

A Manner of Flight

I was sitting in the Café Beret, drinking espresso out of a sky-blue cup, when she landed. She burst through the door in a black hood. I saw her first.

“I wonder if we will survive each other,” I thought.

She saw me next. “I shouldn’t be here,” she said. “I should be working on the wings.” Then she smiled, as if a confession were all that she needed to absolve her. I looked down at my notebook where I had been tapping my pen. In the constellation of ink dots on the otherwise empty page, I thought I saw Andromeda.

She sat down.

I looked up.

There were no violins, no cellos.

My scalp itched.

“I wonder if this is the moment of the freeze-frame,” I thought. “The future flash-back, the instant I will refer to in my memoryvision long after we have forgotten what it is like to be without each other. After betrayal, or boredom, leaves us strangers. After we have stolen each other.” Already the night was rife with melodrama. The air smelled of clove cigarettes and amber musk.

“Tell me about these wings,” I said.

She changed the subject. “My problem is lies,” she said. “They bore me. How can you work in the theater if you are bored by lies?”

“That’s not a problem with lies,” I said. “That’s apathy towards alternate realities. My problem is blessings. I don’t know how to count them.”

“That’s not a problem with blessings, that’s confusing your prayer life with your sex life,” she said. Just then, almost everyone in the entire café was stricken with a low-born English accent. We stopped talking until it passed. I started singing trumpet under my breath.

I have never seen a woman who was as flattered by a black hood as Louise. “Call me Louie,” she said. Her eyes were as dark and sweet as chocolate. Her fingernails tapping against the coffee cup made twinkly noises. Our fingers met at the sugar bowl and stayed there, and we drank our coffee bitter. That is to say, there were stars in our eyes as we scrunched down in our seats and slurped from our cups without using our hands.

“This is too easy,” I thought. “This is much too easy.” And indeed it was, for this is not what happened at all. I flagged her down, I practically begged her to sit at my table. The café was in a basement and the plumbing from the toilets upstairs rushed over our heads. My sweaty hand lay like a dead weight on top of hers, and when finally I moved it, it was as subtle as a prelude to a public service announcement. When I looked deep into her eyes, what I didn’t say was, “I love you.” Instead I said, “Will you be in my play?”

Actually, we were more yelling than saying. The background music was excruciating -- experimental jazz performed by two brooding young men in oversized hats, who called themselves Wings of Desire. They were really more like sound vandals than musicians.

“Plays? Oh, I don’t act anymore,” said Louie, with a dismissive gesture. Really, she was way too young to be going about dispensing dismissive gestures. “I’m into props and costumes now.” Then, leaning towards me, “What kind of play?”

“A very sad, poetic story,” I said. “Tragic, even.” She licked her lips. I pressed my luck. “I can make it pretty, or I can make it honest. Which do you prefer?” Louie chuckled. Most people cannot or will not chuckle with any degree of success, but Louie could and did.

“Let me tell you about the wings,” she said. “I’m designing them for Hamletmaschine. You’re familiar with that show?” My heart sank. She already had a play. I was envious, though I was growing tired of scripts. Words always ruined everything. You couldn’t unfold words. I mean, you could, but they didn’t work like wings. When you unfolded words, you generally just confused people.

“I’m making them out of apple-barrel staves and corsets,” she said. “And maybe some rusty lawn chair webbing, too, I’m not sure.”

“I’m seeing something like old, stained slats of mini-blinds as well,” I ventured.

“Maybe,” she said, but her tone was not encouraging. “I really was hoping I wouldn’t meet anybody for awhile.”

“Really,” I said. “Why?”

“I’m trying to use my powers for good,” she said, “you know, keep the drama onstage, where it belongs.”

“Well, that sounds very reasonable,” I said trying to hide my disappointment. Any self-respecting artist knows that “reasonable” is not a compliment.

“Yes,” she said. “I need some dramamine. I’m tired. I’m over it. Spin cycle syndrome. I want off.”

“That’s not motion sickness,” I said. “That’s the world spinning by while you stand still.”

“That’s a good line,” she said, “but you don’t know a thing about me.”

“No, you’re right, I don’t,” I said. “But I would like to.” I felt like I was losing altitude.

“I want to get off this stage,” she said. “If you close your mouth right now and don’t say anything else, I might still fall in love with you. And well, maybe just a teensy little bit of anguish would be OK. I’m very good at anguish. OK, maybe a lot of anguish.”

“Excellent. But what if it’s a happy play? What’s if it’s a heart-warming comedy with an uplifting ending, suitable for the whole family?” I asked.

“ ‘What if,’ “ she said, blandly. “I have a whole drawer full of that at home.” It was time, the time when you realize that all it will take is meeting the other person’s eyes, and love, or something very like it, will come crash-landing right into the cul de sac of your most ordinary heart. It could cause a scene. It could certainly cause embarrassment. And it scares you so much, you just start to giggle instead.

“Kiss me,” said Louie, in an imperious whisper.

“What?” I yelled back.

“I said KISS ME!” she hollered. I closed my eyes and moved toward her. She said, “Why are you hiding?” I opened them. She was so close that my eyes felt crossed

and I did not know which one of her eyes to look in. “It’s a problem, isn’t it?” she asked, looking into my right eye.

“Hey,” said the waitress, “come back to the Midwest.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

We went. We collected each other in our arms. We almost slept as a lily on the dresser opened and opened; the night subsided slowly, with the sound of our breath overlapping; at the window, black branches against a lavender sky.

The next day I had love hangover and called in sick to work. I went back to sleep and when I woke up, Louie was gone. I gathered all my courage (there was no rose left on the pillow) and called her. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Eating grits and watching the Maury Povich Show,” was the reply.

“What about the wings?” I said.

“Oh, them,” she said. “Right now I’m learning how to make sexy home videos.”

“From Maury Povich?” I said. “That’s very frightening.”

“I’m thinking I’ll make some small ones first,” she said.

“You mean like with shadow puppets?” I said.

“I’m talking about the wings,” she said, annoyed.

“Oh, right,” I said with relief. “You mean like a trial size pair?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“I see,” I said. “Why?”

“Aerodynamics,” she said. “They’ve got to be right.”

“Of course,” I said, understandingly. “I love you,” I didn’t say. What I did say was, “Where are you going to find tiny apple barrels and tiny corsets?”

“Don’t worry,” she said, “be happy.” But I did worry about it, because I understood that art wasn’t meant to be happy. Any self-respecting artist has to worry a reasonable amount of time about any given artistic dilemma, or risk gimmickry and gadgetry and all manner of facile ridiculum.

For example, if you’ve ever worn a flying harness in a play, you know that it takes a certain quota of mishaps before a body can fly with any degree of grace. First there are the lurches and jerks and false starts to get through. It’s a kind of algebra, really, a word problem: Fairy A is an underpaid extra whose flying harness is rubbing her inner thighs raw. Fairy B is an underpaid extra whose flying harness is smashing her breasts into oblivion. Neither fairy has flown before. If the length of Fairy A’s fly cable is 14 feet and the length of Fairy B’s fly cable is 16 feet, which Fairy, at a swing speed of 15 mph, should depart the Genie lift first to avoid a collision in midair?

Answer: the tech crew usually doesn’t know, either. As a general rule, it usually takes somewhere between three and five collisions before at least one fairy quits, or the director abandons his absurdly naïve vision. In Louie’s version, Fairy A got her foot caught in a piece of scenery and ripped the costly forest backdrop to shreds. “Flying is like love that way,” she said. “It’s very hard not to grow cynical once you’ve realized just how expensive the illusion is.”

“I’m beginning to understand why you don’t act anymore,” I said, laughing. I couldn’t stop picturing her dangling in mid air, dazed and fairy-fied, just after the moment of collision.

“It’s not funny,” she said. “It was a ‘Midsummer’s Nightmare.’ I got a concussion AND a contusion. Nevermind that the fog machine malfunctioned and nearly asphyxiated us all.”

“Don’t worry, be happy,” I said.

“Shut up.”

It was a point of honor that I had not yet written a single scene of my play, simply because the requisite amount of worrying had not, apparently, been fulfilled. The Play could not as yet compare to the glorious possibility of its unwritten state, so I diverted my attention to my other inamorata: building a woman out of wrecks.

For months I had been collecting odd rusted pieces of industrial bric-a-brac and automotive chunkage: tailpipes, broken glass, bolts and pieces of metal, curved and flattened by the unthinkable. I was finding her on sidewalks and curbs, in parking lots, overpasses and dangerous alleyways. Only, I had no tools, and I didn’t know how to put things together. I only knew how to take them apart. I only knew how to live in the moment after it had been dissected, and by then, it was too late. Still, I looked for her, and that evening I found an exquisitely twisted torso. That is how I came to be running through the twilight with an orphaned and muddy muffler occupying my arms. Louie was standing at the corner of Pride Avenue and River Street.

“Is that art?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“I have a whole closet full of that at home,” she said.

“Of course you do,” I said.

“How are you?” she said.

“Ask me after it happens,” I said. She rolled her eyes.

“Give me a break,” she said. Then, “Do you want to go shopping for old watch parts with me?”

“Could I finish my run?” I asked.

“With that torso?” she asked.

“How did you know it was a torso?” I asked.

“Because of the way you’re holding it,” she said. I felt somehow caught.

“It’s been too long, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Since what?” I said.

“Since we were together,” she said.

“Louie, it hasn’t even been forty-eight hours,” I said, glad, for once, to have the upper hand. I was dying for her to ask me over.

“Do you want me to go?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “but not without me.” This time we went to her house, which was covered with crazy objects d’art and sketches and paintings of all kinds of wings. It was like walking into a living, flying dada. On the ceiling of her bedroom was a galaxy of glow-in-the-dark, stick-on stars. There followed a romantic interlude in which we

generated so much heat that the sky melted, and in the morning, our faces were stiff and sticky and covered with stars.

I floated out the door in a love haze wearing yesterday's clothes. I came to at the Question Mark, where I sold my time serving various average persons their lattes and bagels. Service with a scowl was what we were known for, and it was only when one of us was falling in love that we forgot to uphold our credo. This morning, for example, I found myself humming "Oklahoma" and thinking conciliatory thoughts towards the normal people, since we needed each other to feel superior. I even smiled at the unhappy accountant, the one with the square head.

"You are out of control," observed my manager sourly.

During a lull in the rush, I called Louie. She had a day off from Frame World, where she matted overpriced prints to match beige sofas.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Practicing," she said.

"Oh, that's good," I said. "What are you practicing?"

"Flying," she said.

"Oh," I said, "where do you practice?"

"In the backyard," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Are the wings finished?"

"I've been rethinking the wings," she said.

“Aren’t you running out of time?” I asked. I seemed to be experiencing all the anxiety that should have been Louie’s. She didn’t say anything for a long time and I thought maybe I had offended her.

I was about to hang up when she said, thoughtfully, “The trouble is that people tend to stick their bottoms out while trying to fly.” I tried to relate that to some basic fact about life, and in fact, I still am.

“When can I see you?” I said.

“I can’t live without you,” she didn’t say. What she did say was, “Do you think we spend too much time together?”

“If you have to ask, it hasn’t happened yet,” I said.

“Do you believe that love is a myth?” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “but myths can be very helpful in understanding where one is in the world. And sexy, too. Myths can be helpful and very sexy.”

“Umm,” said the lawyer, waiting at the counter for his bagel. I looked at him curiously. The normals don’t realize they’re being watched, and used for creative material.

“I put the stars back up,” she said.

“I’m coming over,” I said.

“Right now?” she said.

“After work,” I said.

“Get here as soon as you possibly can, my love,” said Louie. “Oh, but first, pick up a bottle of some liquid drape and some red shoe laces, would you?” she said.

“What’s liquid drape? Is it legal?” I said.

“Excuse me,” said the lawyer, unaware that his tie was busy lapping up a pool of coffee on the counter like the tongue of a furtive dog.

“It’s this gooey glue stuff that lends structure to soft materials,” she said. “You paint it on and voilà, you have a muslin angel, or whatever you’ve shaped it into.”

“The implications are vast,” I said.

“Oh, and get some crutches, too,” she said.

“My bagel?” said the lawyer. He was flipping a plastic bottle of orange juice back and forth in a classically hyper-caffeinated maneuver that always resulted in something getting knocked over.

“Crutches?” I said. “Why do you need crutches?”

“Didn’t take off in time,” she said. The bottle of juice catapulted into an open box of straws, sending them flying in all directions.

“In time for what?” I asked.

“Doghouse,” she said. Then she hung up.

The days passed and turned into weeks. Two weeks is a long time when you’re young and in love, busy not writing plays, and slinging joe in a coffee establishment that calls itself a house, but it’s not, it’s a coffee shop, and it’s not half as cool as the Café Beret. Louie was busy with the wings. The director of Hamelmaschine had already left several anxiety-ridden messages on her answering machine, but that didn’t seem to bother her one little bit. In fact, Louie laughed about it. “That wackjob’s got bigger fish

to flop about,” she said. “The guy that’s building the U.S.S. Ophelia for the dream sequence? Out of cardboard? His basement got flooded before he could even get it to the theater! Cardboard, indeed. What’s Hamletmaschine without a U.S.S. Ophelia? Ha.”

“Wouldn’t it be all the more poignant with that flooded-out basement look?” I asked.

“Don’t you have a play to write?” said Louie.

The specter of my play made me all the more determined to complete my amateur sculpture. I had come to see her as a goddess from the Hades of high industrialism, right there in downtown Indianapolis, Indiana. But the duct tape wasn’t holding. Bungee cords weren’t working. The Woman out of Wrecks refused to come to life. I tried not calling Louie for help, but it was pointless. I couldn’t help myself.

Though she was a chaos junkie, Louie was very good at problem solving. She asked if I’d tried a soldering gun. “For a hubcap breast?” I asked.

“Oh, hubcap-type art,” she said. “Well, for that you’re going to need a welder’s torch.”

“Where would I get one and how would I use it?” I asked.

There was a thoughtful silence. “Nevermind,” she said. “Try Bondo.”

“Bondo,” I repeated. It had the ring of destiny. That, and the name of a sado-masochistic clown. “Thanks.” And so I set to work. While Bondo by itself didn’t hold, it did seem to help support the ill-conceived duct tape/bungee cord system. She came together amazingly quickly. I guess all those weeks of piecing and puzzling weren’t

so futile, after all. She was nearly finished when I heard a knock at the door. It was Louie.

She stepped in, her face aglow with youth and lust and caffeine. And then, she unfolded her wings. They were huge, and very interesting. You wouldn't know they were wings, exactly, unless they were being worn, preferably by a human. They were made of broken crutches, attached to stretched and starched and arching pieces of canvas; it was all laced together with red shoelaces. "Those are astounding," I said.

"I was thinking of Kierkegaard when I made them," she said. I tried not to be annoyed. No offense to Kierkegaard, but I was afraid that a beautiful moment was about to be ruined by a snippet of abstract philosophy, the likes of which can be found on your basic Celestial Seasonings Tea box. "You know Kierkegaard, don't you?" she said.

"Yeah," I said, "about as well as I know Hamletmaschine."

"He said, 'Laughter is the narrow escape into faith.' And I was thinking, well that's exactly what wings made out of crutches are trying to do."

"That sounds very reasonable," I said.

She turned, posing, and as she did, the tip of one the wings brushed against the woman I had built out of wrecks, which teetered. And then, like an avalanche or a deep-soul temper tantrum that gains momentum as it falls, she toppled. Her head went rolling across the floor and into the kitchen, where it banged into the refrigerator grate and came to rest, face down, her slinky medusa hair sproinging all over the linoleum. Her breasts rolled against the sofa, crazily, crookedly, then lay there, staring at us like two mechanical, maniacal eyes. Her torso was definitely more dented than before, and only

one of her legs was still standing. The other had crashed into my bicycle, which had fallen on top of it. The whole event sounded like a shop vac falling down a long flight of cement stairs.

I was devastated. We stood there in shock. “This is what the moment of impact must feel like,” I thought, picturing the perverse glitter of a shattered windshield against dark pavement. But the sight of the wings’ red shoe laces against the carnage of my wrecked Wreck Woman jolted me out of my tragicoma: I would crochet her together! Why, it would be perfect!

The vision unfolded. I would spend long days in my rocker on the porch, our porch, crocheting the Woman out of Wrecks together with red twine and an oversized crochet hook. We would plant daffodils, and in amongst them, we would carefully place a whole series of sculptures, a Family out of Wrecks. And Louie would practice her flying and go on to design sets for other unpopular, deconstructionist plays. She would have a workshop. The vision soared, was breathtaking and fragile.

But then, just like in a dream or a classic rock ballad, I realized that I had flown too high. I crash-landed back into the Midwest when Louie took a step towards me, and the last standing leg of the profaned goddess keeled over with a small, pathetic clank.

And that last little topple was the tipping point: I imagined the shelf holding my collection of 50’s dessert plates – a complete set, not from Goodwill but from the Value Village that is so hard to get to – come crashing down. The little plates and matching cups in repulsively happy colors self-destructing against the dingy tile floor. I envisioned how it would be then: all my precarious, persnickety arrangements of everything laid to

waste, sooner or later, by a relationship that was pathologically interesting. A slow outrage began to spread through me. How unfair that Louie's creation was unharmed, while my Woman out of Wrecks was wrecked. I realized that I was never going to write a play. I saw that, as a person, I was utterly ridiculous. As a wise drama professor once told me, "A demolition in the first act is kind of problematic. Where can you go from there?"

"You *are* very good at anguish, aren't you?" I said. The arc and descent could have turned out so differently if only I had been able to let the tumble of laughter spill out and fill the stage, the little stage there in my studio apartment. It's too late now, of course.

"Can I still be in your play?" she said.

There were no violins, no cellos.

My scalp itched.

This would be the moment of the freeze-frame in my memoryvision.