

Acrobat

by J. A. Hamilton

Une femme pleure la perte de son amante qui semble avoir été reconquérée par sa première amante, sa mère.

Giving me away for your mama was how it had to go, Jet, I couldn't rock that cradle. I couldn't split you up and crawl in beside you like I should've been able to; I couldn't compete. (You said, Mama?) All of you a drum over blood, hot in a rocky shell, so protected you burned against asbestos, keeping your fires tight and banked.

That night coming into you from behind I wanted to hurt you. You thought it was later but it was that night, me inside you too hard and gritting my teeth, grinding myself up into you 'til you came from it like a tic, squeezing around me. In the place I was touching you were highly polished; a susceptible pink. I wanted to hurt you; I was in love with you.

When I touched you at the end, the oil of my skin left thumbprints: an RSVP, an inelegant invitation. Our mouths spilled bits of green.

Your mama would tell me leaving was clinical, a simple wound, a parting of skin, a small surgery. But your mama never stood with you under a piñata. You said, Mama? You told me to dream in colour, running the loops of my brain in blues and yellows. See what happens? I was a wild card. I was too much red and pushing. Somebody set me up. I went down like a spiral, all the way down my spine, my pelvis, my legs.

Jet, I called it love and read all your bumps and valleys. I was willing. I took you in the bathtub, I took you up against the purple hallway wall; I said I was never tired. You were the one thing I had a story for. You weren't pretty but I called you beautiful, Jet, you with the name that made me think of a compact black coal,

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that name you wore like jewelry, like the one earring in your ear of a lizard or a spider.

At first you wanted to marry me. The things I carried that dropped from inside me, the kids like amulets in my womb and then dropping down, pushing out and leaving bloody footprints in me, you wanted them. For awhile, you wanted everything, 'til you didn't. Once, I was married. I made two years of good time, Jet, and I said I'd never do it again. Women can't, that's what saved me in the intervening years, and I asked you to think hard about what you wanted. Finally I said Yes, like I believed, like I could.

Like I hadn't moved through women like a truck. I could have married any number of them, for richer and poorer, 'til death, 'til tribulation, 'til the excesses built up, hills of slights and fucking that went too far and cold silences and never stopping long enough to forgive.

We were talking about saying no to Grace. Holding hands beside each other in bed, on your futon, and Grace in your body like some sticky glue, like Bond-O, and you couldn't get her out. I said Think

of your body as a fence, giving you the imagery; make it barbed wire, I said, and told you how my daddy took me into the horse fields with his portable battery and had me lick my finger and touch the barbs and shocks went through me and how I learned fences keep you out but also in. You kissed my palm. Grace means nothing to me, you said, and I kissed your arm, a little trickle of kisses I imagined meant nothing affectionate. Your skin was hot and dry and smooth, soft. It's always me on top of a new woman, Jet, I climbed on you and rocked my hips while I parted your lips with my tongue and made a roundabout tour of your skin. Breathily saying, Turn over. Tonguing your rump and the ridges of your spine, kissing behind your knees and taking a toe in my mouth to suck. Taking your fingers in my mouth one by one as if I hadn't done that to other women too many times, and probably to men too, when they had something I wanted.

I didn't come, is the thing. I held it back, Jet, and I laughed. You were bending over me, working me, and I couldn't help my laughter. I stared at your face, raw with confusion. Blue alarmed eyes. After that, shy and tiny, I came every time. I forfeited.

You wanted that and I complied, I was teasing my hillocks of need. I held your hips and gyrated against you, talking with the shame of desire, talking that underbelly of poisoned genitals, Want me, want me, want me a kind of chant. And for a time you did, all of me, vessels and bone chips and spots of skin not able to function in the light, like I was an ice floe, a snow bank you were riding 'til spring melt. Jet, you so high and inaccessible, so pure your touch, your lips and teeth against my nipples a flammable acetone. I was destitute, Jet, I was scorched around my

heart, you were inside and your nails were ripping at that central muscle, your mouth blowing colorless gas. I took too much; I took your fist and thought of myself as yours.

Your mama (you said, Mama?) was forty-seven years old that March. I went back to your bed and lay on the navy sheet smelling of sex and you spoke to your mama, your voice rolling and softening. It was me in your bed and your mama was across town. I said that over and over. There was a photograph of me propped on the mantel beside small giraffes; there was a card with a rusty watering can on the front that I once sent you. Something abject inside: how I love you, how I want you, oh Jet. Nothing about you still wet on my skin or how hot the bed was while I was in it alone. Your voice rose and fell in octaves of childish pleasures. When you came back to bed you were distant, coughing, you said you couldn't get it on. Maybe you couldn't. You were a tunnel. I wanted in where I was blind, I wanted eyes on my fingertips.

Who sees you now, Jet? It's your birthday again. Last year it was a Wednesday and I remember the gifts. Something for a young child, modeling clay, a green yo-yo. Jet, I gave you everything you wanted and I should've stopped at one kiss. Afterwards you lost everything to your mama, keeping me out of the frenzy, covering yourself up. I knew where you were. At least I got close, into your mama's crude sketch, fingering, in my bewildered stupor, the lines she used to create you.

Sometimes she frightened you, I knew that. Your legs would part and swing up to my back, your heels pulling my face to-

ward you, and I'd make you stop, wanting to see your eyes. Grace wouldn't make me stop, you'd say. You'd smile a sly smile like a grin inside a box; the breath would be knocked out of me. My tongue was inevitably sore. You'd clamor away and lie on the cold kitchen floor like a baby, foetally wrapped, whimpering. I held your head in my lap and stroked your temple, but it wasn't a magic game, it wasn't anything that could save you. You were stretched like toffee. Somebody was down. Somebody was bound to win. The games weren't only games; someone was playing for keeps.

You said your father was a brutal man. You called him Allan. It was a name; I never saw a picture. When you were in school you used to think Grace was at home, dead, and you thought of all the rooms he could kill her in—once, during trig class, you imagined her stuffed in the dryer of the laundry room. But just as often there wasn't a laundry room; you got your first licks from Allan on how to run away. How many houses and hotels when the bills stacked up, Jet, how many beds were you hauled from at two a.m.?

Women are always fucking their little girls; it happens more often than you'd think. It's a chain of command. Your mama was sweet, was gentle; later you felt lucky to have escaped Allan.

My breasts were smaller than hers, you said. You took me to lunch at her house; Grace fed us pasta and chocolate cake. You were gone by then, up so high I saw you as an acrobat, scudding across the highwires in some serene staccato dance, leaving vapor trails. Nothing was your fault; I wanted to beat you up, wanted my

hands around your neck leaving obsidian bruises. You were so untouchable, up too far for me to reach you. You and your mama were a monopoly.

Something you said: I was the dog who chewed the bone, who got into the garbage.

That last night I reached for you while I wept real tears. My photograph was gone; I was out. You were in, wherever in was for you, in Grace, smeared all over Grace, maybe, and there was nothing of you left at home. Grace gave you a choppy brush cut your friends ridiculed. I was backing out with my neck exposed, going because I had to, going because I wanted to, going because I slid out of my flesh and was somewhere in an ocean.

You were sure you loved me, you said, and apologized for feeling nothing.

I'm dreaming the colors of the rainbow now, Jet. They break on my skin, all the greens and sad mauves and pinks and teriyaki browns. They break and I don't wake. That last morning, the last time I saw you, was waking enough. You took the things I gave you—the photograph, the yo-yo, the stud earring, the flower pot, and called down when I reached the street. Looking up I saw a rain of old love that broke almost the way words do, into letters, chunking down, hitting, smashing, rolling, and then, at last, above my gifts, again, one last time, your acrobat's grin.

Vancouver writer J. A. Hamilton's collection of short fiction, Nights, was recently published. A volume of poetry, Steam-Cleaning Love, is soon to be released. Her fiction won the '92 BC Federation of Writers Award.

CANADIAN CONGRESS OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN —Literacy Project—

A new poster documenting a woman-positive literacy project co-ordinated by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women is being distributed to interested groups. The poster—*Discovering the Strength of our Voices*—highlights woman-positive activities organized by 12 literacy programs from across the country. Further documentation of the project, including a book outlining preliminary research, detailed descriptions of the programs and activities, and written materials produced by the women participants are also available.

Anyone interested in receiving copies of the poster or documentation order forms should contact:
CCLow, 47 Main St., Toronto, M4E 2V6. Tel: (416) 699-1909, fax: (416) 699-2145.