Making Money, The Ugly Step Sister

Denise Duhamel
Two Poems
DENISE DUHAMEL

Making Money
— for Maureen Seaton

It was Gertrude Stein who said
she loved cold hard cash, but hated
doing any of the things she had to do
to get it. Consider phone sex,
what it would be like for a woman
who has been raped twice
to whisper "Ooh baby, ooh,"
into a mouthpiece to a man
who'd like to squeeze her wrists
until they bruise. Consider teaching
freshman composition at a community college,
piles of notebook-fringed papers
on your coffee table. After a while,
getting mixed up yourself
by the subjunctive for conjectures,
the proper use of was and were. The donut shop
is hiring, where you've worked before.
The sweet smell of lard and sugar
cooked into your skin. You could send away
for a kit and become a television repairman.
You could stuff envelopes, a penny apiece,
in the privacy of your own home.
Or dig out your pink-collar waitress uniform,
the cashier's smock, or the factory apron.
Why didn't you ever study accounting?
You could get your other job back at the shoe store.
You've already tried being a journalist,
but could never really stick to the facts:
describing the tragic car wreck as cold metal death.
When you switched to just entering data,
the computer screen made your eyes water.
When you were a candy striper, you went home and cried as though you knew the dying boy personally. And that was only volunteer. So I guess being a doctor is out. Luckily, your mother is a nurse, and so you'd have no white-dress fantasies, she told you early, what it was really like. Covering for the doctor's mistakes, emptying out bedpans. Have you heard about the latest scam, making money in your spare time, as you sleep? The Assyrian Dream Book claims images of eating feces will bring wealth. No prior experience required, but lucid dreaming is a plus.

The Ugly Step Sister

You don't know what it was like. My mother marries this bum who takes off on us, after only a few months, leaving his little Cinderella behind. Oh yes, Cindy will try to tell you that her father died. She's like that, she's a martyr. But between you and me, he took up with a dame close to Cindy's age. My mother never got a cent out of him for child support. So that explains why sometimes the old lady was gruff. My sisters and I didn't mind Cindy at first, but her relentless cheeriness soon took its toll. She dragged the dirty clothes to one of Chelsea's many laundromats. She was fond of talking to mice and rats on the way. She loved doing dishes and scrubbing walls, taking phone messages, and cleaning toilet bowls. You know, the kind of woman that makes the rest of us look bad. My sisters and I weren't paranoid, but we couldn't help but see this manic love for housework as part of Cindy's sinister plan. Our dates
would come to pick us up and Cindy'd pop out
of the kitchen offering warm chocolate chip cookies.
Critics often point to the fact that my sisters and I
were dark and she was blond, implying
jealousy on our part. But let me
set the record straight. We have the empty bottles
of Clairol’s Nice ‘n Easy to prove
Cindy was a fake. She was what her shrink called
a master manipulator. She loved people
to feel bad for her—her favorite phrase was a faint
“I don’t mind. That’s O.K.” We should have known
she’d marry Jeff Charming, the guy from our high school
who went on to trade bonds. Cindy finagled her way
into a private Christmas party on Wall Street,
charging a little black dress at Barney’s
which she would have returned the next day
if Jeff hadn’t fallen head over heels.
She claimed he took her on a horse and buggy ride
through Central Park, that it was the most romantic
evening of her life, even though she was home
before midnight—a bit early, if you ask me, for Manhattan.
It turned out that Jeff was seeing someone else
and had to cover his tracks. But Cindy didn’t
let little things like another woman’s happiness
get in her way. She filled her glass slipper
with champagne she had lifted
from the Wall Street extravaganza. She toasted
to Mr. Charming’s coming around, which he did
soon enough. At the wedding, some of Cindy’s friends
looked at my sisters and me with pity. The bride insisted
that our bridesmaids’ dresses should be pumpkin,
which is a hard enough color for anyone to carry off.
But let me assure you, we’re all very happy
now that Cindy’s moved uptown. We’ve
started a mail order business—cosmetics
and perfumes. Just between you and me,
there’s quite a few bucks to be made
on women’s self-doubts. And though
we don’t like to gloat, we hear Cindy Charming
isn’t doing her aerobics anymore. It’s rumored
that she yells at the maid, then locks herself in her room,
pressing hot match tips into her palm.