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“Colette’s Last Cat,” “121 Waverly Place”

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Colette's Last Cat

On an evening in June when bumblebees were still swinging on the pendulous white orb of peonies, and I'd nearly forgotten about the chronic muscle spasms shooting across my shoulders, I saw the giant green parrot sitting on the ridge of my neighbor's roof, and my striped cat palpitating on the window ledge, her tail swelling, her heart breaking, certain that her most exotic, intoxicating interlude had finally arrived. I wanted to capture the parrot, for out of its cage in Minnesota, it could not last but a few nights on once clipped wings, but I didn't know its name or how to climb high the worn shingles. Instead, I watched Tigre crouched low, eyes glistening tangerine and vermilion, and thought of Colette, and how she saw herself, toward the end, as the last Parisian cat, arthritic and curled up like a turban beside an open window, still fickle and searching the alleys of the arrondissement for the object of greatest curiosity, her upper ledge emptied for the coming badinage, gambling years of looking for the privilege of one more assignation with the laugh of a passing child, or the sudden twirl of a parasol, because even it, her precious, hated, irreconcilable pain, fed on isolation and complaint, even it would one day, soon enough, vanish to play with someone else, just as, in a freshening breeze, the parrot flew off over the oaks, and my cat, exhausted by the sudden removal of the perfect, painful aphrodisiac, flopped over to dream again of a salacious variety of traps, any colossal moments of astonishment and unscalable myth.
121 Waverly Place

By August the air draws down like cracked gray paint or a collapsed tent, and nothing rises through heat but bus fumes and the penny whistle of sirens shooting up the avenues, but in May the wisteria can't be stopped especially at 121 Waverly Place. It's not as old as the scaly horizontal branches of the Hanging Elm looming in Washington Square, but old enough to have seen Poe, Millay, and Cummings carried off. Like those poets, this unkillable ghost vine wrestles with anything it comes in contact with, pulls it from its fastenings, a bad neighbor for shutters, downspouts, mortar, shingles, air conditioners, windows. In this flash of sun, it reaches up by trailing runners, and claw-like, embracing tendrils, tussling, crowding out all other growth, dense clusters swaying sinuously in the slightest breeze, what Colette called that "flourishing, irrepressible despot" gone mad with power of the imperial metropole, driven to search for gold, raw materials, new markets, slaves, the quick annexations of conquered territory, the great hanging panicles of lavender thick with bumble bees smothered in pollen, and dizzy from spiraling inside the rampant, spidery jungle and the moist, unanchored spring air. One woman, scuttling under the periwinkle brim of her hat, says it has always been here, even her grandmother remembers the oily scent...and how can one ignore the weaving of bees, woody roots like lovers' arms twisting love with hate, mixing servitude with adornment, all that's crooked in lower branches made straight above, all that's revealed in the higher swags, entwined and surreptitious below, its seeds hot and poisonous. Gazer of the disbelieved 1835 visit of Halley's Comet, chronicler of the Civil War amputees home from dressing stations, spectator of dithering parades, protests, brawls, mutterings, recitations, buffoonery, poor whisperings...
in the dark, you remember where we are most weak
and lacking and too often satisfied with appearances
of beauty untouched by ugliness, disease, torment.
What had the florid Henry James called himself,
the “incorrigeable observer,” the watcher at the window,
a child treasuring his impressions like “winter pears”
for when he must return home to his New York street
like this one, where a torn umbrella, a shoe and a playbill
rest beside the man on a stoop with a sign propped
Up there, where petals mingle and loop through, cornice
and facade flow smoothly into pinkish-mauve light,
one can almost imagine an artist like Nijinsky in
say Le Spectre de la Rose, simulating this unstoppable
vine, practiced in concealment, conquest, revelation,
when he applied make-up that blurred his features
into insect eyebrows, rose-petal mouth, leafy ears
until there was no telling flower from man, the dancer
unscrambling the flesh, holding one minute of eternity
on his tongue, savoring the unhuman sweetness of a floral
being not yet available for consumption or abandonment.
But there can be no comparison on this unrehearsed day
as the wildly bold wisteria strangles the air, spreads,
winds to 119 Waverly Place, rising on a thermal lift,
then up it goes over the roof to scale the parapet.
Unquenchable weed, sun-seeking flower—voyeuristic,
aggressive, high-climbing, reptilian, long-lived, tapping
at upper windows for death or is it life, the contest is on.