

Rosalyn

In the end, I killed my husband.

But that morning I met my daughter in the park. Our maid had brought her to play. The grass was yellowed, burned by the sun, and Rosalyn stood stiffly watching the other children, her face pallid and moist with sweat. She moved her feet slowly, unsure of the crisp deadness beneath them. Rosalyn stared at her reflection in the tarnished metal slide, almost deadly in its precipitous slope.

Rosalyn knew what life was, even at three years. She was a pixie child, her pale face surrounded with blackness. But her eyes held a darkness, iris becoming pupil. The child was manipulative. I saw her thinking of the ocean behind my back. I loved her fiercely. Sometimes I would pull her to me tightly, knowing she was pulling away. Always she would elude me after that morning. In the sun, her face damp, she was mine.

I squeezed her hand too tightly, her knuckles pressed firmly within my bony fist. She winced, knowing better than to cry out. I wanted to hurt her a little, so she would know she was mine, her flesh my own.

I held her to my side as we walked in silence. She was brilliant, always watching. She could see the movement of the wind, observing willow trees and bearded iris petals. Rosalyn never mentioned the smell of flowers. She spoke only in whispers of the sound of growing things. The whistling of the forest behind our home.

I kept her dark hair bobbed. I took her to get it cut twice a month. The length was critical. My eyes ached when it grew long and wild past her sharp chin and pudgy lips. Unnaturally corpulent lips, so foreign on her baby face. She was too quiet for long hair that hung reckless and shining beyond her narrow shoulders. Her ebony eyes held the ancient longing, so still and quiet, receding into the darkness around her face, fading into her black hair, drowning in shadow. And she clutched

Richard in the morning. She clung to her father upon waking. So, I kept her hair short.

That morning, in the park, I squeezed her hand harder. She was unwilling to love me.

At the time she was conceived, I knew I had created something tangible. After months of swelling and the quiet production of toes and lungs, something I would hold in my hands for the first time—a dripping creature, full of purple blood and covered with my own. She would breathe then, and see what was alive in the air, the breathing of others. I had created her, and I could choose to ignore this thing with sweet indignation. But, if I could keep her within me, maybe she would never love another. Not Richard.

But she was helpless to him. She was like this already in the womb, moving only for Richard. His hand on my taut belly, I clung to his wrist. I scraped him slightly, drawing blood. His cry roused her from sleep, and she kicked for twelve long minutes before settling to the silence of living in darkness. Her heart beat soundly when he called my name. She was like me. I hated her.

I knew it couldn't last, the way I owned her flesh. My body feeding her heart. She would soon be her own with a name. Rosalyn. Like a cacophony. A woman Richard could hold as his own. He didn't love her. Richard had so many women. This infant Jezebel, coveting my husband, thirsting after his marrow. Her dark eyes watched him over the breakfast table. The woman in the mirror was jealous too. We both wanted her. And him.

Richard would touch her hand in the morning, his eyes filled with a hunger. A craving to be somewhere else, someone else. And he would leave her like that. Rosalyn never knew that he was deep in the shadow of tomorrow's lover. She would cry for him, waiting, but he had a life beyond us—two women, both of us longing after another's body. She grew to eighteen months, her eyes darker than at birth. At her birth they had lightness, a grey radiance that hid the ancient look. I had to wait, patiently watching, to discover her soul. I knew she was thinking of things far away when she looked at me. Thinking of the turtle she brought to the door one day. I stepped on it heavily.

She didn't bring me presents anymore.

Rosalyn would wait for Richard by the window at eighteen months old. She would stand there all day. I refused to feed her while she stood there at the nursery window. Starving, she looked to the courtyard and waited for her traitor. She loved him. Her cheeks grew sallow. The darkness in her eyes bled into her legs, covered with bruises and lesions. I brushed her hair four or five times a day, gathering the black hair in a secret box. A part Richard could not claim.

I covered her face lightly with a pillow at night. I smothered her softly, but she never stopped breathing. I would take the pillow away from her mouth and kiss her desperately when I could not stand to look at my hands, shaking over her frail body. The shadows consumed her face. I would see her wake when I held fast the pillow, but her eyes remained closed. Her eyes averted me by the secrecy of dark lids. They hid themselves behind treacherous skin. My flesh.

She grew in the hidden moments, so slowly that I hardly noticed she was not the same child. She was a woman child, so suddenly I stopped watching. At twenty-eight months, she moved in slow circles about the yard. Rosalyn was longing for him. Her hips moved like an old woman and her back crouched low over the long grass. I left her there, her legs raw from walking. I took off her shoes and she wore only a white dress. The woman in the mirror whispered that it made her skin look more sickly and yellow. Rosalyn wouldn't eat, but stood at the window and the yard, waiting. I left her there—in the yard. Her dark hair cropped around her ashen face, her dark and bitter eyes, she cried when I wasn't looking. I was in my closet waiting.

After Richard abandoned us, the maid took her to the park one morning. She told me Rosalyn climbed over monkey bars and slid down winding slides. But I came and saw her. She stood alone, looking solemn. Rosalyn was three now. In the park, her face wet, I saw the sun on her cheek. I couldn't keep her. That's when I sent the maid away. I told her she was not needed anymore.

Rosalyn and I. We went to the ocean.

I carried Rosalyn to the rocky shore. She was too weak to walk alone. I climbed a cliff, scraping my knees. Her white dress caught the wind, and I saw her thinness, knees bulging from legs, no more than switches of fleshy willow. She didn't cry out. Her eyes were closed with ferocity, and she let out a small moan, but nothing more.

I held her to my heart. It was pounding, and my breath was rapid, taking in the salty air in deep and hollow gulps. I couldn't stand her, this defiant child. She would stand all day at the window if I let her.

I held her out over the waves, the water rising on the sharp cliff. Her eyes opened and I saw the ancient blood in them. The old horror. I had wanted her to breathe the creeping smell of stale waves, the foam brewing over dead fish and old storms. I held her precariously over the sea, as far out over the rock as I could reach, feeling the spray on my fingers. The reflection of the sun off the water was both blinding and soothing at once.

To my surprise, she was quite still and tranquil. She didn't scratch or gnaw at my arms but held her body stiff like the corpse of the rat she found under the stairs. There was a resignation in her bones.

I lost my footing, that was all.

She slipped from my fingers and plummeted to the depths of the sea. She was beneath the waves for minutes before rising to the surface, quite serene as the tide washed over her. From this angle, Rosalyn was small—so small—that I could hardly tell that she had been my child once. She seemed only a memory, a shadow. I stood there a long time, witnessing the suppleness of her limp body, hearing a thud against the rock.

The waves washed her tenderly up to the sand. She was no longer breathing, but her eyes were soft now, like a child's should be—innocence and openness. I carried her carefully back to the car. I made sure her hair was wrung out and wrapped her in my yellow sweater. The air was

stagnant, and the clouds dark.

My breath was easy when I carried her inside. My shirt was soaked, and she was heavier than usual. I think the water did her good in that respect.

I knew she didn't belong in her bed. The woman in the mirror warned me that he would take her away if he found her there. So, I put her in a box under my bed, keeping her close and tight. Her pale hand hung out the side, giving the false impression of softness and affection. When I couldn't sleep, I reached under and held her tiny hand, sallow flesh and dissolving bone.

We would bathe together, her quiet mouth pressed to my breast. Rosalyn never opened her eyes. When I washed her hair, it came out in heavy clumps, more than the stringy web I craved before. Thick black hair, leaving my hands entangled with beauty.

She needed a safe place, somewhere I could keep her forever.

Rosalyn belonged in the linen closet. The boxed cavern was hallowed with white sheets and towels and cloths. I wrapped her in a huge sheet, over and over and over it wound around her broken frame. She was malleable now. She was wet. The water seeped into the carpet and the sheet and, when I put her on the highest shelf, it soaked the white towels. The woman in the hall mirror smiled at that. The closet was her white haven against the cold water that had claimed her. She was warm now and could rest. She was mine there, and the silence caught my breath with pure ecstasy.

One day, Richard returned to us. It was raining in the sunlight. He was dripping on the threshold, and I held silent in the shadow, waiting. He wanted to take her from me. He wanted her beauty, her bones.

He went to her room, to the nursery, to the window. He looked to the yard where she would stand waiting. Richard came only when she was through with waiting. He came when she was almost gone. I watched him in shadow. Richard looking and waiting. He turned with eyes angry, full of knowing. He walked to the hall. He knew. He knew her hiding place.

I stepped from the shadow. I could see the woman in the mirror at the end of the hall. Her eyes were crimson, her shirt open, her chest bleeding from deep scratches. Her fingernails were filled with dark flesh. Richard's eyes grew frightened. I laughed. He knew I had her forever.

I went to the linen closet, to claim her. Holy sepulcher for my virgin whore. I knew his mind. The woman in the mirror called to him with limp finger. I lifted Rosalyn carefully from the closet, holding her gently in shrouds of purity. She was dripping, but safe.

He spoke my name.

Rosalyn wanted him still, twitching as she did in the womb. I thrust her into his arms so he would see her emptiness. He could not have her. She was mine now. Richard watched me with tender envy. I wanted him to feel she was gone from him, that he could not claim her.

Richard fell to the ground, lips stretched, face pinched with disbelief, clutching Rosalyn in his trembling arms. The woman in the mirror laughed. Rosalyn laid dripping beside him, waiting. I brought a pillow, and knelt quietly beside him, holding it over his face, tenderly at first, with a compassion and gentleness, then firmly. He made no effort to stop me, but twitched and clawed at the wooden floor, trying to hold her. It was no use. She was gone from him. Her hair crept out of the sheets in the struggle.

The shroud could not hold her.