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The Dove

Abstract

It's raining softly through the night. The rain falls swiftly. Shot, like silver needles from the sky. Striking prostrate figures, on the ground. Splattering off rigid surfaces in the dark. Spilling over and across the sloping roofs. Rain falling with frenzied insistence. Water running alongside the eaves. Tumbling into drainpipes. Rushing downwards. Spurting to the ground. Swirling around stones. Eddying through the metal bars of grates. Flowing quietly in the eroded sluits. Soundlessly deepening a myriad of tiny lines etched into the ground. Throughout the night. All night. A steady drizzle hovering opaquely in space.

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All night crouching beneath the car. Easing her body fearfully into changing positions on the muddy ground. The machine-gun patter of the rain. The choking gurgle of the water. All night. Muffling the warning stamp of men's boots. That dare her to come out.

With hunger cramping her abdomen. Cold stiffening her limbs. Hair, matted and wet, filtering out the running mud. Her school blouse like a sponge soaking up the running water, that washes away the stains, of blood, that is not hers. Would others dare come out? To cloak her female terror of these men?

Who were these men? Who are these others? Whose is the agonized scream she hears each time she closes her eyes?

Losing hold of her surroundings then coming back to the sound of rain falling softly on the wet ground. Strange music. Filtering through her conscious nightmare. The playful swirl of water. The pretty eddying circles. The wanton tumbling to another level. Fading in and out of her slackening consciousness. Fainting and waking throughout the night. All night. Trying to grasp hold of who she is. What had brought her to this fearful place? Who are they who would dare to come to her?

Abruptly the rain stops. As if a voice dictated, 'Cut!' and the frenzied, mindless activity froze into censored silence. In the betraying stillness listening confusedly to the large drops falling without inhibition to the wet ground. Each time with an amplified 'Plop!' Each time reacting as if a gun had sounded. Bruising her body in the confined space.

Then surfacing from a succession of timeless absences to find the water

that had escaped along the gutter to the storm-drain down the street, gathering in trembling puddles around her feet; hiding in the lifeless hollow she had shaped for her head; laying trapped by the angular curves of her young body.

Was she fainting? Or dying? No-one would find her.

Conditioned like a moth careless in its attempts to reach the light she finds herself crawling out of the wet with a crippled, sideways motion, to just within the outer edge of the abandoned car. Flakes of rusted metal catching hold of her hair as she moves; metal dust raining onto her face. From her hiding place disorientated beneath the car, she stares up at this place where she has taken refuge, then slips away into unconsciousness.

It is still night. The same night? Or a succession of nights later? She doesn't know. But intermittently, like still shots captured by a camera, the light before sunrise flashes weakly on dim shapes in the surrounding dark. Something white. Rigid with water. Hanging in space. Something solid and shadowy. Sloping up. To a prison-like wall. Low, deformed outlines. Other abandoned cars. A huddle of dustbins. Empty bottles. Glinting in the light. And windows in a threatening building emerging higher and higher as the night retreats. Should she have left this place?

Somewhere above the ground she sees a movement that brings a further rise of panic. To move back or to stay? It becomes the movement of little feet padding down towards the space in which she hides. Little feet in ballet shoes. The hem of a nightdress? Reaching down to the ankles. Soft grey. Like the pursuing day. Frothing softly around the ankles. A child comes into view, pointing a soft-clad foot to the step below.

Had she seen the child last night? Waiting to come down? Was she to come all the way down? Now in the lightning day? All the way down the steps. Close to where she lay, some part of her at peace, some part of her frantic beneath the car.

Imprisoned in the cage formed by the child's fingers she sees a dove. The child's face, as she descends, piquant and sweet, nestling close to the dove. The dove, quiescent against her breast. All grey like the morning sky. The dove, the dress and the dancing shoes.

The child and the dove touch the ground. The child tiptoes over the puddles with the dove nestling in its prison. Pirouettes on her toes. Releases the dove. The dove floating to the ground. Coming close to where she lay, straining not to lose consciousness. The dove watching timidly near her hand. The girl feeling the impulse to touch it. Needing to feel its warmth and softness. Missing the comfort of a human arm about her shoulders. Reaching out and feeling the cold hard stone wall. All around her. The wall. Four paces away from her. On every side.