

FICTION

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In the Yellow House

BEATRIX HAD THOUGHT HERSELF superior to loneliness, one who claimed a day as a garden stippled by intricate and outlandish blooms. Chosen by her. Planted by her. Raised with water and with sun by her, measuring the light's stance by a hand shaped like a flag. So when she grew lonely in her forty-fifth year, a thin, blonde, elegant woman who had never understood the sobs of late-night phone calls or the longing for companionship turned ridiculous—men with shiny suits and hair, selling anything from soap to cars; paid escorts that had more in common with the waiters—she took it as a cruel joke on her independence. Sitting on the porch of her house, the leaf-shapes of a fallen day all around her, she wept.

When she looked up, she was struck by how quiet everything seemed. The evening was cool, her neighbours performing their last tasks of the day. The girl next door had just washed her hair. She was combing it out, and it gleamed for a moment in the light. Across the street a man in a plaid flannel jacket was raking leaves. He waved to Beatrix, and she waved back. A moment later he clawed the earth with his rake once again.

Earlier that day, she had been looking through her keepsake drawer. It was something she did not do often; rather, she simply dropped items in. Today she had pulled out a pile of things from the bottom and started flipping through them: movie stubs, photographs, high school themes. What had made her keep all these things? Memories, sure—but they seemed so insubstantial. She felt dizzy, as if she were standing outside and the wind swept all those

papers out of her hands. Yet she was simply in a room, examining her own life. After she put the keepsakes away and turned off the light, she realized how lonely she had become.

Tonight, sitting on her porch swing, with the rhythms of her neighbourhood all around her, she wondered why she was.

Could it be baby love? She'd known of women who, having scorned the frills of infant socks and the talcum of their skin, were seized by a madness that erupted in stolen babies, lost pride, and miraculous, stunning births by women who could be grandmothers. Her friend Celeste was such a woman. At forty-four, she had given birth to a boy by an implanted father; she called him Her Joy. When Beatrix, over coffee, said that one day Mr. Joy would no doubt prefer his given name, John, she had meant it as a tease. Yet Celeste turned on her and stung her. Picking up Mr. Joy-John and offering him a breast, she said, "What do you know about love anyway?"

Beatrix didn't say anything but drank her ashen coffee, wondering how love could turn into something so ugly.

Could it be man love? Over her life, she'd had relationships—a lovely, long-haired boy in college, later a business type whose smile glittered like his shoes—but they were never enough to leave her self for. Never been in love then, her mother would have said. She had left her husband inexplicably one morning, saying she was still in love with her high school sweetheart. They took the cross-country trip they had always planned, only ten years later, making love in every horizontal and vertical space, landmark or not, restaurant or not, that they could think of, to make up for lost time. Beatrix was the result of three hours of frantic lovemaking in Yellowstone National Park, while bears roamed in the wild velvet of the landscape.

When her father died of prostate cancer, her mother died one year to the day later. She knew she was going to die. She took a bath, washed her hair in rose-scented shampoo, and put on her muslin nightgown. "I cannot live without him," she told Beatrix, who wondered why, even after all her nights of grief, she herself could. Her mother's pronouncement struck Beatrix as dramatic and self-pitying, something a high school student would say about a film star. She did not tell her mother this; she simply said that she hoped her mother would feel better tomorrow. Distractedly she said goodnight as her mother climbed the stairs, like a heroine in

that nightgown, the blousy sleeves tapering to the wrists, her feet appearing soulfully through the eyelet of the edging.

When her mother died, Beatrix was watching television downstairs. But she was restless, making herself a cup of tea that she did not drink, rustling through the paper. She felt she had been cruel, as if the words she hadn't said were evident in the ones she had. Over time, her mother had become more and more obsessed by the accoutrements of love, like an ageing actress whose signature style is reduced to a scarf flung over the shoulder, the fluttered eyelids of romance.

While a black-and-white drama played itself out on the screen, Beatrix felt something shift in the house, and she stood up. Everything felt shadowed. Then, not believing in such signs, she made herself finish the program, a Swedish film with subtitles and long silences, grim and particular in its high collars, the distant washing of the sea. It was a couple of hours before she went upstairs.

When Beatrix entered the room, she saw her mother on the bed, her hands at her sides. She could have been any age, an archetype of love, like Ophelia in her drowning clothes, the wet crown of flowers in her hair. That picture changed as Beatrix drew closer. With each step the years unfolded on her face, like the ripples of a stone before it sinks. When she kissed her mother, Beatrix thought, *This is what death tastes like*. She wept for a few minutes, those impossible, choking tears of first grief, then called 911.

Beatrix was not living at home by then, and, after her mother's death, after the hymns and the Bible verses and the cold wind covering the single yellow roses flung over her mother's grave, realized she didn't have a home in the world, that once she had finished hugging all her sad aunts, who smelled of face powder and lavender cologne, she would sell off the house and, if she ever walked here again, it would be with a feeling of walking through the frayed edges of time into nothingness, the place where her family used to be, a photograph with all the people cut out but her, hanging on to the empty shapes. She was determined to find wholeness elsewhere. And so she moved far away from her home town to a city, where she worked as an editor for scholarly journals that nobody read. There was a certain satisfaction in this because it was a job that Beatrix could do on her own terms, meeting her own impossibly high expectations. She worked with people she liked,

which she thought a blessing. At night she took walks and never felt fearful, carrying with her the calm her mother had had when she walked up the stairs.

She'd gone through the period, that most very bright people do, of falling in love with ideas. Beatrix smiled and looked over at the neighbour girl once again, the brightness of her hair. The girl was seated at her desk now, opening a book. For a moment Beatrix felt she was superimposed over the girl, as if she would suddenly see her own face.

When she was in college, she thought she was in love with her English professor. She remembered the feeling she had of walking across the campus, the stone buildings glistening in the morning light, the air crisp with a hint of snow, and sliding into her seat in Jefferson Hall. Sometimes she would close her eyes in class to let the words of the poets cover her in waves. The professor was a man in his forties, a man who wore tweed without irony. He read poetry like music, and his thin, expressive face was suddenly alive.

One day the two of them had coffee by the river that cut the campus into two parts. Beatrix noticed that her slip was showing as she sat, nervous, on the bank; her voice broke with the intensity of her heart. The sky seemed impossibly blue, and the noises around her—the distant chatter of students, the slow campus traffic, an occasional bird—dimmed.

"I know how you feel," the professor said suddenly. "I fell in love with poetry too at your age." They sat there a long time, until it was almost dusk.

She remembered the tears that came to her eyes, how the campus around her suddenly was so beautiful she could not bear it. The picture cleared. She stood up and brushed the leaves off her skirt, thanked him for his time. That night she had wept all night, imagining his kiss. They could have read poetry to each other in bed, something most people her age would find ridiculously arcane, like the fact that she was still a virgin. In her dreams he spoke to her again, only this time he said he loved her. She woke up, nightmare heavy, in the dawn, her eyes red, her hands trembling, and wondered what she would do.

She did the only thing she could. She finished the class and in the meantime had found the lovely long-haired boy, to whom she lost that saved virginity, and if it wasn't what she imagined, it was still beautiful. She loved the way he looked like Christ in the

paintings, with a body so thin and white it looked almost bruised. He wrote love poems to her in the style of e.e. cummings, which she could recite back to him.

Yet the relationship with her boyfriend didn't last, not even till her senior year, when the e.e. cummings affectations struck her as trite and he started sleeping with freshmen. She went on with her life, and she did enjoy her solitude, calm as rain, like the miniatures in a museum, crafted by intricate hands.

When some of the evening walkers came by, they startled Beatrix with their hellos. From the blue-blackness of dusk, their faces emerged, a swath of leg, the white shininess of sneakers. Beatrix smiled and walked down her steps a few moments to talk. The women were both about sixty, one with spiky grey hair, the other with short, clipped white. They lived in the house at the end of the street. Beatrix supposed they were lovers, the way they touched each other on the arm, laughed in the space of each other's silences.

"No time to talk," they both suddenly said at the same time, and, after all three of them laughed, the women disappeared into the night. Beatrix sat for a moment on the steps, thinking about the person she herself had been most in love with.

In her early thirties, she had fallen in love with a businessman, who eventually chose the cool glitter of his stocks over her. That wasn't quite right; they both loved their work. It's just that he wanted to have children. "You do understand?" he said in the Italian restaurant that they loved, his voice raised with a lilt, and she said yes.

Later she had seen him on the street with his wife, who was pregnant, their two-year-old girl in a carriage. In a moment she realized he had never mentioned her to his wife, who was at least ten years younger, her dark hair held back with a barrette. Beatrix did her peekaboo routine with the little girl, enough like her father—the dark, expressive eyebrows, the almond eyes—to make Beatrix pause. When she pulled the laces of her hands apart, she wished them all happiness.

It was at this time she decided to move to the country, where she could still get to her job in a reasonable time, plant her garden, take her photographs, write. And she found such a place, a yellow house that, to her, was the imprint of earlier times: a clean, yellow box, with many windows and a porch. And it had remained so.

From her different vantagepoint on the steps, she surveyed the dark sweep of ground to the street, then looked up at the houses. So many of them just like hers, with someone having graham crackers and milk, another putting on her slippers. Just then a boy whizzed by on his bicycle and startled her, leaving her with dust.

Perhaps she just needed more friends. She had always been the kind of person who didn't need other people. Even when she was a child, she had spent long hours by herself—filling in the thick black lines of her colouring books, writing in her diary, getting up early to watch the dawn. She had always had her attachments: a best friend in grade school who wore penny loafers and had pierced ears, a group of friends in high school who worked on the school paper, but it was rare in her life that she didn't eventually prefer solitude. When she heard of people being tempted by their friends to walk the dizzying height of a suspension bridge, sealing them as friends forever, she was bewildered. She would have been the one to say it was getting late, she had to go home.

Of course she had her interests: her black-and-white photographs, which she developed herself, the kiss of the gaze she caught on film. She had her job; she had her garden; she loved to travel. She liked to roam, just walk and walk, until she ended up at a little stone table, where she could drink something cool and let her mind rinse out.

To feel aloneness when there has been oneness! Beatrix wondered if this was when most people found God. She, too, had sat in churches, watched the miracle shows on television, where old people stumbled out of wheelchairs and could walk again, where the boy with an angel face suddenly said, "Oh, Mama, I can see." And, despite her feeling that everything had been staged, she couldn't help feeling the swell of deliverance, the welcoming lap of God's robes in the agony of pure light.

She had in fact gone through a religious phase in her youth, when she read the Bible out loud in her room, while her parents made frozen margaritas downstairs. She liked the feeling of the pages, their crisp thinness, a scent slightly of soap, and the words themselves, like a parade from God, the tiny print like small soldiers marching to her brain. Sometimes her parents were so much one person that they didn't need her, and this had been her curse: to have parents tragically in love with each other, so much so that

people hearing the story of their inevitable love sat listening with joy, the inevitable O-gape forming on their mouths.

But she had gotten over that feeling long ago, and had known that they had loved her, had seen her as the exquisite physical shape of a love that had walked across country and torn apart a marriage it was so strong. She had once heard her mother say, "She looks the way I feel when you make love to me."

Beatrix smiled, looked at her hands, and they seemed strange to her for a moment. She walked back up the stairs and stood, pulling her sweater close. The air tasted like snow.

Did she need religion? She didn't know, but she needed something to make her feel more substantial. And, for some reason, she began to think of a story her mother had once told her about a tattooed man, a story that no one else would ever have told her. Her mother had been dressed in what she called her gypsy clothes, a dress like a sequence of scarves. When she walked, men wondered what the air would do.

They were having coffee in a streetside café, and the pigeons, blue-black and cooing, whirled, the sun like a tracery of heaven on the clouds. Suddenly her mother said, brushing back a wisp of her hair, "Did I ever tell you the story of the tattooed man?"

Beatrix shook her head, smiled at her mother's calm, dark eyes, her petalled mouth. "No," she said for emphasis, leaning forward, her elbows on the table, caught like everyone else in her mother's spell.

Her mother waited a moment for effect. "He tattooed every part of his body," she announced, the scarves around her, the coffee in her hand, her face lit up with her own pleasure. "Imagine!" Her mother added with a seductive undercurrent, "I said *imagine!*" Then she had started laughing, which made Beatrix laugh too, until they ran out of breath.

And Beatrix could still picture it—although more seriously now—how it must have felt that first day, when he knew he was going to do it, how clean his body must have felt, a country of surfaces, whose map he would make. Beatrix could see the usual—snakes and hearts, the names of girls—but the true pleasure must have come when he depended on his own imagination. What would be perfect for a finger, a rich man going through the eye of a needle, or the harvest of a microscopic nation bent on survival, the wheatstrands in a tiny wind? Would he have gotten used to the

pain, or was that part of it too? Beatrix could imagine the woman who loved him seeing surfaces that most can only imagine in our search for self in this life, a trail of symbols and of false starts, of worlds that lead the mind back for more. Would his muscles have winked "I love you"? Would part of this perfect pleasure have been that no one saw what she did, even those who saw his forearms dancing with emblems as he walked down the street?

It was only now she understood why he had done so in the first place.

She thought of her father. When he found out he was going to die, he took the news bravely, that phrase *less than a year*, those even harder words *maybe less*. She and her mother visited him every day in the hospice, where they entertained him with stories and songs, and they read him cards that people had sent, with birds and balloons and cheery messages with flowers. At the end he mistook them and the nuns for angels, which made her mother weep, cluttering the edge of his nightstand with kleenex, until they fell like a child's idea of snow.

She and the tattooed man had this in common: running out of surfaces. There in the murmur of the dark, she closed her eyes until she became him, until she could own the texture of his flesh. How he must have felt, when, studying the gifts of the body, he found only what he had already drawn, this raucous joy of colour and of skin.

Here's what must have happened finally. It could have come to him anytime, pouring a cup of coffee, standing in the first light of day. She opened her eyes and watched him smile, fingering the winking fishes on his forearm. He would make up stories about them, would tattoo additional layers in the skin of his imagination. He closed his eyes to all the fishes that lived, glistening in their own blue waters, and he laughed. There was so much to do.

Beatrix stood up. Whatever she had chosen had brought her here, and even sadness, she knew, had its own beauty. She looked from the porch of her yellow house. Everyone was gone. It was so dark now, it was hard to see anything.

She had always thought of her life as a garden: the scented whispers of lily of the valley, the roses in a sweep of startling yellow, their fragrances so heady she had to sit down. It was all there for her, unfolding in the perfect solitude of her days. Why even the tattooed surfaces of her past, those vines of both paradise and loss, had no end.