

Heads or Tails

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“Heads or Tails” est la première histoire d’une collection intitulée “The Park Bench Diary.” Les histoires se passent à Toronto aujourd’hui et on y lit le journal d’une femme qui tente de se libérer d’un mariage oppressant alors qu’en même temps, elle essaie de voir la faible possibilité d’un bonheur que cette relation pourrait encore lui offrir.

The image in the mirror stared at her ... accusing ... blaming.

Dana stared back at the image in the mirror. She licked the tip of her index finger and gently ran the wet fingertip along the bruise beneath her left eye. It felt soft, supple, like an overripe purple plum—yellow-brownish juice oozing from the cracked skin.

With her right sleeve, she wiped the caked blood off her lip.

A red smudge on white cotton stared back at her—a red smudge with bits of dark burgundy scales—the colour of furred, dark red rose petals in the bouquet sitting on the dresser in front of her. Fresh, exuberant, a dozen of them, with white baby’s breath and three green fern spikes.

Barely an hour had passed since he stormed out: “You made me do it! She means nothing to me!”

Then the roses arrived—begging forgiveness?

“I should have rung the doorbell, announced myself. I should not have gone straight into our bedroom. Perhaps she had come to visit me. She is ... was ... is my friend, after all.” Dana thought of the various ways she could have avoided this incident, and wondered what was it that made infidelity so unacceptable to people who, in fact, committed adultery. She has never been unfaithful. Why was it that she received the bruises after he was caught with her friend?

“If I did not witness his act of infidelity, would that be the same as if it didn’t happen? But then, what of our life together? What has it been? A masquerade? He a phantom?”

She remembered sitting in the dark theatre, fingers

entwined in his. He *was* the Phantom. She had bought the CD and played it over and over again, dancing with her eyes closed and her arms outstretched as if she were embraced by the Phantom.

The song continued, “... *And though you turn from me / To glance behind...*”

They twirled ... she with her eyes closed ... transcended ... loved. She tried to open her eyes, but could see nothing, just total darkness, everywhere. Her head was spinning, as if she were falling into an abyss. All was darkness except for the red smudge that kept changing its shape and colour, fading into shades of burnt orange with blue and green edges, as if she had looked directly into the sun and was blinded by its brilliance. She tried to regain her balance, but could feel nothing under her feet. Nothingness ... is all there was.

And then the song changed.

“Masquerade!”

As if she had landed with a thump, her vision had suddenly cleared, and she saw herself standing on the floor, her feet spread apart, her arms outstretched as if she were ready to fly. She looked at her outstretched arms, hugging the air.

And now the music had stopped, but the CD player kept on going, making shrill squeaking sounds.

“I need to get it fixed,” she thought. “I need to get the CD player fixed.”

“I’m daydreaming. Wasting time,” Dana murmured to herself. “He will return any time now.”

She knew the drill. He’ll be disgusted with her appearance. She’d better get cleaned up and changed before he comes back. He’ll accuse her of sulking and making him feel as if it were his fault.

Yes, he’ll be back any time now, and then he’ll begin his lectures. She could hear his smooth, even voice clearly: the calm after a storm.

He’ll walk in nonchalantly, a slight bounce in his knees, glance at her sideways, squinting his eyes and puckering

his lips in an oh-you-poor-thing expression. He'll suddenly notice the roses and pretend to be surprised.

"A secret admirer? Anyone I know?" he'll query, playfully. His voice will remind her of a purring cat.

She will remain seated on the sofa. She will not look at him. She will stare into Van Gogh's *Drawbridge*. She will seek balance in the two slender vertical cypresses; discover order in the two horizontal lifting devices, fragile in comparison to the stone bridge piers; find comfort in the field of golden wheat; become the silhouette of a tiny, lone, veiled woman with a parasol, standing under the

the field of golden wheat—all sounds drowned.

She will feel his hot lips on her dry, hollow mouth. She will feel his cold, damp hands with those long, slender fingers like tentacles, search under her blouse at the edge of her ribcage, slithering up, and then below her bellybutton, sliding down. They are everywhere, all over her, tightening their grip. She can't breathe. Air? Is there any air?

"Let's not use a condom," she will hear him say.

The wind in her head will whisper, ever so swiftly from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto I, lines 1-3:

Midway this way of life we're bound upon

He will pick up the bouquet from the vase, water dripping from the stems. Slowly, intently, he will walk towards her silhouetted, veiled figure, his eyes fixed on her, piercing ... water dripping from the stems.

curved bridge mechanism, staring absently into nothing, sky above her and water below.

He will pick up the bouquet from the vase, water dripping from the stems. Slowly, intently, he will walk towards her silhouetted, veiled figure, his eyes fixed on her, piercing ... water dripping from the stems.

"Just look at these fresh, exuberant, red roses, a dozen of them, begging forgiveness," he'll purr. "Red is symbolic of my love."

He will kneel on the bare wooden floor next to her, leaning his head on her lap.

She will hear the wind howling in the slender vertical cypresses, in the field of golden wheat. She will remember the last time he played the role of a tragic lover.

He will lift his head and look straight into her eyes. While holding the bouquet with dripping stems in one hand, he will gently touch her chin and draw her veiled face toward him with the other. She will glimpse the face she first loved, way back when she thought he was Truth, Faith, Love, personified.

She will feel the dead butterflies in her stomach turn rancid.

She will feel the urge to vomit.

"But red also stands for danger. Passionate love can be ever consuming, dangerous. Think of Mars, the Red Planet! Think of Mars, God of War! Think of Dante's *Inferno*, red flames and devils!" His voice will rise to a squealing pitch.

She will be reminded of the CD player that needs to be fixed.

"Just look at this pretty, frail baby's breath. It symbolizes innocence. If you could only feel my passion. If you could only love me...."

She will hear his voice fade. She will hear it in the distance, while the wind howls in the slender vertical cypresses, in

*I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.*

"Am I a murderess?" She could hear her own distant voice pose the question.

I told the doctor that I slipped and fell on the corner of our marble coffee table—a believable story—the bruise did not even resemble a man's boot landing on a woman's pregnant belly. While he, with a disappointed expression, waved his hand in an I-can't-believe-what-an-oaf-she-is gesture.

The doctor glanced over his glasses, tilted his head slightly to the left, and glanced at us for a brief, scrutinizing moment before he nodded in consent.

I couldn't blame the doctor. To accuse this attentive husband, apparently crushed by the loss of his unborn child, would have been preposterous, by anyone's standards.

And then, all was black ... infinite ... transcending space and time ... nothing mattered ... nothing existed ... but the miniscule white flowers with red pistils in a weed patch about to be uprooted—the blood of my murdered child.

His breathing is heavy. His hot lips draw air from my chest. Damp, long, slithering tentacles are everywhere. I can't breathe and gasp for air. I feel tears burning my eyes, burrowing hot springs in my face.

Dana heard his footsteps outside the door. The footsteps stopped. She heard the key turn.

She realized that the howling wind in the tall cypresses, in the field of golden wheat, will drown all sounds. The rancid butterflies in her stomach will dance again. And her heart will race on and on until she manages to catch it and close it in a secret compartment, like the broken-winged sparrow she once rescued when she was a child. She had named the bird Nada, which meant hope in her mother-tongue. She had placed the wounded bird in a

shoebox with a piece of chicken wire overtop. She had “mothered” it for six days, during which time she became aware of the family cat her sister had named Macak increasing fascination with the little bird. At first, the cat seemed agitated, and tried to paw the bird out of its cage, but after he was scolded several times he calmed down, content to simply observe and admire the new guest.

Dana followed her mother’s advice and placed the box above the cat’s reach, on top of the high armoire in the corner of the guest room.

Macak observed the bird from many different viewpoints. He would sit on the floor, calm, upright as a vase, his tail wrapped around his legs. Sometimes he would crouch down, resting his chin on his paws, squinting dreamily, yawning lazily, as if he had no interest whatsoever in his surroundings. Every once in a while, he would sniff the air, twitch his whiskers, the grey stripes on his back undulating in wave-like rhythm.

Dana shooed Macak out every time she left the room. She also made sure the door to the guest room was closed as her mother had advised. But she wondered why her mother was so mistrustful of the cat that seemed to adore the little sparrow. For six days and six nights, the cat slept on the wooden threshold in front of the guest room, guarding the injured bird faithfully.

But on the seventh day (she remembered it was a Sunday), she came back from church with her grandmother, and discovered to her surprise that the door to the guest room was open and Macak was not at his usual post. She raised her eyes slowly to scan the top of the armoire. The cardboard box was not there. It was on the floor, on its side, empty, a few brown feathers scattered around it.

And then she saw Macak running toward her, feathers dangling from his mouth.

“You guarded that sparrow day after day! I thought you loved that little bird!” she screamed. The wind was rushing through her ears. Her feet were made of stone.

Macak dropped the bird in front of her feet, his tail twitching proudly, rubbing himself affectionately against her legs.

She stared at the heap of feathers that were once a sparrow, her eyes fixed on the red smudge where its throat used to be—the red smudge with bits of dark burgundy scales.

The key in the lock rattled, again: “Open up, Dana, my sweet. Stop your childish games,” he beckoned through the door. “I have a surprise for you.”

She tiptoed to the back door, then stopped and listened.

“I’ll get rid of that damn deadbolt,” he growled.

She stepped onto the porch, crossed the backyard, then walked along Gothic Avenue, turned right on Quebec, sprinted across Bloor Street, and found herself standing among the ancient oaks in High Park. She inhaled, freely. Then began running through the tall grass, dodging the tree trunks. Soon she was on the well-trodden path, weav-

ing through the Sunday evening joggers, the mothers with baby strollers, the dog-walkers. She crossed the parking lot of the restaurant, ran south along the clipped yew hedges, under the arbour with hanging baskets, down the path under the gigantic ginkgo tree, and past the water fountain. She sat on her favourite bench. Down the hill, Grenadier Pond shimmered in the glow of the setting sun.

She ran the palm of her hand along the inscription on the bench:

*Of memory, images, and precious
Thoughts that shall not die.*

She knew this inscription, knew it well. “Will I ever have memories worthy of an inscription,” she asked herself out loud.

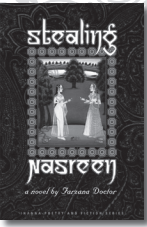
She took a quarter out of her pocket and flipped it high in the air.

An earlier version of this short story, entitled “The Red Smudge,” was published in the anthology, Tales From the Manchester Arms (2005).

Bianca Lakoseljac (biancalakoseljac@rogers.com) holds an M.A. from York University and has taught at Humber College and Ryerson University. Her short stories and poems have been published in a number of anthologies. She has just completed her first novel, The Summer of the Dancing Bear, he is also working on a sequel, a collection of short stories and a collection of poetry. She is President of the Canadian Authors Association, Toronto Branch.

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