

what you do best

by Gary Percesepe

You're auditioning women to replace Gabrielle. Her part apparently has come to an end. Chase's ended months ago. This is sad, these cast changes. As Director you can say that it touches you, you're moved. You do appreciate their years of devoted service, the selfless way they performed their roles, read their scripts, threw themselves into their assigned parts, assumed their characters. At times it was difficult to keep up with them, an almost daily writing on your part, scripting their lives to suit your desire.

Now that they're gone you try to imagine your life without them. It is, you realize, the performative element that you'll miss. Like those telephone conversations with Gabrielle where you went before the interiorized camera, assumed an identity, and constructed a self just for her. With her as spectator and participant, audience and actress, your life was a work of art, and how many can say that?

You're going to miss her, sure. You miss them all. You missed them before they left. You missed them before you met them. You'll miss them even if you somehow get hold of them again. Missing, you've come to believe, may be what you do best.

You call Chloe. She has, you're prepared to believe, the look that is needed, what's more, the name. First things are so strange. The first phone call is a rush. The phone rings. You wait. Once, twice. Then, connection: that familiar clicking sound that tells you someone's picking up. You anticipate the voice. Hers sounds low, cautious. When she realizes who it is you can feel the smile break through. Next: the laugh. You wait for this, thank God for it when you hear it, tender and unrehearsed, try to make it last.

"Not impossibly," Chloe says, when you ask if she could possibly inhabit the space of the word lonechill.

"What are you wearing," you say.

"Beautiful, Estee Lauder. Victoria's Secret, bottoms only."

"All the good names," you say.

"Some blood, the result of a collision with a kitchen appliance. While phonebound to you."

"Blood is good," you say. "We can do blood."

"We must be in love before we can care that all women are not virtuous," she says.

"Take them off," you say. "The bottoms."

Into the receiver she hums what you recognize as a Natalie Merchant song, "Gun Shy." It works nicely with the scripted lines. You remark on the improvisation. Then the line goes still.

You consider: Her voice, the sly metallic glint of it that still rings in the receiver, is perhaps too carefully modulated.

"The beloved is successively the malady and the remedy," Chloe says. "Both the poison and the cure."

"No news there," you say, your voice courting resignation, tottering on the edge of becoming something else entirely.

"They're off. My bottoms, I mean. They're in my hands now. I've gotten blood on them, I'm afraid."

You line the shot up carefully, taking care to see that she is backlit. Her hair, a lemony blonde, is pulled back severely and lies close to her scalp in a single French braid. Her skin is tanned and smooth, her body slender. Her bare brown toes grip the kitchen counter as she leans back precariously on the tall stool like some giant bird of prey. From this angle you can see the light hairs around her navel. You study the line of her left leg, the leg closest to you. She holds the phone with her chin, the blood flecked panty draped over her near shoulder. Both arms are wrapped around herself in the chill morning air, crushing her breasts together.

The trickiest part now: to feign indifference. Your humanity, that part you feel tugging at self-betterment, you experience as both task and episode. "I did God's work in approaching you," Chase had said, and Gabrielle: "I was ready to follow you anywhere."

Which you hear as: impossible, un-writeable.

Chloe hums, deep and off key. You adjust the lens, check the sound levels. Somewhere in here you know you'll lose your way, abandon the script. Maybe you never much believed in the script,

anyway. You're looking, always already looking for the ending. You wish to keep this scene short, very short, make it almost a non-event, and yet one that cannot be forgotten easily. By her.

All ways out: You select one, mumble goodbye, citing difficulties with the lighting, when what you're thinking of is the blemishes. It's best to exit before the physical blemishes are noticed. Spiritual blemishes come later, of course, when it's too late, when your two lives have shipwrecked somewhere off the coast of hope.

You make a mental note for Chloe to do the Kafka reading, the conversation with Max Brod.

We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God's head, a bad day of his.

Then is there no hope? Brod asks.

Oh yes, Kafka says. Plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope. But not for us.

You're off the phone in a flash, traveling faster than she can move, faster than she'd want to, you're gone: Where you want to be. Where she'll find you.

