

PIPING PLOVERS

By Patricia Kenet

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We've all heard about, or experienced, that odd individual in the neighbourhood (Cdn. sp) who doesn't quite fit in. The old woman who lives with 100 cats or the 'bachelor' whose house is stuffed with newspapers. Millicent, in this curious tale, appears to be just such a character. Appears? Well, we're not quite sure if she is a visionary in touch with a beauty denied those around her or just plain eccentric. You decide. What we don't doubt is the author's talent for narrative. The action migrates from the dotted 'i's' and crossed 't's' of a banal courtroom to the surreal outlands of radioactive geography. The transition is seamless and the bright prose dazzles. We think the last line is a whirling dervish. Quote: 'Those damn little birds on their stick feet, dozens moving in unison like a single white cloud on the sand.'*

Piping Plovers

Millicent stood at the podium before the Brigantine, New Jersey City Council shifting from one foot to the other. It was the first time she'd ever done anything like this. She had arrived early, her research in hand.

"What do you have for us today, young lady?" the councilman asked, his glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose.

"It's about killing all those foxes," Millicent began.

The small crowd murmured. She heard a woman behind her wheeze out a "*Jesus.*"

"We've been through this," the councilman began. "There are studies. The foxes kill the piping plovers..."

"Yes, I know, but..."

"...And the piping plovers are endangered. Not the foxes."

"The foxes belong here. They've been on this island for a hundred years."

A councilwoman leaned into her microphone. “You are late to the rodeo. The Department of Environmental Studies issued their findings last month and if we don’t comply, we lose funding. I’m sorry.”

“But, they’re so..so necessary...and beautiful.”

“The foxes are raiding the nests.”

“But...”

“The case is closed.”

“Too late, sister!” someone hissed behind her. “I’ve got a zoning variance, let’s get on with this. Enough bullshit, you fucking libtard.”

Millicent wondered why they weren’t letting her speak. She was frustrated that she had waited so long to approach the council. It really was rather late in the proceedings to be bringing this up. She knew about the studies. She knew about the piping plovers struggling to survive and the threat that the foxes posed. Those damn little birds on their stick feet, dozens moving in unison like a single white cloud on the sand.

But they didn’t know what she did. She couldn’t tell them everything. She’d be thrown out of the building.

It was hard for Millicent sometimes to know the difference between what was actually being said to her and what she thought she heard, but tonight it was all pretty clear. No more chances for the foxes. They would all be trapped and killed. She thought she heard them crying at night though she knew that wasn’t how it was done.

For the past year, she had been healthy enough to work and smart enough to save her money for the things she needed and then to put enough aside for the trip to Chernobyl. She wasn’t afraid of the radiation and was actually fascinated by an invisible force seeping into her body like a thousand tiny ghosts. She knew someday she’d die of something. If it was cancer, she was fine with that. She’d have ten or twenty healthy years in between. Thinking of the healthy years in between exhausted her. The years of accountability and getting along with people at work who only knew their way of doing things.

Millicent's mother told her it was 'fucked up' to go to Chernobyl as a tourist. The kind of fucked of thing Millicent loved to do just to 'piss the fuck out of everyone.'

The tour guides at Chernobyl were full of rules about where to stand, not to scrape your shoe into the soil, and what areas were strictly forbidden. She asked to see the famous 'fireman's boot' that emitted a deadly amount of radiation even thirty years after the accident. Millicent liked their humorlessness of the guides. She liked how there was no need to smile to comfort the men who showed her how the forests had grown defiantly lush and dark green behind the wreckage of civilization. She observed the objects, suddenly abandoned---dolls seated on chairs; books held open to a certain page with a smooth stone, and the plates and glasses on a table set for a dinner that was never served. They all stood undisturbed as if waiting for the next scene of a play. But the animals moved on and thrived. They mated and left their scat. They nibbled on berries blooming with decay. They drank from rippling moon on a blue lake.

She paid her tour guide, Yuri, a hundred dollars to let her break free from the group for thirty minutes. She also told him she'd be willing to have sex with him in the shed behind the toilets as well. He had studied English in Moscow and agreed to help her for just the money. She took a few pictures with him in front of the contained reactor site which could be mistaken for a modern white barn.

Within an hour, Millicent spotted a small fox in the Chernobyl woods, just the size she wanted. The vixen was unafraid of Millicent and approached her open palm laden with peanut butter on a slice of bread. And just like that, Millicent injected the fox who buckled slowly into a deep anesthesia sleep. It was long enough to stuff the fox into a red case. It was long enough with a second shot to take the animal to the airport. She had the paperwork she needed, and more money for bribes so that the fox was in cargo for the flight home.

The fox paced in Millicent's apartment when she returned home from the City Council meeting. The animal was churning with isotopes, matte black, with an ardent smile.

"There you are," Millicent said. "Waiting for the tasty plovers."

But it was not just the plovers that the fox was there to eat. It was for the breakdown of mitochondria of the people who never answered the letters she wrote begging to give the foxes another

chance. And it was for the chance to find a mate and spread the seeds of poison. It was for their own good.

The fox had become attached to Millicent and, at first, did not want to leave her side when they arrived at the beach. Millicent was nothing but a shadow now. In the darkness, the fox glowed scarlet.

“Find a darling before they are all gone,” Millicent said to the animal.

It fled beside the waves, landing on black paws. The ocean roared.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I was inspired to write this very short story based on two events. One is meeting someone who visited Chernobyl as a tourist. It struck me as such a dangerous adventure, but fascinating as well when one considers how nature has overtaken the region once the humans fled. Secondly, I have a beach house in Brigantine and loved spotting foxes at night as they scampered around the neighborhood. They posed no dangers to humans but environmentalists claimed they were killing off endangered piping plovers--the tiny birds that move in unison on the edge of the ocean.*

I am mainly a writer of personal essays and other types of non-fiction, but really want to focus on fiction as a means of finding real truth in my writing.

BIO: *I am a poet, playwright and essayist. My work has appeared in "The Rumpus," "The Washington Post" and "McSweeney's". You can see more of my writing at patricialawlerkenet.com*