

## Lech

Fall is slowly settling in. Everyone loves fall. They go on and on about the colors, the leaves, the brisk air, pumpkin spice, what have you. I just miss the legs. The nearly bare shoulders, with only spaghetti strap threads for covering. The midriffs. Every year I think the same thing. Cool weather forces the heat out, and all of those beautiful legs with it. Pale, luminescent in the sun legs. Bronze legs, sleek, reflecting the light like mirrors. Muscular, running legs, each foot pound in the pavement sending a shock and a ripple through their every fiber. God bless women runners. Cold sets in and all of that beautiful glory is hidden from our eyes for months. Yoga pants help. At least the shape and the curve can be enjoyed. But I miss that smooth, lithe, surface you can almost feel with your eyes. It isn't only lust, though that's most of it; there's comfort. Age dulls lust, a little at least, making the peace that a warm, soft body gives through sight, to say nothing of the other senses, all the more powerful. I sit on a park bench, watching the warmth of the last legs of the season pass me by, isolating me with the profound joy that the mere sight of them brings. Beauty enriches in all its forms, even when the enjoyment thereof is tangled in Id.

Pigeons walk around me, pecking seed. Terminal dopes. I despise them but feed them. Little fools strutting around with necks jerking in ways that would kill a human neck. Mutant birds.

I sit on a bench on the outskirts of a small cement circle, surrounded by foliage turning warm yellow and orange, belying the slow, temporary death of nature. Hot colors juxtaposed against the onset of gray, blue, and white cold. Across the circle, on the opposite bench, sits a young man talking loudly into the phone. More loudly than he needs to. Loudly for my benefit, not for the poor soul on the other end of the line, or whatever you would call it in the cellular age. Life is a stage, he is the actor, and I am the unwilling audience. We're all forced to watch people as they act out some pathetic rendition of their life, acting impromptu, swept away by whatever populist trend they've chosen to allow to erode the last semblance of a personality they had. The stages change in form but the fundamentals remain the same. The online comments, the notes, the pictures, the stories, the pins, pokes, and pricks, all part of a vast fantasy photomosaic of the ideal self, and hence, an indisputable lie forced down the throat of every soul who can't seem to help their own dumb ass from becoming an audience, therefore a participant, eventually a respondent, and as such, one more cog in a network of ever extending self-delusion. We put forth a lie to others, because we care more about what they think we are, than about what we are in reality. Always happy, always having such an extraordinarily good time, until we decide we need to be sensitive, talk about an important issue, prove we're on the right side of history. Until we decide our emotional struggles need to be shared with a vague acquaintance from middle-school, or complete strangers. Until we want to say our opinion matters. Until we want to say look at me. It is all a bubble of narcissism. Self-re-probation, self-adulation, talking needlessly loud on the phone in public, all of it, onanistic.

My grandson set up social media for me, I never use it, or them, the different platforms as I guess they're called. One less monkey online won't hurt anything. I'll just sit in the cold and wait for warm weather to bring the legs back.

In the cold the women walk with arms pulled tightly in around them, as though their arms will keep in the warmth. Body language is isolated and isolating. In warm weather they walk open and free, they engage and take in the world. Occasionally they smile at you. Some harmless, impotent old codger. Never let the bitterness show in your eyes, you'll be rewarded with soft looks and ivory smiles; neither

are as freely given in winter. They're guarded closely in the cold but slip out almost involuntarily in the warmth. They'll never know how a simple smile redeemed an entire day.

*Winter and Summer, you return every night to a cold bed. Another day spent in the park, because you don't know what else to do. You swear there's still an impression of her gray-curled head in the pillow next to you. You remember the sagging skin of her neck that made her feel so self-conscious, the weighted flesh of her arms right above her elbows, all an essential piece of a needed whole now gone. You gaze through the space she used to occupy, into nothing, waiting for sleep. When you awake, you return to your bench.*

Beatrice loved the park. The outdoors in general. If it weren't for her I would have never gone camping. I hated camping, but I did like sex by the fire, when the campsite was isolated enough for me to feel comfortable that is. Her skin glowed in the firelight. The flames reflected off her eyes. She looked down at me, her smile tender. Brown curls hanging loose over her shoulders. Bare skin against black sky.

She had wanted children. So we had children. It's not that I didn't want kids, per say. I just never wanted to look into the face of another human being and see anything that looked remotely like me. My loneliness stared back at me through the eyes of my son. Anya's, the eldest, escaped my poison, but carried their mothers, a poison I couldn't see for years, blinded by love and lust perhaps.

There was something about Beatrice's voice. It was sultry. There was a depth you could get lost in. I used to get her drunk and make her read poetry. She would only read poetry when she was drunk. She hated it otherwise. It was so strange, the difference. Sober, she would mock poetry as boring, a waste of time, and when we were alone or with close friends who wouldn't think her illiberal, she'd call it faggy. Drunk, her voice would bring it to life in ways neither my voice nor imagination could. Poetry made her defensive. She would speak of it with a vitriol usually reserved for the memory of her father. Drink would loosen her for the better, just as it loosens the rest of us for the worse. She would soften. Whatever she read became art. I used to make her read Sydney. Particularly Astrophil and Stella No.2. "Not at first sight, nor with dribbed shot."

Snow settles on my shoulders, lightly, as though it were afraid of startling me. I was hardly aware of it until I realized I was covered. Winter faded in slowly, and then slapped us in the face with the first freeze. Couples walk through the park, huddled together, like refugees, searching for summer. My coffee has long gone cold.

I watched a man walk past, staring hard at the ground, as though it were his enemy. Something about him reminded me of my father-in-law, long dead, and never missed. The man's footprints remained long after he had gone, white dust slowly filling the ridges left in black ice. Footprints, like ghosts, something left behind. What are ghosts but memories; the impression of some horrible experience on time and space. Something terrible, that in it's anger and resentment wanted to be known, to let others know, and more importantly feel what had been felt, even if it was just a shadow. Revenge transposed. That footprint, fading away into white, was somehow oppressive.

My son, poor soul, looked just like him. Cool, gray eyes. That same strong jaw. Wide mouth that leered open when he laughed. An awkward looking child who grew into a handsome young man. I often wonder if he hadn't looked so much like her father if she would have loved him better. She had wanted a child, I'm convinced, to prove she wouldn't be like him. Imagine her horror when day by day her son morphed into a miniature version of him, in appearance at least. She punished him because she could never revenge herself on her father. She punished him, and we all suffered for it. Once the arguing started it never seemed to end. It started in adolescence and paused when he went to college. He didn't come home for Thanksgiving or for Christmas, and she was dead before Spring Break. An aneurysm.

I remember when the gray slowly crept into her hair, running like accents through the brown. She of course hated it. I loved it. I loved so many things about her that she was embarrassed by. One day she said she was going to color her hair. Rarely in my life have I ever put my foot down, so to speak. It was her choice ultimately, I couldn't really stop her when the shit hit the fan. I guess, she could see that I meant it. Experience, life, had added a new dimension to her in that gray. She didn't understand it, but she kept it for me.

Anya only calls me to lecture me, much like her mother did in the latter years of her life. Anya tells me to quit all my bad habits, just like Beatrice. Just like Beatrice, I have to assume it's out of love, but their voices never sound loving. They want me to stay healthy, but it doesn't feel like it's out of concern. They want a few more years of labor of some kind out of me. They worry about my longevity not because they want more time with me, but because they want the fruits of what more of my time spent at work, around the house, and so on and so forth will give them. I'm just a beast of burden. This is probably not what they mean, or what they feel in the long-run, but in the short-term, this is what they communicate, through tone and body-language, and what I think they secretly want. It's rare that a woman ever thinks about a relationship outside of what value, emotional or material, that it brings to them. I doubt I've ever met an unselfish woman. It's not their fault though, it's just evolution. We're all vulnerable in a cruel and unforgiving world, but they especially. They evolved to make use of other people, being trapped for nine months for the needs of another, who in hard times would likely die, or in good times wouldn't appreciate nine months of giving. Nine months of giving gives birth to a lifetime of demanding from both parties involved. Anya calls and I should be glad, but I know she's just going to complain, tell me not to do something that makes me happy, tell me all the things wrong with life and the world, when I know all of them and more, so much better than she, because I'm old, alone, bitter, and everything's been hurting for the last twenty years.

Jenny, the middle child, only calls on birthdays and holidays. That's fine. She's strong, unlike Anya. Anya had the talent, Jenny had the strength. Anya just needed a tiny bit of that strength, not much, a modicum, a negligible amount, but she never got it. For whatever reason, Jenny is the only strong one in the whole family. She married a nice young pissant of a man. No doubt she runs roughshod over him, but he probably likes it. He's a househusband, living the dream, looking after four out of seven of my grandchildren. Jenny, the career woman, somehow with more kids than my other two children combined. Parents aren't supposed to have favorites, but I suspect that we all do. Jenny is my favorite, even though we barely talk. Maybe because we never talk, because she doesn't need me.

My son never calls. Unless physically present, he communicates to me through his wife, a beautiful piece of ass named Trish. I feel guilty for admiring her body, but I'm fairly confident that's why my son married her. She's dumb, and beautiful. She never had any ambition outside of maintaining her

physique, which she does very well. She's had two out of seven of my grandchildren, and her body's still as tight as a teenager's. I do feel bad, about looking any time she bends over, or anytime she reaches for something in the kitchen, stretching out that long, shapely body of hers. She's kind to me, regards me as the father that she never had, or so she tells me, so I can't help but feel guilty when I watch her. Sometimes, they visit on holidays and stay the night, so we can get up and have a lazy morning in pajamas before Christmas presents, or an Easter Egg hunt. At night, after putting the kids to bed, she floats around the house wearing a long silk nightgown, which drapes lazily around her every curve, it's an image I carry with me into sleep. I do feel bad, but I'll be dead soon so what does it matter.

Anya had one child, shortly after she turned forty-two, and then had her tubes cut. A precocious little thing named Annaliese. Everyone tells me that she's my spitting image, in both looks and behavior. I don't know how I behave, and I barely know how I look. We're not supposed to have favorite grandchildren, but she's my favorite. As with most children, she finds joy in the most mundane things, and endless delight in sharing them with me. Very few of my grandchildren come and sit in my lap, without prodding from their parents. She comes to me freely. We sit in my rocker, and watch the sun set. I sing to her, badly, but she enjoys my croaking voice. She falls asleep in my arms. Anya takes her to bed, and I feel hollow.

Beatrice would have loved Annaliese, almost as much I. At least I think she would. In retrospect, Beatrice was not so tender a grandmother. She only met two of our grandchildren, both Jenny's. Jenny started procreating early, as she did everything else. She graduated college early and began her career early. Beatrice didn't seem very excited when Jenny told us she was pregnant. She didn't seem to care when our first grandson was born. Or when he called us some child-garbled variation of Grandpa and Grandma. Far more distant than I would have thought. She was austere as a mother. Firm with Anya, moderately lenient on Jenny, harsh with the boy. When we spoke of our children, she hardly ever called him by his name. I never understood why she wanted children so badly. She never seemed to like them.

Anya was conceived on a camping trip. I took her mother from behind. Beatrice scratched me a little, and I pulled her hair. A bizarre beginning for a life. We want to romanticize it, but when we step back and survey the scene, sans hormones, there's nothing beautiful about it. Passion is ugly. Glorious in the moment, but otherwise, quite ugly. Yet I can never escape it. My hands gripping her hips, leaving ten fading red fingerprints, our shadows on the tree line. Decidedly one of the better nights of my life. But I always felt guilty when I thought about it, in relation to Anya. Why should the animalistic passions of two people create a tiny little stranger? Why couldn't there be any dignity to it? Sex is why there is no God. How can life begin in such a selfish act? In the moment, there's no reason for it but pleasure, there is nothing but self. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar, or has no life in their blood. So what if you love your partner? Love is selfish too. Nothing is more selfish than love. I loved Beatrice, I wanted her, I never once thought about the person we might happen to create.

For Beatrice, having a child was a triumph, for reasons I still don't understand. What happened next was incidental. Grandfather saw Anya twice, and the second time was only because he came to meet Jenny. Neither child has any recollection of him, probably for the best. He never met his grandson, probably for the best. I never knew if he ever felt sorry. I know he never asked for forgiveness. I don't know how Beatrice would've responded if he had. I don't think she ever wanted reconciliation. She preferred her anger.

*Another winter morning. Your bones creak as you slip out of bed. You stood too quickly and you feel dizzy. You wait for a moment. It passes. Once again you're constipated. You take a hot shower. You eat some toast while you watch a morning show of some kind. You get dressed and head to the park.*

So much beauty walks past me on that park bench. Beauty I take with me, forming an ache I carry through the day, into the cold of my bed, making me that much more aware of everything I've lost, everything she took with her when she left.

When Jenny was born, I was away on a work trip. Pre-mature, early in birth, as in everything else. I was conducting lectures on some esoteric piece of literature only four-eyes like myself would find interesting. I came home as soon as I was able.

Jenny was a day and a half old and already very much an adult. She was sizing me up the first time I held her, unsure at first, but eventually, she decided I'd make do. She's carried that same skepticism into her mid-thirties, it's always served her well.

I wonder what she thinks of her mother. I'm afraid that Jenny doesn't like her, or her memory that is. It's an odd place to be, when you feel as though you need to defend your wife, against your children. How do you convince your children that their mother was a good person, when it should never even be a question they ask; they should know, but they don't. Outside of my son, they never speak of her, and he never speaks of her kindly. Don't speak untruths of the dead, but what of the truth? He never made a habit of lying. My children and I, all knew Beatrice, but to each of us, she is an entirely different person. Her memory makes me lonely. Her absence makes them free. I doubt the two images can ever be reconciled. For me, she was a salve, for all the other ills of the world. For them, I don't know. I wanted to be a mediator, but I only made things worse.

My son lives in the city. He often brings his children to see me, two out of seven grand-kids. He wants them to know their grandfather, perhaps because he never knew his, either I should say, my own father died when I was still a boy. His children are lovely. I love them, but not quite as much as Annaliese.

Sometimes I think about asking him about his mother. I never do. I hear enough of his grievances unprompted, and I don't like it because I know he's right, and because I love Beatrice. I don't want to be caught between the two again, even though one is living and one is dead. I don't want to remember the bad things. I want to remember being curled up together in a tent, in the freezing cold, trying to keep each other warm. I want to remember conversations over rum, beneath stars, and beside oceans.

There was nothing special about me. I brought my own issues that I readily forced on her. The fact that anyone stays with anybody is a miracle in and of itself. Our true selves are always so ugly. Only time can chip away the facade we create of ourselves, like Michelangelo in reverse: he chipped away at the marble to find the art work hidden inside the stone. Conversely, time weathers, erodes, strips away our shiny veneer, revealing the darkness we hide from everyone, including ourselves. A darkness only long term partners can see. An intimacy that most people simply cannot handle. It is difficult to share ugliness. To bear each others faults. To look through them, and find something worth loving. I can't

imagine what a nightmare my true self is. I am forever grateful when I think of her, which is every day, almost every hour.

When they pass away, you're left to tend their memory. Sometimes you apologize for it. Jenny was the only one who demanded it, even though she deserved it the least. I apologized on the deceased behalf, never knowing if that was the right thing to do. I couldn't remember enough, to decide whether I should defend her, or concede fault, but she was dead, so the fault, if there was one, was mine to bear.

My son never asked, never confronted me, even though he had the most right, because only the weak demand an apology, or so we think, he and I. Suffer in silence. That is how you show love, even when it is undeserved. That is how you show strength. That is the source of power. Being meek shines a light on all their flaws. The self-aware will see this, and it will wear them down. It worked for me. It didn't work so well for him.

Of all our children, Anya knew Beatrice the best. She speaks very casually of her. She speaks casually of everything. That's how she keeps everyone, and everything, at bay, by being casual about it. The devil may care but she doesn't. It's strange to imagine your own daughter with one of those old-time cigarette holders, and a Katherine Hepburn lilt. It's all an act of course. She won't break character with me, or as far as I know anyone. I'm not sure what she thinks, and that's exactly how she wants it.

I remember well the first time I saw Beatrice, reclining on the college lawn, taking in the sun in between classes. Her skirt was scandalous for the time. Her legs, sun-kissed, lightly muscular, perfectly defined. I watched her, fully aware of me, stand and walk to the water-fountain. Leaning over she took a drink, the sun shining on the green grass behind her. Brown curls draped over her shoulders, drifting care-free. Finished, she stood, a proud figure, the sun behind her. She turned to me, her captive audience. She owned me and she knew it. She moved on and I never thought I'd see her again. But I did, and we talked, and nothing happened for a long time, but it laid the seed, and many months after we spoke, I found her again. I asked her for a walk.

*You wake. It's still winter. Winter never-ending. You're going to pick up Annaliese. You're going to take her to the park. The idea makes you happy, but then you realize it's Tuesday. You pick up Annaliese tomorrow. You decide to lie in bed for a little longer.*

My hands knead the bedsheets. In sleep-haze they search the covers and find nothing. When I slowly fade into the waking world, I sometimes see her lying next to me, and I remember that presence, the companionship, the comfort, the ear that patiently listened. In that transitory moment she's almost real, but she's gone as soon as I wake. Soon I'll get up, get dressed and make my way to the bench. I'll watch the women walk past, and remember Beatrice, dead and gone. I'll look for warmth in their bodies, faces, smiles, legs, wherever I can find it. But it's winter now, they'll all be drawn in, their faces will shrink from the cold, and therefore me, and I'll be left hoping I make it `til Summer.