

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Perry Glasser
Finish With the Rose

1

She peers up at him from under the hotel sheet at his question.

If you really want to know, I'll tell you.

He says he really wants to know.

I was always the second or third best-looking girl in the room. When the boys struck out with number one, they'd move on to me. Nice boys, but leftovers. I dyed my hair blue; I dyed it yellow. Only the girls noticed. It never mattered to the leftovers. Then they would discover I was the smartest girl in the room. I was not second smartest. I was always smartest. Being smart is easy. It takes no work. You just are. It also did me no good. I had to dumb down. I did that. I hated doing that, but I did it. I got tired of dumbing down, though, so to keep the boys interested, even the leftovers, I had to get good at something else.

She pulls the sheet back over her head.

2

In the rough weave at the edge of the coarse blanket, a black geometric line turns on itself at right angles, then turns out, then in, zigzagging a tribal pattern through the warp and woof of his red wool blanket. The design creates boxes that are not boxes.

Iris naps in his home as though she floats on a cloud. The blanket snakes through her long, bare legs, but only half-covers her hips and the two inch yellow tattoo of the angry wasp at the small of her back. She breathes easily. Her full lips part. The titanium barbell in her tongue glitters.

3

Mac cannot recall when or where he obtained that blanket. He knows even less about Iris's tattoos.

He knows it started like this:

Can I borrow your Blackberry?

It was early morning at LaGuardia, their plane was delayed, and the attendant at the front desk of The Flagship Lounge slept. That's how she managed to sneak in. Muted jets moved beyond the thick glass. They talked.

She had had purple eyes from birth. It was why her mother had named her Iris.

Why not Violet?

If I see the bitch, I'll ask her.

4

After she borrowed his phone, it vibrated twice silently against his hip. He ignored it.

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Boarding Mac turned to the left and a first class seat, Iris to the right. Before they told him to turn off electronic devices, he checked. Her text message had gone to an area code he recognized in New Jersey. Her message read *Back off*. He never reads the replies.

5

At the luggage carousel, Mac offered to split a cab fare. Iris was staying at the Drake. She had a lot of stiff, black luggage.

Camera stuff, she explained. *Where is yours?*

Mac travelled with a soft Orvis leather bag that fit in an overhead. He had had no reason to stop at the carousel. The fact was not lost on her.

At the hotel, Iris again borrowed his Blackberry. She worked the keypad with her thumbs.

My number, she said. *You look okay for an old guy.*

6

He sent a text message: *dinner?*

She returned: *wasp> dove> rose* and an hour that suggested cocktails first.

7

They never got to order salad. In that big bed at the Drake, Mac learned that clavicle to knees, Iris was inked. A peacock among vines curled from her left shoulder to her left hip; across her back, two wolves in a pine forest howled to a starry sky. From her right rib cage beneath her breast to her left thigh, over the roiling sea that was her belly, a Spanish galleon flew the Jolly Roger beneath a cloud covered moon, its rigging intricate, pennants in the roiling wind. A green serpent entwined about her right leg, its green scales iridescent, yellow eyes mean slits, jaws open wide on the top of her foot, forked tongue around a very red apple, fangs dripping silver venom.

The wasp was at the small of her back. With his tongue, lips, and fingers, he moved to the dove. He finished with the rose.

When had women started to come with printed instructions?

Why all the ink?

One thing led to another.

8

Iris established an address, but her true residence becomes the two drawers at the left of his mostly empty bureau.

At least twice each month, at the Institute, Iris's purple eyes take in the Impressionists. She sits for as much as an hour before Cezanne's Basket of Apples shaking her head at the wonder of it.

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The black and white series of photos she shoots on the shore near Winnetka is stunning. The clouds, the wind, the light — the project moves Mac.

She frames his favorite print, a shot of rusted junk half-submerged in restless water. Junk, junk that is radiant, junk the color of mercury, junk seen anew. In a way Mac cannot name, the photo breaks every rule he knows. Still, it is beautiful.

9

An architect, Mac's only rule is to keep the roof up. He believes in clean lines, open, well-illuminated spaces awash in natural light defined by polished, hard, highly reflective surfaces. His work is in demand on two continents.

Mac is 46; Iris 23, exactly half his age. He calculates the formula for Sexual Acceptability,

$(\text{His Age} \div 2) + 8 = \text{S.A.}$

She is too young. It must turn out badly.

10

That rainy day when the condo's landline rings, Iris's eyes darken with impatience. Wearing only Mac's pale blue cotton boxer trunks, she throws off the coarse Indian blanket and walks barefoot to the white wall phone. She answers on its seventh ring. She crosses an arm over her breasts.

Iris, she says. I'm his friend.

I am not here.

Her hand covers the mouthpiece. He reads her silent lips. *Your daughter.*

11

Sixteen years ago, Mac knocked up Denise. A mistake. Her winey tongue probed his mouth while she urgently hiked her skirt at an office party. When Jennifer was born, Denise took the baby back to her mother in Wisconsin.

At first, Mac did the right thing. He sent money. He still does. From when Jenn was 5 to when she was 11, Mac saw his daughter twice each year. They flew to places with sand and ocean. After she moved to Ohio, Denise still sent periodic photographs of Jenn, but then that stopped, too.

12

Jenn says she is at the bus terminal and does not know what to do. The kid sounds terrified.

Mac hops into soft designer jeans and sweeps the long tail of a white dress shirt into the waistband. He rolls up the sleeves rather than search for cufflinks. He steps into Italian loafers.

Iris gnaws her lip. *Do you want me to go with you?*

He hesitates, then nods.

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Iris pushes her head into a red T-shirt and zips herself into her skinny jeans, slashed at the thighs and knees. *Going commando, she says. I can go home to my place, if you want. After, I mean.*

Why would I want?

13

The lower level of the terminal reeks of shit. Somewhere a toilet overflows. The blue cement floor is tracked with wet shoe prints like dance steps for beginners.

Jenn hides in a shadowy recess near a bank of vending machines. She slouches so low on a plastic aqua seat that she seems to sit on her neck. Crossed at the ankles, her feet rest on a soft duffel bag. The laces of her black Converse sneakers are undone. Her black jeans are faded to near gray, threadbare at the thighs. Her North Face black puffy is unzipped.

She is someone's daughter. She is everybody's daughter. She is his daughter.

Daddy?

Her embrace hurts his neck. He last saw her, a flat-chested kid who ran a 60-yard dash at a school event and finished breathless, flushed, sweaty, and very proud. This stranger who is his daughter has breasts and hips. Her hair reeks of cigarettes. His daughter is one of those kids who look like she chews iron nails and spits thumbtacks.

Mac shoulders her bag. The bag's bottom is damp. Outside the terminal, walking through gray slush, his Italian shoes are ruined.

In the waiting cab, Jenn sits between him and Iris.

Does your mother know where you are?

No.

We need to call her.

Fuck her. Is it okay if I say 'fuck'? She quickly turns to Iris.

I've heard the word before, Iris says. Does your mother at least know you are all right?

Why hadn't he thought to ask that?

14

From behind a bedroom door, Mac whispers into his cell phone, *Jenn is here.*

Is Mickey with her?

Mickey?

He's not some goddam mouse, Mac. If he shows up, hide the silver.

What should I do?

It's your turn, Mac. I am done. I hear they have schools in Chicago.

He holds a dead phone.

15

While Iris strips the ivory comforter from the white daybed in his office to replaces it with a top sheet and the red Indian blanket from the living room sofa, Jenn showers.

She emerges from the steamy bathroom wearing two hotel quality white towels, walking as if she has been mostly naked before Mac her whole life. One towel wraps her hair like a turban; the other hangs from her breasts and to her mid-thighs.

Iris is nice. She looks hot. How old is she?

Iris comes from his office as he tells Jennifer.

Wide-eyed, Jennifer says, *You could be like my sister.*

16

That night, Iris rolls to her hip, her back to him.

She says you're hot.

She's right.

They spoon chastely until Iris's even breathing tells him Iris sleeps.

In the small hours, Mac rises to revisit Woodford Reserve. This is part of his process.

The lobby of the building he dreamed for an investment group in Bern will need stone trim, a geometric line the color of Iris's eyes, a line that turns in on itself, then turns out, then in again, zigzagging across the wall. Agate. The purple stone line will be agate set in pink marble. He knows a quarry in Italy. Something can be arranged.

Mac sips his bourbon. When his thoughts move from architecture to Iris and Jennifer, he feels like a swimmer on a moonless night striking out for the faint glow of an invisible shore.

17

Bern summons him. Their fax is utterly incomprehensible; their concerns absurd. Nothing but a face-to-face will do.

Just go, Iris says. We'll be fine.

18

In Bern, at lunch he inadvertently mentions his daughter's unexpected return. Three embarrassed middle-aged executives in midnight blue suits, white shirts, red ties, and no-nonsense back wingtips listen politely and then change the topic back to expenses and the colors of stone.

In what someone must have thought was an anonymous kindness, four glossy brochures are delivered to his hotel room the night before his departure.

He arrays them on the hotel's poplin bedspread.

Difficult daughters are a cottage industry in Switzerland. The brochures for schools in Geneva, Zurich, or Bern, show girls like milkmaids, smiles bright, faces framed by yellow braids and blue ribbons. They wear

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pleated tartan skirts, white shirts with broad, rounded collars, and knee high socks that embrace thick calves as they charge over grass fields, field hockey sticks aloft. All four brochures include the word *discipline*, the coded promise that means No Fucking.

19

Mac returns. He is startled to find Jenn alone. Iris works, of course, at a store that sells art supplies. How could he think she would stay on watch in the condo?

His daughter's narrowed eyes observe him. A book lays open on her lap. Though he could not expect Jenn to rush into his arms, when she looks at him as if he is an unwelcome interruption, he feels it.

He unpacks, a practiced five-minute exercise that produces two packages to be delivered to the concierge. Anything soft goes to a laundry; anything stiff goes to a dry cleaner. His clothing will come back folded, starched, wrapped in brown paper or hung in polyethylene, ready for his next departure. The advantage of wealth is that other people compete to take care of tedium.

He returns to Jenn.

Cigarettes?

On the patio. I forgot to close the slider.

Discipline and Field Hockey.

She'd boiled water while he unpacked, found a tin of the Earl Gray, but is defeated by loose tea. He explains the infuser. She watches him with dead serious eyes.

What's the book?

History. Something about diseases and armies. It's cool. It came off your shelf. Didn't you read it?

The decorator bought it.

Fake smarts, huh?

Jenn takes her tea with milk and sugar. He takes only lemon. *I think it is cool that you hang out with Galleon.*

Galleon?

Iris. She's Galleon. You know. Galleon.

What's Galleon?

Not what. Who. Jenn stares at her father across the small table until her dark eyes widen. *You really don't know, do you?*

I'm sure you'll tell me.

She does.

Galleon is the legendary porn actress who disappeared after a half dozen loops and one feature-length DVD. The internet gossip was that either she had been killed by the mob, sold to a vile Arabian prince enam-

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ored of snuff films, or that her father, an Anglican minister from Australian, had kidnapped her back to Brisbane.

Everybody knows Galleon. It's so cool you are with her. She's like famous.

It would be cool if it were true.

The kid's voice becomes shrill. *Don't turn into Denise, okay? Believe me. Iris is Galleon. The hair should be blond and longer, but you can't change those tats.* Her voice rises in pitch. *Why doesn't anyone ever believe anything I say, ever?*

Jenn slams the door to his office, what has become her room. He breathes through his tea's vapors. His daughter shrieks. *My father is fucking the best blowjob in America and wants me to calm down? My family is insane! God! Fuck! Fuck you all! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Why is his 16-year old daughter familiar with the tattoos on a porn star?

20

When Iris returns that evening, she knows Mac knows. He sees the knowledge in the line of her shoulder. She carries enough Pad Thai for three. Mac and Iris use chopsticks; Jennifer needs a fork.

Later, alone in his darkened bedroom, Iris explains. *I came out of a shower. I was doing my hair in your shorts and a t-shirt. I was not thinking, she saw the ink.*

Earbuds in place, in her room, Jenn warbles unmusically at top volume.

Iris slips a DVD into his laptop. *You may as well see the worst,* she says.

After some nondescript music and a roll of credits. the actors shed their clothes. The blonde with the elaborate tattoos closes her eyes and parts her lips in ecstasy. Galleon is Iris; Iris is Galleon.

Money?

I was not starving or anything. They sit beside each other on Mac's bed. *My parents were good to me.*

Look, I was on one side of the camera and then I was on the other. There are drugs. There are always drugs. They care about the drugs, but no one cares about the sex. This is business. It's acting. Ted wanted a girl-girl and I said Sure, why not? I was totally buzzed, but not that much. It seemed like fun. The next thing I know I am Galleon. Guys in bars look at me like they are trying to remember where they know me from. The nice ones wave; the worst ones say some gross shit. Women ask for autographs. It's over, though. Only one person has recognized me since I came to Chicago.

Jenn?

No. besides Jenn.

And?

And what? I handled it.

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On the computer's screen, six legs shift around a kneeling Galleon and the howling wolves inked on her back. The blond version of his lover eagerly fellates three men while she is penetrated anally. Mac shuts the laptop.

It's a job, not a vocation. I'm Iris. That woman on the screen is Galleon.

Behind him, her hands rest on his shoulders, but he does not respond.

Doesn't that hurt?

Only at first. Do you really want details? Look, they planned big money. They were talking crossover to film. Ted had plans, the prick. Then he told me he had taken money from partners, so I had to deliver. I was scared. These are the kinds of partners that come after you. I am not that stupid, you know? So the smartest girl in the room ran as far as she could. I met a nice man and borrowed his Blackberry.

He heard himself say, *You'd better leave in the morning.*

Why wait? She stuffs a flight bag with her clothes.

On the grass playing fields of Bern, red-faced girls with thick ankles run with hockey sticks aloft.

21

Another night, he hears Jenn laugh through her door. She must be on her cellphone. Women had laughed like that all his life. The night Jenn was conceived, her mother had laughed exactly that way. Iris could laugh like that, summoning a sound from deep in her throat that had little amusement to it, something too feminine to call a chuckle, a sound to inflame the imagination, a chortle that hinted at promises that could never be delivered.

22

It finishes like this:

His daughter has nowhere to go, so he says, *Stay.*

I hate fucking Columbus, but my friends are there.

You'll make new friends.

They sit on redwood lawn chairs on the narrow cement patio. The sun warms them. Near shore, sailboats dot the lake.

Jenn smokes; they negotiate rules. Curfew, boys, friends, homework, clothes. Jenn knows every touch point. Her phone is absolutely off-limits. If she dies, he has to marinate her phone in salt water and then smash it with a hammer. He is probably the last person on the planet not to be on Facebook, but if he ever joins, he cannot friend her. Too creepy. If the door to Jenn's room is closed, he has to knock. *And I need Pop-Tarts But no donuts. Never any of those greasy pimple producers. No donuts. But I need the Pop-Tarts. Strawberry. With the icing.*

The wind off the lake snatches her cigarette smoke around the edge of the building.

His only demands are that she attend school, bring no boys home, and never disappear overnight.

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This school. Are there uniforms and shit?

Don't know. You can travel by cab.

We're rich, aren't we?

We do all right.

She considers that. *I never did any needle drugs*, she adds suddenly.

23

At 4 in the morning, weeks later, Mac stares at the empty couch. Uncensored mind-movies have popped up again to interfere with his process. The sun threatens to rise over Lake Michigan. He sits on one of two blonde wooden stools by a counter they called the breakfast nook.

He sips bourbon from a coffee cup and pulls close about his shoulder the coarse woolen blanket. Then he lifts the picture of junk made beautiful from the wall. His thumb traces the beveled edge of the frame, smooth as Iris's shoulder.

He calls.

We should talk.

I miss you, too.

I don't get all this stuff. Am I too old to get it?

Not to me.

This Galleon thing. It's going to bother me.

Only if you let it. Let her go, Mac. Let her go. Please.

Controlling the movies in his mind will never be easy. Iris may be his, but Galleon belongs to everyone, alive, forever young, forever fucking in a world without time, edges, or endings, free in a world free of restraint. If there will be rules he can never understand, what can he trust? What will he become? There are too many questions, no answers, and all he knows is that it is 4 in the morning and he needs to call her because if he does not call her, how will he go forward? Life is going to be too hard.

You should have told me.

He waits until Iris asks, *What do you want us to do now?*

He pulls the red Indian blanket closer about his shoulders, the blanket with the broad black line that turns and turns again at right angles along the edge, making boxes without boundaries that are not boxes, a crooked line in the warp and woof of coarse cloth, boxes that seem one thing but are another.

Iris asked, but Galleon pleads, *What should we do now? What do you want to do?*