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"Susie on a Sunday"

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Susie on a Sunday
L.E. USHER

What, then, happens next?

Susie sits at the kitchen table. The sun’s mellow light pouring through the window is warm on her face. Herb-pots line the windowsill, the vaguest smell of thyme and rosemary drifts toward her. One hand, resting on the scrubbed pine table, reaches for the cyclamen sitting in the center and pulls it close to pick and pluck the dying leaves. Her fingers are gentle, careful not to snap a single stem of the red uncurling flowers. Her eyes watch her hand’s movements.

I do have lovely hands

They don’t look like the hands of a fifty-seven-year-old at all, Susie thinks. But that is because she is vain, a fact she will never deny and readily admits. Since she was young she has taken great care of herself. Since the day she happened to notice her mother’s age-betraying hands, the dry wrinkled fingers like chicken claws, the liver-spotted skin. At that time Mother had been younger than Susie is now. She holds her hands in front of her, examining both sides. The tender pink palms, the backs occasionally freckled from where they’ve caught the Indian-summer sun; the long pale fingers are jewelry free except for her wedding ring. She is mesmerized by their stillness, their steadiness. There is not a single tremor, not even the flick of a pulse in her wrist.

What, then, happens next?

Susie cups her face in her hands, leaning on her elbows, squeezing closed her eyes. Fingertips press into her temples, massaging, indenting the skin.

I don’t know,
I don’t know what happens next.
She does not even know how long she has been sitting there and turns to look at the clock, reading eleven eighteen a.m. The clock-hands might say midnight for all that it matters to her. It is Sunday, after all, a day of rest; no need to heed the passing hours. But she can’t just sit doing nothing. She stands and goes to the sink, pulls on rubber gloves, then turns on the tap to wash the breakfast things. There isn’t much to clean: two cups, two saucers, two plates, from a light breakfast in bed. This will be followed later by a heavy lunch. For this afternoon they have planned a pub lunch followed by a walk, or a walk followed by a pub lunch, the order depending on if the weather holds. She glances through the window at the deepening sunshine thinking she could still go, drive down to that lovely pub on the river. They’ll have rabbit on the menu, or something gamey, pheasant, or guinea fowl, perhaps. But she won’t go, she knows it. She hates eating alone. It’s just too awful the way people stare so at a woman sitting on her own, as if there is something wrong.

So, what, then, happens next?

Susie leans against the kitchen sink and slowly removes the rubber gloves, wondering, wondering what she should do.

_I should phone for an ambulance_

She hears her voice crack the silence in an ugly jarring way and shakes her head as if to clear the noise from her ears. But she can see herself doing it, lifting the receiver, dialing, saying, There has been an accident, can someone please come. And not long after the ambulance will arrive with sirens blaring announcing to the entire Avenue that on this lovely Sunday morning something is not right. And their neighbors, Rob and Vicky would say to one another, There’s an ambulance at Marc and Susie’s, what the hell has happened? What could Susie say in the face of their curious yet soothing sympathy? What would she possibly say in the light of what has happened?

So, what then happens next?

Susie stands at the kitchen sink. She does not phone for an ambulance because they will contact the police. They would have no choice, she knows this. But she can’t just stand around like this, it’s ridiculous.
She has to do something although she still isn’t sure quite what that something is. She knows that no amount of thinking will actually make something happen. Time will pass, that is all, and she will still be standing in the same place, at the kitchen sink.

Realizing that she is still wearing her pyjamas and dressing gown, she decides to change into her clothes. While dressing she watches herself closely in the mirror, examining every inch of skin. She is very well aware that she is at an age now when she is infinitely more attractive clothed than unclothed. Although she is still slender her thighs rimple with cellulite, there are faded stretch marks on her breasts from the two babies more than twenty years ago, and she has developed a tummy, the stomach muscles have slackened to produce a small bulge. Her bottom, though, is seemingly resisting the laws of gravity and when she wears jeans men’s eyes still linger along the length of her legs, before coming to rest on her behind. She is not aging too badly, not too badly at all, which is why Marc’s comments had enraged her.

She can’t recall exactly what they had been discussing when she became annoyed. Now, don’t you worry you’re pretty head about it, he had said, and this was followed by her own peeved response, Oh, for goodness sake, stop patronizing me and explain, in simple language, exactly what you mean. He smiled and looked at her, scrutinizing her face, making it blatantly obvious what he was doing. Then he had said, My dear, but you’re not even a pretty head, and pausing had added, anymore. Susie said nothing, not knowing what to say. It was a careless comment. He didn’t mean it, surely? They finished their toast and tea in silence and then he went to have a bath. Propped up against the pillows, Susie listened to the running water, breathing deeply to ease the rage that churned in her chest and stomach.

Breathe it away — don’t spoil the day —

By starting an argument —

No, she said to herself, I’ve started nothing, Marc started this with his stupid remark. But she tried not to think in that way for such thoughts led to confrontation. And that, as she knew, would make her
sick. It happened every time. Every time since, aged eleven, she had slapped a girl at school. The girl had fled in tears to tell their teacher and everyone had become involved — the Head Mistress, Mother, Father, and the Girl’s Parents — each of them conveying their horror, their disappointment, their embarrassment, at Susie’s bad behavior. Almost as a form of apology Susie had become sick, taking to her bed for over a week. Afterwards, the incident was never spoken of again, but like a scar it was there, marking her as different. And the next time she felt a similar rage she had dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand until the moment passed, soothing the pain as her nails gouged red crescents into the soft skin of her palm, with her mantra, breathe it away — don’t ruin the day —

On the rarest of occasions her rage would get the better of her. Just as it had done this morning. From where she sat in bed she listened to Marc’s splashing in the bathtub. Then she slipped on her slippers and belted her dressing gown and went into the bathroom. While Marc soaked, reading yesterday’s paper, she methodically removed her toenail polish, trimmed the nails, and then applied another color. It had become one of their habits to share the bathroom in this fashion, especially now that the children had left home.

After a long peaceful silence, Susie asked did he mean what he had said about her no longer having a pretty face. Silence was his reply. Marc? she said, then again, much more sharply, Marc! He lowered the paper and looked at her over the top of his spectacles, sighing, saying, Oh, Susie, in the exact tone of voice she knew he would use. And if he hadn’t done so? If he hadn’t she might not then have struck him with the scissors that, only moments ago, she had been using to trim her toenails. But she did. More than once. Then she had laughed at the expression on his face before walking out, slamming the door behind her.

She went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed anticipating confrontation, waiting for him to haul himself from the tub and come into the room. And do what? She did not know and did not want to think about what would happen next. He had only ever struck her the once and that had been her fault, an occasion long ago when she’d had too much to drink yet driven home anyway with the children in the car.
The bedside clock tocked away eight minutes before she forced herself to return to the bathroom. She opened the door slowly, seeing her plants crowded on the window sill, overgrown and thriving in the moist humid air. She expected Marc to be waiting and he was, his eyes fixed on the doorway and on her as she stopped and stared and started at the sight of bloodstained water. When he spoke it was softly, barely managing to whisper, Oh, Susie. But she turned away, refusing to hear more, closing the door behind her.

After Susie finishes dressing, she makes the bed and tidies the room, just as she has done every morning for the past two decades. She returns to the bathroom feeling more relaxed. Marc’s eyes are still open, still fixed on the bathroom door. He looks comfortable, but she can’t bring herself to leave him like that, his skin warped and wrinkling in the now-cold water. Susie grabs the chain and pulls out the plug, watching as the water drains away, noticing how Marc’s left leg shifts slightly in the water’s current. Then she goes to the linen cupboard and takes out a spare duvet to drape over his body. Although she suspects that Marc is beyond feeling she has made the gesture as a comfort to herself.

Halfway down the stairs she hears the slap of the catflap closing, followed by the sound of Robinson’s wail at finding his plate empty. Susie greets him in the kitchen, crouching down to run her hand along his back, over and again, and amidst his purring thrum she hears herself say, darling, Susie has killed Marc. But her words are drowned by the sound of his purr which grows louder in her ear, almost loud enough to deafen her.

What, then, happens next?

Susie feeds Robinson and then sits at the kitchen table.