Pour The Wine

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She stood before him, still half in the doorway as if waiting for a chance to dash out. She turned her face toward the floor, the wall, the lamp, everywhere but at him as he watched the emotions gather in her eyes, in her breathing and in her hands. He wondered if she knew she was doing it, that clench and release of fingers, clench and release, over and over as he watched.

Would you like to sit down? he asks, wanting her to move away from the door, wanting to catch and hold time, slow it down, stop her from rushing him into words he hadn’t thought out.

She stops her breath and watches as he moves slowly, cautiously, to stand beside the davenport. You don’t want to scare her, he thinks. Go slowly, slowly, he thinks. Don’t rush it, put her at ease.

Put her at ease? his mind asks him. Since when have you ever put anyone at ease? Since when have you known the right words, the right timing, what was right? Oh, shut up, he says to himself and forces a smile toward the girl, saying with forced ease, Please. And forcing another smile, Please, sit down, and we’ll talk. We’ll have a nice chat, okay?

The girl’s hand comes up shakily to comb through her hair.

He sees the effort it costs her to leave the door, sees the breath caught and shakily expelled as the hand, dragging through her hair, comes finally out of the tangle and wavers uncertainly down to rest, to unrest, moving restlessly at her side.

His eyes keep returning to her hands. They are like small animals, moving here and there, touching the scarf at her neck, the lapels of her wool coat, the threads loose at her pocket, touching the key, a brass key, hanging from the silver chain at her neck. Her hands keep returning to the key, fingering it like a talisman, wrapping the chain around a finger and releasing it, wrap and release, wrap and release.

That was how she’d been posed when he’d opened the door, just at the end of the bell’s ring, standing there with her fingers curled around the key, her other hand buried in her pocket, her face shadowed by the hood of the coat, yes, even her face buried and hidden and hiding.

He watches her steps; one moccasin-clad foot at a time lifts and falls, softly rubbing at the nap of the carpet with a sibilant soft sound at the end of each step.

How cautious she is, he thinks, as she hesitates just short of the davenport. How ready to escape. He wonders how long it took her to get to the door and how long she stood there, stood at the door before ringing, finally touching and ringing the bell.
He imagines those fingers rising and falling, darting to and from the bell, then whisking themselves back to key and pocket. Back to safety. He smiles at the thought, the small crooked smile just briefly at his lips.

Brief or not, she sees it and looks at him, her eyes bright and suspicious as she looks directly at him, fully at him for the first time. Surprise bolts through him, ripples through him and causes his fingertips to tingle. He resists the urge to turn his head, to look away, to avoid her gaze.

My eyes, he thinks. My God, my eyes. That face, Her face, but my eyes.

She sees the sudden stiffness of his face, the sudden stillness of his breath and she stops, her moccasins stabbing the carpet angrily as her eyes stab up at him.

What? she says. The word is an accusation, the single word hangs in the air like a blade between them.

He is shocked by the violence of that one word, the intensity in her eyes. It drives him back, shoves him back to that time with Her, to Her eyes and the shock of seeing hate there. Hate in those eyes that had never before looked at him without love and trust and need shining out. He’d known. Yes, he’d known even at the beginning that he would never be the strength, the security she’d needed. But she’d been his one hope, his only hope for love, happiness, a family. And she’d trusted him. That was the worst part; she’d never doubted him. Not until the last, that very last when he’d finally admitted it; told her, and left her. Not until then had he finally seen hate in her eyes, hate he’d known would finally have to come.

Oh God, he thinks. Oh God, how wrong could I be, not my eyes at all but Hers. In a moment these eyes will look just the same, just the same.

The girl’s eyes were demanding an answer, he could see her tensing, her hands gathering, preparing to fling away, to fling him away as she left.

Um, he says. Umm, it’s just..., it’s just that your eyes, your eyes are blue. I’d forgotten, you see..., I’d forgotten, I didn’t remember.

Oh, God, he thinks. Oh, God, why did I say that, what did I say? He waits for scorn to form in those eyes, for the hate he expects to come, to arrive in those eyes. He waits and watches, watches the hands, the eyes, the moccasins.

Her hand, the one locked around the key, loosens, and the hand in the pocket lifts and hangs at her side, relaxed and gentled. Her face softens, tames, and amazed he watches a tiny smile appear on her face. It astounds him, that smile, it stuns him. He feels captured by it, caged.

Oh, she says. Oh. Yes, Grandpa has blue eyes too. So that’s why. I mean, if he hadn’t had blue eyes, I wouldn’t either. I’ve always been glad. Her smile twists a little on her face and one shoulder hunches forward a little and inward a little. Her toes in moccasins dig into the carpet and relax, she sways slightly forward and back as the toes dig in and pull out and then with one moccasined
foot she smoothes the carpet back and forth where her toes had dug. He sees with amazement that they are true moccasins, without soles, just the suede leather between her feet and the floor.

But it’s February, he thinks. It’s February and there’s still snow outside.

Your moccasins, he says. Don’t they...

I like them, she says, the words hard again, sharp and honed, and he flinches.

Oh, Christ! he thinks, impatient suddenly, tired of this clumsiness of word and motion. Enough, he thinks.

Do you? he says. Well, I guess, they are unique. He smiles at her, a little nervous, not wanting it to be an apology. He’d been prepared to apologize if necessary, but not for this, not for wondering at her moccasins.

She looks at him sideways, her gaze glancing off of him, sliding away from his face to her toes clutching to the carpet from within their moccasins. She loosens her moccasined feet and again smoothes the carpet, her eyes flickering up to his face as he resurrects the smile that had been dying there. She flicks her gaze away again to land at his feet, his slippered feet.

He feels embarrassed suddenly, embarrassed by those ordinary, everyday slippers that cover his stockinged feet. Suddenly those fleece-lined, cushion-soled slippers seem a terrible character flaw.

Well, at least, he thinks, at least they’re not made of red and green corduroy like the ones Christine gave me last year for Christmas.

The girl looks up at him, away from his slippered feet, darts her gaze up at his face with a sudden sideways tilt of her head, and smiles slightly.

And he knows, suddenly he knows she isn’t smiling at his discomfort. It is a smile that shares, that acknowledges that feeling of embarrassment. It fills him with exultation and he feels his face crease into a smile wider than it is used to, one that feels strange on his face after the stiffness there before. He feels silly, feels giddy...but reckless with it, brave and strong with it.

Well, he says, and the word sounds as joyous and silly as he feels. Well...let’s sit and talk, I’d like to talk to you. You can tell me about your moccasins and...or wait, would you like a drink? I’ve got some orange juice, or milk, or, well, I could fix some tea, I guess. I think I’ve got some tea bags somewhere. What would you like?

Well, she says, the word long and drawn out, I’d like, I mean, um...Do you have any wine? She says it looking at him, as if considering, weighing what he will do.

He stops with his hand on the opened refrigerator door, not even remembering how he’d gotten there or what he is doing there and turns his head back, to look back at her, his eyes showing his surprise and his mind thinking, How old? How old is she? My God, I ought to know that at least. Let’s see, it’s been sixteen
years, sixteen? No, seventeen, yes, seventeen years because Christine is nine and that was eight years later, so yes, seventeen.

Sure, he tells her, I think so. Uh, he says, let me look, let me see...

His hand is at the cabinet, his mind is thinking, Yes? What the hell do you mean, yes? Seventeen is so young, she shouldn't be drinking yet, should she? With the age set at twenty-one? But in Nebraska, maybe in Nebraska it's eighteen? I could ask, should I ask? He looks back from the cabinet to see her looking at him, her coat still on, the scarf hanging down on each side of the lapels, both hands in their pockets, the key hanging abandoned for once between the scarf ends, and the moccasined toes and heels sunk into the carpet. It is the key that decides him. He looks back to the cabinet and says, Well, let's see, I've got a Beaujolais, and a Cabernet and...

Have you got a white wine? she asks. She steps forward, the moccasins making soft rustling sounds as they step toward him, to him, beside him, and stop. He holds his breath as they stop, as she stops, just beside him, just at his side and he stares. He stares and stares at her hair as she leans her head forward to look at the wines. It is long, her hair, wispy, brown and straight but tangled where it lies along the sides of her face, and in the back, buried into her coat. Her hand comes up from out of the pocket that is by his side and reaches up, just past his shoulder height, to push her fingers into the wisps of tangles of hair beside her face and push, comb, and weave them behind her ear. He wants to laugh out loud as that ear is revealed, such a human thing, that ear, soft and tough at the same time, common and elegant all at the same time.

Umm, she says and he's startled because she has forgotten who he is to her, forgotten he's a stranger she doesn't know, forgotten it all, standing there looking at the wines. And he, he's realizing again, like he did the first time when she was new, with awe and reverent fear, what she is to him, who she is, and thinking about how she has come to be here, standing beside him, standing there looking at the wines, at his wines.

Well, she says, the word long and liquid, her head to the side as her hand moves from hair tendrils to the bottles, to turn them to read their labels. There's a Californian Chablis here, but that sounds kind of boring. Um, here's a Riesling and oh, A Chenin Blanc. Which do you like?

She half turns to face him and he takes a breath and lets it out and smiles.

Oh, the Riesling, he says, and pauses and takes a breath and says, trying for casualness, Have you had it before?

Her eyes come up to his face, to his eyes and he watches as they become still and serious.

Not Reisling, she says. But I've tried other German white wines before and liked them. Her eyes flicker down from his and then back.
I’m not really legal yet, not until May. She pauses and says, But I thought, and she says, her eyes dropping, her words becoming chopped, You know. A special occasion.

He stares again at her face, at her face, not believing, not daring to believe until finally her head raises and her chin tilts, her eyes defiant, she looks up at him and repeats, You know?

He smiled, It felt good. He smiled at her and said, Yeah...I know. And then, not even looking at her, not even watching to see, he said, There’s a spare bedroom down the hall, just past the bathroom, to the left. You can put your coat there if you like.

And he got out the glasses and poured the wine.

— Teresa Bowlby