

## When The Wind Blows

I have no desire to go back, none at all, but sometimes I find myself thinking of home. On blustery days, in particular. When the wind wakes me, I lie in bed, picturing how it moves in the courtyard – how it stirs the dusty corners, and wicks the paint from flaking shutters; how it whips the cables to a high-pitched spin. Trash-bags ripple like an ocean.

I wind the sheets about me and light the stove.

Coffee hisses.

I throw the windows wide and click my camera's shutter. Have you noticed how the wind changes people? They're lighter, flightier, as in that gorgeous first flush of love or freedom.

The shifting air lifts my skirt on the way to work, and I let it.

People shouldn't trust me, but they do. I open up the houses which I clean and watch the breeze gust through the rooms. Outside, I string up make-shift lines so the drying linens can swell like pregnant bellies. It reminds me of the games we played, my sisters and I: hiding in the hanging swathes or wrapping them around our heads like mini Madonnas. With our fingers we'd cast silhouettes against the glare, conjuring with shadows whole monochrome worlds that were ours alone. And then, before the dew descended, we'd stretch those pristine sheets between our six thin arms and match the edges up. There's nothing quite like the smell of fresh laundry, is there?

When wind blows, I'm filled with a sense of things being possible. I linger in my clients' houses, moving shoeless between vast, glassy rooms in which the light is perfect. I set up my tripod and shoot myself swathed in stirring curtains or draped upon the stairs, upside down and

limbs at angles, my finger on the trigger. I gaze at myself in long mirrors with leather camera straps criss-crossing the flesh of my back.

Do I worry about getting caught? Not really, no. Naturally, I memorize my employers' routines; and I learned, as children do, to draw the chain across the door. Now that I think of it, the habit served me well on one occasion – a blustery April afternoon, when I heard the untimely jangle of Ben Young's keys. I grabbed a feather-duster and opened the door, but Ben gave me barely a glance. In fact, I don't think he once looked me properly in the face. Perhaps he was worried about staring. I know, I know, and you're very kind, but it really does happen. People can be so rude. It has its advantages, though: I won't deny that. I think that Juliette kept me on for all that time, in spite of the things she must have missed – the Tiffany earrings I gave to Agnes; a silky oyster-colored slip I sometimes wore to work – because she knew her husband wouldn't touch me.

That afternoon, I gave my humblest nod – you know the kind. Ben flashed his teeth and dashed upstairs. Three and a half minutes later he was gone again, leaving behind a potent whiff of aftershave and guilt. I went straight to the en-suite and lifted a few items in the basket – and, yes; you guessed it. It would have been easy for me to do the laundry that day. Instead, I opened Ben's closet just a fraction and went downstairs. I remember that the sight of his brassy keys, forgotten on the entryway table, made me smile.

Later that year, I was suspended from my course, pending investigation, and eventually excluded altogether. Oh, nothing as interesting as you think – just an unfortunate case involving a pretty undergraduate. One of those trust-fund teens. You know.

Without my grant, I struggled to pay the bills, and as winter approached I began to dread the bitterness of my studio – those chilly bed-sheets, and my work crumpling like a sad, slow accordion in the damp. Agnes, ignorant of the reason for my dismissal, wrote to offer

money that we both knew I wouldn't accept. Instead, I spent my time in the delicious, blurry warmth of other people's abodes – and the Youngs', in particular. Their house, though large, was not altogether to my taste. For someone who'd been at art school in Paris and New York, Juliette's style was disappointingly mainstream. Everything was white, or the lightest grey, and gratuitous pillows adorned every possible surface. The prints on the walls were generic. It must've been like living in a hotel – no *soul*, as people like to say.

In November, Juliette flew to Europe to visit family. She entrusted Oscar – her ghastly Chihuahua – to my care, and asked me to help Ben with the housework while she was away. By this she meant that I was to do it all, and I declared myself happy to help. I didn't feel compelled to tell her that Ben ate out, or that I'd spend the whole day at her house, taking photographs; reading; rifling through the mail or her closet. I'd practice speaking in her accent, flipping my hair and fingering the little silver crucifix I imagined at my throat.

What about Oscar? Good question. The wealthy often try to compensate for loveless lives with beasts whose only talent is straining daily pellets onto other people's plants. So, yes. Whenever expedient, I'd place the animal on the sofa just long enough to take a shot. Juliette would reply immediately, and I'll confess that her blind trust somehow stirred in me a deep resentment. It occurs to me only now that Ben might have felt the same, so I suppose we'll never know.

When Ben handed over fat wads of bills at the end of each day, he either didn't know that his wife had done the same, or didn't care. He smiled, thanked me profusely, held the door. In that line of work, you learn to recognize when someone's keen to see you gone.

You know the phrase *don't speak ill of the dead*? Well, on the whole I try not to, but Ben was absurdly unsubtle. One night as I was leaving, a cab drew up. I'd arrive to the whirr of the washing-machine. The trashcans were bursting with sloppy condoms. When Ben went

to work, I'd take the receipts from his pockets (CVS; cocktails; dinner) and slip them into my own. I didn't know the passcode for his phone – it wasn't Juliette's birthday, or the number for the security alarm – and he'd blocked notifications. Perhaps he had a streak of amateurish discretion, after all.

I made sure the house was immaculate for Juliette's return. I placed blood-red roses by her bed and lit some scented candles. She thought that Ben had done it for her – Ben! I heard her call him from the bedroom in a voice that turned my stomach. He came home early, and Juliette told me (her creamy cheeks a little flushed) to take the afternoon off.

I walked over to Wisconsin Avenue feeling strangely feverish. Bruised clouds loomed above the naked treetops, but outside Boo's light spilled onto the sidewalk like molten gold. The shelves inside were stacked with painted blocks and hand-made puppets; piggy banks and wooden trains with smooth red wheels; teddy bears as silky-soft as a kitten's underside. There were tiny boxes of classic cars and a Palomino rocking-horse with a lustrous, braided mane.

The assistant wrapped the gifts in festive tissue and brown paper. She tied each parcel with string, and labeled the tags as I instructed.

When I emerged, the air had a creeping chill I knew well. I hoisted the bags onto my shoulders, being careful not to dent them, and bought myself mulled wine on the corner. It slipped hotly down my throat, thick and soothing.

I saw a Juliette-colored cashmere turtleneck in a window and had one packaged for Agnes. The image of her chapped fingers unwrapping its exquisite softness, and of the children's hands scrabbling at their gifts, the shadow of lashes on their cheeks, made my eyes suddenly fill.

Shipping cost even more than expected, and I was still thirty blocks from home when sleet started falling in unrelenting shards. I let it hit my face like someone who didn't care.

Christmas in D.C. was quiet affair. I was glad when January came, with its snow drifts, and one of my clients finally died. Her daughter tasked me with clearing the house. I said it would take a month and left my studio that night, without bothering to settle the rent, for the house on Kalorama Road. The old lady's carer – a lonely girl called Ignatia, whose long, black braid I would unwind so it fell about her breasts and mine while her employer moaned next door – had gone home to be married. The house stretched open, as cavernous and fetid as a yawn.

The Youngs were abroad – Juliette, like me, detests the cold – so I busied myself with the house and refused to give them any thought. I went through the old lady's things, keeping what I wanted and selling the rest online. I watched the painters come and go. I vacuumed and dusted and mopped and polished. On brighter days, I opened the windows and let the cold air blast the moth-ball stench from the closets. In the evenings, I lit the wood-burner and lay on the chaise-longue with a bottle from the cellar and the old lady's scrapbooks. They were full of letters and postcards and tickets, and one intriguing newspaper clipping about the death, by fire, of a young man who shared her surname. The headline contained a whiff of scandal, prompted, it seemed, by a rather large insurance pay-out.

I enjoyed my reading, and my wine, and in the master-bedroom's vast four-poster I slept well. *All was right with the world*, you will think. But although I tried, I could not produce any work and by mid-February I was restless. Against my better judgment, I telephoned the daughter. She sent a team from New York: big-eyed, bossy blondes who fixated on fabrics and fittings but failed to notice me. The house, once properly "dressed", went on the market, and prospective buyers prowled daily through its rooms.

It was, as they say, only a matter of time.

I had messaged Juliette severally, following her return, but received no response. One evening, I walked to their house. Their lamps were lit, but the drapes were drawn and when I listened at the door, I heard only Oscar's claws upon the parquet.

I went to Juliette's favorite coffee place four days in a row. I strolled around Georgetown's cobbled streets. I took long runs along the river.

On Friday morning, I spotted her in the waterfront park, her huge Chanel sunglasses at odds with her baseball cap and some rather strained yoga pants. Oscar was doing what he did best: defecating upon the trunk of a blossoming tree. I ran past then turned back, as though unsure. "Juliette?"

Her head jerked up. The problem with sunglasses is that they only cover the front of the face. "Oh," she said. I could see her coloring as she turned away, so I crouched down to pet Oscar, smiling through the bastard's piercing barks. "Magdalena," she said. "I'm sorry I did not text. Things have been a little – I had some kind of accident, so..."

"I'm sorry," I said, looking up. "I hope you're ok?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine."

I stood up and put a hand on her arm. "Juliette, listen –"

She flinched like she'd been burnt. "I have to go." She tugged at Oscar's lead. "I'm sorry."

I could pretend that I said more. Did more. But you asked for the truth, so here it is. The whole truth, and nothing but the truth! So help me God.

There was a bar I liked downtown. It was dark inside, with grubby walls and sticky floors. On Friday nights, a band played Blues beneath a dingy spotlight. The lead singer had a throaty voice and a wide, sad face. She liked to lick the scar that runs from my eye to the edge of my lip, tracing its wormlike sheen with her salty tongue. Sometimes I took her to the house in Kalorama and let her think it was mine. We fucked in every room, on the smooth edges of

the staircase, on the kitchen's show-room counters. Afterwards, we lounged in the deep pile of the rug and shared tequila. On that particular Friday, Amber lay against my gleaming skin and asked if she could stay. I stroked the soft smokiness of her hair and thought of Juliette.

On Sunday evening, I walked over to Georgetown. Ben, walking cliché that he was, answered the door in a toweling robe. "Juliette's not here," he said, glancing back into the house. "She's – she's visiting her sister."

"I know," I lied. "She asked me to help you while she's away."

"She did?" asked Ben, his tanned forehead creasing.

"I just wanted to check what time I should come in tomorrow?"

"Right. Usual time, I guess." He had no idea what that was.

"Great," I smiled. And then, because I couldn't resist: "Enjoy your night."

The next morning is one I remember well. When the sea is tranquil, I swim far out and let my limbs float. Don't worry, there are no sharks here – the islanders ate them all. That's how you conquer fear, they say. You consume it.

Held there, in the ocean's private embrace, I close my eyes and replay that day. You'll be skeptical of my memory for detail, assume that I edit or exaggerate – and perhaps you're right.

Spring is in the air. At the farmer's market, the gazebos make slapping sounds in the breeze. I ask the butcher to flip his cuts and watch his knife wick them clean of fat. His sausage fingers wrap the meat like a gift. I sniff the sweet, waxy skins of peppers and rustle onions; feel chili tingle on my fingers. The most important ingredient I've got already. I'm not sure how much you know about developing powder – you can always google it, if you're interested – but suffice to say it is intended for photographic use rather than ingestion.

That afternoon, at the house, I open the windows and let the breeze waft away the scent of sizzling flesh.

Once everything's cooked, red-hot and bubbling in the pot, I peel and bin my gloves. As weighty darkness gathers in the sky, I close the windows and blinds and arrange what I need. I zip Oscar into my book-bag, and wait.

Ben doesn't return until late. From the fumbling of keys, I can tell he's drunk. He stumbles into the kitchen, all blotchy cheeks and bloodshot eyes. "What the fuck are you still doing here?" he slurs, charm personified.

"Look at you," I say. "You're an embarrassment. Juliette deserves so much better."

Ben snorts and takes a beer from the fridge. "Just because you want to fuck my wife it doesn't mean I do."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he says, slumping onto a bar-stool. His tie's askew and his eyes are small and mean. "You know what she says about you?"

"No," I say, calmly. "But I know what she says about you. She says she can't bear to keep the child of someone so weak. She's says she going to kill it."

Color creeps into Ben's cheeks like floodwater: he doesn't know his wife is pregnant. I move round the counter and slowly pull on the oven-gloves. I don't think I'll get him to eat, but that's okay. "She says you're a failure and a coward," I say, beginning to enjoy myself. "She says you sleep with teenagers and interns because only the naïve will have you. That you're pathetic. That even though you're nearly forty and live two thousand miles away, you're still afraid of your father."

Ben gives a choked laugh at that. "Isn't everyone?"

"I'm not," I say. "Not anymore. He's dead."

"Okay," says Ben. "Should I pretend to give a shit?"

“Oh, no. I’m not telling you so that you pity me. I’m telling you so that you know.”

“Well, now I know. Thanks.” He takes a slug of lager.

“I haven’t finished. You’re going to understand how he died, and why.”

Ben gives a theatrical sigh. “I think it’s time for you to leave now. Go on, off you go.”

He waves a hand towards the door.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Just who the fuck d’you think you are?” he says, his bottle suddenly raised. “This is my house! Mine!”

I laugh. “Is this you trying to be intimidating, Ben? Jesus Christ. No wonder Daddy bullies you.” Ben doesn’t respond, so I go on. “Don’t worry. It happens to the best of us. How do you think this got here?”

I gesture at my face and when he looks up, I heave the huge Le Creuset from the stove. The stoneware lid hits him first, above the eye; then the pan and its boiling contents. He topples back and meets the floor with a nasty thwack. Blood and gravy glutinously coalesce in a pattern not unlike Italian marble. Ben’s eyes are open but there’s a deep gash in his forehead. Beer leaks from the smashed bottle beyond his hand. It’s all going very well.

I turn off the flame and open up the gas on all six rings. I take out the largest chef’s knife and lay it on the counter. It glints, pleasingly sharp, beneath the halogens. I don’t think I’ll need it this time, but you know what they say: *better safe than sorry*.

“Listen to me, Ben.” I take time over the syllable of his name. “No – don’t try to move. Just stay nice and still. That’s it. I’m going to finish my story.” Ben groans so I stamp on his face. His nose cracks like plastic. “But first,” I say, “I’m going to get myself a drink. You forgot to offer me one.”

I sit on Ben's stool and gaze down. As you can imagine, he's not looking his best. Blood and saliva dribble from his mouth and mingle with his bubbling skin. I raise a toast; the bottle's nicely cold. That first crisp sip is always the best, don't you think?

"My father's violence was extraordinary," I begin. "It's a cliché nowadays, but it really did happen. Often it was just the usual stuff. Some days my mother's face was so swollen that she couldn't actually speak. On the days she could, she was too embarrassed to open her mouth because, of course, she didn't have any teeth." I smile. Ben whimpers, so I raise my foot and he falls quiet. "But it wasn't just that. With four women in the house – well, three of them girls...let's just say that my father had a diverse skill-set. Are you sure I can't tempt you to another drink?"

Ben closes his eyes and tries to turn away, twitching like an upturned cockroach.

"No? Well, you've probably had enough already." I fill my mouth and feel the bubbles pop. "Anyway, the women in the neighborhood tried to help. They'd wait until my father went drinking, or whoring, then they'd come round with hot towels, iodine, coffee – you know the drill. My mother never said a word. As they ministered to us, she'd sit and stare at the door like a lovesick maiden, or a dog that hasn't been fed. She wouldn't accept their money, either, but when there was absolutely nothing left she agreed to take in laundry.

"Well, Ben, things got so bad that even the priest couldn't ignore it any longer. One Sunday my mother knelt down for prayers and just...didn't get up again. So. The priest organized a collection and the three of us were sent abroad to an institution in the countryside. Very remote."

The slit above Ben's eye opens and closes, oozing gently. I have a couple of photos somewhere, if you're interested, but they don't really do it justice.

“Inevitably, they split us up. If we spoke or touched hands we’d be beaten. You know how it goes. Boring, really. We used to stare at one another across the refectory. It’s amazing how much you can feel when someone just looks at you, Ben.

“When they realized my little sister was pregnant, they put her in isolation. The sanatorium overlooked the chapel, which was always lit at night. It looked quite spectacular, actually. Sort of mystical, you know? Almost as though there were a God.

“On Ada’s birthday, I snuck out of the dormitory and tiptoed my way through the dark. The grass was wet beneath my feet. If you positioned your hands right, you could cast enormous shadows on the chapel walls. I did a whole show, just like when we were kids. The flashing lights must’ve woken her – I could see her silhouetted at the window.”

Ben’s three eyes are blinking at me.

“I like to picture her laughing, but the truth is that I’ll never know what she thought. Two days later she was lying in a pool of her own innards. The baby was dead, too – but of course they already knew that. The doctor was a very devout man, you see.” I glance down. “Guess how old my sister was then, Ben. Go on, guess.” His mouth makes a gurgling sound. “You’ll have to speak up,” I say. “I can’t hear you.”

Blood colors the cracks between Ben’s teeth. “I’m not like them,” he whispers.

“Yes, you are,” I say. “You’re all the same.”

The edges of the room are growing smudgy. I’m starting to feel rather sleepy. I drain my beer and place the knife back in the drawer. I haven’t got to the best part yet, but the gas hisses like a warning and Oscar’s wretched whines are growing urgent in the corridor.

Outside, the wind is high, roiling the budding trees with a longing sound. I raise my hood and check the street. The dog cowers in my bag, a loathsome necessity.

We’re only a couple of blocks free when I sense a mighty punch of air, and then the mournful wail of sirens.

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When the wind blows, I throw the shutters wide and allow the drapes to billow like the sails on the horizon. Ada gurgles in her cot. The air wafts up off the beach, salty-warm and carrying with it the scent of bougainvillea. Behind us, the mountain lounges like a nude.

Juliette snoozes, her hair a web on the pillow, her face a picture. I tiptoe to the kitchen, put the water on to boil and open the doors. Oscar trots silently out. I look beyond the pool to the lush green fronds which slope down to the beach. A few miles out, the *Diamant* crouches in the turquoise sea, beautiful and threatening in the changing light.

I pour the coffee into shallow bowls. They're rough underneath, but their innards are the glossy pink of a conch. Juliette's so good with her hands. I love watching her wet fingers smooth the slippery clay.

We lie against white sheets, talking and drinking. The baby giggles between us. When she gets hungry, Juliette feeds her. Ada's pale eyelids droop and I lay her in her cot.

I straddle my wife, pulling the sheet over us like a tent. Her body is dotted with golden freckles. I trace her caesarean scar with my tongue.

Afterwards, we leave the sheets in a tangle: Marie will be in later for the laundry.

When the wind blows, we sit beneath the palms and watch waves frothing on the sand-bar. We walk along the beach for a baguette, or take a *p'tit café* in the square as the church bells toll. We have friends here. There's Adèle, in the bakery, who slips Ada morsels of *pains au chocolat*; and toothless Baptiste, who saves us thick, pink *tranches* of marlin from his catch; and Solène and Rudy, who run the restaurant where checkered tablecloths flap and flickering torchlight shimmers on the sea at night.

On days like this – most days, here – I’ll choose a camera and snap Ada as she crawls, like one of the island’s pale crabs, along the sand. I want a photograph of her perched on freckled shoulders, her little hands entangled in the salty waves of her mother’s hair, but Juliette won’t let me take her picture. She’s like those indigenous tribes, you see; she believes it’ll steal her soul. I know, I know, but I promise it doesn’t upset me too much. Besides, Juliette will come round eventually. She always does.