

## ***Reach***

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PETER ORNER

The way a door gradually yawns open when you're alone in a room. One way of seeing it, how she came to understand – all at once but slow – that he wanted her. Understood that he wanted her. And that he had for months, wanted her, maybe from the first time he heard her speak. He was a writer, a freelance journalist of some renown. He was also blind. He needed someone to take dictation for him when his fingers hurt too much to use his infernal machine. So she typed for him, answered his mail. But mostly she listened to him and kept him company. He's dead now. This was years ago, but today, this morning, while looking at her own exhausted face in the mirror, she thinks of his fingers. Not because anything happened. In fact because nothing did. How easy it would have been to satisfy him. A lonely man lusting, needing to feel her throat in his hands, more than a voice – what he wanted was touch, and she, well, he was old, grizzled, her boss. Dead coffee breath, decay, a sort of fug. To wrap her legs around him and let him do the best he could. What pain to her? In that little office. Nothing more than a table, stacks of rubber-banded papers, a half-empty bookshelf. His computer, ink-stained keys. A curtainless, shadowed room tucked away. Dwarfed by taller buildings. The sun only slanted across the floor for a half hour in the early afternoon.

She thinks of how he listened to her when they weren't talking. Her feet shifting on the grainy floor, her clicking tongue, what he called her little girl sniffles.

When he was tired he sometimes asked her to read Faulkner. He used to put his head on the table and let her lull him. *Just listen to him. He's your crazy drunken Uncle spewing until you see that what he's saying is more sober truth than anybody in their right mind could handle so crazy yes, but not crazy drunken uncle crazy, to say it, to live with it.* And yes the time when she was reading and he – without lifting his head – reached slowly across the table and placed a nervous twitching hand on her collarbone. Then withdrew it immediately and bolted up in his chair, shocked. She was wearing a low v-neck blouse; he'd been prepared only to meet cloth, not skin, not yet. She didn't say anything, just looked up from the book and searched his face. Watching him she imagined him wishing he was a kid who could just sprint away. Kid tossing a brick through a store window and fleeing down an alley, not looking back, never looking back. But he could only sit there, this great man, this winner of prizes, head drawn into his shoulders like a frightened turtle. He didn't try to explain himself. And she let him dangle.

But this morning, so many years after, she imagines sliding a bare toe up his pants. Pulling his head into her chest *small breasts but her mother always said two more than a mouthful's all that counts* and stroking his rough cheeks, still not saying a word, only holding him. What to call it. Must it always be a choice between love and pity? Back then she didn't have either. Hadn't even bothered with anger. After a while she simply picked up where she'd left off. That day it was *Light in August. He reached the woods and entered, among the hard trunks, the branchshadowed quiet, hardfeeling, hardsmelling invisible. In the notseeing and the hardknowing as though in a cave he seemed to see* (Then she began to read too fast, no longer allowing the words to leak like a slow wound, the way he'd taught her) *a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack –* Haughtily injecting too much of her own singsong.

Each one was cracked. Fuck your Faulkner. And your useless stories. And this job. But what if her pride lied? What if it was only loneliness trumping loneliness? How to know? How we come to see what happened changes, depending on – what? Where we end up? No, not this. It's just that some mornings now –

There were days back then she'd walk around her apartment with her eyes squeezed shut, idiotically trying to endure a little of his life. One Sunday morning she even blindfolded herself with a bandanna and made coffee in a foolish red void. Early on – maybe three weeks into the job – he'd told her he'd been married. He never told her how it ended, but after that he talked of his wife often, incorporating a 'we' into his stories to remind her he hadn't always been alone. *I was on an assignment in Guatemala. This was in the bad old days and we got up before the dawn to see the sunrise from the top of a volcano. The soldiers didn't start shooting the peasants until about nine so we thought we'd get in a bit of sightseeing. But we were too late. I was too slow climbing. When we got to the top the sun had already risen – but for the first time in my life, I thought I knew. The flush of heat on my face. I thought I could describe it. That there's nothing gentle about it. Rose-fingered dawn and all that crap. So I told my wife some nonsense about a bloody-handed God slapping flesh back on the world only to slap it around some more another day, and she laughed and said stop writing it, Howard, feel it.*

Again, this morning, she sees him. In the unswept, yellow-walled room in the afternoon shadows. His glasses on the table between them. His stillness. The distance across the table. His reach. His fingers hardly pressing before they were gone, gone as now.