

Lady's Dream

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Lady's suffocating. Robert can't stand to have the windows down because the air blowing into the car bothers his eyes. The fan is on but only at the lowest speed, as the sound annoys him. Lady's head is getting heavy, and when she blinks she has to raise her eyelids by an effort of will. The heat and dampness of her skin give her the sensation of a fever. She's beginning to see things in the lengthening moments when her eyes are closed, things more distinct and familiar than the dipping wires and blur of trees and the silent staring man she sees when they're open.

"Lady?" Robert's voice calls her back, but she keeps her eyes closed.

That's him to the life. Can't stand her sleeping when he's not. He'd have some good reason to wake her, though. Never a mean motive. Never. When he's going to ask somebody for a favor he always calls first and just passes the time, then calls back the next day and says how great it was talking to them, he enjoyed it so much he forgot to ask if they'd mind doing something for him. He has no idea he does this. She's never heard him tell a lie, not even to make a story better. Tells the most boring stories. Just lethal. Considers every word. Considers everything. Early January he buys twelve vacuum cleaner bags and writes a different month on each one so she'll remember to change them. Of course she goes as long as she can on every bag and throws away the extras at the end of the year, because otherwise he'd find them and know. Not say anything – just know. Once she threw away seven. Sneaked them outside through the snow and stuffed them in the garbage can.

Considerate. Everything a matter of principle. Justice for all, yellow brown black or white they are precious in his sight. Can't say no to any charity but always forgets to send the money. Asks her questions about his own self. *Who's that actress I like so much? What's my favorite fish?* Is calm in every circumstance. Polishes his glasses all the time. They gleam so you can hardly see his eyes. Has to sleep on the right side of the bed. The sheets have to be white. Any other color gives him nightmares, forget about patterns. Patterns would kill him. Wears a hardhat when he works around the house. Says her name a hundred times a day. Always has. Any excuse.

He loves her name. Lady. Married her name. Shut her up in her name. Shut her up.

"Lady?"

Sorry, sir. Lady's gone.

She knows where she is. She's back home. Her father's away but her mother's home and her sister Jo. Lady hears their voices. She's in the kitchen running water into a glass, letting it overflow and pour down her fingers until it's good and cold. She lifts the glass and drinks her fill and sets the glass down, she walks slow as a cat across the kitchen and down the hall to the bright doorway that opens onto the porch where her mother and sister are sitting. Her mother straightens up and settles back again as Lady goes to the railing and leans on her elbows and looks down the street and then out to the fields beyond.

Lord almighty it's hot.

Isn't it hot, though.

Jo is slouched in her chair, rolling a bottle of Coke on her forehead. I could just die.

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Late again, Lady?

He'll be here.

Must have missed his bus again.

I suppose.

I bet those stupid cornpones were messing with him like they do, Jo says. I wouldn't be a soldier.

He'll be here. Else he'd call.

I wouldn't be a soldier.

Nobody asked you.

Now, girls.

I'd like to see you a soldier anyway, sleeping all day and laying in bed eating candy. Mooning around. Oh, General, don't make me march, that just wears me out. Oh, do I have to wear that old green things, green just makes me look sick, haven't you got one of those in red? Why, I can't eat lima beans, don't you know about me and lima beans?

Now, Lady...

But her mother's laughing and so is Jo, in spite of herself. Oh, the goodness of that sound. And of her own voice. Just like singing. General, honey, you know I can't shoot that nasty thing, how about you ask one of those old boys to shoot it for me, the just love to shoot off their guns for Jo Kay.

Lady!

The three of them on the porch, waiting but not waiting. Sufficient unto themselves. Nobody has to come.

But Robert is on his way. He's leaning his head against the window of the bus and trying to catch his breath. He missed the first bus and had to run to catch this one because his sergeant found fault with him during inspection and stuck him on a cleanup detail. The sergeant hates his guts. He's an ignorant cracker and Robert is an educated man from Vermont, an engineer just out of college, quit Shell Oil in Louisiana to enlist the day North Korea crossed the parallel. The only Yankee in his company. Robert says when they get overseas there won't be any more Yankees and Southerners, just Americans. Lady likes him for believing that, but she gives him the needle because she knows it isn't true.

He changed uniforms in a hurry and didn't check the mirror before he left the barracks. There's a smudge on his right cheek. Shoe polish. His face is flushed and sweaty, his shirt soaked through. He's watching out the window and reciting a poem to himself. He's a great one for poems, this Robert. He has poems for running and poems for drill and poems for going to sleep, and poems for when the rednecks start getting him down.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,*

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*I thank whatever Gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

That's the poem he uses to fortify himself. He thinks it over and over even when they're yelling in his face. It keeps him strong. Lady laughs when he tells her things like this, and he always looks at her a little surprised and then he laughs too, to show he likes her sass, though he doesn't. He thinks it's just her being young and spoiled and that it'll go away if he can get her out of that house and away from her family and among sensible people who don't think everything's a joke. In time it'll wear off and leave her quiet and dignified and respectful of life's seriousness – leave her pure Lady.

That's what he thinks some days. Most days he sees no hope at all. He thinks of taking her home, into the house of his father, and when he imagines what she might say to his father he starts hearing his own excuses and apologies. Then he knows that it's impossible. Robert has picked up some psychology her and there, and he believes he understands how he got himself into this mess. It's rebellion. Subconscious, of course. A subconscious rebellion against his father, falling in love with a girl like Lady. Because you don't fall in love. No. Life isn't a song. You choose to fall in love. And there are reasons for that choice, just as there's a reason for every choice, if you get to the bottom of it. Once you figure out your reasons, you master your choices. It's as simple as that.

Robert is looking out the window without really seeing anything.

It's impossible. Lady is just a kid, she doesn't know anything about life. There's a rawness to her that will take years to correct. She's spoiled and willful and half-wild, except for her tongue, which is all wild. And she's Southern, not that there's anything with that per se, but a particular kind of Southern. Not trash, as she would put it, but too proud of not being trash. Irrational. Superstitious. Clannish.

And what a clan it is, clan Cobb. Mr. Cobb a suspender-snapping paint salesman always on the road, full of brummer's banter and jokes about nigras and watermelon. Mrs. Cobb a morning-to-night gossip, weepily religious, content to live on her daughters' terms rather than raise them to woman's estate with discipline and right example. And the sister. Jo Kay. You can write that sad story before it happens.

All in all, Robert can't imagine a better family than the Cobbs to beat his father over the head with. That must be why he's chosen them, and why he has to undo that choice. He's made up his mind. He meant to tell her last time, but there was no chance. Today. No matter what. She won't understand. She'll cry. He will be gentle about it. He'll say she's a fine girl but too young. He'll say that it isn't fair to ask her to wait for him when who knows what might happen, and then to follow him to a place she's never been, far from family and friends.

He'll tell Lady anything but the truth, which is that he's ashamed to have picked her to use against his father. That's his own fight. He's been running from it for as long as he can remember, and he knows he has to stop. He has to face the man.

He will, too. He will, after he gets home from Korea. His father will have to listen to him then. Robert will make him listen. He will tell him, he will face his father and tell him...

Robert's throat tightens and he sits up straight. He hears himself breathing in quick shallow gasps and wonders if anyone else has noticed. His heart is kicking. His mouth is dry. He closes his eyes and forces himself to breathe more slowly and deeply, imitating calm until it becomes almost real.

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They pass the power company and the Greyhound station. Red-faced soldiers in shiny shoes stand around out front smoking. The bus stops on a street lined with bars and the other men get off, hooting and pushing one another. There's just Robert and four women left on board. They turn off Jackson and bump across the railroad tracks and head east past the lumberyard. Black men are throwing planks into a truck, their shirts off, skin gleaming in the hazy light. They they're gone behind a fence. Robert pulls the cord for his stop, waits behind a wide woman in a flowered dress. The flesh swings like hammocks under her arms. She takes forever going down the steps.

The sun dazzles his eyes. He pulls down the visor of his cap and walks to the corner and turns right. This is Arsenal Street. Lady lives two blocks down where the street runs into fields. There's no plan to the way it ends – it just gives out. From here on there's nothing but farms for miles. At night Lady and Jo Kay steal strawberries from the field behind their house, dish them up with thick fresh cream and grated chocolate. The strawberries have been stewing in the heat all day and burst open at the first pressure of the teeth. Robert disapproves of reaping another man's harvest, though he eats his share and then some. The season's about over. He'll be lucky if he gets any tonight.

He's thinking about strawberries when he sees Lady on the porch, and at that moment the sweetness of that taste fills his mouth. He stops as if he just remembered something, then comes toward her again. Her lips are moving but he can't hear her, he's aware of nothing but the taste in his mouth, and the closer he comes the stronger it gets. His pace quickens, his hand goes out for the railing. He takes the steps as if he means to devour her.

No, she's saying, no. She's talking to him and to the girl whose life he seeks. She knows what will befall her if she lets him have it. Stay here on this porch with your mother and your sister, they will soon have need of you. Gladden your father's eye yet awhile. This man is not for you. He will patiently school you half to death. He will kindly take you among unbedding strangers to watch him fail to be brace. To suffer his carefulness, and to see your children writhe under it and fight it off with every kind of self-hurting recklessness. To be changed. To hear yourself, and not know who is speaking. Way, young Lady. Bide your time.

“Lady?”

It's no good. The girl won't hear. Even now she's bending toward him as he comes up the steps. She reaches for his cheek, to brush away the smudge he doesn't know is there. He thinks it's something else that makes her do it, and his fine lean face confesses everything, asks everything. There's no turning back from this touch. She can't be stopped. She has a mind of her own, and she knows something Lady doesn't. She knows how to love him.

Lady hears her name again.

Wait, sir.

She blesses the girl. The she turns to the far-rolling fields she used to dream an ocean, this house the ship that ruled it. She takes a last good look, and opens her eyes.