

K. D. Miller / GALAPAGOS

It is barely morning when she wakes up. She doesn't know what has wakened her. He isn't snoring the way he told her he would. He isn't even breathing loudly enough for her to hear.

She rolls onto her side and props herself up on one elbow to watch him. Gradually his outline comes to her through the dark. She holds her own breath until she hears the soft sighing of his.

He is on his side with his back toward her, one shoulder jutting up in a painful-looking point. He has pushed the covers down, and the skin of his back is chilled.

Leaning over, she whispers, "Lie on your stomach." He bats at her voice as at an insect. She repeats more softly, "Lie on your stomach."

"Whunkh?"

"It's all right. Don't wake up. Just lie on your stomach."

"Hye? Uzzeye sorring?"

"No you weren't. Don't wake up. Just lie on your stomach and let me cover you."

He humps around onto his stomach and lands heavily, face-down in the pillow.

"Turn your face to me."

"Mmmmmffp?"

"You can't breathe. Turn your face to me."

His back tenses up. She whispers, "Never mind. I'll do it." Then she puts one light hand on the back of his head, pushes the fingertips of the other hand between the pillow and his chin, and gently turns his face toward her.

She is pulling the covers up over him when he shifts sideways. He butts against her, pushing her over onto her back. Then he settles his head on her chest, moans a deep "Ohhh!" and stays there.

He is heavy. She tries to ease him off her, and can't. After a while, she puts an arm around his shoulders. She crooks her other arm around his head, resting her fingers in his hair. She is wide awake now, holding him, looking into the dark.

His scent is different when he sleeps. It is faintly bitter, as if the day's poisons are being burned out of him. His hair feels thicker too, even longer, when it is sleep-touselled. The curls tickle scratchily at her cheek. She would like to stroke his scalp, but doesn't want to wake him up.

His sleep is a precious thing, she thinks suddenly. And right now I am its custodian.

It is one of those thoughts that come to her sometimes and always make her want to do something—write the thought down, or sing it, or turn it over and over in her mind as she would turn in her hand some interestingly-shaped stone.

"His sleep is a precious thing. And right now I am its custodian." She does not actually whisper the words—just parts her lips and breathes them, barely tasting the consonants on her tongue. But he shifts a little, as if he has heard. She breathes more shallowly, willing him back into sleep.

He lies with his chin tucked down. His expression, she guesses, is petulant. She suspects he may frown, as if sleep is hard work.

The only other time she saw him this way was one evening when he fell asleep on the couch. She sat stiffly across from him in a chair, studying the things that irritated her the most—his flung jacket, his scuffed-off shoes, his stubbed cigarette. At last she got up, crossed to the couch and knelt near his face, intending to waken him and tell him to go home.

But she did not waken him. There was an earnest look on his face, and he had that faintly bitter sleep-scent. She realized she could do anything to him. She could clap her hands above his nose, scream in his ear. Make him lurch and gasp, eyes huge. Or she could get a blanket and cover him so softly he would not even feel the breath of its settling.

It was several seconds before she realized she was crying. But when he opened his eyes, he knew it immediately. He pulled her to him and breathed for a long time into the hair over her ear—in out, in out, saying nothing.

Usually, words puff out of him, white with smoke. What he's done. What he's going to do. He paces while he talks, pushing and shouldering his way. He reaches for his cigarettes with a gesture like a punch. He leaves logjams of butts in every ashtray. She thinks sometimes that his entire being must end in a small red smouldering point.

But the moment before he burst inside her, he barely moved, barely breathed. The skin of his face became taut, and his expression so tender she had to look away.

Afterwards, he whispered that he was afraid he might be too heavy for her. She kissed his temple and shook her head. She wanted to tell him that her body made a shape beneath him like cupped palms.

His breath has moistened the hollow of her neck. There is a feeling of morning coming. She can sense, more than see, the gradual lifting of the dark. He senses it too. He draws in a deep breath and raises his head. His skin parts stickily from hers. She lifts her hand, feeling his curls snag her fingers before letting go. Still asleep, he pulls away from her, turns jerkily onto his side and begins to snore.

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This is her routine now: She wakes up, looks at the clock and starts to cry. She can't remember how long she has been doing it — waking an hour or two before they both have to get up, then crying quietly beside his sleeping body.

She lies on her back, taking in long, shuddery breaths. Exhaling. Letting everything run. A minute before the alarm is set to go off, she will press the button down, get up, go into the bathroom and wash her face in cold water.

It is her preparation for all the necessary smiles of the day, all the reasonable tones of voice. She doesn't know what he does to keep himself going. All she knows is that they have turned into bad actors — making gestures, mouthing words.

She remembers how easy it used to be to fight, how quick and hot it was. The edged voices, the hard stomping through the house, the fragile things rattling on the shelves. Then tears — noisy and jerky, proud of their pain, dying down into whispers, muffled at last in bed.

She swipes at the wetness trickling into her ear, and glances to the right. He sleeps with his back to her, one shoulder pulled up. In all their beds, he has always slept to her right. Once when she wondered out loud about it, he tugged her earlobe and grinned and told her they slept that way because he was right-handed.

She looks at him again, smudging tears down her face with the backs of her hands. She knows what she is doing with this looking. She is checking to see that he is still there. She almost smiles at herself.

She can never really know where he is. Not even when he's inside her. Sometimes she cracks her eyelids open and watches him through to the finish. He does look like he is running a race, his eyes fixed desperately on something just ahead, his expression close-to-tears as he slows and shudders and falls.

Is he seeing what she sees? Does he watch her sometimes and wonder where she is, what she is seeing?

She always chases after something that skims like a bird, dotting the ground with its shadow. There is a wind—her eyes tear with it—and she can never quite see what she is chasing. Then her breath catches, and the whole scene shatters.

Once they tried to tell each other. She remembers them whispering, elbows propped on pillows, glancing into each others' eyes, then away. He spoke of a warmth spreading as far as his chest and knees. That was all. Nothing about the loneliness, the disappointment she always sees on his face. So she told him that for her it is like a sped-up film of a rose or chrysanthemum bursting into bloom. Soon after that, they stopped talking and fell asleep.

She never told him what it really is for her—the lonely panting run, chasing something she cannot see. She wonders again now what it is that he never told her.

She has started to make noise. She doesn't know how long it has been going on, only that her body has taken over. Sometimes it surprises her with pleasure, pushing the sounds of pleasure out of her mouth when she is so sure she cannot, or will not. Now it surprises her with pain, pushing out the sounds of pain. She jerks with each coughing sob. She tries to cover her eyes and mouth, but her hands aren't big enough to hold in the sounds she is making.

He is awake. She feels the shifting of his weight, the warmth of his nearing body. Then his hand closing on her wrists and softly tugging.

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She wakes up remembering how Indian women mourn. First they pull their earrings from their ears. Then they bang their wrists together to shatter their bracelets. At last they kneel, lean forward and softly knock their foreheads on the ground.

Odd thing to wake up thinking about. So vivid, too, like something she has just witnessed. But she only saw it on TV. Or did she read about it in a book? Or did he tell her about it?

She shakes her head to clear it. She rubs her eyes and takes in a deep, loud breath. Her whole body expands—her toes, her hair—as if she hasn't breathed all night.

She looks at the clock. Still an hour before the alarm is set to go off. She looks at him. There he is. His back. She sees it every morning.

His body. It all still intrigues her: his feet—long, thin and blue-veined, the toes thick as ginger root; his erect penis, leading him like some blind sensor. How sad and funny, this complete nakedness, as if he's forgotten to tuck something in. His body can have no secrets.

But his back is secretive this morning. She wants to touch it. She does reach out. Then she stops her hand an inch from his skin. There is something about the nearness of her hand to his back—

She pulls her hand away. She folds her arms over her chest and tries to think about something else.

Indian women in their prescribed rituals of mourning. Where did the memory come from? Is it something she discovered by herself, or did he tell her about it? She doesn't know anymore what comes from him and what from her. Hasn't known for years. Decades. Couldn't possibly put things into boxes labelled "his" and "hers."

They've grown younger together. They've started to play. Sometimes she tells him she wants to camp out for the night. So they unfold the sofabed in the livingroom and make cocoa and eat crazy things—wieners stabbed on forks and dipped in a jar of mustard they pass back and forth. She sits cross-legged on the sofabed in her pyjamas and tells him what she always tells him when they camp out—that they must have been children together. They must have played together, and slept together without knowing there was anything more to it than sleep. Because now she can't remember her life without him. He's there, at all her birthday parties. At her graduation. He's there.

He's there beside her. He hasn't moved. He isn't snoring. The skin of his back makes her think of pink marble. She shifts closer to pull his covers up. An inch away from him, she freezes.

His warmth. That's what it is. His warmth is gone, and with it his bitter, fiery scent. That is what her hand missed, what all of her misses now.

She still does not touch him. She smooths the sheet between them over and over, searching for warmth, her fingers dangerously close to him, her fingernails almost grazing his skin. At last she stops. She listens, hard. She looks, her eyes dry with effort. No breath. None.

She should shake him. Yell in his ear. But she scrabbles as far away as she can on the bed. She wants to get away from what has happened, but it follows her, enters her. She puts her hands to her breastbone and digs her nails in, trying to prise herself apart.

It's all inside her, and she has to get it out. But she doesn't know how. What are her rituals of mourning? Where does she begin?

* * *

Morning.

She doesn't know why she keeps waking up so early when it's still dark. She has stopped having the dream that sometimes used to wake her—the one about her hands disappearing, her wrists becoming smooth nubs. She used to lurch awake from that one and feel her fingers with her lips to make sure they were still there.

She looks over to the right, squinting through the dark. Then, because her hands are still numb and useless, she rolls the width of the bed to the far edge. Her eyes were right. There's nothing there but cool sheet.

She isn't crazy. He could be there. He could be anywhere. She caught sight of him on the subway just the other day, just as her train was leaving the station. He was on the opposite platform, walking along, hardly breaking stride to light a cigarette, obviously going somewhere. And about two weeks ago, she was going up the up escalator in the shopping mall, and he was going down the down, and they criss-crossed. He was carrying a shopping bag and looking at his feet. Afterwards, all she could think about was how much he had always hated shopping, so what on *earth* was in that bag?

What on earth. She smiles and edges back to her side of the bed. She isn't crazy. It's just that he might show up anywhere. He'll

never tell her, of course, never give her an inkling. One day she'll unlock the apartment door and just be putting her keys back in her purse when she'll hear a tinkling sound. She'll look up, and there will be the back of his head poking above one of the chairs on the balcony. He'll have gotten himself a ginger ale from the fridge and be sipping it. The tinkling sound will be the ice in his drink.

She'll be flustered. She'll tap on the balcony door and gesture him in. Then she'll sit across from him the way she did when they were dating. She'll have to think of things to say. *What*, for heaven's sake? It'll be like starting all over. They'll hardly know each other any more. After all, he's still sixty-five from the look of it, whereas she —

She crosses her arms over her eyes. Her hands are still asleep. She knocks them together, they make a sound like wood. She hates them when they're like this — stupid, clubby things. Rust-spotted. Worm-veined. Making her feel like she's dying by inches.

She takes a deep breath. Coffee. Might as well. Last night she got all the fixings for it together, as usual, so it's just a matter of nudging the coffeemaker's "on" button. She can do that much with the back of her wrist.

She learned the hard way to get things ready the night before. The last time she tried to make coffee from scratch in the morning, before her hands were awake, the can slipped from between her wrists and the grounds made a brown Sahara all over the kitchen floor.

She screamed at him that morning, not for the first time. Screamed until she thought she'd have to cram a teatowel into her mouth. Damn it, where *are* you, she screamed. Why can't you just *be* here?

He was supposed to be here. She used to watch old ladies stepping along the sidewalk in that careful old-lady way. Alone, or on the arm of another one just like themselves. Tight, white curls, navy polka-dotted dresses, shoes too big for the withering feet. And she used to think, not me, then give him that certain smile he always took her up on.

Coffee. Carefully, she elbows herself up into a sitting position. Then she eases her legs over the edge of the bed and rocks up onto her feet. There. Nothing broken, nothing strained. She slides her feet into her slippers, first one then the other, leaning against the wall for balance. When she is sure of herself, she sets out for the kitchen.

She figures it takes her about three minutes now to make the trip. And she has started thinking of it as a trip. Time might come when she'll have to pack provisions and a change of clothes.

She reaches the couch in the livingroom and leans on one of its arms for a moment, getting her breath back. They were always going to travel when he retired. They had a trip all planned, too, to the Galapagos. The *Galapagos*, she said, when he brought the pamphlets home. Why *there*? Well, he had been reading about the islands, he said, and thought maybe they should go. When had he been reading about them, she wondered. He never went into the library, just dropped her off and waited for her in the parking lot. But somehow he'd gotten the Galapagos into his head and had decided that's where he'd like to go.

So she had started getting books out of the library and reading paragraphs out loud to him after supper. Bits about turtles still alive that were hatched the year Napoleon was born. Huge lizards like dragons. Prehistoric birds that have no business still existing. She was just starting to get excited about it all when he had his stroke.

She has reached the kitchen. She rests against the doorframe for a minute. That's what they told her it was, anyway. They couldn't be sure, because it happened in his sleep. But that's what it looked like. Stroke. Funny word. Stroke of a whip. Stroke of a hand.

She goes to the coffeemaker, nudges the "on" button with the back of her wrist and stands waiting. When the trickle begins, she drapes her hands around the warming urn. Soon there is a pins-and-needles feeling in her palms that spreads to her fingers. She takes her hands off the now hot urn, breathing in the smell of coffee. She flexes and shakes her hands, curling and uncurling her awakening fingers. Her morning dance, she calls it.

This is always a good time, when she can open a cupboard door and put a cup to a saucer, and pour herself some coffee.

She takes her cup to the diningroom table and sits down with it. She sips. The Galapagos. She wonders if he ever got there. Maybe not. Maybe he's stuck with subways and shopping malls. Didn't somebody have the idea once that whatever you avoided in this life you'd be stuck with in the next? Sort of like getting your uneaten supper cold for breakfast?

She sips her coffee. She doesn't know. For that matter, he might be sitting across from her, eyeing her steaming cup. Maybe she should pour one for him. Or tell him to go pour his own. After all, if he could get himself a ginger ale out of the fridge, he could just as easily...

She puts her cup back down on her saucer, leans her face into her hands and laughs. She isn't crazy. No crazier than the Egyptians. Didn't they bury bowls of food with their dead in case they got hungry? Horses for them to ride? Servants? Wives, for that matter? Crowded down there.

She lifts her face from her hands and wipes her eyes with the backs of her wrists. It's just that he can't possibly be all finished and gone. Nothing ever is. Every time they made love, part of him stayed inside her until long after they fell asleep with their backs to each other. And even now, the stains of him are still in the older sheets, like ghosts.

She picks up her cup and sips her cooling coffee. Then, very quietly, she puts it back on the saucer and listens. A sound from the bedroom. Wind changing direction. Or a curtain scuffing a windowledge. Or a breath indrawn. Could be anything.