Deedee And The Dove

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

"On Saturday mornings, DeeDee goes to the open market to buy clothes for Sra. Paloma. DeeDee lives in a dark brick building on Suffolk St., near Peretz Square, in lower Manhattan. Sra. Paloma lives across from her in a wan green tenement that has been swept by fire. Her walls are charred and blackened with soot, her floors sag from water damage, and her furniture - still soaked from the firemen's hoses - has sprouted mildew. It is rumored around the neighborhood that every morning the Senora scours her furniture in her dark fury, but the mildew always returns in a ghostly fashion."

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DEEDEE AND THE DOVE

On Saturday mornings, DeeDee goes to the open market to buy clothes for Sra. Paloma. DeeDee lives in a dark brick building on Suffolk St., near Peretz Square, in lower Manhattan. Sra. Paloma lives across from her in a wan green tenement that has been swept by fire. Her walls are charred and blackened with soot, her floors sag from water damage, and her furniture — still soaked from the firemen's hoses — has sprouted mildew. It is rumored around the neighborhood that every morning the Senora scours her furniture in her dark fury, but the mildew always returns in a ghostly fashion.

In Spanish, "paloma" means dove. DeeDee has never spoken to the Senora, but she is in love with her. So far, she has left the Senora a pink paisley scarf, a coral-colored dress, and a pair of sandals. DeeDee leaves the clothing in Sra. Paloma's mailbox as she would leave food for a wild animal, carefully, and with distance.

On Saturdays, the garment factory slides open its boxcar-like doors, and racks upon racks of clothing are rolled from the platforms out into the street. The clothing is cheap and florid, but the market swarms with people, most of them Spanish women.

For herself, DeeDee favors black, but the for Senora she chooses bright colors. Black, while chic, is also mournful. DeeDee's trembling hands rove systematically through the unfashionable dresses, the poorly tailored coats, and the torrid stretch-pants as if they were reading braille. She is searching for the one special item that would suit the pretty Senora. The clothes are cheap, and of a one-size-fits-all quality, manufactured with as much attention to detail as paper-doll clothes. Still, there is often a treasure to be found for the Senora.

DeeDee is a gaunt, brittle-looking woman of sixty-three. Her hair is red (dyed), and wiry. Her eyes are small and sparrow-brown. She wears green eye shadow, but no mascara. Two circles of rouge roughen her heavily powdered cheeks. She wears a black turtleneck sweater, and black stretch-pants which mold to her sticklegs like a second skin. Her most noticeable feature, however, is her palsy. Her head wobbles as if attached to a spring, and her hands are a bundle of tremors. She always seems to be moving, even when standing still. Because of her condition, she has trouble putting on her lipstick. She draws a bow over her thin lips, but the color spills out the sides, eluding symmetry. Then she looks for all the world as if she has just finished an orange popsicle.

Women's voices waft above the buildings from the marketplace, as they do a slow ritual dance around the racks. They are young, elderly, middle-aged; they carry babies or bundles of groceries; they wear kerchiefs
or shawls, blue jeans and tanktops, sneakers and orthopedic shoes; they have long swinging hair, or short matronly curls; they are corsetted and girdled, braless and barefoot, and they laugh. Their laughter is a loud cry along the street, a sign of discomfort, of relief. Someone sings, another has a guitar, and still another beats a small drum. A little girl weaves through the crowd with a small reed in her mouth, tooting shrilly in her stained dress. The bells at Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy play a tinny "Theme from Man of La Mancha." A dissonant chorus of neighborhood women sing "To dream an impossible dream," and then break off into shrieks of laughter.

DeeDee holds a lemon-yellow blouse studded with rhinestones, folded in her arms. She smiles wanly as she passes through the crowd toward home.

Suffolk is a pinched, dead-end street, shot through with potholes. It is dwarfed by a series of buildings, now condemned, once a slaughterhouse. Sometimes DeeDee imagines the smell of calves' blood rising in a steam above the pavement. When she walks down Suffolk, she has the sense that she cannot breathe.

The hall in her building is dank, and smells of cigars, fried pork, and urine. She never feels safe until she is inside her apartment. The door opens to her bedroom, which is overwhelmed by an enormous heart-shaped bed trimmed with lace and pink satin ribbon: a valentine from her marriage. A profusion of satin pillows clutters the bed, and a few have fallen to the floor. Beneath a padlocked window is a windowseat crammed with knick-knacks: figurines, jars, vases, a hand-mirror, a box of stale cookies, a portable T.V. set, and a cactus that has lost most of its needles. A spindly Wandering Jew hangs from the window, its purple and green leaves trailing from a bone-dry pot of dirt.

In one corner is a stack of Reader's Digest magazines, a white wicker divan, and a small table with a dirty glass on it. The table has a picture of the Grand Canyon etched on its top. DeeDee shoves her purse on a nightstand near the bed that is covered with an array of cures: Tums, Nyquil, Milk of Magnesia and Sucrets. Looking at the nightstand she thinks, "I'm old." Beneath the stand on a little shelf is a copy of the Bible, a book by Norman Vincent Peale, and a worn copy of "Sweet Savage Love" by Rosemary Rogers. DeeDee puts Sra. Paloma's lemon-yellow blouse on the shelf, and goes into the kitchen. It is a nest of rags, dirty dishes, jam-jars, clumps of red hair, and dried-up plants. A few bananas moulder in a pottery bowl. She clears dishes from the table and sets them on the floor. There is still tomato sauce dribbled on the Formica, left from dinner two nights ago, and a crust of half-eaten bread wrapped in a napkin. DeeDee's latest project litters the table: she is making a wreath for the Senora, not a funeral wreath, but one of cheerful, bright flowers. When it is finished, DeeDee will tack it anonymously to Sra. Paloma's boarded-up door, but she is worried that it will never be done; her tremors make it a painstaking process. The flowers lie on
the table, in clusters of statis, gypsophelia, and colored straw, entwined with a circlet of grapevine. DeeDee wishes that someone had brought her a pretty wreath when her husband died, some years ago. It has been two weeks since Sra. Paloma’s husband was killed in the fire, and DeeDee has not seen one visitor at her door. The neighbors say that the Senora has gone mad from grief.

As DeeDee begins to weave the flowers around the vine, a flash of color catches her eye. Sra. Paloma is hanging the coral-colored dress that DeeDee bought her out to dry. The floor where she lives has been hollowed out from fire. She prefers a world made of ashes. Once, the police came for her and she screamed at them, and threatened to set them afame. She is not much older than twenty and is waiting for the police, or the attendants from Bellevue, to flush her out.

As Sra. Paloma moves quietly to the window, her long dark hair shimmers in the hot breeze of summer. The red coral dress ripples in the air like a bright, brave flag. The Senora has a smooth, dark forehead and black eyes lit by tiny fires. Her body is strong and vigorous. Her lips are pouting, dark like plums. Her hands and face are sullied with ash which is everywhere: in her skin, her mouth, her hair.

As if by telepathy, she turns toward DeeDee in a slow, almost calculated movement. She smiles slightly, ineffably, and nods to the old woman. When she moves back into the room, she is still smiling. Her hair swings softly, and brushes against her back. The red coral dress ripples in the breeze, and DeeDee, struck by love, waves furiously to the young woman, but the Senora does not see her.

Amy J. Bown