

On a Page from Rilke

by

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In the mail are two notes from women in his recent past. One says, "I want to see you." The other says, "I want to kill you."

The latter is scrawled in red felt marker across the face of a postcard he had once sent to another woman from Italy. The former is in neat, round script in lavender ink on the margin of a page from Rilke. It arrived in an airmail envelope from the Grand Hotel in Kampala, but was postmarked Côte d'Ivoire. On the stamps are tropical birds and a crocodile.

The re-mailed postcard came in a plain manila envelope postmarked Baltimore. Through the red scrawl, he can see a black and white photograph of the Spanish Steps.

One woman he can remember only naked. He remembers her nakedness shimmering, begging to be touched. Traces of blue under soft glowing ivory, rising roundly to a comical conical protuberance like soft pink brick. Another roundness that quivered at his touch and ended in soft curly hair. Clothed, she had disappeared into the crowd like a dun-colored deer into the forest.

The other he can remember only clothed. He has, he knows, seen her naked, but cannot remember the color of her nipples or the curve of her thighs. He had turned on the light when they were making love. But it was only a glimpse before she pulled the sheet around her, angry and frightened at his intrusion. So when he tries to imagine her naked, it is really the other woman he sees. When he tries to imagine the other one clothed, it is really this woman he sees.

He is trying to remember which one is Louise, which one Ilse. Louise wants to kill him, she says, but is she the naked or the clothed?

The page from Rilke reminds him of the Bible leaf Blind Pew gave Long John Silver. *“Und plötzlich ist er Flamme, ganz und gar.”* Now he is more frightened of Ilse than of Louise. Not only because a woman who would tear a page from Rilke is capable of anything, but also because she is in motion -- Kampala, Abidjan, ever nearer. The controlled handwriting and the terseness of the message, even the color of the ink, all frighten him.

On the other hand, a woman who says openly that she wants to kill you has already expressed her rage and probably does not mean to do it.

On the train to Baltimore, he writes, “He knew the answer to his question, of course, but could not bear to hear it. Slipping into solipsism, lately he formulated only questions to which he knew the answers.” Then he closes the notebook and his eyes, because he can not bear to write any more.

He heads directly for a large shopping mall. He wants to make it easy for Louise to find him, but in a public place where, if she really means to kill him, she may at least hesitate because of witnesses. She will find him, he is sure, because shopping malls are nodal points in the communications network by which all women, the world over, spy on men and coordinate their strategies. His only chance is deliberately to make himself vulnerable. If she sees him thus, perhaps she will protect him from Ilse.

He stands next to a splashing indoor fountain with real and artificial ferns, watching. The women are all clothed. He knew they would be, of course. It is one of their tricks for confounding men. Louise, he thinks now, must be the one he can remember only naked. She will see him first, then. She will be able to come very close and shoot him before he recognizes her. Or stab him, perhaps. Therefore he must, as a matter of self-protection, try to visualize all the women

he sees as though they were naked. He stares, but of course he does not have X-ray vision, so he cannot tell if their breasts and thighs are glowing under their black leather pants, their loose blouses, their skirts and sweaters. This concentration tires him and overwhelms him with visions of probable flesh.

He pulls his notebook from the pocket of his jacket and writes:

“Man creates gods in his image and likeness. All gods exist, as long as any man believes.”

A woman interrupts him and says “Hello.” She is as tall as he. She is wearing a red velvet suit and a large black ribbon tied loosely in a bow at the collar of her white blouse. The tight skirt is split to the thigh. It is a whorish version of dress-for-success, he thinks. No, he was mistaken. There is no split. Her hair is dark brown. Her voice is low and rich.

“Louise?” he says, trembling.

The left side of her mouth smiles and she looks at him steadily. An electric charge surges through him, from his teeth to the end of his genito-urinary tract. He lowers his eyes and tries to smile, obediently.

“Ilse, I mean,” he says, in a very low, humble voice. “Forgive me.”

“No,” she says. “I mean, no, I’m not Ilse.”

When he looks up at her, he sees she is eyeing him curiously.

“My name is Katherine.”

“Katherine? But -- who sent you?”

“Why, no one. Really! But when a man is seen standing in the same spot for almost two hours, it makes you wonder.”

“Ah, yes, you’re right! We can’t very well have loose men floating about, like unattached ions, can we? I know that. Forgive me.”

She laughs, then frowns. “You okay?” she says.

"You've been watching me for two hours?" He knows he sounds accusing.

She motions with her head toward a boutique. "That's my shop," she says. "You've been here since before four."

"I was waiting for a friend. She says she wants to kill me." He laughs. "I don't know why she hasn't showed up."

He looks around anxiously. None of the shoppers seems to be paying them any attention, but a little boy, being dragged by his mother, stares up at him as they go by.

"Did she tell you she would be here?"

"No, but I was sure she'd find me. She sent a message from Baltimore."

"Well, looks like she's not coming."

"Uh-huh. Well, so that's the way it is."

He sighs, then adds, "Am I supposed to go with you then?"

Her head snaps back and she stares at him intently, as though startled by the thought. Or, he thinks, secretly pleased to see through her deception, like a cobra prepared to strike. He has thrown them off guard by coming here, directly confronting them in their lair, this conspiracy of incompetent vipers.

"Katherine," he says confidently and confidentially, taking her arm in his. "*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.*"

"Say what?"

But she allows herself to be led, through the broad palatial lobby of the mall, toward the exit. Toward their destiny. Already he has begun to imagine her with her clothes off. But suddenly another voice intrudes.

"Hey, Kate, whacha got?"

A man in uniform, a tall, heavy black man in gray, with a police-style cap pushed back on his head, moves into their path and then slowly, seemingly reluctantly, walks toward them.

“Heya, J.J. Whaddaya say? ‘Sanother one. Something about my boutique, I guess. You wanna make sure he finds his way out?”

The guard — so they are protected by guards! He should have known! — the guard rocks back on his heels, then slowly nods, and reaches forward to take his free arm.

“*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich*” he shrieks —but the shriek remains inside him, what emerges is more like a gasp.

“Yeah, buddy,” says J.J., “that’s what I always say, too. But we gotta go.”

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Spanish Dancer

by Rainer Maria Rilke, tr. Edward Snow (from Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems [1907]*. New York: North Point Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984, pp. 144-145.)

As in the hand a sulfur match, first white,
stretches flicking tongues on every side
before it bursts in flame—: so in the circle
of close watchers, hot, bright, and eager
her round dance begins to flicker and fan out.

And all at once it is entirely flame.

With a glance she sets her hair ablaze
and whirls suddenly with daring art
her whole dress into this fiery rapture,
out of which, like startled snakes,
her bare arms stretch, alive and clacking.

And then: as if the fire grew tight to her,
she gathers it all up and casts it off
disdainfully, with imperious demeanor

and looks: it lies there raging on the ground
and keeps on flaming and does not give up—.
But triumphant, self-assured, and with a
sweet greeting smile she lifts her face
and stamps it out with little furious feet.

Spanische Tänzerin

Wie in der Hand ein Schwefelzündholz, weiß,
eh es zur Flamme kommt, nach allen Seiten
zuckende Zungen streckt—: beginnt im Kreis
naher Beschauer hastig, hell un heiß
ihr runder Tanz sich zuckend auszubreiten.

Und plötzlich ist er Flamme, ganz und gar.

Mit einem Blick entzündet sie ihr Haar
und dreht auf einmal mit gewagter Kunst
ihr ganzes Kleid in diese Feuersbrunst,
aus welcher sich, wie Schlangen die erschrecken,
die nackten Arme wach und klappernd strecken.

Und dann: als würde ihr das Feuer knapp,
nimmt sie es ganz zusamm und wirft es ab
sehr herrisch, mit hochmütiger Gebärde
und schaut: da liegt es rasend auf der Erde
und flammt noch immer und ergiebt sich nicht—.
Doch sieghaft, sicher und mit einem süßen
grüßenden Lächeln hebt sie ihr Gesicht
und stampft es aus mit kleinen festen Füßen.