

From the Dark

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IN THE ROOM twilight prevailed. From the main streets of the city sounded life's unrest, settling like an accompaniment beneath the death-laden silence there inside. Through the grill in the tall iron stove the coal fire shone forth without lighting anything, but cast a concentrated glow over the lower part of a blond man's face which, against the dark around him, appeared as if it were illuminated from within -- formed by a glowing, transparent, red metal.

The man sat leaning forward on his chair, with his hands clasped between his knees and his gaze staring into the fire. The contours of his figure nearly disappeared in the dark.

In the corner, shielded by drapes at the side of the stove, the dark was thicker than elsewhere, and nothing could be seen from there. Everything had vanished into the gaping gulf of the projected shadow. But up from the gulf where a glint of light there was something resembling a chaise longue, and from the hollow-eyed dark above it, the nerves of a sensitive person would have registered the sensation of a sharp glance as well as seductive, unnaturally enhanced hearing.

"There is a sick point in my brain," said a voice from the dark, speaking slowly with melancholy uniformity and contralto timbre. "It was already developing when I was a child, and it's this that has grown. All that has wounded me and weighed upon me has rested its tip on this single point; now the wrapping is soft and the resistance broken."

The man did not move, but his wise, deep-lying eyes gazed compassionately into the dark, where the voice was generated.

It's as if I've been alive for a hundred years," it continued, "and now I'm only the empty shell around what has been alive -- hollow as an old willow tree. I think that I've seen generations come and go, I've seen people being born and then gone, I've been bound in relationships as full of sap as young spring shoots, but they've all come to nothing, like frozen flower vines in a late-autumn night. Spring and winter have come, one after another, and people look at me and say I'm not as old as the oldest. But I know that I've lived for a hundred years. And yet I never, never became what I wanted."

Like dead matter the silence once more filled up the room, and life's commotion broke futilely against it, then sank back and turned into a subdued accompaniment as before.

"My father didn't hate women," added the monotonous voice without resonance. "It was worse yet: he despised them. My mother had run off abroad with a tenor and then gone into the theatre. I grew up with my father; no sooner had I left the wet nurse than we were alone, he and I.

As long I was so little I had no gender for him; I was not very much more than a puppy. But I was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh -- that is to say his property -- and he needed something warm and soft that could press up against him; he needed a living creature around him that could chase loneliness away.

He was afraid of loneliness, my father, for when he was alone, dark whims came over him -- a gun barrel in his mouth or a rope around his neck: dark whims that enticed but produced anguished sweat. Nothing warms so softly as a baby's body, nothing calms like chubby little arms, and nothing gives such dreamless rest as a child's breath. For this reason Nina became her papa's company: for this reason he took his meals with her presiding at the table: a serious woman; for this reason he rode about his properties with her sitting across the shoulder of his horse. And for this reason Nina idolized her papa. She was little then, in a fuzzy dress; neither boy nor girl, just a pudgy youngster.

"But Nina grew. And she developed a slender neck and long arms, she acquired a mouth that lost a few teeth, and she had a pair of inquiring, wondering eyes. And then her father saw that she was a girl."

The voice paused, and the man bent forward to stir in the coal fire so the ember glow freshened up.

"Oh, I was so little when it occurred to me what he had against me; I was so little that I didn't comprehend how it was possible for me to understand it

"I had no playmates, my nurse was old and peevish, and all I possessed of devotion centered about my father. Children have an instinct that teaches them to read into the souls of the great and which almost never leads them to read wrong. And children's grief is just as real as the grown-ups' -- deep enough to leave a mark for life.

"I was like my father, nimble and alert like him, gloomy and timid like him; easy to kindle into overwrought mirth, fast to fall into spiritless despair. No wonder he cared about me then!

"Ever since I was six or eight years old, we started playing out our comedy together -- a child's comedy; that I was what he wanted: a boy. I went riding with him on my own little horse, I took up boys' ways and learned to whistle, I exercised my body's strength, and I swore a little to please him."

The one speaking came to a stop and seemed to search her memory.

"I don't know for sure when I noticed it the first time -- this disdainful expression of grief blended with disgust, that later my father's face and voice so often assumed -- but

I believe it was a time that etched itself especially deep in my memory. We were out riding and had been trotting briskly. My father was fervent and warm, his eyes black and his nostrils wide. When he looked that way, I knew he wasn't hiding anything. We came to a broad ditch or canal and my father galloped over it, and he turned the horse and waited to see me do the same. My horse was small, and I don't know whether it was on his account or mine, but he didn't make the leap; he stopped short at the edge of the ditch. My father then swung his horse around -- I can still see the turn today! -- and with a single leap the animal flew over the canal with a jump as powerful and agile as that of a greyhound. There was a shiver, from the back of my neck all the way to the roots of my hair, when my father grabbed me by the arm, and he looked harshly into my eyes and said: "You're *afraid!*" He said not one word more then and released my arm, as if he were embarrassed at having been outraged. His glance just passed over me and the horse. I was dressed almost like a lad and rode in a man's saddle, but over the saddle bow lay my dark blue little skirt. . .

"Then I saw it in his eyes: what brought me down, which ever since has forced me to the earth. No, not kept me down but made me collapse like a limp rag -- of its own emptiness.

"I received not a word of explanation, nor did I say one word. He merely gave his horse a rap with the riding crop and trotted off, while I remained sitting. With my secret instinct I sensed that he didn't despise me because I was afraid, but because I had the *right* to be afraid. Of course, I could never be anything but -- one of those for whom cowardice was a virtue! The voice grew quiet, for it had begun to tremble with passion - - with the same deep resonance as the strings of a cello.

"This wasn't the only thing: it was merely the first blow to the point, which would then grow tender with each touch.

"On the farm there was a herd boy, a hale, handsome boy, approximately my own age. Since I was very little, it had been my father's pleasure to let me test the strength of my arm with this boy. It had been a pleasure for me to summon my utmost powers, and I took no small delight in almost always coming out the winner. But one day it occurred to me. I released my grip and turned blood-red as if he'd struck me. I looked at him with the most enraged embitterment: `You're lying -- you're stronger than I am!'

"And I went away, overwhelmed with humiliation at having let myself been betrayed for so long, having accepted as a gratuity these easily won victories the opponent had given me, because I wasn't even strong enough for my defeat to be deemed an honor.

"In those two stories you have the key to my whole life.

"There was an end to the rides by and by and likewise all the rest. We could no longer pretend that I was a boy. I grew quiet and still, and people looked with surprise at this saddened child who could never smile. But in my father's office I still had my favorite haunt. I had selected for myself an obscure place behind an old aquavit chest in a corner between the cupboard and the wall. My father still had his dark whims as soon as he was alone. For him I was a kind of protection against them; and I never bothered him.

"He was popular in social circles, witty and slightly mischievous. Visitors often came to him, there were one or two friends, and there was talk over a glass of sherry. They forgot my presence of course, and I sometimes heard things I shouldn't have heard. Like almost every melancholic, my father was so extremely occupied with himself that he didn't come to think of others: and in these conversations he unleashed his contempt for women. Having no mother, no human being to care about other than this gloomy pessimist I had to adore, I learned from these conversations what other women don't learn in a lifetime: I learned to understand men's train of thought, I learned to distinguish every shift of commiseration and disdain that can be concealed beneath words of praise or admiration. The sense of solidarity and community with my whole gender eventually awoke; and at each poisonous and concealed attack I suffered in secrecy, as if it had been aimed at me alone.

"When I was thirteen years old I acquired a stepmother. She was a beauty, not of the stately queenly sort but of the fair, irresistible type. She was soft as a rabbit; she had hands so small she used children's gloves; she always smiled when she was not crying -- and when she smiled, she had dimples in her cheeks and showed small white teeth, like mother of pearl. She was pure gentleness and endearment, and she didn't have a thought in her head.

"My father was vain about her beauty; self-reliance had never counted for him. He selected her costumes, for she herself had no taste, and he accompanied her to balls. When she bore him the first boy, the old fortress's canons were shot in jubilation, the wine ran in rivers down thirsty gullets. This was then repeated every year or so: the same gala celebration, the same party mood. When it was over, someone else took care of the little boy, and the mother went off to balls again.

"She was neither good nor bad, my new mama; she was only fair. She looked like a child, and she knew she was supposed to look like a child, the more simple-minded the better. It became her.

"Toward me she was never mean, but she got out of my way, and it appeared as if I'd been older than her because I was never merry or talkative. Otherwise there was embarrassment about my awkwardness and stupidity; I got a governess and was kept out of sight as much as possible; I was even lonelier than before; but from this my eye was sharpened. I was not envious of my stepmother: I knew my father all too well. I could read every expression on his face and each intonation in his voice. It did not escape me, what insatiable contempt lay beneath his homage. Even his amenability was contempt. An injustice from the wife's side did not annoy him, for he had never thought she would have

sense enough not to be unreasonable. He could yield to her whims with a smile and a kiss on the hand; still, he did her bidding with the same smile and the same kiss on the hand. His tolerance finally made her conceited; she began to brag, to hold forth upon subjects she did not understand and to talk stupidities. My father just laughed a little and let her alone; with a beautiful woman one didn't have to keep such careful account.

"But it was as if it fell down upon me -- everything, all of it. Everything she didn't even sense penetrated my sick mind. I had learned to see with my father's eyes: I saw from a man's point of view what it means to be a woman -- repulsive, one solitary accident beginning at birth!

"I saw myself as a mangy dog. Then this humility developed, which is the stigma and incurable defect of my character. Oh, that blemish on my brain! How tender and soft it became, so that every point could penetrate! What an ability I had to comprehend, when it concerned this one thing: understanding what was as unintelligible to my sisters as birdsong.

"I have never been young, and I've scarcely been a child.

There was a moment's silence. The man still bent forward, staring thoughtfully into the embers.

"I cannot conceive of this intensity of feeling in a child," he said slowly. "And I wonder if you're not exaggerating a trifle -- at a later time."

"Yes, but this is due to the fact that everything has helped to make this point sensitive. I want you to understand this. And if at some other time in your life you meet a woman who also bears a humility like mine -- the humility that you've always wanted to explain away and that you've had such difficulty believing in -- then you'll be able to comprehend that it derives from *shame* -- the shame of being a woman.

"For you, I've been neither man nor woman, just a living creature; and therefore you could become my friend. If in your eyes I'd been a woman, you would have despised me too."

He moved his chair out from the firelight, closer to the chaise longue; and from the dark he gathered up a fine, morbidly, thin hand which without a word he slowly pressed against his lips. She understood the meaning and thanked him with a little stroke across his hand, before withdrawing her own.

Then she continued to tell the story again with her sad, broken voice.

"I went out into the world, and I looked at women just the way my father had taught me. My view had unnaturally high definition -- not a flaw or a defect escaped me. The cowardly, the false, the petty. . . all little mean qualities I found in women in so much higher degree than in men. I was not blind to men's flaws; but in the flaws themselves there usually lay something of character; it was not the watered-down, bloodless nothing as in women. In men the rule was competence, ability to work,

enterprise, love of truth, and honesty; for women all this was nothing compared with this single thing: never to sin against convention. Did a man become less honorable for having one or another little erotic sin on his conscience? No. But for a woman this was everything.

"And the guilt does not lie with men -- as mentioned -- but with women themselves, in their cowardice, their lack of character. For women themselves external modesty -- appearance -- is everything. Their virtue is lodged not in the character; it is located on the outside, like the brand of a domestic animal. From this comes the solidarity with the entire sex, casting the responsibility for *one* woman's actions upon them all. She is not regarded as an individual; she is just a member of her sex. How haven't I experienced this! I, who felt as if all the others' faults rested upon myself alone, as if my humility were a sacrifice to compensate for all the others' narrow-minded, blind conceit, hunger for power, or selfishness! My brain had its sick spot, and all the material that life gave me went to nourish this single point.

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"MY FATHER didn't want me to become an old maid, and so he married me off. I knew that the only way for a woman to elevate herself to a higher social rank was to get married to a man on his way up. I got married and I rose up -- ascended when I gave the indications of love to a man who was more repulsive to me than a crawling, many legged larva. I was beautiful at that time -- it was long ago. To be beautiful and young is the only thing not a shame for a woman. My husband was ambitious, and he wanted to get ahead; and in order to do so he needed others, at least *one* other, and this man visited us often. He was our friend, was seen outdoors in the company of my husband and indoors in my company. I liked him; my daily life was a masquerade so as not to show *how much*.

My husband was 'happy' -- as it's called. And two years is enough for a man to get enough of a woman. So 'the other' came one day wanting to give me a gift, a present so precious that a bridegroom scarcely selects such a thing for his bride. I said no, and I said it with fear. I was beside myself, and I offended the giver.

"My husband got to hear of it indirectly. And do you know what he did? He grabbed me by the arm and said: `You'll upset him with a no. Accept it. You have the right to say that it came from me.'

"So it happened that I brought upon myself the shame of being a divorced wife. I couldn't tolerate being regarded as a commodity, that they were hawking me like a worn-out dress. So the shame came over me -- the shame of being a wife without a husband.

"Everything is shame in a woman, for she is nothing on her own; she is only a member of her sex. I worked among men, and they called me sexless and scorned my chilliness. I almost believed myself that I was a neuter, and even that was shameful. I feared that my chin would grow a beard and the men would ridicule it. But then one day I felt that I was a woman, because I loved.

"It was like having wandered all your life on sloshy, trampled roads in overcast winter fog with a feeling of never having seen the spring and never being able to behold it -- and then one day seeing the sun break forth and finding that everything has sprouted and grown under the wet haze, that now there will be greenery and that flowers will bud -- in sunlight, sun!

"I would like to have given my life to become his friend, but I couldn't -- I could only be his woman friend. . . Do you hear what an uncomely sound the words have: his woman friend! Shame and misgivings adhere to them!

"It bothers you to talk," said the man, his intonation filled with compassion. He took her hand yet another time and kissed the quiet one, almost humbly, without a word.

"Oh, for once let me speak my piece," she continued. "I've kept quiet and kept quiet -- year after year, decade after decade, it seems to me -- and now it's as if I were the entire female sex. I'm as old as Ahasuerus, and my shoulders bear the guilt of the entire race. I feel it with the nerves of a woman and see it with the eyes of a man.

"You know what I was in his hands. He exposed my brain to see how it functioned, he poked at my insides with his scalpel to correct his knowledge of human beings, and he lacerated my heart -- like a naughty child -- just because he saw it beat. And when there was no longer a single pain I could suffer without dying -- he discarded me. Not because I was bad or wicked or untruthful or halfhearted or cowardly or divided -- for I was none of these! But only because I was a woman. Not a friend, just a woman friend!"

She grew quiet, and a painful trembling passed through the dark room.

Then at last, in the same flat monotone, but just slightly lower:

"To be a woman is to be a pariah that never can raise itself above its caste. That I am a woman has been the damnation of my life.

"I have never had any mother, I lost my father before he died, and I have no son. . ."

Her speech ended in a tearless lament. It was dark. The man's face no longer was visible -- and he had no answer.
