

DANAE

Gold legged girl in an empty seaside parking lot . . . three young men pursuing her like in those cruel scenes in Botticelli's "*Legend of Nostagio degli Onesti*," each a movement that carried hatred in its rush to destroy. Her long, gold, windswept hair a tumult of despair and her limbs the avid configurations of fleeing motion, like a scream half held upon a lip. There was a blurred motion, a shambled quality to her flight, swaying and falling into the spaces lunging up before her.

In rapid succession, sure of themselves, three young men, boys really, ungainly in their step, one more hesitant than the others, apprehending in their thoughts this golden prize as they, with their smouldering adolescent desires and manly legs, the firmness probably of seventeen years, chased after her—clearly, one supposed, not to rescue but possess her; the awkward, hesitant one a younger brother (discovered a day later when I accosted him in the supermarket parking lot and questioned him about the "blond girl").

He was even more scattered in his movements than the others, who, perhaps, would never love another after a childhood spent in awe of such beauty. Wars had been fought over such beauty. While I, from a distance, watched from behind a stack of empty fish crates that had the names of expensive east coast restaurants stencilled on them in indelible ink.

It was after the movie, about eleven, and still reeling from the sense of wonder and abandonment that films instill in the human heart I, too, gave chase, unsure of my motives yet compelled in my actions by this lure of beauty, beauty under duress, driven by these figures who hurled themselves impetuously into the night—I, too, pursuing, I suppose, the phantom of those slim, refulgent legs that seemed to harbour all desire, all longing, but also, though unknown to me at the time, all human despair.

The sense was that of being a part of another temporal world altogether. A part of another's live fear, too. With perhaps a tinge of another's hopelessness in life and a vague sense that I might be of use . . . might serve as witness. The anxious overburdened night was

permeated with the wonder of the sea, the ichor of the sea—of rotting sea weed and low tide dolour—a smell that itself carries in its heart anticipation, desire, and, more clandestinely, the yearning to destroy that pulses counter to love in the human heart.

All four had disappeared behind a stand of warehouses, a fish and lobster factory that gave the local air its indigenous quality . . . a continual saturation of the lower air masses that curb this eastern fishing village with a century of fish processing and storage, of festering sea meats.

In increasing wonder and what, I admit, must have been a sense of shared ardour, too—of curiosity admixed with desire—I followed, my senses engorged like the boys', reaching after I dare not say what, those effulgent legs perhaps, or those brightly minted arms flailing at the world, inviting the world to share in their plight, or perhaps that tumble of shameless golden hair illuminating the darkness like the radium glow of a watch. I, too, followed in abject pursuit . . . the antiseptic freshness of the sea inundating my senses and giving my desire a peculiar olfactory edge.

The girl was perhaps sixteen. She was marvellous to behold, as only a young woman can be, magnificent from the front and from the rear. Her body's easy handling of her beauty stirred something deep in me, as it obviously did in her pursuers, in those fleeting seconds I'd glimpsed her. So I, too, followed into the night, with my heart in visceral chase of this creature, who drew these boy-men after her in such lusty pursuit. Already my imagination had played out several scenarios before I caught up with them again.

They'd stopped by a pier. Darkness haloed the bright coins of their faces. The faces flashed sideways and then outwards towards the black gulf with a kind of silvery quality that strangely brought to mind the image of lucre, of pieces of silver.

Voices accompanied the actions now—rude voices, roughened on the playing fields of youth—filled with frustration and something else, a desire to contain an unruly situation, one that had somehow got out of hand.

Two of the youths were actually fighting, tossing adolescent shoves and punches—the kind of infighting that bristles over girls and that, on occasion, provokes the deeper, chthonic anger that lurks at the heart of desire and lies just this side of murder.

She'd stopped running and was half bent over a time-ravaged timber pylon rising from the water, to which fishing boats could be moored. She was gazing out to sea, while her two pursuers raged over a secret lodged in her past or in her beauty, her ephemeral yet time resistant beauty, or perhaps just her heart, more earnestly now and with calculated blows.

To the side stood the other—the brother, as I was to discover a day later—who already in my imagination carried the sceptre of protector, and who, though a couple of years younger (fifteen instead of seventeen perhaps), stood aloof from the others and their immature squabbles, while at the same time expressing real concern about *his* sibling . . . establishing his callow maturity, so to speak, against their seasoned immaturity, their overstatement of a physical resolution. He desired her the most, I could tell, from the way he avoided contact with her and directed his energies into disbanding the fight.

Meantime, I'd edged along the wall of the warehouse to a spot concealed from view, through the thick effusion of fish oil and dead fish carcasses, a smell that wouldn't dislodge itself from my nostrils and conjoined in my sensorium with the image of this beautiful girl, this desirous young girl in short summer dress that sent flashes of virginal white underwear into the night as she fled, and, of course, the scissors-like gnashing of those legs, the shame of my own voyeurism flushing through my system by this time.

I stopped, confident of my own removal from the scene but less so, I'll admit, from my fantastical imaginings and desires.

Fight! Fight! Fight! She shouted, hugging the pole as if it, too, must give way and release her. *Always fighting! Always fighting! Stop . . . stop! Sto. . .* her words choked. *I don't care if he apologizes! Stop it! Don't you see . . .* squeezing the pole tighter until it, too, gave off in imagination its own kind of pain.

But they wouldn't stop and the blows they inflicted to each other's head and upper torso continued unabated, if also to little effect (for the boys' blows were really aimed at themselves not each other), choreographed by the girl's cries and what I took to be a more inexorable pain than some teenage disappointment or humiliation.

Do something ! Do something! cries that caused the brother to enter the fray anew.

He tried to wedge himself between the two and disentangle them but soon fell back, feigning a mortal wound. Even to me it was clear the injury was more to the brother's pride than his actual person. But then, embarrassed at his own humiliation, he sprung at the pair again, managing to separate them this time. At this, screaming, the girl left her post and flung herself at the darkness again.

Yasee! Yasee! Yasee what ya did!

A brother's mournful plea . . . and, stepping forward boldly, the brother smashed one of the boys in the face with his fist. Shocked by the seriousness of his action, he then took flight after his sister. Whereupon the other two, the injured one nursing a bloodied nose, followed in turn, but not before delivering a few final blows to each other's pride.

And I resumed the chase, drawn by the players in this drama, by the crude actions and psychological defences of these boys, unable by now to quit the pursuit even if I had wanted to, caught up in this girl's plight, this drama, as I say—which something in me counselled didn't feel right and could easily end unhappily.

Soon the girl, the focus of all this physical energy, had left the grounds of the fish plant and was running across open sand, the town's small public beach. The unsteady surface slowed her flight and caused her arms to flail, lending her an even more desperate quality. I followed the caravan of figures, caught in the tangle of golden hair and golden limbs, which continued to draw their glow from some invisible light source.

Already the girl had reached open water. Without a second's hesitation she threw herself (beauty doesn't always possess a natural grace) into the gently lolling surf until the water reached her waist. She stopped then as though anchored there, letting the wavelets nudge against her thigh gently, peering out to sea as though awaiting the call to plunge more deeply into these waters, which, though relatively calm tonight, were known for their treacherous undertows.

In any case, the precariousness of her situation wasn't lost on me, and, in my mind at least, I was ready if necessary to proffer my assistance should the girl attempt anything foolish.

By this time her pursuers had reached the water's edge as well but gave no indication that they were prepared to follow her into the water. Quite the opposite, in fact. Their rigid stances (the blows to the body had stopped, at least) suggested that their desperation had its limits and that the water was a threshold they weren't prepared to cross.

All, remember, were dressed in normal clothes, not beach wear, so that the sight of this fully clothed girl waist high in the water and of her three attendants waiting rigidly on shore for her next move was a strange sight indeed. Meantime, I'd circled off the main track to the left so as to remain hidden from view behind some conveniently located food stalls that were boarded up for the winter.

Then the brother, braving his fears, or mustering his teenage courage, plunged with great deliberation into the water after his sister. Reaching her, he grabbed her about the waist and transported her amid a gale of blows back to the shore. Brother and sister struggled mightily then collapsed in a damp lump upon the sand. By now, the others had positioned themselves between the siblings and the sea.

I could hear sobbing, a plangent, heart rending sobbing, like an animal caught in a snare. The brother pinned her to the sand as he must have done myriad times during a lifetime of innocent play—but there was nothing innocent or playful about this submission, nothing innocent or playful about her cry, which was a cry to end innocence.

In any case, I sensed no brotherly hesitation in the way he locked her to the ground but something more manly and aggressive, which spoke more to adult lust than adolescent play. His weight, I noticed, equalled his full weight and didn't hold back. She, of course, fought like a woman pinioned to the ground.

Leave her. Leave her, one of them called out. There was a noticeable gentleness to the boys' movements now, unlike before, a genuine solicitousness on their part, one might even conclude affection, not the metal spike of anger of before, which had the effect of disarming my fears, as it did, it seemed, the players themselves caught up in this night drama.

Her gold hair spilled on the sand like liquid metal. Her voice, still torn in muted sobs, was calmed partially by the lisp of the receding tide.

I cannot give you what you . . . I cannot give you Leave me please. Leave me God's sake. I cannot give . . . the vulgarity of her words to me, an outsider, was that of a prayer.

Emotions deflated and returned to normal again. Her voice, its plaintive pleading, signalled the change. The cries faded, the thrashing ceased, the brother let up on his grip. The girl was on all fours, protected by her brother positioned strategically above her, shunning her former pursuers, who stood frozen in uprightness—*uprightness*—off to the side.

She began retching. I heard coughing and moaning and a series of easeful groans that could only have been retching. Then further plaints of . . . *leave me . . . God's sake . . . leave me . . .* washing over the night, lapping against the night.

The last tension drained from the air. I wanted us all to catch our breaths and express compassion for this girl, ambered in her beauty, her whole being snared by that beauty, with no say or control over her life. (In certain humans, beauty is trapped the way light is trapped in metamorphic stone—marble, say.) But none could respond with words commensurate with her plea. Only more adolescent thrashings and counter thrashings, which did nothing to alleviate the other's pain. Let's say each revealed his incapacity for love in his attempts to console this bright figure who held them all enthralled.

A burst of sea air, its antiseptic freshness, overpowered my senses. I didn't fear for this girl now—nor for myself. Her sickness had saved her from us (as perhaps her beauty would save her from the harshness of the world). Her retching had confounded her tormentors, exposed their inadequacy at the sight of beauty interrupted . . . beauty corrupted.

Rising from her crawl, she staggered towards the water again, where she began bathing her face as though salving a wound. Like animals satiated on some prey and drifting towards sleep the boys followed. They sought to communicate with each other (no communication was possible with the girl) but with grunts that couldn't begin to acknowledge their defeat.

A hand crudely framed a question, which another dismissively cut short. Only the brother stayed put, proud in his oversight of the situation and relieved to have his sister returned to him again.

She concluded her bathing with a series of coughs that were like a gull's cries caught in the wind. She turned brazenly towards the boys. She was in full control of herself now and greeted their disapproval with a worldly disapproval of her own.

A phrase or two reached me via the breeze, a mention of *alcohol* and *too much*, uncommonly vulgar words under the circumstances but ones, at least, leached of the lethal anger of before. Her reply was struck from the vernacular as well but less crude, phrased more like a cry of expiation than explanation.

What is it you want from me? What is it you all want from me?

No words, no hand reached out to the girl, who carried an aura of nobility about her person this moment. No love beckoned. She walked confidently towards the area that she had fled from earlier—almost, I wanted to believe, with a certain pride in her step—free from her pursuers, free from the tormentors of this world. Heads resolutely bent, like mourners at a funeral, the boys followed, the brother separated from the other two. What they couldn't express through words they expressed through the lumpish forward thrust of their bodies.

The confidence, the slowness, of her walk was beautiful to behold. She had removed her sandals and her long gazelle like legs seemed to float on air, while the boys' feet sank sulkily in the sand. The gold that fell dishevelled from the head continued to form an aureole about the beautiful face. The three followed as though caught in its brightness, as if doomed to follow its brightness in broken gasps. And I remained concealed where I was.

I stood with my back to the wind and watched the procession leave the strand. She was beyond me, too, in her isolation and in the secrets that her beauty carried into the world. She was safe now, I knew, from all of us.