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THE MISNAMING OF PARTS

Rose has a habit of dipping her shrimp in guacamole because of how well the colours mix. She says that the avocado and the orange marry so well you'd wonder why more people didn't think to put the two of them together, if only as art. I tell her that she's going to kill someone with a shell fish allergy if she keeps it up. And that she's all dressed in green from tip to tip, a little like the thing she's eating.

"You remind me of someone," she says. "You remind me of my husband, Gerald. Your bodies are the same and your face. Or maybe it's just the eyes." I don't tell her that she's said all of this before.

"I can remember once," she says, "the two of us were driving through Latvia, which was still the Soviet Union back then, and we met this old farmer on the side of a gravel road. He was tall and thin and covered in dirt so thick it might have stopped bullets if it had to. Behind him he had hung a slaughtered cow on the branch of a dead tree and was selling chunks of meat to anyone who didn't mind the flies or the smell of rot. Gerald was, at the time, thinking of writing a book on Soviet agricultural practices, and so he asked the man if he could take his photograph. I should mention that he teaches on the subject. Chair of the department of Soviet Studies, which meant a whole lot more then than now. Anyhow, the farmer agreed to the idea, but only under the condition that I pose in the picture with him and that he be allowed to keep a copy of it for himself. And so Gerald had us stand for two photos; one of us next to the cow as it hung on the tree and another in the barn where the farmer had killed it. He had us stand in the dirt with our bare feet and I remember it being wet with soaked-up blood. And how terrified I was of the cutting tools that swung around our heads, clinking against each other like wind chimes because we'd left the doors of the barn open.

"Gerald left us after that to take pictures of some farm equipment rusting in the field. And as if sensing the lack of a reason not to, that farmer started to shuffle closer and closer to me. You probably won't believe this, but he would actually lead into every step with a question. He'd say: (in broken English) 'How long have you been in the area?' And then he'd take a step toward me. 'Have you ever seen an animal with its throat cut?' Another step. And every time he asked a question I would answer it, even though I knew what answering it meant. Before long he was so close to me that I could see the white hairs on his chin and smell the foulness of his breath. 'Do you know how to use a knife?' He pressed his hand into the small of my back. 'Is that your husband?' (shifting his eyes out through the window and toward the field where Gerald must have been). He ran his finger down past the lip of my belt and started to wiggle it from side to side like a blind worm between my cheeks. And I didn't fight it. I just felt the heat of that finger there in the opening and I thought, Oh God, what if Gerald comes back in at just this moment and sees this bugger with his hand against my bare ass? He'd have killed him with one of those butchering tools—in a heartbeat—and probably me too for not fighting it. My God, what would Gerald have thought of that?

“I still have a copy of that photo, of the farmer and I in the barn in black and white with the curved blades hanging just behind our necks. Whenever I see it I think of Gerald in the car driving away from that farm and asking me why I was suddenly so quiet. If that farmer had said something that upset me. And all I said was: ‘No. He was a dull old man.’

“But I wish now that I’d told him to go back there and cut that son of a bitch’s throat. And that I loved him. I wish I’d told him that.”

Her eyes are wet with remembering.

On the other end of the room the women have come together and are passing around a matching set of hats. When they go out they will put these on, they say, at baseball games and movie theatres, so that everyone will know that they’re together. And that none of them have come alone. Rose reaches out to catch the hat that’s being thrown to her. One of the women says: “We’ll all have alliterative names. Like, I’ll be Lovely Lori and you’ll be Erotic Ella.”

Everyone laughs, teased by the idea of sex.

“And you, Rose? What’ll you be named?”

“How about Ramblin’ Rose?” someone shouts.

Her face twists in disgust.

“Or maybe Randy Rose,” I say, bringing another round of laughter from the room. From everyone but Rose, that is, whose face is still wound up like a knot, not quite sure for a moment of who I am or why I just said what I said.

She reminds me of my wife. Or of someone who was almost my wife. A woman who never really gave me a straight answer to the question of ‘will you marry me?’ Although I asked it often enough. I remember driving up to her grandparents’ cabin in the spring when the trees were still bare and you could see the shape of the earth more clearly. Before anyone else would be there and we could have the place to ourselves. A little one room cabin with a bed and a fridge and a desk in the corner, where I could pile my books and work on my lectures for the week.

Where she ran her finger-tips across my scalp and complained about the rain. She said that if it didn’t let up it would make the earth too heavy to shovel and she’d never get the chance to look for her grandfather’s motorcycle. The one he’d buried in the early stages of his Alzheimer’s and had since forgotten about. The one he brought over from the Czech Republic in pieces, a few parts in his suitcase every time he flew, until he was able to completely reassemble it on this side of the Atlantic. It would mean so much to her, she said, if she could be the one to find it. And if I would be the one to help her dig it up. She tipped my head back to gauge my reaction.

Me: “You’re a terrible liar.”

Her, smiling: “I’m hungry. Did we bring anything to eat?”

Later, in bed, when we were packed inside our zipped-together sleeping bags like luggage, she pressed her mouth into the space where my neck and my shoulder met and asked me to say something to her in Russian. Something I would never have said to my students. She wanted to feel the words vibrate out of my throat and into her own. They would mean more to her that way, she said. So I told her, in a language that she couldn’t understand, how she was the most beautiful naked person I’d ever met. How we’d spent the day turning over stones and picking worms out of the dirt to use as bait. How we’d had no running water and rinsed our apples in the rain. Then I asked her where the motorcycle was buried, but she gave me no answer. She just wrapped her arms around me and laughed into

my ear. She said: "You're not as wonderful as you think you are," and I said: "Will you marry me?"

In public she would ask people, "Have you met my husband?"

Rose is a bit like this. The body and the face are the same.

Someone is playing the piano now, an attempt at a kind of waltz. Everything is lit only by candles and it makes the grooves in our faces look deeper. It drives us to the edges of the house, to the hallways and the darkened corners, and leaves the middle of the living room empty - the perfect space for Rose to begin her dance with an imagined partner. One hand up where his hand would be, the other around his make-believe shoulder. And as she moves across the room the green of her dress spins a blur around her legs, her knuckles swinging within inches of our noses. No shame in acting silly, though silly isn't the right word.

Someone says: "You're beautiful, Rose," and all of us see her sneer.

"You're a wonderful dancer."

But maybe she isn't dancing. Maybe she's pretending to punch each of us in the face. To say to us: "I'm on to you, you condescending batch of goat-fuckers. I'm on to you and would gladly skin you all by hand if I had the strength." And in the heat of this anger she imagines blood gushing from our faces where her fists have just landed. Or how fun it would be to string us up over the branch of an old tree and sell our meat to passersby.

We watch her. All of us wondering what her bizarre movements are meant to show. The grace of her aging body? The ferocity of her hatred? In the flickering light of candles it's impossible to tell.