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# Jonquils for Narcissus

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*caverns underwater. The cavern of the mind, bleak, desolate, hollow and ringing. Isolate the hope and hope it holds. One of these days I'll get serious and I'll put some study in. I won't be worth a shit until I do this . . . (from Della)*

## Jonquils for Narcissus / Ursule Molinaro

His problem is: How to make a living without wasting his life. Without the Monday-through-Friday deathwish routine reducing his life expectancy to 48 hours a week. If that much. Much of Sunday is wasted by the thought of Monday . . .

Why can't he be like other people? Who are earning their living. Handicapped . . . in wheelchairs, they're earning their living. He's seen them on the posters in the bus. Who does he think he is!

I'm a poet . . . My tolerance threshold is lower than that of other people . . .

But your arrogance threshold is spectacular. Nobody likes to touch drudgery. Roachy wallpaper flowers . . .

Which the poet counts while he lies talking to himself about his problem, in the one-room apartment of the thin girl. On the ½-mattress space she offered him, as a trade-in for his serpent belt. From London.

Which the last owner bestowed upon him in lieu of other payment. Out-right money would have shattered the owner's desirability mirror. Besides being more expensive. "I know you've always admired this belt of mine . . ."

When the poet stopped being a pet. & took cocktail time out to write a poem. About: The Ghosts of Leaves on Winter Trees.

When he found himself dismissed when he ignored the jingling cocktail glass that had been inserted between his face & his writing pad. When he found himself eased out the front door, with his bag & his writing pad. With just enough change to sit in a nocturnal cafeteria that looks like a second-hand operating room over a cup of coffee that tastes like liquid cardboard into which he milks a miniature cardboard udder & he thinks he should maybe try looking for a job that leaves him free to do his writing on the side.

& he becomes a hip mailman. & he walks early-winter-morning streets. With federalist hair hanging to his grey mailman shoulders, from under his grey mailman cap.

& he does a lot of smiling, as he thinks of himself as a harbinger of glad tidings. & occasional bills.

But after Christmas he finds himself laid off. & he goes back on a diet of humble grapes & sour pie. & lets himself be taken to bed again. For a night, 2 nights; a week. One entire Mexican spring. By owners of all sexes. Who range from ancient to middle age. From independently rich to gainfully employed.

Who cluck over the tangible evidence of his desire, spaced out on a mirage of makebelief. Telling themselves & him that he desires *them* rather than the houses/cars/swimming pools/clothes they own.

Which he doesn't own, or he wouldn't be doing what he is doing. He'd be writing.

Why do the rich who want to be loved for themselves tend to exempt from that self the lovable quality of being rich?

Their cajoling fingers curl to employers' fists when he asks for a small share of what they own. A severance pay, after he has supplied them with ego-injections for a night/a week/ one long Mayan spring.

His own ego as well. Because he's superman, Man. He commands desire. Even his own.

He doesn't ask anybody for anything, actually. He can't be frank with these people, & present a bill. He tells them a long dull story about his mother. Who is sick. Whose birthday it happens to be. For whom he'd like to buy a small remembrance. A token of his gratitude, for mother's day. (Which he celebrates by going to see a rerun of *Psycho*.) But he hasn't any money to buy her anything. Corn corn corn. & he wonders if his dear friend would mind very much lending him a small sum, so that he might . . . etc . . . & more corn. . . . After he crawls wax-faced from between crumpled sheets.

& the dear friends frown. All the way up into their receding hairlines. Into their hairpieces/their wigs. & sigh. & study his face with grievous resignation before they turn their backs on him, for him not to see them extract a bill from some secret sacred hiding place. Or pocket. & when they finally turn back toward him, they look deep into his deep-ringed eyes. Which have turned a bluish-opaque with anticipation. & they shake greying/balding/hair-pieced heads, as they slowly hand him a small sum that is a great deal smaller than he had anticipated. A great deal less than he's worth, in his opinion. When he has seen them hand lavish tips to waiters/busboys/toilet attendants. Who he is told are making an *honest* living.

Still . . . : he expresses thanks. & takes his leave.

& they call after him to watch his step, as he stumbles from their beds/their hotelrooms/their stoops/their driveways.

& he sits in a nocturnal cafeteria that looks like a third-hand operating room over a cup of cardboard coffee the think-drink trying to think his way out: . . . 'If you're part of the problem you're part of the solution . . .'

In which he is interrupted by a thin girl in a long purple skirt & sandals who pigeon-toes over to where he's thinking. & sits down across from him. & asks if he's hungry. & if he has a place to sleep. & he trades his serpent belt from London which she admires; which only reminds him of proprietary stinginess for a sandwich. & for sleeping beside her rather than with her on a bony mattress on a not-too-clean floor in her not-too-clean one-room apartment with a bathroom the size of a closet & a kitchen the size of a cupboard across from the nocturnal cafeteria.

But he can't go to sleep. The think-drink won't let him. & he listens to the thin girl breathe through a couple of nightmares before he finally plunges into one of his own.

When he wakes up around noon she's gone.

He burrows into the middle of the mattress & lies looking at the ceiling for a while. Thinking again.

He tries to remember the dream he's had. In case it contained a solution, as dreams are supposed to. Expecting the thin girl to walk back in any minute, with a container of milk under her arm, maybe. & he hopes, a pack of cigarettes.

In which case he'd better not continue to lie there. He'd better be up & bouncing & on his way out, if he doesn't want to apologize for not having made love to her last night by making love to her when she gets back.

Meanwhile he is counting the flowers on the wallpaper beside his right shoulder, from the window corner to the door of the closet-size bathroom. Perhaps he'll arrive at some oracular number 43 dust-browned jonquils which might suggest what he should do.

Get up, for one thing.

On the chair in front of the open bathroom door a \$5.-bill has been placed in evidence, under a ½-full jar of instant coffee. Obviously for him.

He keeps thinking about it while he boils some water & stirs some coffee into it, & drinks, wishing he had a cigarette.

The money obviously means that the thin girl wants him to leave.

She is paying him to leave.

She is paying for his serpent belt. (Which is worth more than \$5.- Even used it's worth more than \$5.-) She likes it too well to give it back. It goes too well with her long purple skirt.

It doesn't, actually. The skirt starts too high up. Right under her liberated breasts, which droop thinly over the rim. They made him think of the ears of the Irish setter he'd had when he was a boy.

The girl hadn't put the belt on, last night. She had sat stroking it. & when they left the cafeteria, she had hung it around her neck.

She would have accepted it as a gift, if he had slept with her rather than beside her. He has offended her by not making a pass at her.

He is being presumptuous. On an ego-kick again. She is grateful to him, on the contrary. For keeping to his half of the bony mattress instead of imposing his body on hers. Out of a routine sense of maleness which she can't stand. She, too, was tired. & isn't the sort of girl that picks up just anybody to go to bed with just because she's lonely. She is glad he sensed that about her.

She is sorry he has to leave. & go looking for a job. He isn't offended by the \$5.-, she hopes. She'd like him to stay. Living alone is no fun.

Why doesn't he stay. There's a job right here, if he wants it. For as long as he wants it. The apartment could use a cleaning. Can he maybe cook? She's tired of cafeteria food. But when she comes home from the job she has she hasn't the strength to face the supermarket scene, & cook for herself.

She doesn't earn very much, but she earns enough for 2 to eat at home on quite well if he doesn't mind doing the cooking.

After he's through writing for the day.

Why doesn't he stay. He can write while she's away at work. —Where she doesn't mind being; she isn't wasting any particular talent.— She'd love to hear him read what he's written, after dinner. Nonsense, he needn't feel obligated. She'd enjoy the company of a friend. A brother she doesn't have to sleep with. If he insists he can pay her back when his poetry starts paying off. After he wins his first award. Sure; she'd be flattered to have his first volume of poems dedicated to her . . .

They hadn't talked very much, last night. Perhaps she's cool. A thin but cheerful girl who isn't hard to live with. He has found the solution to his problem. (To her problem, too.) It's so obvious, he almost didn't see it.

He'll clean the place up for her. Before he cleans himself up. After he runs downstairs for a pack of smokes.

She has not come back when he comes back. Which he takes to mean that she has indeed some kind of job.

He works uninterruptedly for several hours. Thinking how surprised & pleased she'll be. The tiny apartment is difficult to clean. He's never done anything like this for anybody. In exchange for not sleeping with somebody.

He wonders what he should buy for dinner. Perhaps the girl is a vegetarian, & would hate a chicken. She's thin enough to be a vegetarian. Who also hates spaghetti, though.

He pulls the sheets off the mattress. & the blanket. He finds a pile of dirty towels stuffed behind the bathroom door. He takes everything to a

laundromat, & while it washes & dries he buys cheese & bread, & a bottle of wine. Which most people like, whether they're vegetarians or not.

& some flowers. A bunch of jonquils that are still yellow.

On his way back he sees her sitting in the cafeteria. He crosses over to the other sidewalk. He hopes she hasn't seen him; he doesn't want to spoil the surprise. She might suspect something if she sees him go back into the house.

He works feverishly. Laying out the bread & the cheese. Arranging the jonquils in the coffee mug. Placing the wine in evidence in the center of the chair (which serves as the table) where the \$5.- bill had been placed in evidence. He hopes she won't come up before everything is ready.

Everything is ready.

He sits on the neat mattress on the taut clean blanket over the taut clean sheets. He'd like to smoke, but he waits; he doesn't want to dirty the ash-tray. He'd like some wine, but he waits. He is quite hungry, but he waits.

& counts the dust-browned jonquils on the other wall, from the cupboard-size kitchen to the window: 61.

Perhaps the lonely thin girl counts them every night. On both walls. & weeps on them to make them grow.

He is about to run down to the cafeteria & get her when she walks in. Leading a moss-haired little man on a leash. On his serpent belt, leashed around the little man's moss-haired neck. She is laughing. The little man is playing "doggie." Lifting a weaving leg against a corner of the mattress.

He looks like a bum. A drunk, whose glittering eyes have saluted the bottle of wine on the chair.

He is straining toward it with outstretched arms. The end of the belt slips out of the thin girl's hand. It is dangling down the little man's crumpled back.

I thought you'd be long gone: the thin girl says to the poet.

Who thinks: She's lying. She's seen me go back up. She knew I was in the apartment.

Was she hoping to humiliate him, by bringing up a drunken bum. To make him wonder if he's perhaps not so different. Another stray . . .

The little man is weaving toward the kitchen sink, carrying the bottle in front of him with both hands.

He decapitates the bottle against the edge of the sink. With unexpected precision; closely below the cork. Without cutting himself. He must have decapitated hundreds of bottles: against fire hydrants curbs corners of houses. He has turned around & is leaning far back against the sink, tilting the bottle toward his upturned open mouth.

Please leave. Before he gets too sloshed to do anything: the thin girl says to the poet.

I cleaned up your place: he says.

She shrugs: No one asked you to.

Scuse me: says the little drunk, trying to weave past them, on his way to the door. He is holding the half-empty bottle by its jagged neck.

The thin girl catches the dangling end of the belt & pulls him toward her. He falls against her, spilling a hiccough of wine. You didn't tell me you had company: he says reproachfully.

You mean *him!* she laughs, pointing her chin at the poet: He's a poet; he's no company.

She snatches the bottle from the man's hand. & cuts her thumb. Which is bleeding slightly. She pays no attention to it. Get down! she commands: On all fours, if you want it back . . .

Wouff wouff: says the little drunk, weaving to his knees.

That's a good doggie: she laughs: That's what I like . . . Why don't you bite the poet, doggie? Bite a nice big hole in his pants.

Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr: says the little drunk, heading for the poet's legs.

He jumps over the man & runs out. The thin girl's laughter follows him down 3 flights of stairs.

## The Most Erotic Man / James Mechem

The Marquise went out at five. "Darling," she said. "Ring up Caresse Crosby and tell her I've met the Most Erotic Man." Caresse Crosby arrived punctually and the Marquise introduced her to the Most Erotic Man who proceeded to brush his lips over her White Gloved Arm.

## Umbrellas for Rainy Wear & Parasols for Fair / James Mechem

I scooped up the sand by the handful and sat down beside her. She said hello. I said hello. That seemed to be that. I helped her build a sand castle. The sky overhead was very blue I noticed. I lay on my back and watched it