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"Martha"
by Darryl Benjamin

Martha hesitates before pushing the glass doors of the restaurant. Inside, the waiters bustle about, taking orders, delivering meals, hurrying to facilitate satisfaction. Martha inhales the scent of *foie gras* and seasoned steak. She might be tempted to order something. Odd that she should have that hungry-not-hungry feeling, she thought, when really she ought to be starving. She'd left home early for her appointment, but faced typical delays in the reception room and then traffic. And now it was already lunchtime.

The news from the doctor wasn't good but it wasn't unexpected, either; she had grown used to the steady stream of negative results. Certainly it doesn't faze her appetite.

Unaccountably her eyes are drawn to the opposite corner of the restaurant just in time to see Howard, her husband of eight years, emerge from the elevator with his right arm wound tightly around a woman's shoulders. Martha records the scene in her mind. She runs it through again, and still can't understand. Her heart does not skip a beat the walls do not buckle. Martha is used to seeing things and figuring them out later, usually by writing them out in her diary. But later isn't good enough. She'll have to do it now.

She squints to make out details, but the room is large and the elevator, which ferries people to the floors below, where her husband works, is far away.

Yes, Martha decides, it is definitely him, her husband — what other 36 year old man would express his individuality with an old-fashioned but gentlemanly handkerchief in his breast pocket, not to mention a Fedora?

At first she had admired his style, but now what she feels is embarrassment. It is as though she is seeing him through the wrong end of a telescope, strangely clear and small. How is it possible that someone she had once believed was down-to-earth and charming now appears so unbearably pretentious?

The crowd in the restaurant fades to a ghostly mist. She moves forward, straining to see. Who is that girl? Martha doesn't know her. Of course she is still a distance off at the opposite end of the room. In the dim atmospheric light she can make out a pink blouse with ruffly trim and pea-green skirt that is miles too short. Nice legs, Martha notes, mentally filing it for later processing in her diary.

Martha pushes her way through the room, making excuses as others crush against her. She feels as if she's a salmon swimming upstream and people are the rocks and barriers she must pass. Deftly, she dodges blurry waiters and customers, adroitly negotiating the narrow slip of polished wood floor between tightly packed rows of tables. People crowded like cockroaches, she thinks, maybe soon they'll eat each other?

Before she has gone ten paces she stops abruptly because her husband, who is now clearly visible, is leaning against the far-most wall with the girl. He is bent over her head, she is looking up intently, their lips almost touching, he is saying something earnestly into her face. Then she is crying and he is comforting her, all arms, pulling her close — too close. Martha watches in fascination as the girl coils herself around him and releases a cloudburst of tears, her

face distant but visible to Martha, wetting his red shirt. *The one I bought him*, she blazes, *the one from last Christmas*.

Automatically she presses on, "Less than twenty yards," she thinks, aware she is advancing like attack infantry, with stealth, hyperaware of everything around her, the clinking of silverware against porcelain distinct, conversations reduced to white noise, she calculates her distance.

Of course it's only speculation. Can she trust her eyes? Lately, she's been spending so much time commiserating with her diary that she had to make a pact with herself not to dwell. "Negative feelings hinder health," she wrote, but later she was resentful and rebellious: "Writing about one's problems is therapeutic, and besides, unhappy thoughts are a part of life."

They haven't kissed. Could she have misunderstood? Maybe he is comforting her. Maybe her father and mother just died in a horrible accident. What then? What if it were her? Wouldn't she seek comfort somehow? But why him of all the comforters in the office?

Martha imagines what must have happened: tears over the untimely death of her beloved, adoring parents, Howard's footsteps as he gingerly approaches, offering his handkerchief handily plucked from his breast pocket, and then the consoling hug that lasts a microsecond longer than it should.

What. . . *did he just grind his hips into her?*

Martha sees his hips tilt in a flickering frame and press against the girl. And then it's over. They move apart, awkward, arms at their sides, suddenly aware they're in public. Martha tries to seal a mental picture for her diary but it refuses to stay. The diary is supposed to wash away impurities and make way for growth. She can't make sense of this.

Now they stand shy and apart, Martha only six feet away and closing fast. They sense her presence, their eyes dart upwards toward her, and then, almost with a soft, audible pop Martha enters their atmosphere, as if being sucked through an osmotic membrane, and says, breathlessly, "Oh hello I just saw you."

Howard stiffens and colors as if he is trying to blend into his shirt. "Martha. . . I wasn't. . ." he stammers. Martha looks at the girl and notes her skin is soft and smooth. Her expression is innocent, but her eyes are opaque, refusing to meet Martha's.

"I was fired today," the girl shrugs. "For what, I'm not completely sure, but I have my suspicions." Then she examines her shoes and cradles Howard's handkerchief in her left hand like a plate, sniffing and preparing for the next round of tears. In a bleak, monotone voice she recounts, "They said I was a square peg in a round hole or vice versa but the truth is he wanted to put his peg in my hole and I wouldn't let him."

Martha coughs and apologizes, for what she isn't sure. "Is there recourse legal or otherwise?" she asks automatically, but that's not what she wants to say. She feels tired, and wants to be away from both of them.

"We didn't do anything," Howard, who is able to read her disquiet, says defensively,

"He was just being sweet, is all, and I appreciate it," the girl says, then stares into the crumpled handkerchief in her hand.

Martha records it all in her mind's eye and thinks about how it will look in the pages of her diary. The thought depresses her, and she wonders, why bother? Last weekend when she had nothing better to do she opened some of the binders dating back twenty years. The pages were yellowing and brittle. It had frightened her. Lately, she had been feeling old. She was tired a lot. Nothing had changed for a long time.

"Are you two together?" she snaps, spitting the words out precisely. And then, as if to warn from straying from the truth, "I saw you the moment you got off the elevator." A breathless silence descends over the three of them and even the girl's sniffing stops.

Howard either couldn't speak or wouldn't. Instead, he nods slowly, almost a bow, his eyes fixed on Martha's. She is thinking about Howard and this girl together, their hands urgent under each other's clothes, the girl's long legs, naked, rising around Howard's hips. The cubicles are perfect for a moment's grope. Doubtless her short skirts were designed for easy access. She briefly considers asking Howard what shape hole the girl had — round or square.

"What's her name, anyway?" she suddenly asks.

"Kristy," the girl says, "and you're Martha," she adds with a bleak we-could-have-been-friends smile, which Martha detests. There is no way she would be friends with her. It would be like going back to high school. What did they have in common?

It hadn't always been this way. At first she and Howard grew flowers in a backyard greenhouse, a nursery whose offspring was nurtured by their love. They savored the grittiness of dirt under their fingernails as they raised fresh-cut flowers, always dreaming of the day they could afford a bigger piece of land. Martha learned to make flower arrangements and sold them to local restaurants and B & Bs. Howard had early on displayed a knack for marketing, tirelessly pursuing prospective clients. Those had been the happiest years.

They had wanted children but were unable to conceive. She poured her frustration into work and he began to scan the classifieds. He found a job at BernardWorldwide Inc., a global advertising agency, and quickly rose through the ranks. He said the money he earned would be put toward buying the farm where they would raise their own flowers. But gradually he spoke

less of this, more of fast food accounts, computers and trendy cars for the 18-24 year old marketing segment. His wardrobe mirrored his changing tastes as he developed his business persona.

Alone in the greenhouse, Martha's interest in fresh flower arrangements withered. Reluctantly, she switched to dried flowers.

They argued about the ethics of his job.

"But what you're doing is brainwashing, programming a generation of young people to want things they don't actually need," she said.

"But if it makes them happy," he said.

"You're encouraging greed and conformity."

He would leave the room, then, silent and furious.

Still later:

"Materialistic pig!"

"Hippie farmer!"

She couldn't imagine it would've turned out this way. For a long time she wished for reconciliation. Lately, she had allowed the slow crush of depression to take over. He seemed to go merrily on his way, as if nothing was wrong, as if they had never argued.

Maybe she had discovered the reason why.

The emptiness was always there; she had never spoken of it outside her diaries because she assumed most people felt that way and just accepted it. After her thirtieth birthday, however, what most people thought and felt became less important. She decided that age brought selfishness — a desire to please herself rather than putting others first.

Howard would always find his way. He made his home wherever he hung his hat. His Fedora, to be exact. She had been envious of that, he was a self-contained unit.

The Maitre d' interrupts. He is a tall, thin man in his forties, wearing tails and a slender Chaplain moustache, a throwback to the 30s. "If you would prefer to continue your tête-à-tête at a table?" he asks, oozing unction.

Perhaps sensing a potential impending scene — it was after all his job to notice these things — the Maitre d' leads them to a corner table. Martha sits with her back against wall, the best feng sui point facing the entire room. She deserves the best seat. After all, isn't she the injured party?

She orders a gin and tonic on the rocks. She thinks, "What does it matter now? There is no longer a point to coddling my body."

"I didn't expect to see you," Howard says. "What made you come?"

"That's obvious," Martha says, referring to the first part. "Test results," she adds. Howard steals a quick glance at Kristy. So he had told her? What else had he told her?

"There's no reason we can't be civilized," Howard says, catching Kristy's eye.

So approval for his actions is no longer my domain, she thinks.

For five years they struggled with infertility. They both wanted a baby, fiercely at first, then when trips to the doctor and varieties of treatments failed, less so. The frustration each harbored spilled into resentment. Outwardly they professed a desire for a child but inwardly they had begun doubting. Why had she wanted a baby so badly with Howard, anyway? All the hot baths, the drugs, the endless massaging. It had begun to feel less like a labor of love and more like work. Even the lovemaking was tedious, long on intention and short on romance. Whatever slender control she thought she could exercise over her circumstances was gone.

Martha's breath catches dizzily as she pictures Howard's hands on Kristy's round breasts, Howard pushing her firmly against the wall, grinding and teasing into her until he stains his pants.

The drinks arrive. A Scotch and soda for Howard, a strawberry daiquiri for Kristy. A young person's drink. A candy-coated drink. That must be her world, where everything is candy coated. Maybe some of the coating had come off being fired, Martha thinks. But no, it is always someone else's fault when you're young.

Martha marvels that she had never thought in those terms before, "When you're young." The faded diary pages were at odds with her memory, which recalled each and every line written as if was yesterday.

"What were the results?" Howard asked, feigning interest. Martha is brought back to the present by the futility in his voice. She realizes he has already left her.

She says nothing.

Kristy slides her finger around the rim of her glass. Martha has a sudden image of Kristy's fingers around Howard, doubtless using the same technique. How can she sit there so inertly?

"Are you two in love?" she asks, thrusting the question out like a dagger. Besides her express-lane short skirt, what did this girl offer? A fresh pair of lips, a sweeter scent, plumper, firmer breasts, larger than Martha's had ever been, defying gravity still. Maybe that was enough for Howard. She puts herself in Howard's place and admits she can see the attraction. She has it all, Martha thinks despairingly, without the circles under her eyes.

Kristy's blue eyes stare directly into Marsha's. "I am," she says after a moment, briefly meeting Marsha's eyes. Funny she should say I, not we, Martha thinks and turns her attention to Howard. "And you?" She feels like a priest at a wedding. "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" — only in reverse, "Do you renounce your current wife and take this other woman to be your new love and possibly new wife?"

Howard unfolds his cloth napkin and puts it on his lap. It is a ceremonious. A sales technique. "Yes," he finally says, tilting his chin toward her defiantly.

"How long?" she asks.

Howard takes a slug of Scotch before answering. Maybe he thinks the worst is over. He's in love with another woman and his wife knows.

"Is there a point in torturing you with details?" he asks.

"It's a little late to start considering my feelings."

Kristy cuts in, "We've been together on and off six months."

"On and off? Like a light switch?" Martha retorts, blinking, her eyebrows rising.

"Martha," Howard says, "get a hold of yourself."

He was right, she had gone too far. Now she had written herself out of her diary. She was on her own. And she wasn't about to stop. "No, really, I want to know what makes you tick. Just tell me why. Are you sick of trying for a family? Do you blame me?" The drink warms her. Now is probably the only time she can hold him accountable: while Kristy was there, able to correct his perceptions if they needed correcting, the link between them providing answers she couldn't glean had either been alone.

"Not really," Howard says evasively. "I just want to be with her."

"What about us?"

"It hasn't been great lately," Howard says.

Martha is silent. "And you feel the same way?" she finally asks Kristy.

"More than you can ever know," Kristy says flatly, like a lid snapping shut, staring into Howard's eyes, her drink already gone.

"More than I could ever know?" Martha laughs. That was too much. She hadn't wanted to become contentious, but what gall! How could this girl this twit this little upstart possibly know what it had been like in the early days, when she and Howard were deliriously in love?

Martha steadies herself. "Have you ever been in love?" she asks. But she doesn't wait for a reply. It isn't really a question, it isn't really anything she wants to know; it is an attack, and they all feel it. Then she sighs and sits back against the sea-blue upholstery, her eyes surveying the room. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Martha watches the businessmen consuming their businessmen's lunch, drinking their tonics and laughing, their briefcases at their feet, some shuffling papers between them, nodding and questioning each other. Some are couples speaking intently, possibly wives cheating on their husbands with office-mates, or the reverse, as it was with Howard and Kristy. And what did she expect? Forty hours a week, at least, 200 hours a month, that was more time than she spent with Howard. And could she really blame him if he wanted a family she couldn't give him?

Now she is nothing more than a clock on the mantelpiece, keeping time. If days were filled with the clamor of children — attending to their needs, a happy home with a picket fence — wouldn't the sound of the ticking clock be a comfort instead of a timebomb with a fuse, measuring her waning biology? Just like my flowers, she reflects. First nourish them with water so they can grow out and bloom into ripe fullness, then cut them and hang them up to dry, denying them the sustenance they had relied on; is that how it's meant to be? Martha makes a

mental note for her diary: *I am like my flowers, dried up but still pretty, a flattened Martha, suspended and desiccated.*

She shakes her head angrily, bringing her back into the moment. She had been so easily discarded. "I just need to know," she says, finishing her drink, "I just want to hear it from your lips, Howard: Say you don't love me any more, tell me you don't want to have a family with me."

Martha frowns inwardly as she says it, a loaded question with no possible response because there had never been nor was it likely there would ever be a family.

Does she really want a child? Or is it more to the point to ask if she really wants a child with Howard? She reminds herself she has only to look to the pages of her diary to see the extent of her doubts.

Howard looks from one to the other before meeting Martha's eyes. "You know we're not in love any more," Howard says. "I'm sorry it has to turn out this way. I'm sorry this is how you had to learn about Kirsty. But it's better this way. At least now you know."

"Better for you, you mean?" Martha snaps.

"What do you mean?" Howard asked.

Martha thinks it saves him the trouble of summoning his courage. "Never mind," Martha says.

It was possible her body had cast its vote against Howard early on. Perhaps it had sensed Howard's growth away from her right from the start, causing some valve to turn on or off, or maybe a psychological screw to tighten or loosen, somehow triggering a hormone that shut down any hope of a child. Anything was possible. She had heard at a New Age conference the phrase

'the body speaks the mind.' She wasn't sure she agreed with it. There were too many variables. Still, it may be possible, she thinks; we don't know everything about how the mind works.

Kristy and Howard stared at her, their eyes widening. "What's funny?" Howard asked in a peckish voice. Had she laughed? Yes, she supposed she had. A short karate chop of a giggle. She hoped it didn't sound hysterical. Had her body done that, too, without thought? Howard was annoyed. Martha is flooded by questions. Was he disappointed she wasn't taking it as hard as he would've liked? Did it hurt his ego? He seems proud of this young and silly girl. Does he hate her so much he wants to humiliate her? Or is it that he needs a young girl to prove something to himself after the humiliation of not being able to father a child? It's all so confusing.

When she comes up for air she tells herself she can answer the questions later, in her diary. It was times like these the diary helped most. Writing restored order to chaos. It was someone she could talk to with complete honesty. Someone emotionally available. She'd carry the diary with her, using a tiny key to keep her thoughts private. It was exhausting to sift through every faceted emotion but that was the price one paid for comfort.

Kristy, who had been quiet, suddenly speaks up. "I don't want children," she announces. Then, an afterthought perhaps: "At least, not now."

Martha turned her full attention to Kristy. "Just how old are you?" she asks. Before Kristy could answer, the waiter appeared. "Another?" he asks, smarmily aware of the response. Howard and Kristy nod together, though the question had been directed to Martha. She wonders if Kristy had been carded, and then dismisses the notion. They'd probably been there drinking and making out enough times to leave impression on the upholstery. It was she, Martha, who was the unknown, the interloper.

"Twenty-four."

Martha tries to remember what she was doing, what she was like, when she was twenty-four. She hadn't met Howard until she was thirty.

When Martha was twenty-four she was working as an editorial assistant at a publishing house in Manhattan. She had a lot of boyfriends, some that came and went, others that stayed for a while. Dancing, smoking pot, drinking, going to movies, restaurants, plays, music concerts in the park. She was at the target age of Howard's advertising agency: 18-24, young adult, with disposable income. It had been a wonderful time that promised to stretch forever. Now, looking back, it all seems so pointless.

Martha eyes Kristy and thinks, *First the fun, then the heartache*. She wonders if Kristy will feel as tired and defeated about love when she reaches Martha's age. Isn't it inevitable? In time, Kristy will be less sure of herself, less the Queen of Consumer Culture, fewer men rushing to open doors, her TV-looks no longer the fuel lubricating her engine. And then what? Will she backpedal as she approaches every woman's horror of thirty? Will she reject Howard?

Of course she will.

"And why don't you want children now?" Martha asks.

Kristy shrugs. The waiter comes and leaves. Kristy picks up her fresh drink and examines the pattern left by the salt. "I've already been pregnant twice," she says.

Martha is stunned. "What do you mean?" she demands, sitting up.

"Two years ago," Kristy says, "with my boyfriend. I had an IUD, but I guess it didn't work."

"You *guess*?" Martha asked.

"Anyway, I got an abortion."

Martha winces. "And the second time?"

Kristy's eyes flicker and lock momentarily on Howard's, only a momentary flutter but Martha catches it.

She sets her drink down and looks first at Kristy, who has lowered her eyes. Howard is hiding behind tented fingers. He lets them fall away and Martha can see his eyes.

"You got her pregnant?" When no response is immediately forthcoming, she repeats the question. "This. . . *fashion plate*?" Martha says in a hoarse whisper. "The only thing holding her together is her Victoria Secret underwear." She hadn't wanted it to turn nasty, but it had. It won't look good in the diary, she thinks. Fuck the diary.

"Hold on," Howard says, trying to sound reasonable.

"Don't you think I've held on long enough?" Martha cuts in. With a deftness that surprises even her, she empties the icy dregs of her drink into his lap.

He jolts forward and then sits immobile as the cold permeates his crotch. Martha imagines him shriveling. She looks around. Some people are watching. Good, she thinks, the more eyes on him the better.

She stands and hesitates for a long moment and then takes a mental snapshot. Kristy is daubing his crotch with his moist handkerchief while Howard, irritated and embarrassed, is pushing her away with his hand and tells her it's all right.

Later, when she is alone, Martha will report it all on crisp white leaves of paper, allowing a small smile, but a smile nonetheless.