

A. S. A. Harrison / ADA'S DESIRE

Ada came up the walk to the house. The air was filled with the smells of the neighbours' suppers. Ada was hungry. She pictured herself eating supper with the neighbours. She didn't really know any of them. She only knew them to see.

Inside, the house was dim and quiet. In the entrance hall she looked at the mail lying on top of the radiator. There were the usual bills for people who didn't live there any more. There was nothing for Ada. There was nothing for Johnny Raphael.

Ada climbed to the second floor and went along the hallway to her room. Johnny Raphael lived on the third floor. The staircase to the third floor was right outside Ada's door. Ada let herself into her room with a key, leaving her door open a little.

It was a large room with big windows. Over Ada's bed was a small stained glass window. The setting sun was coming into the room making everything look pretty.

Ada hung up her coat. She stood and listened. She was listening for sounds from Johnny Raphael's room. He lived directly above her. She heard muffled voices and other noises coming from distant parts of the house. She heard noises of cars and children coming from the street outside. There was no sound from the room above.

She went along the hallway to the kitchen. The kitchen light was on but she found the kitchen empty. There were some dishes in the sink and crumbs on the table. Everything looked as it had in the morning. In Johnny Raphael's cupboard there was the usual instant coffee, there were some dishes and a few bottles of spices. He rarely ate there. He often kept some eggs in the refrigerator. Ada made herself a sandwich. The sounds of her chewing were loud in the quiet house.

In the bathroom she used Johnny Raphael's toothbrush to brush her teeth and she dried the toothbrush on her towel before replacing it. She stood still outside the door to her room at the bottom of the stairs that led to the third floor, making up her mind to go up and take a look. She couldn't hope for a quiet ascent. The old wood creaked badly. Her heart was beating a lot faster than usual. At the landing she stopped and peered around the corner, up the remaining steps, and there was the door to Johnny Raphael's room. A crack of yellow light showed under the door and up one side of it. He's in there alright, she thought, and was instantly frightened away by the idea of being discovered. Back in her room she was slightly out of breath.

It was growing dark. The overhead light gave everything a yellow, hollow cast that was upsetting. Ada needed to get a table lamp. She was thinking, what if Johnny Raphael isn't home. He could have gone out and left his light on. It's quiet up there.

She stripped off all her clothes, letting them drop limp at her feet. Sneaking up the stairs that way made her perspire. The smell was a faint perfumed deodorant. The mirror on her dresser was badly distorted, making dressing difficult. Dressing was difficult anyway. She could never find the right thing to wear. She never had been able to.

She was listening so hard that when there was finally a noise overhead it startled her. It was a scraping noise. It could have been made by a chair. He was up there. It was a relief. She thought she'd better hurry now and began to perspire again. Her cheeks grew flushed. Trying on clothes was frustrating. The mirror made her look ridiculous anyway. How could she tell how she looked. She couldn't tell. She wanted to be there when he came into the kitchen.

Johnny Raphael wore black Wellington boots and you could hear him coming. From the kitchen Ada could hear him right at the other end of the house, coming down the stairs from the third floor. She heard him reach the landing and could tell just when he was passing the door of her room. She had left it partly open and the light was on. He didn't stop there.

Johnny Raphael's black Wellingtons hit the old wood sharply. The hallway was high and narrow and amplified his footsteps. She knew the beat well, a hard clean step followed by a light scraping step, Johnny Raphael had a right leg one and a half inches shorter than his

left leg. Ada stood in the kitchen, listening attentively to the approaching rhythm. It was catchy. She found herself beating time with her fingers, a hard beat, a light beat, a hard beat, a light beat, tap TAP tap TAP tap TAP tap TAP, he had a strong, steady stride, tap TAP tap TAP tap TAP. It was a long hallway.

She composed her face and arranged herself casually, feeling tense. She didn't think that he might not be heading for the kitchen. When he was at home in the evening he always made himself coffee in the kitchen she thought. He was getting very close now. Ada was pink with expectation.

The footsteps stopped and there was a confusing shuffle and then the creaking of the bathroom door. He left it partly open while he urinated and the rich gushing sound made Ada uncomfortable. She tapped her fingers nervously on the kitchen counter. It seemed interminable. It let up with maddening leisure. Finally it stopped and Ada let out a breath. Johnny Raphael loitered. Ada sipped her cup of tea and shifted to a new position, feeling stiff and uncomfortable. The bathroom door made its characteristic creaking. Now she was really sweating. Johnny Raphael's feet scraped and hesitated and again took up their rhythm. The footsteps receded. Ada heard them change to a light patter going down the front steps and die away.

She looked at her watch. There were times when she knew exactly what she wanted and without hesitation. There were old standbys in her life. Chocolate cake was one. Peanut butter and honey sandwiches could make her happy again and again. But sometimes she had to have something special and exactly the right thing and this was one of those times. She closed her eyes and gave her mind over to discovering exactly what it was that could satisfy her.

There were certain tastes and textures she definitely craved. One thing was the voluptuous lushness of whipped cream. Pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Hot gingerbread with whipped cream. Strawberries with whipped cream. Chocolate cream pie. She rolled them all skilfully on an imaginary palate. The trouble was, she wanted ice cream.

Ada kept her eyes closed and her face was buried in her pillow, the better to think. What she really wanted was something chewy and sweet. Certainly there was nothing like that in the house. She considered the shelves at the corner store. The shadows of passing cars

skirted her room. A wet patch of drool appeared on her pillow. She wiped the corners of her mouth. Her vision was complete, it was this: thick slabs of vanilla ice cream sandwiched between two layers of sponge cake, topped with apricots and syrup and completely covered with freshly whipped cream. She was captivated.

She tasted and chewed the creation in her imagination and rearranged it until it was exactly right. She attended conscientiously to detail and proportion, tailoring the ice cream filling to an inch and a half in thickness (an inch and a half she thought, was the difference between Johnny Raphael's right leg and left leg), slicing the apricots lengthwise into thin slices, and ensuring that the sticky syrup permeated both sponge cake layers.

The young woman behind the counter looked up when Ada came into the store. Hello she said, smiling and nodding, noticing how fat Ada was, still not used to it although Ada was getting to be a regular customer.

Hello said Ada feeling self-conscious about the purchases she was about to make. She passed briskly to the rear of the store.

Ada picked out a half pint of whipping cream, a pint of vanilla ice cream and a tin of apricots. There were several kinds of cake on the shelf. There was pound cake and there was plain cake. There wasn't any sponge cake. She knew of a bakery that stayed open late. She would have to take a taxi.

Ada put her selections on the counter and looked at them and the woman punched her cash register. She's really quite flabby Ada was thinking, noticing how the woman's brassiere strap pinched her over the shoulders and across the back. I wonder why she wears those tight sweaters, they reveal every bulge. Their hands touched as money passed between them. They thanked each other.

I hope this bakery is open Ada was thinking, fearing it wouldn't be. She hailed a taxi deciding that if they didn't have sponge cake she would settle for plain cake. She was anxious as the bakery came into

view. Then she saw that it was open and felt relieved. She bought two pounds of sponge cake off the fat lady who ran the place. Once it was safely in her hands, she was full of impatience to be home with it. She held it in her lap and she held her bag of groceries in her lap and wondered how she could bear to wait.

Ada assembled the cake in her room. Her door was locked, her curtains drawn. If anyone had knocked on her door now she wouldn't have answered. She especially wouldn't have answered if Johnny Raphael had knocked.

For eating, she had chosen a blue china plate and a small dessert fork. The cake fell apart lusciously on her plate and tasted delicious. She sat at the table in the corner and consumed it one slice at a time until it was finished. The eating was intensely satisfying. She knew she would remember the experience with great pleasure for days or weeks afterwards. Some of her fondest memories recalled eating experiences. She remembered in particular, a raspberry tart she had eaten perhaps ten years before, she didn't know the exact date. The memory lingered, less on account of the excellence of the tart itself, more because of the peaks of pleasure achieved in the eating and her feeling of utter satisfaction afterwards.

She ate slowly and the cake occupied her for close to an hour. She felt sick eating the last few pieces. She thought she would never get enough. When there was only one piece left she looked at it and felt panicky, knowing it was the last piece and there wasn't any more, feeling too sick now to be able to eat any more anyway but frightened when she thought of stopping. She made tea in the kitchen and drank tea with the last piece. After she had licked up the crumbs and juice she went to bed.

Johnny Raphael had said see you later. Hadn't it been lucky bumping into him. She didn't usually see him in the morning, he was usually still sleeping when she left the house. She'd been startled seeing him and had trouble finishing her breakfast, hadn't felt hungry suddenly. But she finished it pointedly, not wishing to betray embarrassment. She had said good morning but couldn't say his name. He had called her Ada in a familiar way that she heard with pleasure and remembered.

She remembered it now, staring at the ceiling with a book lying open on her stomach, hearing the creakings and rustlings in the house.

She was waiting for him. When he came home he was going to come into her room to use her telephone. He had asked her if he could, saying her name and looking right at her, then he had said see you later as he got up to leave and as he was leaving gave her a last glance over his shoulder. She had sighed then, and now she was listening for the dull distant thud of the front door and the light toe-tapping on the stairs.

She could practically hear the sounds she was listening for. She had heard them many times before. Perhaps he would stop in to say hello on his way up to his room, but it didn't matter. Later, when he came down to use her telephone she would invite him to sit on her bed and engage him in conversation.

He had been born with a right leg one and a half inches shorter than his left leg. He called it being crippled. Ada wanted to get him to talk about it while she listened sympathetically, protesting that he was being hard on himself. Actually his condition excited her. Talking about it made him relax with her. If she asked him he would take off his black boots and stretch his two legs out on her bed and she would see that the difference between the length of his right leg and the length of his left leg equalled the width of three stripes on her bedspread or exactly one and a half inches. It didn't seem like much, one and a half inches, but it was a long way from one heel to the other, Ada knew it because she had tried walking around in one shoe.

The door of Johnny Raphael's room was not locked. Ada knew because she had tried it. When she tired of waiting and she couldn't read her book she wore a red satin housecoat and she went upstairs and went into his room.

It was an oddly shaped room with a curved wall and a sloping ceiling. Some light filtered into it through a thin window. There was a desk, a dresser, an alarm clock and some books and papers. Ada had already looked in all the drawers and in the cupboard and read the titles of all the books. The air was stuffy in the room and smelled good to her, like she knew Johnny Raphael would smell if she could get that close to him.

The bed was a mattress covered with rumpled sheets and blankets and strewn with Johnny Raphael's socks and shirts. Ada let her red satin housecoat drop on the bare wood floor and she lay down on the bed and pulled the bedclothes around her body and face, breathing

deeply and shivering. She looked at the corners of Johnny Raphael's room, crossed with shadows, feeling horrified that he might come home at any minute and discover her there. She would never be able to explain herself. She would be speechless and she would blush uncontrollably, bending over to pick her housecoat off the floor. He would be standing and staring at her in amazement. Her pendulous breasts would swing towards him as she bent over. When she stood up she would be covering herself with the housecoat but as she ran out of the room the preposterous enormity of her rear-end would be finally revealed to him. As she fled down the stairs she would hear him laughing. Hot tears would begin streaming down her face. Alone in her room at last, her heaving, trembling body would collapse on the floor in a heap of shame and mortification.

Ada's thoughts frightened her out of the room. She had started to shake. In the hallway she met a huge fat woman scrubbing the linoleum outside Johnny Raphael's door. It was obvious from the woman's expression that she'd been watching through the keyhole. Ada hurried away.

Johnny Raphael's biceps rippled and bulged as he buttered toast. With all his might he was restraining himself from grinding the hard pieces of butter brutally into place. Ada watched him, loving to see his big muscular hand making small delicate motions with the butter knife.

Ada was wearing her brand new black t-shirt. She had never owned a black t-shirt before. This was the first time she had ever worn one. She had thrust her body into it and looked at herself every which way in the mirror. She had thought it looked sexy. She had thought it made her look thinner. It made her feel good and she had never shared a meal with Johnny Raphael before.

She lifted the lid off the frying pan. There were four eggs frying. A fine spray of grease splattered her face and glasses. It was so fine she didn't notice it but it left a film.

Sorry. I forgot to take the butter out of the refrigerator she said, feeling worried about it but liking to see Johnny Raphael's hard muscles squirming under his taut skin.

The toast is ripping he complained.

Here, let me help you she offered, spying a chance to lean close to him, feeling his body heat, and as she was slipping the knife from his grip she could feel the black hairs on his knuckles tickling her palm.

The hand that had held the knife came to rest briefly on Ada's waist. It made her flinch with pleasure. Looking to see that he wasn't looking at her, she immediately felt her waist where the hand had touched it. She found there a lumpy roll of fat and cringed. As she shoveled up the fried eggs her body shook and her chins all wobbled and the fat on the backs of her arms slapped the air. She pulled nervously on her t-shirt, pulling it down over her hips, not wanting Johnny Raphael to guess how fat she was. She served him two fried eggs on a white plate. She served herself the same.

Sitting down, Ada felt her stomach push out against her trousers. She felt the trousers give a little under the strain. She was feeling stifled and pulled on the neck of her t-shirt.

Johnny Raphael pulled his chair up to the table. Underneath the table his two knees touched Ada's two knees. She was startled and didn't know what to do. Sucking the butter out of the pores in her toast, she figured quickly that her right knee was touching Johnny Raphael's left knee and her left knee was touching Johnny Raphael's right knee. She tried to remember which was his shorter leg. Did he have a left leg one and a half inches shorter than the right leg or did he have a right leg one and a half inches shorter than the left leg. The right leg was shorter she thought. In that case, her left knee was touching his deformed leg. Or was it the longer leg that was deformed. She didn't know. She could hardly bear to eat when he was sitting right there and under the table her knees were touching his knees. She chewed her toast. She dunked it in her egg yolk. She forked flopping pieces of egg white into her mouth. She ate deliberately because at supper she knew, it was the thing to do. She felt her face growing pink and shiny, holding her knees rigidly where they were, touching his. Her trousers were growing tighter as she ate and her feet were going to sleep.

Do you want some buttermilk she asked.

I don't know he said. Let me taste it.

She handed him her glass and he took a drink. No he said. I don't think I like it. He handed back the glass. What is buttermilk he asked.

She looked at him thoughtfully and said, I don't know. Her tongue gathered the drops from the rim of the glass where his lips had touched it. She looked at the buttermilk in the glass. Which of your legs is shorter she said.

The right one is shorter he said.

One and a half inches isn't it, she asked.

Yes that's right he said.

How tall does that make you, she asked.

Well, if I stand on my right leg I'm five feet ten inches, and if I stand on my left leg I'm five feet eleven and a half inches, he said.

I see said Ada. Then after a while she said, where is it shorter. Is it shorter above or below the knee.

He looked at her intently and then said, here, let me show you. He took off his black Wellingtons, the right one and then the left one. He stood up and took off his jeans. Ada crouched down in front of him and he pointed out that he had two legs, each one perfectly proportioned and finely formed, both of them nicely covered with soft curling dark hair, only the right leg was ever so slightly smaller than the left leg. The left leg was ever so slightly larger than the right leg.

Ada considered his two legs for a long while. She made him turn around and she ran her fingers up and down each leg several times. Finally she said, let me show you the fat on my body.

She stood up and quickly removed all her clothes. You see, she said, how it has collected here on my hips. Very little on my legs and thighs, but here on my hips and stomach, and on my behind. She turned slowly around once, and then again to be sure he saw everything, touching the fat with her hands. It was soft under white skin. Drops of sweat squeezed out from under her arms and trickled down her sides.

Johnny Raphael ran a fingertip the length of a deeply grooved stretch mark on her hip, making a gentle soothing noise with his lips. I'll make some coffee he said. Ada watched him put on his jeans and tuck in his t-shirt. Then she turned away and closed her eyes for a little while before getting dressed again.

They drank the instant coffee he made. Johnny Raphael said he was going out. He stood up to leave and said, see you later, giving her a last quick glance over his shoulder. Ada sat at the table and listened to the quick rhythm of his receding footsteps. Then she finished eating her supper.