off with. The head mushroomed out of the stick-figure body, blown up to grotesque proportions and yet its features were never distorted, they were highly realistic, almost photographic. Coy, sideways-glancing, even seductive cornflower blue eyes with long curling lashes, pursed red lips and china doll white skin—a Marilyn Monroe face poised atop a skeleton. Grausen was purebred Aryan, which made her story even more shocking—she'd spent years in the camps, she went in right at the beginning. What we didn't know was how or why, we found out during that miserable dinner but the tale wasn't worth it.

She and I sat on the white leather couches next to our geniuses, our legs crossed, not speaking as we sipped our German champagne (very good, she was quite the patriot, an ex-patriot patriot, apparently her experience in the camps hadn't soured her on her country), smiling smiles poor Lind missed out on, he must have wondered what was going on. Had we been two women in a competition over the fame or money of our men she'd have won hands down, I probably think or like to think my boyfriend more famous than he really is. Besides his collection of short stories (which don't sell that well and thus don't attract much attention) he's only written one novel, even if it has made a Big Splash in the literary world, to put it how my boyfriend's agent is always putting it. Maybe it's the sheer bulk of the book he's referring to, the paperback is three inches thick and if you threw it in a lake it would make a big splash. My boyfriend is always saying no one has actually read his novel or if they have they've read only the first five hundred pages. It doesn't bother him, the first five hundred are as good as the second and twelve, anyway, it's the rare reader who can maneuver the linguistic gymnastics and multi-layered plots the novel's second half

lapses into, he doesn't blame anyone who quits early. Still I'll never tell him I've only made it to page eight hundred, no matter what he says he's got an ego about his novel. My boyfriend tries to keep his ego in check but he tries too hard, it's his obsessive avoidance of pretense that belies his pretentiousness. For instance, even if their names come up in conversation he'll refuse to comment on the obscure European or Eastern European writers everyone knows he's read because they've influenced his style so heavily, god forbid someone bring up a well-known writer, if someone brings up Hemingway or Mailer or DeLillo my boyfriend will frantically change the subject to major-league baseball or global warming rather than be overheard discussing literature. And he *always*, not just for writerly occasions, gives all three of his pen name's names, as he did when introducing himself to Lind. He's so proud of the pen name he says his agent came up with but I'm sure he had a hand in himself, it's one of those names in fashion for male writers these days: three (minimum) boyish, all-American first names like David Sean Anthony or Michael Wallace Taylor, such wholesome names appeal to the American public—if it likes its artists flashy and oddball it likes its writers wholesome and hip, my boyfriend is both. I won't give his names here, you may have heard of him and I don't want to cause trouble or put a dent in his “cult following” which according to his agent the Big Splash established practically overnight. He deserves all the fame he's gotten and the doubtless more to come.

I like my boyfriend's novel, I do, I think it's a work of genius even if I've only made it to page eight hundred. I didn't quit because I was bored, it's just a really long book, even the critics' reviews skim over the last bits, I'd love to quiz one of them on the details of the final chapters. But I feel a pang of jealousy every time I see the two and a half shelves full of it on my bookcase with its creepy Norman Rockwell cover (it's supposed to caricature the book's screwed up characters with their “unmistakably American existential malaise” to lift a line from the back cover). I've always thought there was something repulsive if not pathological about Rockwell's paintings, they're perfectly suited to *The Saturday Evening Post* but not to great literature, that cover was the worst aesthetic choice if not the worst career move my boyfriend's ever made. A few months before he went to Costa Rica, my boyfriend moved in with me, keeping his apartment on the other side of the city, that is, San Francisco, which according to his agent is the third best town for up-and-coming writers behind, of course, New York and L.A. He kept his apartment to write in, it's not that he couldn't write, he said, when I was around (I'm home a lot, my coursework is completed and this year is devoted to my dissertation), it's that when he wrote at my place he was always worrying that I was bored, he always felt like I was lurking in the other room (my words, not his) waiting for him to get done so we could walk down to the coffeeshop or catch an art film together. Maybe I was, I'm so sick of goat's hair death masks I can hardly stand it . . .

I'm not jealous of his “cult following” or the women who are constantly e-mailing and calling him, sometimes on my phone, he's been on all the Bay area talk shows and he's not bad-looking. He has a boyish, all-American face (my boyfriend is from Minnesota), even freckles, they clash with his hipster black-frame cat's eye glasses, it's a look lots of women go for. I don't mind, I don't have an insecure bone in my body when it comes to other women, it's his genius I'm jealous of, then to find when I arrived he'd already finished the first draft of his second novel, he whipped it out hours, he said, before my plane landed, he wanted to get it done so he could give all his attention to me for my four-day, five-night visit, I had to give him credit for that. My boyfriend had already accomplished what he came to Costa Rica to do and he still had a month left. He always gets done what he says he's going to, it's maddening, I've always been more fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants and that's probably what my boyfriend likes about me most. Before we had even gotten out of the airport the night I arrived, the night before our miserable Thanksgiving dinner, he announced he'd finished the first draft of the second masterpiece, I couldn't believe it, last I knew he'd been leafing through Barnum and Bailey archives trying to get ideas for his Depression era novel about the circus family wandering poverty-ravaged America and hadn't written a word. I was happy for him. I even suggested we stop before leaving San José and have a drink to celebrate. In the smoky, strip-mall café with candles on the table the waiter never lit despite my boyfriend's repeated requests and the sick-sweet mingle of fish and plantain frying in the back kitchen, we held hands across the table, hands and gazes, that night my boyfriend couldn't get enough of my gaze, we stared into each other's eyes and talked softly about the last two months. ‘I can't believe all the work I'm getting done,’ he said. Me: ‘That's good. That's wonderful.’ ‘I get started first thing in the morning, I don't daddle around like I used to.’ He must have been talking about the ritual we'd developed since he moved in of having coffee and reading the papers together in the mornings, a ritual which lasted sometimes an hour or two and which

I really enjoyed. He took a deep breath and puffed out his chest like Tarzan or Popeye, he wouldn't like the reference but that's how he looked. 'And I don't stop until dark. I've never felt so . . . *vital*.' Me: 'Maybe it's the rain forest. Negative ions.' He shook his head. 'No, no, I mean as a writer. I finally have time to just focus on my work, you know? Nothing to distract me. No phone, no web, no cable.' (My boyfriend has a weakness for cooking shows, it's one of the things I find endearing about him.) 'I've finally got, as Woolf put it, a room of my own.' With his free hand he lifted his sangria and sipped from it. He stopped mid-sip: 'I've never even read that,' he said, obviously seized by the terror he was being pretentious. 'But the gist of it is that a writer's got to have his privacy, his space, the proverbial room of his own to work in. Or her own.' He smiled and stroked my hand. I didn't tell him I've tried every room in my apartment and still can't write my dissertation, I've been on goat's hair death masks for months and that's only chapter four. Nor did he ask about my dissertation, maybe he knows I'm not that interested in anthropology anymore, I doubt it, most men, especially geniuses, can't see past the end of their noses when it comes to other people, the genius's vision penetrates ultimate reality but when it comes to what's right in front of their noses they're even blinder than the rest of us. My boyfriend probably thinks just because I still have tribal batiks and fertility staffs from third-world countries hanging on my apartment walls anthropology is my passion just as writing is his but what he doesn't know is I'd rather be an artist or writer like him. I'd never tell him that, I can't risk him guessing my jealousy, anyway I have absolutely no artistic talent or, worse, just enough to be called mediocre, it's one of the great regrets of my life. Instead I go out with artistic men, I've dated folk musicians and painters and a mime. I even slept with a ballet dancer once, one of the few one-night stands of my life, I thought it worth it for a ballet dancer even though he was mediocre both on stage and in bed. My three-named writer is the most gifted so far. It's a blessing the public has noticed it while he's still young.

When our champagne glasses were dry Grausen ushered us into the courtyard where a rectangular glass table long enough for a banquet was set for three, she noticed right away and barked in German-tinted Spanish at a maid to set another place. The squawks and screeches of the giant tropical birds swinging in cages around the pentagonal courtyard reverberated on the tile. Grausen took her seat at the head of the table and started conversation by giving the birds' names, ages, species and personality quirks one by one, they were all named after 1940s German movie stars. The sun was out and the huge, colorful tropical blooms glistened with rainwater from the afternoon shower, it was a beautiful Thanksgiving evening. No one said grace, they weren't that kind of people, we weren't either. Grausen sat Lind on her left and I on his left, my boyfriend alone on the other side. The seating gave him plenty of opportunities to meet my gaze, opportunities he didn't take once, all evening he avoided my gaze, either I'd done something to offend or embarrass him or he was simply preoccupied with his own private obsessions, who knows. Grausen never did introduce herself, perhaps her ego was so puffed up she didn't feel it necessary (it wasn't), nor did she show any desire to know our names. When the turkey arrived, she stood and plunged an enormous pearl-handled fork into it, then went at it with a matching knife the size of a small sword. Now she was playing the man of the house, she cut big steaming planks and placed them on our plates, on her own she put a sliver about the length and breadth of her little finger. 'It's incredible to eat like this,' she said. 'I can't believe such food. I feel sick to my stomach to look at it.' The table was spread with sweet potatoes and mashed potatoes, bratwurst and sour-creamed peas and black German bread, coconut soup, fried plantain and jerk-seasoned fish, an outrageous feast topped off with champagne, white wine, and black tea with cream. 'You feel guilty,' Lind said, surprisingly—he'd hardly spoken since she arrived on the scene. 'You can't believe you have the right to fill your stomach and there's still enough for everyone.' She scowled. '*Ach, nein*, Jacek. Three years was I in the camps, never once I feel guilty, why should I feel guilty now?' 'You shouldn't,' he agreed. 'Nobody who was in the camps should feel guilty.' Grausen snapped back, contradicting herself for the sake of contradicting him, it was comical: 'Ha! Easier said than done. Sometimes such you feel guilty, you can't help, or you don't know even know you feel guilty but you do. You don't know how was it, Jacek. You know *nothing* how was it!' Under his hump Lind's ghostly gaze fixed or appeared to fix on the steaming plate she'd loaded for him. She too turned to her turkey, she murmured into her plate: 'Such horrors, you can't imagine.'

Still my boyfriend didn't raise his gaze to meet mine across the table or roll his eyes so we could commiserate together or show our incredulity at the famous couple's juvenile behavior even though any other couple would doubtless have done so. He kept his eyes, too, fixed on his turkey, now all three pairs of eyes were on the bird though only two could see it. He took a long slow sip of wine, set his glass down

deliberately, and said, 'How did you come to be in the camps, Ms. Grausen, if you don't mind the question?'

She waved her huge, heavily jeweled hand. 'It's what everyone wants to know when they meet me. They think no one like me was in the camps.' She snorted. 'Some don't believe I was there, they think like I lie—and Jacek too, in his paintings lying!—They say, You? No one like you went' ("vent," really she had a strong accent, it made her a caricature, the fierce, fuming German). 'Like they will catch me in my make believe, like I forget to look in the mirror when I make believe, people are so stupid, ach, people give me a headache.' She clapped her hand on her forehead, she was quite the actress. 'But I tell you what happen, such you won't believe. Such stupid mistake, the stupid of the German police ruin my life. I lived in a house on the third floor, my neighbor below me she worked for the underground, everyone in the house knew it. She was smuggling secret papers to the French resistance, such things as get you shot. This was in Berlin, early in the war, a terrible time. Everyone was frightened, everyone but me, I had my head in the clouds, I was on my way to being big actress and my mind always was on stage, I was going to be a star. I should have paid more attention because I looked just like my spy neighbor. We wore our hair the same and we were same like blond, people said we looked like sisters, I thought, what, we both have blond hair, every woman in Berlin has blond hair, every free woman, the problem was we wore it the same way, always I wore my hair in braids long down to my waist, she too wore such hair though hers was not as long as mine and her braids were more thin. A woman would have known us apart no problem but the police are men. One day some fat chief say arrest a woman with long braids who lives on the third floor of my house, that's what went wrong, the spy lived on the second floor and I on the third in the room above her, you see what happened, still it's impossible to understand, my life ruined by some stupid policeman's mistake. Of course, *my* stupid mistake was to keep my hair like the spy's, everyone in the house knew her time was coming, but I was nineteen, my head full with clouds and I such vain with my hair, after all it was very beautiful and won me lots of roles. I had the star role in *Edelweiss* but this I never got to play, the police came for me on opening night.' Her large bony fingers picked at the yellow-white spirally puffs on her skull. 'Couldn't you show them your papers?' I said. 'Ach, you these police don't interest in papers. They break your door, they throw you down and beat you. To women they do worse. Such horrors you can't imagine.'

The table was quiet. Grausen gazed down the long table as if at a ghost sitting at the opposite end, perhaps the ghost of one of those soldiers or policemen she'd had to please with her body to survive. She hadn't touched her food, those little child-portion piles must be cold by now. 'She never forgets,' said Lind. Grausen: 'His rotten paintings don't help me forget,' she said, glaring at him (apparently even she forgot he was blind at times). Lind: 'She's never been that fond of them. They bring back the painful memories.' They were referring to each other in the third person as if they weren't sitting right next to each other or as if my boyfriend and I were mediators or judge and jury. Grausen: 'There's no bringing back, such memories *never* go. And it's I who has to look at them, he has never to look at his rotten creations.' Lind smiled placidly. 'It's true,' he said. 'I've always given her credit for that, she's provided all my material for me, I'm forever indebted to my wife.' 'Hrmph!' Grausen snorted.

Lind had been trying with no luck to scoop his few remaining sour-creamed peas onto his fork, a difficult enough task for the sighted. Now he laid his fork down, resorting to his fingers, they groped the plate for the greasy peas. Grausen gasped as if sighting one of those horrors such as she could never forget and we could never imagine and shrieked: 'Ach, Jacek!'

The peas were already on the way to his mouth and would have made it there safely had she not shouted—her shrill voice must have hammered his super-sensitive ears, the blind develop canine hearing—his hand jumped and the peas shot out, bounced off his green silk lapel and onto the white silk placemat. They rolled a bit and stopped, leaving oily tracks in their wake. Grausen: '*Mein Dios.*' She put her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. In this pose, she said calmly, 'Jacek, one day your rotten manners will send our guests running, one such day they'll stop coming and then what? Then we'll rot away alone in these walls, that's what.'

I glanced at my boyfriend. He was shoveling in his sauerkraut like Grete Grausen must have done on Liberation Day, I'd never seen him so famished, men can't stand the slightest tension. I could see if I wanted the subject changed I'd have to do it myself, I wasn't going to miss this opportunity to talk to a

world-famous artist. I smiled at him, forgetting the absurdity of trying to flatter a blind person with a pleasant smile, and said, 'Are you still painting, Mr. Lind?'

The genius cleared his throat with some effort as was his habit, he had a problem with phlegm, we could hear it gurgling in there. 'Not really. I do have several paintings, oh, you know, in progress'—he chuckled, his other habit was this self-deprecatory chuckling, he really had no backbone, no wonder he was a humpback. He jutted his chin in my direction but his gaze slid past mine to land somewhere in the wreckage of food, overflowing dishes we hadn't touched and wouldn't—'I call them my stillborns, they'll never be completed, not at this late hour.' He wasn't talking about the evening, I wondered how it must feel, the inevitable approach of the twilight. For him the darkness had fallen years ago but soon a darker darkness would descend. 'And my hands, they're on their way out too, they ache after ten minutes. But my worst enemy is my back. As you can see it gives me trouble, it's very painful.'

'Kyphosis,' barked Grausen. 'The popular word is hunchback.' She turned to me as if to an ally or confidant, or perhaps it had just dawned on her I was a woman too, women among men instinctively feel some camaraderie. 'If he'd sit in his chair—the beautiful chair his chiropractor sent from Switzerland, thirty thousand we spend on this chair, and there he refuses to sit.' She pointed through the Spanish style arches where indeed the chair was parked in the patio shadows like a space alien or science fiction creature with its steel spires and clamps and hooks and giant computer panel. 'Look! It sits—and you know where *he* sits? There'—she pointed to a weather-worn stone bench, backless, at the far side of the courtyard. 'He works on that old bench—if you call his silly sketches work—it's incredible. He will do *nothing* what's good for him, he'd rather give up working than take care his back. People think he's superman, he's not, he's a stubborn old goat. I think he's done with art, I think he wants to quit.'

'Oh, you're doing some sketches?' I said. Lind either ignored me or didn't hear me. 'She may be right,' he said. 'To tell the truth I don't have that many ideas anymore. Nothing really comes to me, I can't see like I used to. I could paint my wife until the end of my days, I never tire of her as my subject but you heard how tired she is of being my subject and I don't want to paint her if she doesn't want me to. Even artists have to respect others' wishes, even they have to face the fact they don't rule the world.' He gave one of those disgusting self-conscious throat clearings, he brought up some phlegm he'd later have to put back down. 'When they're really working on something artists think they rule the world, it feels fine at the time but later they pay for it.' 'Pay? How?' my boyfriend said. He was perking up, the conversation was finally starting to interest him. Lind waved his hand as if erasing or attempting to erase his words, a gesture so like Grausen's it was eerie. 'Oh, I don't know. Ahem, ahem.' He put the phlegm back down where it belonged. 'Is the turkey tender enough for you?' 'It's very good,' my boyfriend said. 'But maybe it won't be the same for you.' Lind chuckled. 'Maybe you'll be the one who gets away with it.'

Now it was my boyfriend's turn to clear his throat. He shifted in his seat. He was trying to decide if he should push this any further, he did: 'Get away with what?' Lind's eyelids fluttered over his glassy eyes. He sat back in his chair and his lizard head sank into his shoulders. He sighed. 'Did I tell you I'm working on some sketches?' Apparently he'd chosen to ignore my boyfriend's question. 'Those such he does on his bench,' said Grausen with her mouth full, she'd finally taken a few morsels of her sweet potatoes. 'I don't have any new ideas but I do have a new friend. I'm getting to know the pencil again, I've been spending my mornings with it, it's a wonderful instrument though I use only one end. I don't make mistakes, I can't see them if I do, so for me they don't exist.' He paused, frowned thoughtfully. 'May I show you? No one but Grete's seen them.'

On the drive up we'd fantasized Lind would invite us to his studio, show us masterpieces no eyes had yet lain upon, it would really be something to tell our friends, Lind is one of the most famous artists in America as well as in Europe since 1950. We nodded enthusiastically. 'They said yes,' Grausen told him. Then, to us: 'Don't get excited. They're not much. If he'd sit in his chair he might make something but he perches on the rotten bench such like a goat, I don't know why, he can't even see the view.' (A shame, Lind missed out on his own million-dollar view of the rainforest.). 'One day he'll catch cold sitting in that dew, he's sitting there at the break of dawn, it's incredible, scratching with his silly pencil. One day I'll find him *frozen* on the grass—he's been stubborn all his life and such stubborn will put him in the grave, he's almost there now, look at him, seventy-seven, it's too old to sit in the dew on such a bench.' 'And I didn't

expect to live to be sixty,' Lind said. Grausen stabbed at her last shred of turkey. 'You should sit in your chair.' Lind grinned. 'Not bad for a hunchback.' Grausen: 'You're not the typical hunchback.' She popped the turkey in her mouth, a tiny bite no bigger than a fingernail. Her plate was clean, not a crumb left. When the pumpkin pie with great dripping dollops of rum-flavor whipped cream (which Grausen skipped in favor of more champagne) had been served and eaten and the Tico maid was clearing the table, Grausen snapping orders at her from her throne at its head, Lind shuffled off for his sketches, his fingers groping the open air until he reached the security of the adobe walls. My boyfriend's gaze was roaming the courtyard, at last it settled on one particular bird, I think it was Marlene Deitrich. Apparently he preferred the sight of animal cruelty to the sight of my eyes—the beautiful birds were stuffed in cages half their size and they obviously didn't like it, their screeches and squawks had hammered my eardrums all night, perhaps it was Grausen's special torture for her husband, it must have really pained his canine ears. I reached across the table to get my boyfriend's attention, a last resort. He looked at me. I rolled my eyes as if to say "can you believe these two," it was the private exchange any couple would indulge in such a situation, and we finally did, he rolled his eyes back and covered my hand with his. Out of the corner of my eye I saw—or thought I saw, the inner eye too has its grand delusions and shapes or censors what the outer eye sees—Grausen's gaze start when it fell on our joined hands. She went right on bickering with the maid but I thought I saw her gaze start or jerk when it fell on our shameless exhibition of camaraderie or sexual attraction or true love the way one's gaze does when it meets something it fears or detests or regrets such as the obvious affection between my boyfriend and myself.

True, I'm in love with my boyfriend, it's hard not to fall in love with a man whose art you genuinely admire. His work is nothing like Lind's, it's not personal at all, my boyfriend is a razor's edge, no-holds-barred social critic or allegorist and he doesn't let his private obsessions or secret desires trickle into and poison his work. I don't recognize anyone from my boyfriend's real life in his novel, including myself, I'm not insulted because I didn't know him when he was writing it. But I don't know if anyone else in his life is insulted not to feature in his masterpiece, his mother or sisters or former girlfriends, women are more picky about that sort of thing, or at least more inclined to bring it out in the open if they are insulted. Everyone envies the position of Grete Grausen, nothing is more flattering than to be the star subject of a loved one's art.

I looked at him as I held his hand in the dimming twilight, suddenly I really felt in love with him and was glad I'd come to visit. I looked at his too-short prep school haircut with the long, fashionable bang that fell over one eye and gave him the hipster if not indie-rock look (he was already thirty-seven, barely young enough to be considered a promising young writer), he thought important to market himself as a hip young writer, indeed his agent had recommended the cut. His black-framed cat's eye glasses and thick lips contrasted with his boyish freckles and pudgy, farmboy face—my boyfriend is from Duluth, a fact he's embarrassed to relate now most of his time is spent between New York and San Francisco. What if I was, I thought, the star subject of his new novel. What if our relationship has trickled into his work in spite of himself, it's only a matter of time before our secret obsessions slip through the cracks, we don't have as much control over them as we like to think. Perhaps he'd made me the heroine of his story about the Depression era circus family wandering poverty-ravaged America in caravan wagons and encountering tornadoes, tuberculosis, railroad hobos and swindlers (it sounded a lot like the *Grapes of Wrath* to me but I didn't dare tell him that, he knows as well as I do the last thing literature needs is another *Grapes of Wrath*). That would explain why he'd been so vague describing it over our sangria at that strip-mall café the night before, not because the moment I got off the plane he'd regretted inviting me and was thinking what a drag it was going to be to share his room of his own with me for the next five nights and even sex wasn't worth it. He'd probably been so vague so I wouldn't guess my role in the new masterpiece, but I doubted I was the heroine or the love interest, that would be too obvious for my boyfriend, more likely I was the fishnet-stockinged lion tamer who sticks her head in the lion's mouth once too far or the beautiful but clumsy trapeze artist whose gloves slip mid-pinwheel. My boyfriend likes to see me as a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kind of girl, flighty if not reckless, that's the kind of girl he goes for . . .

Lind shuffled back with the sketches, sat down and held them out in the direction of my boyfriend. He took the top few pages, they were on plain white drawing paper, about eleven by thirteen, and handed me the rest, there were six or seven. They were blank. There was nothing there, not that I could see. For a split second it occurred to me my eyes were tainted simply by being feminine, Lind's latest genius must be accessible only to the male gaze, after all my boyfriend was examining them intensely, holding them so

close to his face I couldn't glimpse see if his, too, were blank. At last he lowered them, but on these too there was nothing but some grayish smudges that looked like the oils fingerprints inevitably leave on white paper once they've handled it a few times.

'They're experimental,' Lind was saying. 'I'm trying something new with the pencil.' Maybe he's using the wrong end, I thought. I looked at Grausen. She met my eyes and shrugged. She frowned. 'Never I understood art,' she said. She looked out at the million-dollar view, her eyes far away in her wasted face. 'Very interesting,' my boyfriend murmured. He was gazing intensely at the blank pages as if his own inner eye had just opened up, maybe it had.

Grausen was the one who called it a night. 'It's 9:30, I like him to bed by nine,' she said. Lind: 'I want to be up at dawn.' He smiled in our general directions. 'You've inspired me. I want to finish these tomorrow.' He stood, his hump rising up like a beast hidden in him all this time. He extended his hand across the table and my boyfriend took it. 'Come see me again,' he said. 'I'll read your book and we can talk about it.' 'I have a lot to do this week,' Grausen said. 'Maybe Francisco read it to you.' 'Sure, Francisco will read it to me,' said Lind, then to my boyfriend and it seemed to me there was some cryptic message concealed in his froggy voice, some secret code only the two of them could decipher: 'Come back. Come in the afternoon. We have a lot to talk about, we didn't scratch the surface tonight.'

It was a depressing evening. We were quiet on the drive back to the colony, indeed the whole weekend was quiet if not depressing, that miserable dinner set the tone for the rest of my visit, even the sex wasn't any good. I left wondering if my boyfriend wanted to break up with me and didn't have the guts to do it but my worries turned out to be needless.

My boyfriend has been back from Costa Rica a few months and things are going really well. He never went back to see Lind and he regrets it—Lind died a few weeks after our visit, now he's really famous and becoming even more so, it's one of the blessings of the curse of death. Grausen must be raking in the millions now, the fantastic way he died, fried by an electrical malfunction of the Swiss space alien chair (I could see his blackened hump, his hands eternally "frozen" in those grotesque curls), would really sell paintings. A fantastic way to die, that is, if you didn't know those two, if you'd never had Thanksgiving dinner with them and seen how his woman in the wings was constantly badgering him to sit in his "special chair," now we know why, her secret desires finally got the best of her, it was only a matter of time. That's what I think, my boyfriend doesn't agree, it's amazing how he can render such complex and believable characters and yet be so blind when it comes to real people. It's probably best I'm not in his second novel—now I've read it I really don't recognize myself, the lion tamer is too sexy, the trapeze artist too sarcastic, then again maybe that's how he sees me, we never see ourselves as others do, the inner eye in each of us clouds the outer vision. I love my boyfriend and we're getting along really well. He's in the other room now, when he came back we made it into a study for him and he finally gave up his apartment, apparently he's gotten over worrying about me being bored while he's writing. Or he actually thinks I'm writing, too, sitting here in my room of my own with my death mask research scattered about me, he doesn't see my frozen pen or blank page, the signs are right in front of his nose but he doesn't see any of them. His study is nice, sunny, with a wall of glass doors he can look out to the backyard and on clear days see the Golden Gate, a beautiful view, he says he doesn't take it for granted as he would have before meeting Lind. He's writing now, I can hear the clicking of his fingers on the keyboard, he's making the final touches on his novel, his agent says it's the best draft he's produced yet. No doubt my boyfriend's on the road to even greater fame and greater genius, it's only a matter of time. His new novel will be on bookshelves (mine and stores' nationwide) before New Year's, the only problem is his first novel has already consumed all the space on my bookshelves, I don't know where I'm going to put all the copies of the new one. If he keeps churning out these monstrous novels, they're going to take over the bookshelves in my room, too. One of these days I'm going to have to do something about it, it's only a matter of time.