

Mercè Rodoreda

RAIN

She'd just put the finishing touches on the living room. She stepped back and stood at the door to inspect her handiwork. She'd washed the curtains the night before and ironed them that morning. They looked pretty, all starched. They were cream-colored, with green dots, parted and with a ruffle at the bottom. A green ribbon gathered them at each side.

Beneath the windows sat a divan and two grey velvet easy chairs. On the coffee table, a blue vase with roses. The huge Breton cabinet had just been waxed; facing it, her desk with its books neatly arranged, its clean inkwell and spotless pink blotter.

Everything had been painstakingly scrubbed, dusted, made to look just like new.

On the hope chest, to the right of the door, a crystal decanter of cognac and two glasses sparkled. In the tiny, dazzlingly white kitchen, a tantalizing aroma rose from a tray of pastries. There were six more in the refrigerator: three with custard and three with strawberries.

Everything was ready.

Marta entered the bedroom that, along with a small bathroom, rounded out her apartment. What dress should she wear? Or would a robe be better? That blue one with the flared skirt and white flowers embroidered on the bodice and pockets? She felt so pretty, so alluring in it that she thought: "If anything happens, it'll be the robe's fault." There was also a lacy tulle blouse that she hadn't worn yet . . . At last she decided upon a brown shirtdress and a thick suede belt with gold studs. She washed her face and arms, carefully combed her hair, but put on no makeup. She chose her sheerest stockings and some suede shoes.

Perfume. A last glance over her shoulder at her reflection in the mirror and she returned to the living room. She sat down.

It was early. Barely three. Since she was worn out from fighting the dirt all morning, she'd rest until he came at four. It was the first time Albert would visit her at home . . . and she felt nervous. She got up, walked to the desk, and tried to choose a book to leave on the coffee table. Which one? Maybe Shakespeare? "O my fair warrior!" Othello says to Desdemona as he greets her in Cyprus.

What more pathetically pure compliment could a soldier give his lady? Like Antony when, before his death, he calls Cleopatra "Egypt," imbuing that single word with all her queenly grandeur. Perhaps seeing such a serious book, Albert would think: "She's a snob." Basically she didn't care, but she abandoned the notion and, without further thought, picked *Du côté de chez Swann* and left it next to the roses.

She sat down again. Leaning back against the easy chair, she felt lonely. Lonely and empty. As though her excitement at Albert's visit had melted away and nothing could replace it.

She had no financial problems. A small inheritance on her mother's side gave her just enough to live on. Her job as secretary in an export firm where everyone thought well of her allowed her some comfort and even a few luxuries. She had two or three girlfriends who loved her and on whom she could rely: good, disinterested friends. Why did her heart insist so fiercely on something more?

She'd been in love once before. With all the passion of youth. Now she thought it a mistake and told herself: "With each affair, more bitterness accumulates, and besides, you can get pregnant." When she was twenty, a timely operation had saved her life but left her deathly afraid.

She got up. She couldn't just sit there. She rearranged the roses so the prettiest one faced the window.

It was raining outside. It had been cloudy all day. A stubborn drizzle, the kind that just makes everything muddy.

"Am I in love?" she wondered as she walked to the kitchen. She couldn't resist eating one of the pastries. The coffeepot on the stove was still warm. She poured herself a cup and dropped an aspirin into it. She sat down on the table to drink it.

She liked Albert, of course. Young, at once dynamic and easygoing, simple: an excellent companion. They hadn't known each other long but she often felt she couldn't live without him . . . But love, so complex and vast: could it really be embodied in a nice young man like him? True love was behind her: "Darling, you're the only one, my kingdom . . ." A volcano of words and feelings. Afterwards, the taste of ashes. He'd died far away, and she'd gotten his last letter when maybe not even his corpse existed. That letter had been like poison. A cry of longing that cut her to the quick. A single wish: to go back. It was a cursed time. And now Albert. Very restful, certainly . . . There was no one else around, yet how deep did it go? One day he'd ask her to marry him and they'd rent a big apartment. If he was faithful, he'd be demanding, severe, gloomy. He'd grow old slowly. If he wasn't, he'd be indulgent, broad-minded, he'd have heart trouble and lock himself in a world from which she'd be excluded.

She got off the table and paced to and fro, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a second pastry in the other.

"He'll bring me a bouquet and a box of chocolates. We'll talk about the weather, politics. He'll tell me his philosophy of life but we'll both be thinking of something else. Before leaving he'll tell me how much he loves me and ask for a kiss, which I'll gladly grant him.

"Or maybe he'll storm in looking determined, a little dramatic, and he'll say: 'I can't live without you.' He'll squeeze my arms. 'You hear me? It's impossible;

I can't live without you! I want you every day, every night, beside me all night long.' His eyes will glow, he'll kiss me greedily: my cheeks, neck, and lips. He'll try to unbutton my dress, to get me excited too. Yes, my breasts are pretty and a little attention wouldn't hurt . . . Maybe I'd like it too much. But I don't want to. No, it's not that I'm prudish. I've got my own ideas about many things and a certain notion of how to live, but . . ."

She went back to the bedroom. Then the bathroom. She plucked a hair from the sink. She straightened the bottle of cologne. The mirror had fogged up, so she wiped it and looked at herself.

"Why complicate your life? You feel alone? If he leaves you you'll feel even worse. They're making a dress that'll be my favorite. They're fixing an antique ring that used to be my mother's; it'll be sumptuous, maybe too much for someone as young as me. I've got ten pairs of gloves and an exquisite lingerie collection. This year my bank account has grown considerably. No one kisses me. But kisses often turn out to be costly . . ."

A churchbell rang. It was three-thirty.

She felt like running away, escaping a danger she could scarcely identify. She'd been silly to invite him. She hadn't given it much thought, but he'd be full of hopes she couldn't bring herself to share.

Determined, she put on a felt hat and raincoat and shut the door behind her. As soon as she reached the landing, she smelled the rain. She was down the stairs like a shot.

The street was deserted; on one side was row of single-storey houses, on the other, a garden. When the trees along the wall were bare, she could see a tennis court and swimming pool from her window. In spring, the fragrance from the acacias and honeysuckle made her dizzy. When she left work in the evening, she approached the street slowly, savoring that intoxicating perfume, which at night filtered through her balcony.

It was drizzling. Everything glistened: the sidewalk, the cobblestones, the grass poking between the cracks. Water trickled down the walls and drops fell from tiled roofs. The sky looked like lead, and everything was immersed in milky radiance, as if the trees and houses got their light from an airshaft.

As she started walking, she wondered where she'd go. Where did this urge to flee come from, pushing her through the streets? On a windowsill stood a kitten with a string around its neck. Every time a drop fell on its nose, it looked up. Inside she could hear children screaming.

She walked with her hands in her pockets, her hat pulled down. The streets were deserted. The air seemed still. After a while, a woman carrying milk bottles crossed her path; the bottles clanked together. She passed a nursery school; she could hear the little kids singing. As she approached the center of town, there were more people in the street. Passers-by hurrying beneath umbrellas, with their hopes and their cares. The shop windows were full and some had turned their lights on. A grocer had covered his outdoor fruit stand with a big tarpaulin.

She entered a café. The men were playing billiards and cards. Some whispered and argued, as though they were talking business.

"A coffee."

"Our machine's just gone on the blink."

"Some herb tea, then."

And it kept drizzling. Cars passed, shiny in the rain, a rattling streetcar, a wagon, its drowsy driver wearing a wet sack on his head. People entered the movie house across the street. Inside the bar, a dreamy little boy slowly collected cigarette butts. A lottery ticket vendor asked if she'd like to try her luck; she declined with a weary gesture.

What about going to the movies? But she'd already seen the film. Queen Elizabeth's green feather fan. She remembered Her Majesty's shadow as she descended a staircase. That mirror with a queen inside it . . . She forgot the film. The rain reminded her of those lines by Valéry and she wondered why they were famous: whether Valéry had made them famous or the other way around.

She was beginning to feel tired. She paid and left.

It was still raining. It had been raining since early morning. No downpours; just a calm, steady drizzle. She walked beneath some trees. Their leafy branches met, creating a green, aqueous tunnel. She passed a church. The bells were striking four. Only four o'clock? Every peal stabbed her heart . . . It was absurd, what she was doing. Out of character. She ought to hail a taxi and give the driver her address. But she did nothing. Something stronger than herself held her back.

She couldn't help realizing that the man loved her. Eyes don't lie, and neither do tones of voice. But she had a past. Sooner or later, she'd have to tell him she'd done something crazy. Two things: loving and preventing her child's birth. He'd be four years old by now, and she wouldn't be alone.

But no, that wasn't why she'd left. "Then what was it?" she asked herself impatiently. "Why this fear of a new love? Why this self-absorption, as if you were a crotchety old lady?"

She hurried beneath the dense foliage. She could hear her steps, her breathing, the blood throbbing in her temples. She walked rhythmically. O my fair warrior! There was a bench every hundred yards on the promenade. She felt like sitting down, calmly savoring the undersea light and the sound of rain on the leaves. A kind of modesty held her back. A phrase from she didn't know where had been floating through her mind: *And on just such a night, Queen Dido called out from Carthage to fleeing Aeneas . . . and the lion's shadow frightened him . . .* No, that wasn't right: *And on just such a night, Queen Dido with a willow branch . . .* Now it was Dido who fled. She laughed and muttered: "Idiot!" Tomorrow, seated before the typewriter: "Dear Sir: The shipment of canned sardines, scheduled for mid-September, has been delayed due to circumstances beyond our . . ."

He must have climbed the stairs. Now he was probably ringing the bell with a bouquet in his hand, smoothing his jacket with a swift, unconscious gesture, breathing heavily because he'd mounted the steps quickly. Nothing. Emptiness and silence. He rang again. He grew impatient. He rang again. Nervously. More silence. Finally, with a last glimmer of hope, he'd ring again. Till, disappointed, he'd put on his hat and descend the stairs.

And she walked on. She'd never walked down so many streets in one afternoon. Her feet were frozen, but her face was sweaty. She walked for hours. When the bells struck seven, exhausted, she entered her street. The street said nothing: neither that he'd arrived happily nor that he'd gone away sadly. The

shadow of a streetlamp cracked into pieces on the wall and a radio sent out waves of waltz music.

Against the light, she saw the slender needles of rain. The sky was opaque: it would rain all night and then some more.

She groped her way up the steps, like a reveler returning from an orgy. The staircase said no more than the street.

She entered her apartment. A wave of perfume hit her. She'd dabbed some on the easy chairs, the ribbons on the curtains, when she'd finished cleaning. It was a perfume he liked, and she'd done it to please him.

She shut the door and, with a weary gesture, threw down her hat. She left her raincoat in the kitchen. Her head ached, her tongue was white as chalk, her legs hurt.

Everything was the same; the *aubepines* in Proust's book were surely prettier than ever. Who could imagine everything that had happened that afternoon? That is, everything that hadn't happened, everything irretrievably submerged just when it was about to become real? She hardly could herself. Not even her. She knew nothing. Neither why she'd left nor why he'd come. "I can't think about what I don't know; for me it doesn't exist. China suddenly exists when I think of it, when I say: 'Flowering cherry tree, Fire dragon . . .' China or Japan . . . The Dalai Lama's dead if I think he is. The man I expected this afternoon existed because I'd met him, and I existed for him because he wanted me. God, what a headache!"

She entered her bedroom. She'd skip supper. All she wanted was to sleep. She started undressing . . . *Oui, c'est pour moi, pour moi/que je fleuris, déserte!* Now she'd have the imprints of kisses on her shoulders, her arms, her lips; she could hold onto them and they'd keep her company at night. She could slip them beneath her pillow and maybe they'd come out while she was sleeping, returning to the same spots on her arms and shoulders.

She put on her prettiest, most diaphanous, most bridal nightgown. The perfume made her head spin. She turned off the light and opened the balcony doors. The light from the streetlamp entered her room. The monotonous rain fell relentlessly. The night smelled wet. It must be cold.

Barefoot, she went to fetch the decanter of cognac. She was shivering. The bottle was cool against her fingers. "I'll get drunk," she thought. O my fair warrior!? . . . And she drank three glasses in quick succession, all full to the brim.

Translated from the Spanish by David H. Rosenthal