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The Leech

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The road was narrow. It ran through a young innocent woods of birch saplings. The scent of spring, a thick smell of winterbroken, decayed boughs and thawed, rich, warm humus, drifted through the open car window. Pale-yellow morning rays glistened on the chrome hood ornament and dazzled on the white finish of the long, elegant car."

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The Leech

THOMAS McKAGUE

The road was narrow. It ran through a young innocent woods of birch saplings. The scent of spring, a thick smell of winterbroken, decayed boughs and thawed, rich, warm humus, drifted through the open car window. Pale-yellow morning rays glistened on the chrome hood ornament and dazzled on the white finish of the long, elegant car.

Why'd ya hav'ta come this way for?" said the driver a thick-set, rich looking man, to the girl on the opposite side of the front seat. As if interrupted from some sensuous pleasure, she said curtly, "You needn't swear." And then her eyes sparkled suddenly as she raised her bare, small shoulders almost to her ears in a gesture of childlike excitement. "It's spring! I want to see the earth again. The flowers and the buds. . . ." She gazed out the window at the blur of woods, her lips shaped in a puffing smile.

"Humph!" he snorted, pressing harder on the accelerator. As he sped along the rough road, he became increasingly annoyed at the numerous ruts and small rocks.

A scratching, groping sound in the back seat broke her quiet, enchanted spell. She leaned over the seat and clutched at the furry creature scampering on the floor. "Come on, Monkey. Come to your friend," she said in soft, caressing tones. The monkey was small and pathetically thin, but had large, shimmering, liquid-black

eyes which protruded from its bony skull. She pressed the melancholy face to her firm young breasts. "Monkey, was it dark and lonely back there? Oh, we'll fix you up." She opened the glove compartment, took out a pint bottle of whiskey, poured some in a paper cup produced from her mammoth handbag, and trickled the warm-smelling stuff down the monkey's open, eager mouth.

The driver showed no surprise at this, but merely gave a faint sarcastic grunt as he continued to drive along, watching for mudholes in the road.

The animal jumped up and down when he had finished drinking the liquor, screeching and hissing and making sounds that could only be interpreted as laughter. She rubbed its little pink palms between her delicate hands and kissed its bony head. "Now you feel better, don't you?"

A deer watched the long white car speed by from its secure camouflaging of intertwined, budding birch branches. It caught a glimpse of the young girl sitting by the window in her black cocktail gown, tiara sitting askew on the orange-tinted pompadour of the otherwise fine black hair, with the monkey crawling around her shoulder and toying with the multitudinous loops of colored beads slinging from her long, fresh, tight-skinned throat.

She placed a cigarette in a foot-long silver cigarette holder and lit it, swinging her free hand out the window, letting the warm moist air rush against it. The smoke made the monkey sneeze and she giggled gleefully. And then, without any change of expression on on her pink face, she said softly, "Be a darling and stop the car. I want to go for a hike with Monkey."

A sharp guttural groan escaped from his sagging mouth. Red faced, he began to talk. "I should've known it the minute I laid eyes on you at that damn party. You're a case! A real case!" He stopped the car and stared fiercely at her calm, unperplexed eyes. "Now look, I've picked up a lot'a dizzy broads in my time, but you're. . . Once we get to Philly, if we ever find the main highway again, I'm gonna ditch you as fast as. . . Now get out and go for your damn hike, and bring that flea-bitten rag of an animal with you!"

Not disturbed in the least by his outburst, she slid out of the car gracefully, carrying the monkey on her shoulder. Calmly she said, "Now wait here. We'll be back in no time at all." "Yea, sure!" he growled. "Damn broad'."

And she stood there for a while in the morning sunlight, now a charming, innocent-looking girl of twenty, slim, tall, dressed for a night club, holding a small monkey to her chest, looking at the budding woods before her, smelling the real smell of spring, enchanted by this new, strangely familiar world, smiling. A shrill honk broke her spell, and an impatient voice boomed from within the car, "Hurrv up, dama ya! I don't wanna stay here all day!"

She didn't look back, but stroked the thin shaking body of the monkey. "Come on, we'll get away from that mean old man."

The lonely, quiet, crisp, sparkling woods greeted her as a friend. The monkey jumped from her arms and raced ahead; she took off her heels, lifted her gown above her knees, and ran barefooted after it, grabbing the low-hanging branches as she passed them with her free hand, tearing

off the yellow-green buds as she stumbled on the virgin earth. And then she slipped on a rotting mat of leaves, this time making no effort to get up, but rather she lay breathlessly, laughingly, looking at the pale-yellow morning rays that filtered through the scrawny network of white birch branches above. Birds chirped excitedly; a white rabbit hopped over her long, jeweled arm and sped onwards through the woods. She was happy.

But all the browns, yellows, greens, the blue sky above, everything in the reality of the woods was too bittersweet for her sensitivity. The smile left her face and she began to whisper through the blades of grass touching her cheek. "Well Mama, I'm home again. 'Don't know why I left when you died, but I just couldn't live in that dull town anymore. I had to run away.'" Suddenly the monkey pounced on her sprawled body. "Monkey here understands, don't you Monkey?" The creature did not seem to understand; rather it screeched and jumped up and down on her stomach, a sudden terror oozing from its protruding black eyes.

"You know, Monkey, I can still picture that summer morning years ago when I was playing on the back porch and Mama brought out a tray of freshly-baked oatmeal cookies for me. I can still see her understanding smile, and I can smell the warm cookies even now - it was a kind of sweetish, earthy smell. But I musn't think of those things. It makes me sad."

In her reverie she did not notice the monkey's nervous screeching and its constant tugging at her beads. But a sudden cold, slimy feeling at her calf made her spring up. The monkey gave out a deathly howl and clutched desperately at her neck, with big monkey tears swelling around the

edges of its popping eyes. She stared down, cautiously, stiffly, at her calf. On its shapely curve clung a large, black-brown speckled leech, unmoving, sucking her fresh red blood.

For a moment there was utter stillness. She and the monkey looked down quietly at the feasting parasite; even the birds were still, terrified. The whole woods, the sun, seemed to be peering downward at the helpless calf. She did not know what to do. And then she screamed.

A million terrorized birds fluttered and chirped in the trees; the monkey clawed at her neck, screaming hopelessly; she screamed again; she ran to the car, tripping many times and screaming all the way; she pounded on the car door, hysterical, crying; she tore the monkey from her throat and dashed it to the ground; she flew at the front seat, squirming, digging into the leather with her fingernails; she stiffened, shook throughout her body, and then collapsed. The man stared at her prostrate body aghast, not understanding. And all the while the ugly leech continued to suck her fresh red blood.

Later she found herself laying on the back seat. As she peered out the window, she saw that the day had grown cloudy, and that they were now driving on the main highway. He turned to her and said, "You alright now?" She nodded. There was a pause. "I took the thing off your leg and bandaged the mark."

She looked down at her calf. There was a neat white bandage over the wound, with red mercurochrome dye smeared around the edges. She would push what happened in the beautiful woods miles behind out of her mind.

The oozing, slimy creature was forgotten. She would tell her friends she had scratched her leg on a car door.

“Be a darling and light my cigarette, would you?” The foot-long silver cigarette holder with an unlit cigarette in the tip hung over his shoulder. “And give me the bottle. Monkey here looks sad and lonely again.”

And the long white car sped gracefully down the highway towards Philly.