

## Compulsions

I lit my first fire in a can of bear grease in my father's garage when I was nine. It was forbidden territory and my hands shook as I struck the matches, the first one sputtering out. The third one caught. I climbed the stool and dropped it into the open can before it burned my fingers, watching the flaming head whirl and hit the pale yellow grease, the way the lit match almost extinguished from the impact. Then it breathed, glowed, and began to burn in a swirl of flame over the surface, spitting globs against the pegboard behind the workbench.

My father would use the grease to moisturize his leather boots in the evening, sitting in his chair in the corner of the living room beside the reading lamp, one hand inside the boot and one using a soft felt rag to rub in the grease, his wide thumb caressing the toe of the boot, the smooth length, the rounded heel. Now he couldn't caress his boots in the evening anymore and ignore us. He'd have to love us instead.

As a divorce lawyer, I still help people make changes. I help them shed their old endings. Maintain a stable center while their world shifts around them. Some of my old clients call me up on weekends. They're looking for a connection with someone who knows the way they were, before.

"Hi. It's been a long time, how are you doing? Still busy with the practice? I sure appreciate what you did for me. I have a whole new life now. Taking tai-chi classes. I walk up to the top of the mountain to meditate in the morning."

"That's great."

I know where they're going before I even pick up the phone. After I hang up, I sit in my black leather chair and pour a drink, look past the leaded glass windows and heavy stone moldings at the smog over the mountains. Sometimes I imagine my father has called.

When I was seven, the circus came to town. I was fascinated by the painted ladies. One, in particular, flicked a blue tongue at me as I walked down the midway to the Big Top, reached a scaly cerulean arm through the bars of her cage. I gripped my mother's hand so tightly that she looked down at me. Noticing the painted lady, my mom smiled. "She's freer than you might think," she said.

The painted lady reminded me of the chameleons that occupied the hillside behind my house, how they'd stretch their arms languidly across the tops of granite boulders in the first rays of morning sun. Once they warmed up, the lizards were too fast for even a seven-year old boy to catch. But there was a brief window of time when I'd be able to capture them, to grasp them behind their head, wrap my other hand quickly around their torsos, and feel their still-warming sluggish heart lurch and thud against my fingers. The flutter of a pulse and the breath in their throat. I used to hang onto them until they were fully warmed and their scrabbling claws gained momentum against my grip. Then I'd let them go, on the sand. As they scurried off, I'd bask on their boulder.

Last summer I went back to Italy. Not the old hometown, but Turin, with its spires and old city walls, its views of the Alps. I came to see the Egyptian museum and Roman ruins, trappings of antiquity. The Turin Shroud, in particular.

Standing in front of the case that shrouds the relic, I pressed my fingers against the glass. The Shroud was first displayed in the French village of Lirey, in 1356. A representation of the body of Jesus lies stretched under glass, imprinted on a linen cloth complete with puncture wounds in side, feet and wrists. Hands folded peacefully at his waist. A residual version of himself.

Believers say the Shroud is not a fake because it is a negative image. Our minds don't see details in negative, they claim, making it improbable that a medieval artist could have fabricated the relic. More likely, this shroud holds the last remaining atoms of the body, driven into the cloth by a brilliant pulse of energy.

Oneself in reverse. A caramelization of carbohydrates driven deep into the linen.

*This robe seemed to me like a mirror,*  
*myself facing into it.      ~~For~~ were two together divided / Yet in one we stood in one likeness.*

*And in it I saw*

That afternoon, I follow a couple walking by the canal, holding hands. I guess how old they are, how long they've been married. Perhaps they've been together forty years, it's been that long. I imagine their golden anniversary. She'll take off her head shawl for that evening, brush out her silvered hair, put polish on her toes, wear sensible sandals and a sundress under her black cardigan. He'll put on a jacket and trim his stubble, exchange his sneakers for leather shoes, splash some Pino Silvestre on his chin. They'll dance a shuffle among a shower of coins.

They stop at one of the benches set in a cement pad on the bank over the water. He lets go of her hand. She pulls a yellow plastic grocery bag from her purse, then walks a few steps forward to the edge of the slope, puts her hand in the bag and pulls her fist out, scattering breadcrumbs. When the ducks and coots come splashing over he steps to the edge of the slope, waves his arms in the air and gives a series of yelps. He sounds like a chorus of monkeys. I imagine furred bodies swinging in the willow branches above his head.

The birds abruptly change direction and fly across the canal to the safety of a cluster of painted wooden skiffs. The man laughs and sits down on the park bench, heavily. His wife turns to him and gives his shoulder a swat with the grocery bag, and speaks, loudly enough for me to

hear modulations in her tone. Then, she laughs, sits beside him, puts her hand on his knee. I give them twenty more years at least.

I never saw my mother put her hand on my father's knee. Or anywhere else on his body. He, on the other hand, put his hands on her. Lots of times. Once her cerulean bruises poked out from under the neck of her ruffled blouse like forgotten easter eggs. Even that morning, she kept moving, always in motion – around the kitchen, the potted plants on the patio, the wash-line, the garden. I believed that if she ever stopped moving the fabric of the sky would unravel, drop ashen pieces of the burning heavens on our laps.

The pastor had told us that the heavens were burning. He explained the wrath waiting, smoldering, like a volcano to erupt. My mother kept moving because something was wrong; *she* was wrong, and the harder she worked the more likely she could fix it. That's what my father told her, over and over, while my brother and I were in bed. I saw her, still moving through the yard when I turned my head to look back at her on my way to school.

I was in motion too, often when supposed to be still. At school, where the chair wobbled when I shifted, encouraging me to rock my weight back and forth. At church, in the wooden pews that didn't fit the curve of my small back. Motion was my natural state. God wanted me still, my mother whispered. My teacher informed me that the principal wanted me still, and rapped her ruler over my knuckles.

When my mother took my brother and I to the circus I would run, anywhere that had the possibility of getting lost, even for a few minutes. The circus was rife with opportunity. You could angle through a line of people and dodge behind a snack cart, change direction and be gone before your mother finished wiping your brother's nose. My favorite spots were adjacent to the

attractions of the midway, small corners of canvas among the tent walls where I could sprawl on the ground and contemplate where to go next.

The midway had the best things to see. Once, a man with fur all over his body. Once, a human chimera, with the face of a cat. Animal displays. When I was four, a tethered lioness with her cub beside her. Mom found me playing with the cub, lioness crouched over me, cub and I flopped over each other, too single a unit for the lioness to be able to decide what was hers and what was alien. I can't remember if she had my head in her teeth.

When I started going to Italy as an adult, I always asked for a corner table. I spent my time watching people and attending to a salad and cappuccino, or a glass of Chianti. I preferred cafés with a view through to the street, so I could watch people enter and exit.

In Turin one evening a couple came in, dressed up. Looked like they might have just returned from the opera. She was wearing a beaded opera jacket. Electric blue. Beads swung from the sweeping hems in a cascade when she reached out her arm to open the door. He was behind her, somewhat surly. Black shoes, black suit, black tie, black countenance. As they walked through the door neither was saying anything.

I imagine the source of their discontent. She had lingered a little too long at intermission, chatting in the line for apéritifs? Face fetchingly flushed. He had? Looked down the theatre aisle a little too long, glance drawn by some high-heeled nymph with hair upswept into ringlets coiled with crimson orchids?

She was still ahead when they reached the café counter, determined strides all business. I wondered why they didn't just take it home. Why stop to eat? But this is urban Italy and life here takes place in motion, in the whirl of public places, under the marble limbs of ancestors who have been absent for centuries.

She slammed her hand on the silver bell on the counter to summon the waiter, who came walking out from the kitchen.

“Yes, Signora? And Signore? How can I help you this evening?”

“A table.”

The waiter raised an eyebrow and Signora managed a curt “Please.”

“Right this way.” The place was close to empty. The waiter led them to a table by the window and lit a wide candle. Signore sat down first, roughly pulling out his chair so it rocked once from side to side. He sat heavily, slouched back in his chair. Signora pulled her chair straight back from the table. She sat up on her seat bones, placing her forearms on the table in front of her. They looked at each other. I sat as still as I could and read the first page of my menu.

“Well?” she asked. I was gratified to learn that I could hear her.

“Well what?”

“Aren't you going to look at the menu? You wanted to come here, remember?”

Signore leaned forward and grabbed the menu, silverware clattered in the wake of his arm. He tented it up in front of his face.

The waiter poured sparkling water into fluted crystal and Signora ordered a glass of Passerina. I noticed that her cheek was flushed with rose. When the waiter walked away she leaned forward into her crossed arms. The beads of her sleeves were spread over the tablecloth like pools of water.

“So what do you think you were doing back there?” Signore’s menu didn’t move. He must have said something, I couldn’t hear, because Signora’s back suddenly tightened and her arms moved apart on the tabletop, beaded pools turning into separate rivulets of blue.

“What? How could you think that?” The waiter came with the Passerina, beads of moisture etching channels down the chilled glass. Signora took an icy sip.

“I told you I was sick. Don’t even get me started on all the times that you have – “

She was interrupted by Signore throwing the menu down on the table.

“That’s it. I’m sick of this. I’m going home.” He walked out. That was my father’s trick too. If my mother started to retort and he wasn’t too angry yet he would leave the house, leave me free to creep out of bed and tuck myself under her arm. When he didn’t come back I was still in her bed in the morning, as the dawn crept through the window and onto the bed, and the rooster crowed outside.

Signora rubbed her temples with thumb and index finger spread across her forehead, sipped her Passerina deliberately. She picked up the menu, opened it to the third page, spent a few minutes just looking, right index finger pointing to an entry. I flipped the page on my menu. She was considering the *Lumache Alla Bourguignonne*. Sea snails with shallots in garlic butter.

I order another glass of Chianti. Signora enjoys her snails, grasping each fragile shell with small tongs, then carefully picking the snail out with a slender fork, probing for the tender bits of flesh like a sandpiper feeding at the beach. She angles her chair towards the window and sips her wine, staring out into darkness outside. I have a new view of her. I notice how the light from the candle hits the gentle whorls of her ear, makes her earlobe glow peach. I feel that she’s not as free as she seems at this very moment, yet I can sense a change, something shifting in her flesh. Her date is not coming back, either. She needs to move to become free, but away. Her trajectory must be away from her center.

Later, I lie in bed at my hotel, on my back, one arm stretched across the mattress, fingers draped over the piping at the edge, tips tracing the spirals on the mattress through the thin cotton

sheets. I stare into the blackness above me and imagine the cherubs I know are frescoed on the ceiling wheeling around each other on pinions of sinew, colliding and disappearing in sudden flashes of light. My fingertips are the only parts of me that move, and gradually even their tracing stops.

The next morning is my last in Turin. It is Sunday. I leave the hotel with my carryon in tow, the plastic on the edges of its sharp handle biting into my palm. Finally I collapse the telescoping handle and carry it by its nylon straps. I head toward the main square, Piazza Castello. There's a café there that I want to have breakfast at before I leave, a new place with back corner booths. My flight is at ten. The day is going to be hot, and in the east the rounded dome of the Basilica di Superga rises above the city in a haze of orange sky.

People are starting to cross the Piazza and the café is still closed. I grab caffè' and bomboloni at another, too crowded, and sit outside on a bench facing the space between statues of the two warrior horsemen Castor and Pollux, twin sons of Zeus. Their marble faces are turned away from each other, but their bodies are tilted towards the emptiness between them. My caffè' is steaming and I lower my head to blow on it. A pigeon hops onto the iron arm at the end of the bench and I stretch out an arm to shoo it away, wiggle my fingers.

There are a lot of pigeons. A hundred, maybe. Scattered across the vast square in fervently pecking groups. A worker in overalls and rubber boots has turned off the wide fountain behind the statues and is scrubbing with a long-handled broom, standing in the pool of water. In front of him a family is taking a walk. A small boy, perhaps eight, runs towards a group of birds, flapping his arms. They rise into the air slowly, migrate a few yards over, resettle. He runs closer and scatters a group towards me. They fly over my bench in sporadic waves of a couple birds at a time, loose feathers floating around my head. The parents are walking deliberately, in the space

between the statues, now. The father grips his wife's elbow and steers her towards the statue of Pollux. When he notices his son running through the pigeons he releases his grip on the elbow to gesture at the boy.

“Matteo! Come back here right now! Stop running around!” The boy stops short, a yard from my bench, face a mask of stubborn confusion. He's dutifully fighting the impulse to run shouting through the square. He's partly in the shadow of the trees, and the sun shifts in saturated dapples of heat across his cheeks, his nose and furrowed brow. He notices me. His eyes are dark.

“Matteo! Subito! God is waiting for your obedience!”

Before I know what I'm doing I've risen from the bench and am running through the pigeons, baggage forgotten. Matteo catches up with me. We circle through the square, always in motion. We move from the outside edges towards the fountain, birds frantically circling in the air above and around us. They spiral over the fountain and up as feathers drift into the turbid water.

Back at home my practice continues. I distract myself by going to shows. There are no circuses that visit here. I go to plays, sit in folding red velvet seats and make sure to tuck my legs out of the way when people want to get by. I try not to, but sometimes, I sleep. Once, at a production of *Oklahoma*, I woke myself suddenly with a loud snore. Then, *Cirque du Soleil* came to town for the first time. Just another mundane distraction, I thought. Acrobatic opera. Something to fill the space. I bought a ticket along the aisle.

The show was nothing like I expected. It opened with sudden darkness, then performers running through the aisles with lit torches, spiraling from the edges of the tent inwards, throwing shadows onto the canvas ceiling of blue and yellow. They yelped and howled, ran onto the stage and stabbed their torches into a pit of sand and climbed a metal tower in the torchlight, hung upside down from its braces. Then the entire show took off flying. Acrobats whirled through the

air above our heads in the half dark, coming from unexpected places. Emerging from the shadows, they looked half-formed. But directly above your head they were suddenly solid, dense exotic bodies encrusted with sequins and paint, creating vortices of air.

After intermission I watched the balancing acts on the stage with my plastic glass of red wine in my hand. The performers seemed entirely alien from my distance, shifting forms arranging themselves into towers of triangles, ovoids and squares. I started to drift. I remember half-waking to a flash of color and heat running through the aisles.

Afterward I stumbled out into the darkness and wove sleepily down the path towards my car, past the cluster of canvas storage tents in the back lot. Scattered streetlights dimly lit the way. I listed around a corner and found a performer in front of me, costume of vivid blue, feathers, fringes and painted tips of sparkling waves. She had blue tights covered with fishnet stockings. Her face was painted with whorls of cerulean blue and she stretched out her hand to grasp my shoulder. I could feel heat radiating through her palm, and as the ground whirled around me I followed her.

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by Faye Mankowske