

The Last Transgression

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August 31. Valerie cut her foot on a shell this afternoon and acted like she was going to die. She's so fragile, so brittle sometimes it makes me want to slap her and break her glasses. How did I become involved with this person, someone who could smell like this, with that sick perfume in her sweater every night from the boutique? But there's nothing the matter with Valerie, really, not much to complain about. Leaves me to myself to work usually, doesn't argue. Jackie always smelled like she'd been digging trenches.

September 2. Showed her the last draft of "Dolores X" and she just stared at it a moment, then did something fairly magnificent, changed "kernel" to "shard" in the opening paragraph and it's made all the difference, I think. Sets the tone without screaming it through a megaphone. I think I'll take her out someplace for a change.

September 3. Dinner at Chez Jean-Paul yesterday evening. She made some more suggestions for "Dolores X," working in the clock and violin again at the end for a cleanness and circularity, maybe also trimming the madwoman's ramblings. Valerie has a few sharp ideas, but she's drifting inside these days, I know, looking for something to do with herself. Seems to have given up or forgotten about the singer-songwriter fantasy, thankfully; the piano is collecting dust and she hasn't asked me to listen to anything lately. Says she thinks she'll

start weaving those Celtic things again. God, she's lost. She looked nice tonight, though, strange in the candlelight, with a faint desperation clouding her features. I blurted that she looked like a ghost and she smiled, but I could tell it hurt her. We ran out of conversation and the wine was working in me so I stomped hard on her foot to see what she'd do and she just looked at me, crushed, like I'd told her the world would end that night.

September 4. A couple of Valerie's friends invited us over. They were discussing their Russian composers and Valerie got pretentious and wistful like she does sometimes and started reminiscing about some recital she gave at the school they all went to years ago. The ugly one got excited and said Valerie ought to sit down at the piano and play something for old times' sake. She said no and they begged her and looked at me. I pecked her and told her to make the evening special. So she minced over to the piano a little theatrically, composed herself and frowned abruptly in concentration, then started playing and slipped up and butchered the piece. Nobody said anything, but she broke up after we left and had to pull over to let me drive. I put my hand on her shoulder and told her it didn't matter. She kept crying all the way home and I told her again and again that it didn't matter. I could have smashed her. She's in there moping even now.

September 5. Valerie tripped into the city and bought an old Bosendorfer and had it set up in our bedroom. Why? You've already got one you never play, I told her. What do you need another one for? She's bought the exact model she played in the school when she did

the Scriabin recital. Says she has to start practicing again, went on about how great she used to be, how she used to feel it coursing in her blood like a disease, and now that it's lost she has to "reconstruct that ambience entirely." She's hung up framed pictures of Chopin and Scriabin and all her old gods, unscrewed one of the light bulbs and put up black drapes so the room will always be dim. She's very clean in almost everything she does, and it bothers her that her playing isn't precise anymore, not crisp and perfect like I guess she thinks it was before, like everything else in her life until she met me, I suppose. Poor Valerie. Jackie was filthy. She'd lie there picking her nose, too lazy to do anything else, rolling the booger between two fingers until it was hard, then flick it at me. Valerie doesn't appreciate any of this.

September 7. She's quit her job at the boutique so she can spend her time practicing. She only worked there for something to do, anyway. She doesn't know how to live. She's a wreck, her nerves are burnt, and she starts crying and shaking whenever I close a cabinet or drop a spoon while she's playing her precious Scriabin sonatas. She can't bear to hear the toilet flushing, so I have to go to the burger shack down the beach. I really think the woman has gone insane.

September 8. We apologized to each other and made up, strolled arm in arm along the esplanade and fed the gulls like we haven't done since we first took the house. From now on she'll only practice while I'm away. Everything has to be perfect, she says. You already are, I told her, but it came out sounding phony. Her conversation now is all fractional: "perfect fifths and minor sevenths," etc, etc. I wanted to go

to bed. Well, it's demanding material, I said, and you haven't played it for what, ten years? She was glaring at me. You don't understand, she says, I could play these pieces like clockwork, no, not clockwork, like . . . She couldn't think of the word she wanted and wandered around the house haunting it like Barbara Steele for a few hours. I still don't understand why the damned piano has to be in our bedroom when there's a fine spot for it in the attic. Or the ocean.

September 10. I make a point of being gone more often now, even when she isn't there. House still smells like sick perfume and something else less definite. I can't breathe in peace. I walk down to the deserted beach and sit on the empty drums to read, making notes for the novel and watching the waves wash the sand. Beaches are best depopulated—no noises except the birds and wind. In my bag this afternoon I found some scraps of that ridiculous story "The Last Transgression" I'd been writing for Jackie before she left:

We're having our afternoon lemonades on the terrace and she says quite out of nowhere, "I suffered through years of psychotherapy trying to overcome my anal and urinary retention. Finally I arrived at a compromise. I hold it in until it truly hurts me and I cramp up; then, when the explosion of the release comes at last, it's more powerful than any orgasm a human being has ever known. The long retention, though it pains me dreadfully, has become a pleasure for me, the prelude to the greatest ecstasy. It's like holding in the hit off some dynamite magic time-bomb joint, except that you're smoking the joint with your asshole or your cunt."

"You're a poet, Hannah. Listening to you makes me realize I've never felt passionately about anything in my life."

"Passion is just something somebody invented or imagined one day a long time ago, I think. Did it ever really exist?"

"It must. I feel it now. For your cunt and your ass, Hannah."

"But if you've never experienced it before how do you know that's passion you're feeling and not simply an extraordinary erection of your cock?"

I punch her in the nose, wrestle her back into the room, and throw her onto the waterbed.

Half a Fu Manchu moustache wisps down from the irregular lips of her cunt, inviting me closer to hear it whisper.

She's insulted me horribly and I insult her back:

"I fucked you because you're a rodent. It makes me feel brutally blond and hard and sharp like an SS man."

"But you're not blond at all."

"Precisely. I only wish you'd been a girl of eleven with acne and braces or a rich old bitch with a golden tooth I could have extracted with a wrench."

"I only wish you'd been a pissoir," she says.

We kiss, make love, lie in bed the whole afternoon, smoking and drinking, philosophizing, reflecting on our irredeemable baseness.

"It doesn't bother me that you're a Nazi," she says. "Admiration of Hitler is one of the last transgressions society's left us."

"Surely there must be something worse."

God, my writing was so stoned then. Jackie was always such good times, even when she was worthless to me.

September 13. "Dolores X" is finished. I'll send it to Clyde. It's turned out nicely, I think, maybe the best story I've written in the past couple of years. Too bad the novel is dead in the water. Not even Valerie can change that, because the novel was Jackie essentially and she was the end.

September 14. Valerie thinks she's made some progress and wants to play the Third Sonata for me tomorrow night. I'm hoping this will finally close the door on it all.

September 15. I told her she really had something remarkable in her and that I was proud of her. She said I was lying and patronizing her. I wasn't. But Valerie can't be satisfied anymore.

September 17. The weather is gloomy and wet but we ate on the veranda anyway. I wanted to get her off the subject of music, started telling her Indiana stories and Jackie's name came up. She asked me how Jackie died and I told her. She was silent a long time and then touched my hand as if to say that it was different now, that nothing like that could ever happen again. A sheet of lightning lit up the sky and glinted beautifully on her face and I wanted to go inside with her. But she clung to me all night and all I could think as I held her and kissed her was how she still stank like the boutique.

September 20. Dreamt that we were in Paris or somewhere in France. A mime is following us through the streets, silent, lugubrious, but somehow also loud and obnoxious like a calliope. He dogs us from a

distance, his presence discrediting us and making us ashamed to exist. Suddenly pained, I stop, holding Valerie close to my heart, and wait for an excruciating moment as he approaches us with an obscene grin. I hand him some money and tell him to disappear before he can even go through his tawdry schtick, but the episode has ruined our lives already. I'll have to use that in a story. Or maybe I'll find a way to work it into the novel.

September 21. Jackie on my mind so much lately. Why? I remember that, writing in the diary once, I called her a "baccunt." She'd been standing behind me, reading over my shoulder, and laughed. Strange that I never minded Jackie reading my diary. It was ours, really. I could never show this to Valerie.

September 23. Another grim day with a sky like stone. I think that's why she waited until today to play the sonata for me again. All theatre with her. She must have known what she was about, though, because it was it was nothing short of brilliant. She'd tuned into a crystalline moment in time and transported herself. Her face was obscured by her hair from where I sat and yet I felt and knew somehow that she was more frighteningly beautiful in that moment than I'd ever seen her before. She had the universe in her grasp and then something absurd happened. Electronic bells sounded faintly on the air and "The Entry of the Gladiators" tooted in. An ice cream truck was cruising through and the spell of that moment, that coordinate of epiphany in the space-time continuum that she'd somehow discovered had flickered out. She didn't want to hear it and kept playing

through it, and it was painful. Gaudy colors swirling together like oil in a puddle, a cacophony like some futuristic dystopian carnival. The ice cream truck must have been parked outside, hoping we'd come out of the house. We could still hear it even after she'd finished, "The Entry of the Gladiators" carrying from a distance as it slowly floated away.

September 24. Woke up from a nightmare in the middle of the night and Valerie was sitting up staring at the Bosendorfer. I told her she looked like a lizard and went to take a piss and when I came back she was still just sitting there, glaring at it like a gorgon. And I share my life with this person.

September 26. Came in from the beach and she was hunched over grunting at the kitchen table with her face in her hands, digging her nails into her forehead. I went to her gently and took her hands in mine, kissed her neck and ear and whispered to her. It felt so horrible to know that I hated her and I asked her please to talk to me. The ice cream truck has been coming by every day, sometimes even twice, so that she never knows when it will interrupt her. She wonders if God is punishing her for wasting her life. Jackie would have giggled at that and I almost did.

September 29. Valerie smiled today and it startled me. She drove into the city for her prescription and I thought maybe I'd get some writing done, but as soon as I sat down at the kitchen table I blanked. I got up and grabbed the biggest knife and went into the bedroom, opened up the piano, and cut two of the strings. Took my notes down to the

beach, read them all through, and still didn't know what to do. The sun was gone and the sky and the sand and the waves were one dull gray nothing color. Then the title came to me: *Cannibal Famine*. It's marketable. Then I was hungry and walked over to the little burger shack. The ice cream truck was parked outside. He was in there having his lunch and we started talking, and I said it was funny an ice cream truck showing up when the weather was getting cold. He says it's a nomad operation and he drives it down the coast gradually as autumn comes on. I asked him if he liked it and he said it was okay. Said it was the most freedom he'd ever had. There's a story in this man.

October 1. She hasn't said anything about the piano yet. Maybe she thinks God cut the two strings. I left before she woke up this morning and went for a good cold swim. I think I've finally got some fresh ideas.

October 2. Valerie had a man in to fix the piano. She's gotten sort of quiet. Is she realizing it's a waste of time? Why bother with the expense of having it fixed, then? Strange, but I'd almost gotten used to the crack-ups. Got some work done. Reworking the structure, putting in some things, and cutting out most of Ch. 5 with all the backstory. It's better abstract, ambiguous. Perhaps that's been a large part of my trouble: I try to explain something best left unexplained. Met the ice cream man at the burger place again. He's hanging around town for a few days, waiting for some supplies. He used to be a cop in a desert town and says driving an ice cream truck is the same thing but tastes better and isn't as mean. He told me some dirty jokes and a story about a prostitute he used to know who got run over by

the ice cream truck when another guy was driving it. The man was fired and that's how he got the job. Didn't mention any of this to Valerie—she wouldn't appreciate it like Jackie. At dinner I told her some of my ideas for the book and she just agreed and didn't say much. Exchanged some banalities about the meal and the weather, watched an awful French movie.

Later I went for a stroll by myself and as I was coming back to the house I heard her playing and stopped to listen. It was a different one. It wasn't good to hear it alone in the night.

October 3. Valerie took a deep breath at breakfast and announced rather abruptly that she will be performing Scriabin's Seventh Sonata (she rattled off the opus number and everything) tomorrow "at exactly the solar climax" (which she kindly explained to me means noon) and that her music school friends will be over to sit in audience. I told her it was wonderful and sat there wondering if she ever realizes how idiotic she sounds sometimes. Met the ice cream man later and told him I'd give him \$200 if he'd drive the truck out to the house tomorrow at exactly the solar climax (which I explained means noon) and park in the driveway with the speakers blaring the most annoying song he's got at top volume and just sit there with it running for half an hour. He looked at me like I was weird, so I told him I was having some friends over and that we were going to trip out and wanted some heavy carnival music with long range projection. Then he understood and I gave him the \$200.

October 4. Motel 6. Mission accomplished. □