

with Lot's daughters. No, the angels were sent to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah because save for the dubious Lot, there was not another righteous man there, and because the inhabitants were not very nice to strangers. The angels sung-spoke Lot's family's escape route from the megacity of Sodom and Gemorrah with such purity that all present wept in rapture. The angels, thus assured of their powerful place in mythology as bringers of loveliness and doom, ordered Lot *et al.* not to look behind them. The angels' amber eyes never left Lot's wife's as they admonished Lot to look forward, lest he see the skin melting, the animals running wild with flames suckling at their underbellies. Lot's wife, not accustomed to being spoken to, and certainly not by name, since she didn't seem to have one, became overwhelmed with a curiosity and accountability she had never before felt. She became obsessed with looking back. In order to get it out of her system, she kept peering over her shoulder as the family packed their few portable things, causing her daughters to almost lose themselves in a frenzy of double-checking.

But Lot's wife did not get it out of her system. She could not stop looking back—to her short childhood, to her mother—whose name she had forgotten, to her wedding night, to this morning at the market where she heard tell of strange floating men so beautiful you wanted to kill them. That morning she picked fat flies off of prickly desert pears and felt the first thought form in her mind in three years:

*Oh for those beautiful men to feel the dread I have felt each day as I walk to market aware that I am being watched by the eyes of the men of Sodom, from boy to old man, watched, as a cow to slaughter, as a ripe fruit before biting. Let them be smiled at with menace, let them feel bound by ropes of weakness, let them struggle, long after they are no longer beautiful, struggle silently for a name.*

So when the mob came, Lot's wife understood why they wanted to deflower and kill the angels. She understood their hatred of the beautiful unavailable weak ones, because she felt it herself. In Sodom and Gemorrah, as in much of the world (and in the theatre tonight, thought Rachel) it was human nature to want to crush the lovely small vulnerable lights of the world, the baby chicks, kittens, and unnamed daughters. Though Lot's wife thought these thoughts, she did not speak up. She did not speak up even when her own daughters were offered to the hordes by her righteous husband. Is that why the singing angels turned their unblinking amber eyes on her? Is that why they doomed her to salt?

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## ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

### Magdalena's Journal

1.  
We might have a storm, or war,  
by afternoon so, checking our supply  
of candles, canned food, cabbages and bread,

(nothing left to buy),  
we shut the windows, lock the door,  
put another blanket on the bed.

2.  
We must leave the country  
and somehow get his aunt out.  
We can't let her go home.

We have our passports. She  
needs her documents forged.  
She is old, but well-known:

They still photograph her eerie eyes,  
strong jaw, long straight hair now gray,  
the navy beret she always wears.

We sketch her disguise—  
shall we pad her into a portly man,  
or a nondescript crone, dye her hair?

We cannot plan aloud:  
the children are young,  
might not keep our secrets.

At home we only discuss  
schoolwork or dinner. Neighbours  
eavesdrop, others keep watch.

The children point out a new device—  
camera or telescope—on the roof  
across from our flat.

They don't ask if there's also  
a rifle, but may understand  
why we avoid the balcony now.

Even the cat stays indoors.  
We whisper: "Tonight."  
In the back room, his aunt

stuffs money in linings,  
sews necklaces inside hems,  
pads her shoes, ugly but tough.

She crops her hair like a man's,  
turns it black with shoe wax,  
shortens my husband's old pants.

First, she will set off with him,  
sausage and bread in their pails  
like two workers for the night shift.

She knows where to buy  
new documents and our visas  
with her emerald ring.

I'll take the children at dawn  
to the central market for hot  
raisin buns, they like excursions.

We'll all meet among onions, potatoes,  
together filter away from town,  
take the back road to the border.

I fold one change of clothes for each,  
roll them small in the baskets,  
dole out the bean soup.

"Always travel with kinjal" advises his aunt,  
hones her dagger. "The blade will slice  
bread, meat, a homely turnip, if need be, a man.

The journey ahead will be hard, best sleep now."  
We settle her in our bed, he takes the couch.  
I fold into sleep in the closet.

3.  
I wake before dawn. No one here.  
Papers, school books and clothes  
lie scattered across the floor.

Baskets and pails are gone, no food left.  
I button my coat, heavy now,  
tuck passport and kinjal inside my boots.

I lock the door, rush downstairs,  
nod to militiamen on the corner.  
They always look me over.  
A meow from the balcony rail.  
I should walk on, but return.  
Small, the cat fits in a pocket.

The navy beret on the floor:  
cold outside, I will wear it.  
In the market I dart stall to stall

as if searching out the best fish,  
bargains in cabbage or carrots,  
check over my shoulder.

At last I buy apples and bread,  
fill my other pockets with cheese,  
a fish tail for the cat.

The sun climbs the sky, tips  
into clouds.... Late. Stalls close.  
I start for the border.

4.  
A shepherd warns: "That hill  
is new, only next spring will weeds  
grow over bones, saplings sprout

from the hearts of the dead. Hundreds.  
This morning. And children. The old.  
Do not try to cross, not by the road."

"Leave your cat," he adds, "for my mice."  
Tonight he will lead me over the pass  
with care: the moon will be full.

My life will be empty. I am alone.  
I will eat, sleep and die alone  
in a strange land.

"Alone, afar, you may live."  
He shows me the way.  
So I must survive.

And I will return to fight.

*Elisavietta Ritchie's recent books include: In Haste I Write You This Note: Stories and Half-Stories; The Arc of the Storm; Elegy For the Other Woman; and Flying Time: Stories and Half-Stories.*