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Tale of Twelve

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Tale of Twelve

Abstract

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

"She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Sue was nineteen, but her fully matured body and large frame made her appear in her early thirties. It was sad to see her crouched like a Hindu on that straw and filth covered floor clutching her child as though at any moment it might be snatched from her. She sat motionlessly with her bare knees pointing awkwardly at oblique angles toward the stone walls. How I would have dressed this queen! With gowns and furs and a tiara for her long black hair. But 1as it was her beauty was housed in a short plain dress made gray and thin from too many washings. And yet she had elegance. Her smudged forehead and darkened eyes could not obscure this fact. And she was gentle. She shared her natural warmth with her child and with an infant lamb which lay curled snugly against her hip."

Cover Page Footnote

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Tale of Twelve

By THEODORE VALLONE

"She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She was nineteen, but her fully matured body and large frame made her appear in her early thirties. It was sad to see her crouched like a Hindu on that straw and filth covered floor clutching her child as though at any moment it might be snatched from her. She sat motionlessly with her bare knees pointing awkwardly at oblique angles toward the stone walls. How I would have dressed this queen! With gowns and furs and a tiara for her long black hair. But as it was her beauty was housed in a short plain dress made gray and thin from too many washings. And yet she had elegance. Her smudged forehead and darkened eyes could not obscure this fact. And she was gentle. She shared her natural warmth with her child and with an infant lamb which lay curled snugly against her hip."

"Lucia's mother stood waiting patiently with a large bowl in her hands while her daughter unfolded, adjusted, and readjusted the table cloth she had spread upon the warped boards of the outdoor table. Since the first hot days of summer, the family ate dinner together under the shade of an ancient rusty-leaved apple tree which stood just beyond the path leading to the fields. It was too stuffy to eat indoors, and besides Lucia could not bear to be separated from her beloved tree. This little twelve year old tomboy with bluejeans and chestnut-colored pigtails made the upper stories of the tree her playground from sunup to sundown. Even when ordered by her mother to set out a few dishes, she could not forget the tree, and so she danced and jiggled around the table like leaves shaken by the wind. Her mother seemed not to notice Lucia's antics and went about her own work. Perhaps she remembered her own childhood days and realized how quickly they could slip away. She was young herself, though the hard work required of a farmer's wife had left disastrous effects upon her health. An appearance of oldness seemed to extend to the very spirit of this small, fragile woman. And indeed it was a spirit dulled by constant strife with herself, her husband, and the world. Her graying hair was tightly drawn back from her plain and featureless face—a face which could do nothing but wrinkle with age. Dressed, as all peasant women are, in a long black dress and shawl, she could see herself with ugly hump-backed ladies on the way to light candles or to the evening novena. This she could see all too plainly and it made her bitter to think there was no escape.

When the table was set, two men appeared on the path walking slowly homeward. As they passed the storage shack the larger of the two pointed

toward the structure and grunted. The younger man said nothing but continued to walk with his eyes straight to the ground. In a moment his companion ducked into the doorway and was gone. When Raffaello reached the table his wife and daughter were already seated and waiting. Together they blessed the food and began to eat.

'Isn't he coming?' the wife asked sullenly.

'You know he will not say grace with us. Ah, see, he is coming now.' "

"Let me tell you about the fat man. He was amusing to look at. He wore a short sleeved shirt with an open collar and large baggy trousers which were spotlessly white also. Even his carefully clipped hair was white. There was no other color to him except for a tanned face and a black leather belt which he wore loosely around his waist. As he swayed and waddled down the path he looked like an enormous cloud the wind was playfully pushing along. But when he plopped down on the bench, his mass seemed to consolidate and then he looked like one large melon ripening in the sun."

"For days now she had sat alone with her child and allowed no one to go near. It was the product of her own flesh and the season of impulse which she held in her arms. Her child was premature and sickly and as she bathed it with her tears she thought her love would have the strength to nourish it back to health. She wanted so badly to love it, yet she was unsure. It was her baby and it was her ruin: how could she love both? And if she loved the infant, had she to love the sin of its conception? Her mind was unsettled and unclear. She thought back to that night she crossed the threshold of womanhood. It was then her dream began. The hostile world became so calm and loveable that she entered a sleep from which she had not yet awakened. Now her dream was an ecstasy which grew weaker with time, but one which she would not give up."

"*'Nacita e morte sono accidenti naturali, sposalizio, noi lo possiamo scanzare. Non è vero, Raffaello?'* (Life and death are natural accidents, marriage we can avoid. Is that not true, Raffaello?) the large man asked with a slightly distorted smile on his opulent lips.

'Yes, yes. You always were a clever one with sayings, old man. Ha Ha.'

Raffaello jerked his head quickly toward Lucia and met her bright eyes with a stern countenance. 'Lucia! Stop that giggling. You know it aggravates me. Here, pass this nil.' Then calming his voice he said, 'Tomorrow remember to first pour two full spoons of oil into his bowl before you add the *scarola* leaves. He likes his salad rich.'

With both hands Lucia carefully took hold of the tiny crystal decanter which seemed so out of place among the plainer ornaments of the table. The rays of the noon-day sun struck and held fast within the bottle and the golden liquid shimmered as she placed it before the feasting man. He gave her a kind, gentle smile which she returned a hundred times magnified.

'How jolly he is,' she thought. 'He is always joking with daddy. I know I will come to like him more and more. I will.' "

"Yes, she loved the infant. She could no longer doubt it. Every last fragment of energy she possessed was now focused on one end—that it might live. Before its birth she had prayed that it would be a strong baby and live. But always then she kept within her a faint hypocritical fear that her prayers might be granted. Now when her mind and soul were of one accord she could not pray. She was too ashamed, too proud, too overcome by the beauty of this skinny red babe. She felt too close to God to speak. But with the slow ebbing of the child's life her spirit waned. She ceased to believe in the omnipotence of her role as creator and so more and more she found herself on her knees. Still without that total air of resignation due of more ethereal beings, she whispered, 'Our Father . . . ' "

" 'Our Father, Who art in heaven,' she prayed and you pray likewise. But you are mistaken. Your father is here. Do you not meet him a thousand times each day? Why will you not know him? Your father gives to you life and energy . . . he holds your mortgage. Your father gives to you sons . . . he makes you sleepy. And he takes away. He takes away your failures because he gives you pride. He makes you religious because you are lonely. He anoints you with the oils of success, wealth, and fame because he, too, gets sick of your petitions and promises, your holy sobbing voices. He turns the hourglass of causality so that good runs into evil, and evil into good. He invented death because there were too many practicing martyrs. "

"What I remember most about the old man is not his aphorisms, but the queer sheepish grin which accompanied so vast a bulk. With his hooked nose turned downward and the rounded corners of his mouth turned upward, he gave a perfect appearance of a boy who had stolen candy, or one who had stepped on a toad. A boy! He was too large to be a man! An elephant was a pigmy to him. As he ate Raffaello looked at him in disgust. And when he reached across the table to spear sausages with his fork, Raffaello shuddered.

'Aren't you done yet?' he said angrily. 'We have finished ten minutes ago.'

'Ah, but you do not work as hard as I do,' said this farmer in white. 'And what's more, you must be good to me or I will tell where your money is hid.' At this he broke out laughing so loudly that Raffaello had no choice but to join him. And again Lucia giggled.

For Raffaello, as for his wife, there was no escape."

"Each new day was like the last. Each new table was set with the same ware, and each meal was filled with the same trivial talk. Finally with the

impetuosity that only a young mind has, Lucia one noon violated an unspoken rule.

'Why does the baby cry so much?' she asked. 'Doesn't she care for it?'

'Of course,' Lucia's mother replied compassionately looking at her daughter's bright eyes, 'but she has no milk.'

'But we have milk.'

'Goat's milk is too sweet. The baby will not take it.'

'We can go to the market for cow's milk.'

'No, my child,' she said. 'It all goes to the men who are fighting for our country.'

For a long time there was silence. However, failing to receive an expected reprimand, Lucia's dare increased. 'Hasn't the baby a father?'

'He is in the war, God save him. He had to leave his wife to fight for our liberty. She was with child when she came to us last December.'

'Was he at Anzio?' Lucia asked rapidly.

'Be quiet!' commanded her father. 'You ask too many questions, you are too noisy. Why can't you . . . ?'

'No!' her mother sharply interjected. 'Let her talk. It is only natural she would wonder.'

'Al right, all right,' he said quieting himself. 'He was at Anzio. And this man is her godfather. There, now you know everything.'

Then slowly a wry smile came over his face at the thought of what he had just said."

"Her tiny room formed her retreat. There under a few square yards of thatch she had watched the winds and rains, fiery sunsets, and cold star-filled skies. Now that was past. The child which she grasped to a heart of quickening terror was dead. How long was it before she would admit the fact? For one, two, three days—who can tell?—she hung on to that motionless remnant of her dream."

"Somewhere high in the branches of the olive trees, cicadas buzzed a dull monotonous song while, as if without heed to this phenomenon, cloud formations became mobile and began to shift. Here was the irony of the universe spoken in terms so simple and commonplace that even the least of

the schooled could understand. What is the power of sages and philosophers standing in the naked face of nature? They are voiceless dying men.

The winged creatures, so plentiful that August, were always accurate when they sang. It meant the following day would be bright, dry, and intolerably hot. No field laborer had ever ignored this sign, and always before setting out at dawn he would slip an extra flask into his pocket to supplement an inadequate water ration.

But equally trustworthy was the sign given by the heavens. First white globules of misty cloud began to fuse and thicken. They grew dark with swelling, and then with great vertical development they became heavy, mountainous, cauliflower-like masses which hung overhead and threatened.

Sailors learn the sky before they learn the sea. The next day it would rain!"

"She waited until dusk. It came but she could not move. Everything seemed so different, so unreal. There seemed no reason for anything, not for herself, not for her child, not even for things impersonal. She would close her eyes and lapse into unconsciousness. Each time she awoke she saw only a colored blur. The world had melted and run together into a vast plain. And what was she?—one tiny upright speck of flesh. She could not bear it. She wanted only to spend her eternity in that spot, to lose herself in the endlessness of space.

The evening became morning. Once or twice she was shaken to reality by the violent clap of thunder born of a tempest in the making. 'Before the rain comes,' she said, and slowly she crept out of her shelter into the open air. Dragging a shovel behind, she made her way across an open field and then down a shallow incline to where the soil was sandy. As she walked the sultry winds pressed close against her face and nostrils and made it hard for her to take a full breath. It was the bosom of nature returning to her the same full embrace which she had lavished on her child. But for her it carried no warmth and only sent an agonizing chill through her body.

She worked assiduously and with care, though not quickly. The sky had calmed a bit and there seemed less necessity that she should hurry. The dawn light was diffusing over the land. She had almost finished when her shovel struck something hard. She tried to dig around it but it was too large. Stone perhaps lay beneath the entire bottom of the gully where she was and she knew it was hopeless. She cleared the sand away from an area of the rock and then fell down weeping bitterly. Not even this last act as a mother could she do properly.

She wept long and hard but when she had lost all the fluid from which tears are made, she gained a sort of peace and her courage came back. She

placed the body of the child upon the stone and surrendered her right to its life. Her son she placed upon the stone.

There was a feeble light in the horizon just beginning to assert its presence as she walked homeward. The son, like a glowing coal struggling for life, rolled and trembled in the sky. Now its moment had arrived and it burst into radiance."

Struggle

Life often sparkles and shines.
Then suddenly I close my door
And fall into the night.
There I wander aimlessly
Until I find the stairs.
Then I climb and climb;
Finally I reach the top
And happily burst outdoors.

J. R. PIKE

And I,
in the dawning stillness of your eyes live reflected,
reflecting on the unideanness of you.

GREGORY CONCHELOS