

FLIGHT

A tousled blonde head adjusted on the pillow. Unnatural silence lay heavy, tomb-like. Horizontal light peered between shutter slats which peeled in grey, nickel-sized scabs. A sigh. Mascara smudged eyes shot open, found the room's only window. Nostrils flared at the pungent stink of urine and unwashed man. A sucking, open-mouthed snort erupted from the dark head which occupied the neighboring pillow.

“Ohh...” The woman groaned then clamped her lips shut and slipped silent as a snake from rumpled sheets. She rounded the foot of the bed, her fingers trailed the edge of a bookcase. Her toes tested obstructions — clothes, shoes, dampness, a pint bottle on its side. Three walls of bookcases filled with dusty, spore-plagued books sucked real life from the room. At the door-less closet, the woman lifted a grey silk robe from a hook then eased from the bedroom and gently pulled the door closed. She turned on the bathroom light, brushed her teeth, spat, winced. The pink tip of her tongue explored her teeth. The right front one gave. She tapped two aspirin from a bottle, swallowed them dry then ran fingers through her hair. A stranger stared back from the mirror.

Dawn reflected off white walls in the living room. She righted an overturned chair, gathered broken bits of glass from the dining table and dropped them into the pocket of her robe. An unadorned picture window framed a brilliant golden sun rising over the azure Mediterranean Sea. A neighbor's white dog scampered down the rocky terrain which fell away from the cottage. Nose to the ground, only the dog and God knew what scents and centuries he explored, perhaps even Nietzsche's wandering soles.

FLIGHT

“Hi, boy,” the woman whispered, touching the window. “I’m Sara. I offered you cheese once.” Her fingertips trailed down her reflection. Far below, dark, glossy, fist-sized rocks covered the beach. A green and white fishing boat churned a milky froth wake across the teal colored bay.

Movement on the coast road caught Sara’s eye. A bus on its daily run to Nice rocked back and forth as it navigated the narrow curving corniche. Just before its stop in front of the café, taillights tap-tap-tapped red. Sara touched her lip. Riders got off, riders got on, people going about their lives. Well after the bus carried on, she stared at the spot where it had been.

On her way to the kitchen, she studied the floor to avoid the ever-present stares. Seductive lips and inviting postures on walls taunted her from gaudy gold frames. Poses suggested fragrant oils and sounds and sex. Sara hurried into the kitchen, filled the tea kettle and put it on the stove then grabbed it before it whistled. Moments later with a small breakfast tray balanced on her palms she nudged the back door closed with her hip.

An overgrown path led to a garden shed tucked below a decrepit out-building. She placed the tray on a metal café table on the small gravel patio then ducked inside the shed. One window faced the sea. Below the sill sat a worm-eaten gardener’s table upon which earth-soiled clay pots were stacked flush with the wall. Under the table stood a battered wooden chest scattered with an array of rusty, dented garden tools. Sara moved the tools and opened the chest. Inside were a white hat box and a black leather bag. From the bag, she extracted a crinkled magazine and put it aside then straightened and finger-pressed the lapels of a red tweed garment which had been folded and stored beneath the magazine.

Outside, she pulled an iron chair to the table, sat and then poured milk into a delicate Limoges teacup on the tray. She added sugar and steaming tea and stirred with a tiny silver spoon.

FLIGHT

Pages of the magazine flipped through her fingertips which lingered sometimes on photographs of couples with beautiful white teeth, other times on immaculate homes with well-tended gardens. She frowned, she exclaimed, she sighed. A dog-eared story required a closer look. Her lips moved. A wistful smile played on her lips. The handsome pair in the photograph wore khaki shorts, broad-brimmed straw hats, and long sleeved white shirts rolled to the elbow. They knelt on a beach beside a wire enclosure with a handwritten sign attached: Do Not Disturb — Loggerhead Turtle Nest, Harbor Island, South Carolina.

Above Sara a sea gull hovered and laughed. She looked up and watched it sail toward the sea on invisible currents.

“Saaaaaraaa,” a gruff male voice yelled. Muffled profanities followed. “I need you. Where the hell are you?”

Always English. French required too much effort for him. She tossed the magazine on top of the clothing in the satchel and looked around the shed. A short stack of newspapers lay in the corner. Sara wrapped the teacup, saucer, spoon and tea pot in newsprint, placed the set on top of the magazine and then grabbed the tray and hurried to the cottage.

“Finishing your breakfast, Paul,” she said.

While coffee dripped, she placed two croissants on a plate with a smear of butter and two dollops of strawberry jam. Several minutes later the aroma of dark roast followed her to the darkened bedroom. Lifting a robe from its hook, Sara held it out for the rail-thin naked man who sat on the edge of the bed. In their matching grey silks, the two looked like stick-figure twins.

Sara went to the picture window, stared at the view and listened. Paul’s shoulder constricting cough broke phlegm from his tortured lungs. He hawked into the toilet then urinated.

FLIGHT

Why wouldn't he close the door?

"Check your blood sugar while you're in there." She insisted he monitor his diabetes. Own it. It's yours, she thought.

Paul turtle-walked to the wing chair next to the picture window then dropped into it. Breakfast awaited him on a tray on a small round wooden table.

"Coffee," Paul croaked. He took a sip, lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Sara placed a Golden Gate Bridge ashtray, Paul's sole possession from home, on the table.

"Let's go to Paris." Paul coughed. Ashes sprinkled his chest from the cigarette cupped in the hand over his mouth.

Sara frowned. "I worked in a hospital there. I came here to get away from the city, remember?"

Paul's eyes closed. His lips parted revealing stained teeth. "We met on the beach here, didn't we? Tell me about it."

Sara drew in her breath. This story was often repeated. "I had just gotten off the train from Paris. The beach looked lovely." She studied her fingernails. The cuticles were dry and needed attention. "You stared at me. I went for a swim. When I got out, I gathered my things and left." Paul drew on his cigarette. "Eat something, Paul. The bread is fresh."

While he nibbled, Sara went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water.

"You came to my gallery," Paul said, "looking for me probably. You were quite taken by an oil painting of the harbor."

"Yes," she said. But she wasn't looking for him. Something about the way he had looked at her... "I was looking for a job when I wandered into your gallery."

FLIGHT

“Aha. And you found one.” He blew a stream of smoke. “My pretty little nurse.” He got to his feet like a praying mantis with twigs for limbs and walked toward the sofa.

Sara stared out at the beautiful blue-green water. **Mon dieu.**

“Eeeahh...” Paul swept his bony knot of a fist across the coffee table. Papers and books scattered.

Sara jumped, her water spilled, her free fingertips touched the dark blue bruise throbbing on her cheek.

“I can’t stand clutter.” Paul’s sunken chest heaved in and out. He fell onto the sofa in a jumble of angles.

Sara crossed her arms and stared at Paul’s lopsided, uneven-toothed grin. Halloween’s wicked jack-o-lantern.

“Let me look at you,” he said as he pulled at the sash of his robe. His other hand dug between cushions and produced a glass which he sniffed and then drained of a cloudy amber liquid.

Sara’s cheeks reddened. She took a deep breath then loosened her sash. Her downcast eyes followed the grey silk as it slid down her thighs and pooled around her feet.

“**Hey,**” Paul said.

Sara’s head jerked up.

“You’re my nurse. I pay you good money to take care of me.” A back-heaving coughing fit threatened his lungs.

“Come.” Paul’s long knobby toes stretched, his boney thighs flexed. She knew what he wanted. “Come here,” he said, his gravelly whisper a command.

FLIGHT

Thirty minutes later, Sara slipped into her robe and glanced out the picture window. A pint of Scotch lay on the floor beside Paul's hand. Finding all of his hiding places had proven a futile battle. He was clever. He snored like a male bear the day after the start of mating season.

Sara tiptoed to the bathroom, cleaned her teeth and showered, long and hot. After pulling on her underthings and robe, she stuffed toiletries into a small canvas makeup kit and lingerie into a hand crocheted grocery bag. From a stack of folded clothing on her side of the closet, she pulled a leather wallet fat with cash. This she tucked in securely among her underwear.

In the kitchen Sara prepared Paul's afternoon snack tray and put it on the table beside his ignored breakfast. She slipped out the back door and retraced her steps from that morning. Inside the shed she opened the wooden chest and removed the hatbox then opened the satchel and moved her tea things to the potting table. She shrugged off her robe and tossed it into a corner. The silk collected cobwebs as it floated to the dirt floor. From the satchel she gathered up a tweed jacket and matching skirt, leaving the magazine. She gave the clothing a shake then stepped into the skirt and smoothed the fabric over her hips. She slipped on the jacket, carefully slipped buttons through button holes then tugged gently on the sleeves.

From her plastic bag, she extracted a pair of resoled black leather boots and pulled them on. She flipped off the top of the hatbox and lifted out a handful of tissue paper which fluttered to the floor. She cradled a red wool beret for a moment then placed it just so on her head. Sara gathered her tea set and put it gently in the satchel on top of the magazine and then added her

crocheted grocery bag. She fastened the satchel, gripped its handles with one hand while the other grabbed the canvas bag. One glance around the shed, and out the door she went.

FLIGHT

A couple in hiking shorts and boots walked the stony trail just ahead. Sara glanced back. The medieval town of Eze looked down from the pinnacle of rock above the cottage. A red bird sat on the sill of the window of the garden shed. Sara smiled, fancied herself free as that bird. The little café table and chair and her pretty flowers looked like a postcard. The pile of broken whiskey bottles in the back corner of the lot spoiled it, but she had her picture.

Sara walked on, staring at the brake lights down the hill. Her new soles crunched over small loose rocks and skittered over the hard-packed trail. The lights changed from red to out. Black diesel fumes belched from the exhaust. Her feet found purchase on asphalt. Her hand grabbed the beret from her head and waved and waved and waved. Bus tail lights went red. Azure sea met infinite blue sky.

The bus waited.