

Tangled Up in Blue

Stop. Remove book bag (from shoulder). Place on chair. Sigh. Assume mildly chagrined expression. Pause (awkwardly, if possible). Survey room. Item: one large pile of laundry. Item: one unmade bed. Promptly walk out door.

It might not make either one take care of itself, but the sense of snubbing both should be at least moderately satisfying.

Oh, and don't forget the book bag.

Rebecca halted briefly on the steps to the apartment. An uninvited, nagging voice was reminding her that it was only Tuesday evening and only eleven and that there were no doubt things the world had convinced itself she ought to be doing. She did her best to squash such notions. Failed. Tried again. Failed—but not as badly. Tried again. Succeeded. She hoisted the strap of the tan bag up on her shoulder: a rather unwieldy, canvas thing covered in small button badges. Indulging in one more too-audible sigh, she started off down the steps.

Better.

She had been told from an early age not to smoke cigarettes, not to talk with her mouth full, and not to walk alone late at night. She was sure that they had told her something else as well, but whatever it was escaped her now. Perhaps it wasn't important. Either way they might as well have saved their breath.

Except that the phrase 'saving one's breath' couldn't really be thought of with a straight face. What would one do with all the breath one had saved, and were would one put it? And of course then she would find herself staring quizzically at nothing in particular, one eyebrow higher than the other as a signal to the world of her general discontent with the English language. Empirical evidence suggested that this facial expression rarely helped the situation, whatever that happened to be.

In any event.

It was possible that the notions about smoking—or not smoking—cigarettes had had some effect. Maybe even the lectures about proper table manners. But she liked walking. And she liked the world better late at night. And she liked alleyways. That was all there was to say on the subject.

Correction. That was all there *should* have been to say on the subject. Somehow, she never managed to escape

those earnest and concerned souls who claimed that more simply must be said. At such times she would listen patiently, then equally patiently ignore their nearly (but not quite) endearing calls of distress. Early on she had tried explaining that what the world didn't put on display was far more interesting than what it did. But she had failed to make much headway. She had even attempted to convey that, in the balance between exploring the world and appeasing someone who liked to play with statistics all day, she felt that there was a clear winner. (Not to mention that most people she knew who worked with statistics were driven more than a little mad by the practice, and probably not to be trusted.) Besides, Mr. Hyde had yet to jump out at her, and she had noted neither pit nor pendulum. This too fell on deaf ears. Which she probably should have expected.

This particular night happened to be a Tuesday. Unfortunate—dare one say it, even inauspicious—but true. On the whole she found Tuesday to be a useless invention. And even more to the immediate point, she suspected strongly that this Tuesday was unlikely to change her opinion. When she had the opportunity (which she wouldn't) to make suggestions to the committee on historical improvements (which to her knowledge didn't exist, but should) she would be sure to mention that whoever came up with Tuesday should be efficiently and ruthlessly obliterated.

She had no real destination in mind, though it never occurred to her that this might be a problem. If she started walking she would end up somewhere, and it might at least have the potential to be interesting. Falling into a well-rehearsed pattern in which one foot did its best to plod in a straight line after the other, she dropped her head halfway to her chest and became as inconspicuous as possible behind a mass of short, wavy, dark curls.

She enjoyed the streets. Not in the manner that one enjoys finishing laundry (the sort of mild satisfaction that comes from knowing that the thing is done and will not have to be done again for a good two weeks and therefore will therefore stop crying out to be done) but really, actually enjoyed them. Perhaps a bit like good yogurt, or cello music. They were *interesting*. Ridiculous and wonderful. Their plywood, their stray newspapers, their self-absorbed fascination with tiny nuances... nuances that rapidly morphed into gulfs in the eyes of those who built and inhabited them. And of course their inhabitants, their people, who made Rebecca sad but who she loved best of all.

At something close to regular intervals, street corners presented themselves on both left and right to the pale,

skinny individual. It was the form of one who might have been almost pretty if she hadn't tried to actively pursue plainness. No unnecessary decoration, no color in the face (save a smattering of brown freckles), no sense of carriage or authority in the way the body was held. She was reminded again how the real drawback of this method of travel was its tendency to become more and more difficult, her increased intimacy with the city forcing her farther away from her apartment in search of the unfamiliar. She sighed. Maybe she ought to go back to a street she'd already visited.

Meh. Maybe next time.

When she finally found a corner she didn't recognize, she stopped to contemplate the merits of left versus right, picked left in a brash fit of whimsy (as it aligned more with her political sensibilities), and almost immediately regretted it. She paused awkwardly for a moment, with the intention of backtracking, then gave up on the notion. Having started left she might as well keep on going.

Her selected street was yet another thrilling example of the uncreative genius the world seemed so eager to display. Neon signs advertising pizza parlors, florists next to delis next to drug stores, too much scaffolding and too many one-way streets and trash bags and more people offering to cut her hair than seemed reasonable... From time to time Rebecca wondered what the streets would look like if the committee on historical review were to have introduced triangular-shaped doors, or houses without ceilings, or even no streets at all, when building the first cities. She had a notion that when the world finally got around to blowing itself up, any odd remnants of the city would somehow still manage to include said pizza parlor and florist and deli. And that they would mysteriously maintain themselves even if everyone in the city had long since been killed.

She moved as close to the buildings as possible as she walked down the street, in the hope of giving any passersby a wide berth. Old buildings. At least, old for buildings in America. She rather liked them. If she mentally removed the incongruous bits and pieces, they could belong to people in even funnier shoes and shirts than they did now. A no doubt equally squalid era, but less recognizable and by extension less unsettling. When she thought about it, she liked the buildings almost as well as the signs in languages she couldn't understand, which she loved almost as well as Bob Dylan. Which was no mean feat.

...*Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach*. The Flite analogy had come to her late one night, and she rather liked it. Of course, she was without a birdcage, but the principle of collecting *people* was more or less the same. It was what kept her coming back to her alleyways, kept her prowling for new and interesting personalities. Hunting, even. She didn't really mind whether they ended up in her sketchbook or written down on paper or (as sometimes happened) just cached away somewhere in the musty recesses of her brain for future use. They were all interesting.

At times of epic moroseness, she liked to think that it was simply a search for the worst in herself—safe and uncomplicated when displayed in other people. A way to catalog and critique and investigate oneself without the pain of actually doing so. At other times she would conclude that this was merely pretentious and wishful thinking. At still other times she would conclude that her first conclusion was simply an indication she ought not read so much Woolf. Or Plath. Or Camus. Or Zola....

Rebecca passed three alleyways before she found one that looked really promising. Dumpsters, lighted store backs, smatterings of graffiti, a slightly musty and claustrophobic smell. All in most excellent and working order.

Experience had taught her that loitering without something in her hands gave rise to too much awkwardness, even for her taste. She halted herself just past the intersection, fumbling through her bag for an excuse. Two books, a sketch pad, a pen, knitting needles bearing a half-finished hat... Not ideal, but not bad. Certainly sufficient to forge ahead.

She pulled out a book on topology, then quickly shoved it back with a grimace. She had forgotten it was in there. That probably said something.

Without question, her parents would have told her that it said something.

"Sometimes I think you're just lazy." Her father had only lost his temper on the subject once. Her father was not lazy. Her response had been mute and she was sure that he had missed it.

She had minded that comment very much at the time, though it had changed her little. She was sleeping

through college just as skillfully as she had slept through the first 18 years of school. Or the first 15. Or however that ought to be counted. Sometimes she concluded that this was the result of not pursuing her original intent of going to art school. After all, doing things because they were a good idea was almost inevitably a bad move. Then again, most of the time she was too sleepy to care.

Of course, she was perfectly aware that she would have turned in just as few assignments as an art student, and probably have felt a bit worse about it. But that was no reason to ruin a perfectly good rationalization.

Maybe she could get a dog so that it would eat her topology book. And her analysis book. And... except that she didn't really like dogs. Maybe she should just down the book in a butt of malmsey. But she didn't have any malmsey.

She pulled out her other book, a copy of *The Divine Comedy*. Too heavy, but far superior. In so many ways. Casting a quick glance down the alley, she turned on her heel and ran as quickly as she could toward the curb across from several lighted back doorways. The rubber soles of her shoes echoed in an odd, almost squishy way as they slapped against the pavement. Her lampshade-like woolen skirt did nothing to help the situation as it tangled itself around her bare legs.

Arriving at her destination unseen, she opened her book and waited. "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.*" It was the one line that she knew by heart. After all, it seemed about right. Though she wasn't sure she needed to go all the way to the gates of hell before abandoning all hope.

Once she had caught her breath, she let her eyes trace over the pages of English and Italian, watching the shapes the typed words formed on the page. The book was heavy. She waited.

At length, her patience was rewarded.

The man who appeared must have been in his early fifties. She kept her head down and her hair in her face, letting only her eyes flicker quickly back and forth between the pages of her book and the newcomer. White, balding, somewhat rounder at the waist than he had probably been in earlier years. From his apron and the clatter of dishes in the room behind him, his occupation didn't strike her as terribly hard to guess. For the moment, at least, he seemed not to notice her. He scratched his ear, pulled a box of cigarettes and a book of matches out of

an apron pocket, and efficiently performed his ritual.

He took several long drags before noticing the girl on the sidewalk. If it startled him, she couldn't really tell. Calmly, his eyes walked over the twiggy girl sitting across from him, a form pale to the point of being ashen. He snorted softly. She let her eyes meet his for a moment, then returned them to the book. He pulled on his cigarette several more times, the smell of nicotine filling the alley.

She waited, but he seemed uninclined to initiate conversation. Unfortunate, if not uncommon. In her experience, the world had an obstinate tendency to be talkative only at all the wrong moments. She was surrounded by people auditioning for a role in Beckett's *Not I* or new and exciting versions of Joseph Heller's *Texan*, but only in moments calling for dignity, discretion and reserve. Given an opportune moment to wax lyrical on life -the-universe-and-everything (the present one came to mind), they somehow remembered a deep-seated need to become stars of the silver screen.

People were much harder to study when they refused to be cooperative.

"Hi," The word was uttered quietly enough to be nearly inaudible. Immediately upon speaking, her gaze darted to the ground and she let her hair fall in her face.

He looked at her steadily. "Huh."

After a few painfully silent moments, she let her eyes off the book again.

"Huh," he repeated. "Thought *you'd* never say hello."

"Oh." She thought about adding something to her comment. But didn't.

He shoved his free hand in a pocket and answered the question she had yet to ask. "Well, you look like the silent type."

She made a noncommittal noise, struggling to place his hint of an accent.

"Guess not." He turned away from the hunched figure.

She waited, but he seemed without intent to offer anything else. Alas. She pulled her thin, blue jacket tighter around her shoulders, despite the muggy weight that summer had brought to the air. Still nothing. She shifted uncomfortably on the curb. "Do... do you work there?" She gestured vaguely in the direction of the lighted room from which he had emerged.

"Say what?" He answered without turning back to face her. "Oh, yeah. Yeah." He paused again. She tried (unsuccessfully) to make out a pattern in the stains on his apron. "Yeah." He looked back over his shoulder at the screen door. "But I'm not complaining, you know."

Rebecca moved her head noncommittally, unsure as to whether or not the appropriate agreement was a yes or a no. He cast a quick glance her direction, and finding that his audience had yet to disappear, he continued.

"I'm not complaining. Still. Sometimes, you know, you've gotta *wonder*."

She waited while he progressed further through the cylinder between his lips.

"I mean, Jesus." The J came out in an overly explosive way. "They're morons. They're just morons." He shook his head in disgust, simultaneously rubbing with his palm at the shiny, exposed flesh on his head. "Can't trust no one to get shit done."

She nodded slowly. Tonight, it appeared, the Lord in whom she didn't believe had been generous.

"Every time they screw up, I get the blame." Even through the excess bulk on his face, she could see his jaw tightening. "Jesus."

He had yet to return his attention to her, apparently preferring the view to his left. For a brief period he lapsed into silence, stabbing several times at the pavement with the toe of his boot. "Sure as hell not paid enough to be running the whole damned place."

He looked over his shoulder at the girl on the curb. From his expression, Rebecca surmised it had only just mentally registered that his audience was not only still there, but was even, in fact, composed of a sentient being. "Yeah." He tilted his head to one side until the upper spine yielded a low, cracking sound. "Sorry."

The monotone was somehow lacking an apologetic air. He wrinkled his nose, though whether at the smell in the alleyway, his annoyance with such social niceties as 'apologizing,' or something else entirely, Rebecca found it impossible to pinpoint. He cracked the other direction. "Don't pay no attention. Don't mind me."

"I don't mind." Her eyes toyed with a small patch of pavement.

"Huh." He lingered as he blew out smoke one last time, crushing the cigarette butt under his shoe. Crossed his arms, leaned up against the wall. "You and no one else. Fuckers."

She raised her eyebrows slightly, though her gaze remained fixed. She hoped he couldn't see enough of her

face to notice. From a few streets over, the whine of a car alarm cut through the sounds of the kitchen: clinking silverware, running water, low voices interspersed with an occasional yell.

"You just... you wouldn't *believe* this crap." He raised his arms suddenly in a gesture of helplessness. "Okay, so some jerk sends his food back, or he won't pay for it, or he even *comes into the kitchen* to complain about it. So he's an asshole. How the hell is that my fault?"

Rebecca watched with fascination, trying to soak in the details of the newest personality in her collection: the scent of sweaty cotton, the staccato rhythms of impulsive frustration, vocalized.

"So, okay. I mean, fine." The fricatives and plosives formed a rapid-fire battleground of sound. "Let's suppose for a minute that it's my sorry-ass job to fix the...customer or the server or the hostess or whatever the fuck is broken. Just how would I do it? It's fucking ridiculous." The wall toward which this exposition was aimed seemed unimpressed. He turned his attention to the girl on the curb, finally directing a question at his partner in conversation. "Okay, fine. You tell me. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

She pulled her legs and arms in closer to the center of her hunched body, pursed her lips and said nothing. To pass the time, her subconscious noted with annoyance that the car alarm had yet to give up its crusade.

"Damn right. You can't say shit to that."

Rebecca reflected on the statement that she couldn't say shit. In point of fact, it seemed about right. She closed her book. Pause. On impulse, she offered it with both hands to the man standing across from her. He made no move to take it. "What's that?"

She gestured lamely again in his direction with the book. After a moment's hesitation, he reached out to take it from her: the slight squeal of sweaty-flesh-on-lamination when his thick fingers grasped the cover. Seeing his continued hesitation, she made yet one more indecisive encouragement with a now-empty hand. He opened it with all the enthusiasm of a man sawing off his own limbs.

Casting one more glance in her direction he began thumbing through a few pages, a snapping noise accompanying the unnecessary force of each turn. At length, for no reason she could see, he paused and adjusted the distance between book and face. "... *gridando*..." the word came out slowly, one syllable at a time. His accent bore a distinct dissimilarity to Italian. "...*gridando*... *il... padre a... lui*..." He tried once again. "...*gridando ...il*

padre... a lui... 'Mala via tieni!' Somehow she had the impression that Icarus' story had been read by greater orators. More well-rehearsed orators, at any rate.

"Huh." His eyes moved left to right across the page, interrupted only for carriage returns. She watched as the task absorbed him, his breathing becoming gradually less audible. "...*descends, weary, with many a wheeling...*"—the monotone English oration left almost as much to be desired as the Italian—"...*to where it set out swiftly, and alights,*" he paused to clear his throat, "*angry and sullen, far from its master...* Angry and sullen. Ain't that the fucking truth?"

He read silently for several lines more, then snapped the book shut. "Huh. Not too bad." He spit on the pavement and unceremoniously shoved the book in her direction. Looking behind his shoulder once again, he tightened his jaw and reached in his pocket for another cigarette. "Fuckers." Her imagination found a sort of defiance in the gestures to retrieve and light it. From the direction of the car alarm, the sound of sharp voices carried through the air. The corners of his mouth hinted at upward movement as he sucked on the paper.

Without warning a new voice, emanating somewhere in the depths of the lighted room, barked unintelligibly. Apparently to her companion. He raised his middle finger, but otherwise made no motion to respond. "Fucker."

In the pause, Rebecca attempted to mentally record more details of her companion. Face pockmarked, very hairy ears. From her point of view, a fantastic model. Perhaps she would draw him. Hands cracked, probably from too much hot water. A tendency to lean backwards on his heels very slightly.

At length the car alarm ceased complaint, replaced only by quieter sounds of movement: gravel scraping between shoe and pavement, rustle of clothes, hollow slam of a car door. Shouts. Without speaking, Rebecca and her object of study listened to angry words they couldn't understand. Sometimes it was rather disheartening. *What a piece of work is man.* And all that. Rebecca held her book more tightly to her chest.

She didn't really register how close the voices had come until they were on the far side of the alley. Three figures, sufficiently obscured by distance and lighting to make even the gender uncertain. From behind her curtain of hair she watched their interactions, movements that she imagined to be grandiose hand gestures, sudden pivots, pacing... shouts in time with the rhythm of their fustian dance, puncturing though all else audible.

Her companion grunted, thrusting his cigarette aside. She watched. He put his head in his hands, muttering to

himself. "Don't need this shit."

To her surprise, he lifted his head and took off in their direction, more swiftly than she would have thought possible for his physiology. "What the fuck do you want?" His gestures were nearly as unruly as the strangers'. The incomprehensible cacophony escalated, though with no noticeable change in either party's actions. "Get out." She thought for a moment that he might be inebriated, but couldn't recall the scent of alcohol. Odd. "Yeah, you. I said move your ass." The newcomers looked at him, but failed to relocate. "Fuck off!" The aproned man was nearing his maximum lung capacity. "I said fuck off!"

They yelled something back at him, in a language she couldn't understand. She tried not to let her imagination run away with her as she shifted uncomfortably. The trio's words seemed to halt her model, though he continued his vocal barrage. Feet planted, hands on hips. "You deaf? I said fuck off!"

She didn't see it, but even through the warring languages she heard the explosion.

She was vaguely cognoscente of a retreat on his part, nearly back to his original post. Retreat, collapse. Then silence. No scream, howl, bellow, squeal, wail... Nothing. No more voices shouting in unintelligible tongues. Nothing. Silence. Or something very like it. The only sounds rhythmic and predictable, thousands of noises that coalesced into a single, almost imperceptible hum. Refrigerators and vacuums and microwaves and washing machines, running water in kitchens and bathrooms.... materials scraping or striking with characteristic sounds: metal or ceramic or pavement or wood, clanging, thumping, screeching.

Rebecca stared at the crumpled form on the ground.

From the kitchen, a middle-aged man's face appeared in the doorway. She looked at it, or more accurately past it—her eyes boring aimlessly through the wiry and overly tanned visage. "Get help." She paused. "An ambulance. The police." Her words were far steadier than she would have guessed they might be. The face's eyes widened. It disappeared.

Without any real conscious intent, her legs straitened until she was standing. She began to move. It was an odd, eerie sensation—being driven by a mechanical *something*, a something both part of her and separate. She

had not really known it existed. Her mind played lazily over the possibilities. Instinct, perhaps?

Her eyes passed over brick and glass and plastic without seeing, simply focused forward. She could feel where warm, dark liquid had stained her blue sweater. She ignored it.

She reached the end of the alleyway before the face appeared again in the doorway. "I called for..." a tight, panicked voice trailed off as its owner saw her disappearing. "What happened?" It called after her. She noticed that the pitch seemed too high for the body from which it emerged.

She didn't turn around to answer. "There...." the words seemed odd and foreign inside her mouth. "There was an accident. Is someone coming?"

The response came merely as short burst of unrecognizable sounds, while he attempted several comments simultaneously. Finally a single word: "Yeah."

Her back still turned, she stood at the end of the alleyway and tried to focus on a lamp across from her. She waited. At length—a time delay both immediate and infinite—noise and lights and red and blue appeared in the distance. This was apparently enough to satisfy her unexplained need to wait, and the legs again began to move. One foot after the other. Her feet doing their best to move in a straight line.

She was only vaguely aware of arriving back on her own doorstep. Entering the apartment, walking into her room. Taking down the large hatbox, the one filled with sketches and writings, accumulated over many months. She stared at the contents.

Stop. Remove sweater (from torso). Place in box. Don't sigh. Don't alter blank expression.

The sweater didn't fit inside, but that didn't particularly bother her. She simply balanced the lid atop the new relic of her collection—an item to be taken out and stared at late at night. Her eyes glued forward, she replaced the box.

A moment later, she realized that she had forgotten her book bag.