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Libretto

Cassandra Atherton

I won't slip my stories under your door any more. I'm tired. Too tired to wait for you to realise they are all about you. You and me. And her. Always her. Ringing you up. Writing you cards. Walking your dog. Just once I want it to be all about me. I search your libretti for a fleeting reference. A rouged moment. Something other than green words and natural metaphors. But you write like you make love. Pathetic fallacy.

*

Last Wednesday when the moon was a perfect circle, Strumpet strolled onto the lawn, smoothed the creases in her towel and soaked up all the silver. She held your libretto in one hand and a Long Island Iced Tea in the other. A clipping of Amy Fisher, Long Island Lolita, was wedged between pages four and five. Yellowed and jagged across the masthead. You hid in the bushes behind the tower. Watching. Wolfish canines gleaming in the creamy light. Hairy knuckles grasping at the leaves obscuring your vision. Strumpet placed the libretto in her lap and traced your words with her little finger. Smiling. Listening to the ice tinkle inside the tall glass. As she reached for a pencil, you watched her purple cocktail umbrella twirling among the fruit. She adapted the second line of your third verse from, 'the begonias are bristling in the pot outside my door' to 'my begonias bristle in the adjectival silence'. You have always valued her annotations, encouraging

her to fill your libretto with silky squiggles of grey lead. I only have photocopies of your libretti. I know because each sheet has the same speck in the top left-hand corner. Dirt on the lens. Liquid paper on the glass. I'm not invited to scribble on your original libretto in the moonlight. So I write about you. And me. And her. And I wait for you to realise that it is all about us.

*

I won't store your telephone number in my speed dial any more. I'm not going to call you. Not with her there in the background cooking risotto. I'm tired of waiting for you to call me. You're too busy now. Too busy telling her how wonderful she is. So I am going to put her number in my speed dial and ask her to scribble on my manuscripts in the moonlight. Maybe I'll join her for a Long Island Iced Tea and share her towel. Maybe then you'll let me adapt the fourth line of your sixth verse to 'soft petals underfoot.' I would never be bold enough to make changes to your chorus. She did once. She changed all the fuchsias to nasturtiums. You changed them back and now all you ever let her read are the verses. Your verses. In the moonlight. On a towel.

*

When Strumpet puts down your libretto and her Long Island Iced Tea, she whistles. You go to her, nuzzling her nape and parting her legs with your hairy knee. She makes a long, low noise in the back of her throat and arches just enough for you to slip your hand into the small of her back. You rip off her silver pendant with your teeth and lick the salty hollow of her neck. I remember how it feels to have your pointy hipbones burrowing into me. And as I stand with the photocopy of your latest libretto I almost

whistle for you. I almost put you back on my speed dial and push another handful of pages under your door.

*

Strumpet wriggles out of her transparent raincoat and traces the line of rogue hairs sprouting from just beneath your elbow. She smiles as you nip the inside of her lip. As you rip the left cup of her moist pink bra. You chew on her nipple, leaving a pattern of broken blood vessels in the aureole. Still she urges you closer until you growl softly into her ear. I want you to bay at the moon. To tip your head back and howl. Howl that she is not me. Howl that my stories are published without you reading them first. But you slump against her, sticky and spent.

*

I won't meet you at three in the morning to sing with you. I remember your voice rumbling rich and low as you played the notes. My voice soaring like a pink Catherine wheel. I was always overjoyed to see you, scared that when the song finished you would return to her. But she had already heard your songs, urged you to play them a dozen times while she sat in your armchair and hummed.

*

I haven't encouraged you in the last three months. I've just watched you with her in the moonlight. You want me to hold your photocopied libretti while you make love to me. Singing while you tear me to pieces. I'm not going to do that any more. I'm not going to keep you warm for her. Eat out my heart and keep it in

your pocket. Think of me as I stain you rouge and russet. Then write about me so that she will start to scour your libretti for a piece of herself. A silver slice of her life.

*

Strumpet is lying on her towel with a bass player. Your eyes glow amber behind the tower. She drains her Long Island Iced Tea and pulls your moist libretto from beneath her buttocks. She won't whistle for you tonight or any other night. She has finished scribbling on your libretti. The moon is still a perfect circle. Your hairy fingers tremble as you claw at the leaves obscuring your view. You need to know if verse seven line eight should read: 'stray braids of wisteria climb the straight, white fence.' She won't tell you. Not now. Her pencil has rolled down the incline and the bass player is murmuring in her ear. You gnash your teeth and sniff the air. My scent curls up behind your ears. You approach Strumpet and her bass player, interposing yourself between them. You reach for the crumpled libretto, directing them to the eighth verse. The bass player tries to stand but you hold him down. You grate your teeth down Strumpet's neck while she tries to think. Slowly she turns to you and whistles. You puncture his neck with your right canine while Strumpet laughs and waits for you to part her legs with your hairy knee.

*

You give me her crumpled towel and the original bloodstained libretto. I have my rouged moment.