

Everything is Fine

by Victoria Lancelotta

The first one was dark and angular, coiled-looking inside an expensive suit. Over her food at a small table in the hotel bar, Francesca had been unable to look at anything else but him. Out of the suit, unsprung on a king-sized hotel bed, his skin paler than she had at first thought, she was still transfixed: the stubble along his jaw, the small hard muscles in his calves, his forearms, an odd curling leaf tattooed high on one shoulder. His body was foreign to her, a strange country. He smoked cigarettes and watched her, and finally spoke, for the first time since he'd unlocked his door and stepped aside for her to slip into the room ahead of him.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" he said, and for an instant she was surprised she understood him, so convinced was she of his foreignness.

"Nothing is. What? Why would you ask me that?"

He gestured vaguely, a lift of the hand in her direction. "I don't think you'd be doing this if you weren't unhappy about something."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm fine, nothing's wrong. What would make you ask such a question?" She wound the sheet around her bare shoulders like a shroud. She was thirty years old, on her second sales trip of the month. She had been married for almost three years.

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College had exhausted her. She was tired after four years of struggling to keep up with her friends, boys and girls who had gone to boarding schools or else been raised by parents who were young and well-educated themselves, who were what she came to think of

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as *culturally fluent*, and who made sure their children were as well. Francesca knew only what she'd been taught by the teachers in her small, undistinguished high school, or in the novels she read on her own. She did not know about contemporary drama or art or politics. Her father subscribed to the local newspaper and Time magazine; otherwise he did not read at all. So she was worn down by college in a way her friends were not, by the endless effort to not only keep up with her classes but to catch up on the rest of it as well, to see the films her friends mentioned in passing as though it were unthinkable that someone had not seen them, to borrow introductory art history textbooks from the library and study the glossy pages, to read the progressive political magazines her friends left lying around. She took electives during summer sessions, scheduling classes around part-time retail jobs; before the long winter break she would photocopy the book lists posted for upcoming spring philosophy classes, cross the books off the lists as she checked them out of the library, and pack them in her bags to take home. She spent most of her time reading on the couch while her father was at work, and at night left him in his chair in the living room with newspaper to watch television in her old bedroom. During this time she gave no thought at all to politics in the developing world, or Fassbinder. During this time she gave no thought to what her friends from high school might be doing. During this time she curled into herself like a small cold animal.

* * *

At her wedding to Daniel, Francesca's father had walked her down the white-silked aisle. He accepted her kiss and sank into the pew, hands and legs trembling, face impassive. His job was finished. She had tried to convince herself at the time that he was excited by the day, by his part in it, but in the photographs his smile is stiff, uncertain; his gaze fixed somewhere away from the camera's bright eye.

He did not ask about the honeymoon, or the house they moved into after. When the wedding photos came he did not ask for an enlargement in a pretty frame to put on a wall. He did not ask if Daniel was good to her, if she had any regrets. He did not ask if she was happy.

Happy--a dangerous idea, slippery and treacherous as black ice. She preferred to think of her life in terms of the concrete, the quantifiable: she was not a wife, and then she was; she had been alone, and then she was not. She did not care if she was thinking in what she'd learned in college were false dichotomies--they were safer than abstractions, safer than trying to decode what *happy* meant, or *content* or *uneasy* or *terrified*. Wife, partner, mother, runaway: such classifications afforded no room for the hidden, the unexpected; they brooked no possibility of surprise. And she thought in any case that her father's failure to ask if she was happy was not because he didn't care, but because he understood how little the answer mattered; because he of all people understood how quickly the answer could change.

Like black ice on a winter night, as merciless and sudden as that.

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Brown leather club chair, brown-and-blue upholstery on the banquette. A glass of Sangiovese, bread with a saucer of oil for dipping. Her purse and a magazine on the chair next to her, wake-up call for seven AM already requested. She'd called Daniel and her father before coming down for dinner--*I'm here, checked in for the night. Everything okay there? Love you. I love you.*

She lifted her glass. She'd looked up to thank the waiter and saw him then, sitting alone at the bar. Black suit, white shirt, no tie. A rocks glass--bourbon? scotch?--and the cigarettes, one after

another. Flat silver cufflinks.

"Your salad, Miss," the waiter said, and deposited her plate with a flourish.

An oblong plate of mixed greens, walnuts, Gorgonzola, strips of rare steak crisscrossed over roasted red peppers; a serrated knife. When she left her room she'd been famished. She sawed at a piece of meat and set the utensils down, tore off a bit of bread. It caught dry in her throat. She lifted her glass, drained it, scanned the room for the waiter.

She could not keep from looking. *He reminds me of someone*, she told herself, *it's just because he reminds me of someone.*

Pale skin, dark stubble, a narrow chin. Almost effeminate, his face. Almost. There was no reason to look twice, nothing exceptional about him.

There is nothing exceptional about him.

His fingers were long, graceful. When she saw the waiter walking toward her she lifted her empty glass and he nodded, turned around.

Stop it. He could be anyone.

When the waiter returned with the wine he glanced at her untouched plate. "Is your salad all right?" he said. "If there's any problem--"

"No, it's fine. Really. It's--I've had a long day," she said. Her voice in her own ears was close to breathless. "It's been a long day."

She stabbed at a pepper, lifted it to her mouth, chewed and

smiled at the waiter, willed him this time to disappear so she could spit into her napkin. She did not think she could manage to swallow. "Thank you," she said, gulped water and forced down the pepper. The waiter nodded uncertainly, backed away.

Before Daniel there had been only her father to call, to worry over. Now when you're away, Daniel had told her, there'll be someone who's worrying about *you*.

The empty brown chair across from her, the wine, the L-shaped bar with the ubiquitous television above it, always a television wherever she went, always on, something to watch, anything to avoid meeting eyes with any other exhausted stranger.

She'd left the room in such haste she hadn't bothered to change clothes or wash her face. A brush through her hair and a spritz of cologne, powder on her face and fresh lipstick. She'd left her cell phone charging in the room.

So just leave a message if you need me, Daddy, okay?, she'd said, loud so he could hear her. Just remember you have to wait for it to beep and I'll get it when I come back up.

And to Daniel, the door already open: I'm just running down for some dinner. An hour maybe. Okay. I love you too.

Waiting at the elevator, almost lightheaded with hunger. And now.

She pushed the plate away, enough to give herself room to rest her damp wrists on the table's edge and clench her fists. She did not trust her hands.

Daniel liked to take her hands and open them, bring them to his face and press them to his cheeks, temples, chin. He kissed the

palms. It was an intimacy she did not understand.

The man at the bar nodded as the bartender set another drink in front of him and then he lifted it, smiling, in her direction. An acknowledgement of her presence--they were the only two customers in the room--nothing more than that. She was used to such gestures, the tired offerings of solitary strangers, one to another--*I am here, you are here*--used to responding in kind, unthinking, reflexive.

He lifted his glass and a part of her heart that she'd forgotten broke open.

Later, back in her own room alone, she would think of the moment just after he raised his glass and remember the feeling of something inside her cracking wide and empty. It was like a mockery of hunger: no gnawing gut or dull hollow throb, nothing she could silence with food or drink or sleep or what her husband, what everyone, called love, but something else, something ravenous; huge and ugly enough to swallow her whole.

She thought of Daniel, of his mouth on her hands, of his lips moving across her, arms and shoulders, belly and thighs, whispering into her, as though beneath her skin was something miraculous. Everything I will ever want is right here, he would say to her, and her flesh was mute, ashamed. But even so she'd married him, had pledged and vowed and promised, bowed her head and knelt, repeated words she did not believe. She had done all that: she must have wanted him enough, that day, at least.

How can we know what we will want, in a day or a breath or a year, in a life?

Everything I will ever want, right here.

Right here--what is right about here?

She'd sat in that hotel bar and thought of her husband's mouth as she raised her own glass in return, and when he stood to join her her hands opened, instinctive, like the beating of birds' wings.

There will be time enough for me to be ashamed later. A life of time.

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Francesca had decided, sometime during an upper-level class in feminist theory or post-colonialism, that her mother must have left them as an act of political resistance, of self-preservation. She had left because of the oppression of marriage, the strangling monotony of the days. Francesca further decided not to blame her for this, but rather to find it admirable, this willingness to throw off everything familiar, everything *loved* (but did she? *were* they?), and start again, alone, with no word or explanation.

My mother left in the seventies, she told her friends, and they nodded, the girls knowingly, the boys sadly, all too ready to shoulder the guilt and shame their fathers or grandfathers had lacked the decency to feel.

You probably would've done the same thing, the girls told her, we all would have. Don't you think?

The girls asked this of one another to make sure. They were careful to agree without hesitation or equivocation, wholehearted: If it had been me I would have left too. Not because I didn't love my family, but because I had to save myself. Women had to save themselves. Back then, I mean, don't you think?

We think.

That is what they did, these young university women: they thought. They lived in a place where *back then* was a safe distance away, far enough to be of no danger to them. Or so they *thought*.

* * *

She sat at her table with her open waiting hands and watched him coming toward her and thought not of Daniel but of her father, home in the house he'd refused to sell, newspapers overflowing the card table by his chair, the kitchen clean and closed and dark but for the light over the stove--was today Tuesday or Wednesday? the woman he'd hired to cook and clean came Monday-Wednesday-Friday--plastic containers of stew neatly labeled and dated and stacked in the refrigerator, his robe over his shoulders, his slippers. His feet were always cold. Something she remembered about her mother, one of the few things, vague and blurry: a closet shelf piled with pairs of extra slippers. Backups, her mother called them. She bought them in bulk when they went on sale, the day after Christmas, Presidents' Day. When he wore a pair out her mother was at the ready with new ones. This stockpile lasted for almost three years after she'd gone.

He's fine, she thought. *He knows how to reach me. He's always known how to reach me, he knows if he needs me I'll come--the difference between me and her. One of the differences.*

The slippers were grey plaid, fleece-lined and leather-soled. She'd got them for his last birthday. They were expensive, hand-sewn, but she hadn't thought to buy more than one pair. She tried to remember how long she'd said she would be away from her room and told herself *He's fine. He's probably fallen asleep with the TV on.*

When he arrived at her table he extended a hand, palm up, and

eased her out of her chair with gentle pressure, his fingers beneath hers. *He knows I would come if he needed me*, she thought, *if he needed me, if he asked, if he ever asked.*

Later, after, when she got back to her room and checked her cell phone for missed calls, there were none.

* * *

In college she was dazzled by those boys, dazzled by their wit and light and heat: she had never known such boys. One sweeter than the next, one more serious, the next more brilliant, and all of them with steady honest eyes and straight shoulders, all of them beautiful.

Every one. She had dated none of them; she loved them too completely for that and they in their turn did not love her at all. In any case she was almost afraid to touch them, afraid that she might find something less than perfect, some hidden flaw. And she was afraid of what they might see in her, a girl not nearly as sophisticated as she tried to seem, not as cultured or quick. Better to study together, to read over each other's papers and make corrections or suggestions, to admire a clever insight. Better for a boy to sleep on the couch, to bring pillows and a blanket, to save the leftover pizza for breakfast. Better to listen to him describe the girl he'd met at a party the night before, a sophomore he'd never paid much attention to until he heard her arguing post-colonial theory with a friend of theirs and keeping up her end, her lipstick crimson, her hair a bleached-white tangle: I mean I'd seen her around but I never really thought about her, I never talked to her, I never thought she was anything other than cute.

Better to risk no surprises.

But she's fucking brilliant, Francesca. Do you know the one I'm

talking about?

Better to keep smiling and think *She may be cute and fucking brilliant but she's not with you now--I am. Look at me.*

Look at me.

She did not want to see that these boys might in fact be no different from any others she'd known, not really, not if you peeled away the perfectly frayed thrift-store shirts, shaved the stubble on their just-clear skin and relieved them of the heavy knapsacks filled with Sartre and Salinger--if you did this, and put them in Izod shirts and Topsiders and fit them behind the wheels of Jeeps or Chevy Blazers, they would be interchangeable with the boys she'd known in high school, the ones she'd had no time for.

She's brilliant and really fucking hot.

I know. I heard you the first time. I hear you every time, all the time.

These university boys would have been interchangeable with the ones she'd known before but for one small thing: the others, eventually, had wanted her. Once she understood what was expected of her, once she learned how to divine from them what--who--they wanted, once she learned how to give that girl back to them without argument or commentary, they had presented themselves, unselfconscious in their shiny cars and clean clothes, and left the rest of it up to her. She was the one they thought was *brilliant* and *really fucking hot*. They told her this and she believed them. But through four years of college she had been unable to do more than guess at what those shy brilliant boys wanted, those boys without a hint of swagger or vanity to them, and so through four years of college she had waited for just one of them to take her out for more than coffee, to stay the night after walking her home from a

party and not take the couch, not keep her up half the night drunkenly extolling the charms of Lenore from his Medium as Message class. Four years she had waited, and after graduation, after packing their cars and piling their recycling in bins behind their apartments, they'd hugged her goodbye like a cousin.

* * *

"You wouldn't do something like this if you were happy," he said, his voice soft, unaccusing. He trailed the tips of his fingers over her bare hip and across to her wrist, her left hand. He nodded toward it--her hand, the object of his gesturing earlier. She hadn't thought to remove her wedding ring.

"Happy," she said. She propped herself on an elbow and reached for one of the tumblers on the night stand, still half-full of wine. She felt ill, nauseated, but drank anyway. He was waiting for her to continue. *Happy*, she thought. She struggled to make sense of the word but could not. She had lost all but the most fundamental of thoughts: *I feel sick, I am cold*. She set the glass down and pushed herself back onto a pillow, out of his easy reach. His hand fell away and she drew the sheet up to her throat and he did not try to touch her again but instead leaned back himself, opened the white expanse of bed between them. He kept his eyes steady on her face, waiting, and though she looked she could see nothing disingenuous in him, nothing deceitful, nothing that would explain his willingness to do what he'd done to her. With her. *With me*, she thought, exhausted, *with*. Even sitting upright did not dispel the nausea. She did not bother trying to convince herself it was because of the wine.

From now on I'll have to keep track of what is true and what is not, she told herself, the thought coming easy, a silky dark flower pushing up through poisoned soil.

She had no idea what to say to him and still he was waiting, watching her in the silent room. She saw that she had been wrong in the bar to think there was nothing remarkable about him--he was beautiful, the lines of his body perfect, his face dark and calm and watchful. That she had not recognized this made her want to weep.

"Happy," she said again, but still the word was hollow, an empty signifier, "I don't understand--" *what that means*, she thought, but trailed off into silence, convinced that he could wait all night, that he would go for hours without speaking again, waiting for her to say something that made sense, his lovely face unmoving. He was a stone, a confessor priest. She closed her eyes and he did not exist.

She turned away, let the sheet fall and began to gather the clothing she'd kicked off how long ago--an hour? More? She struggled to dress, her hands shaking. There was movement behind her and she smelled smoke, a fresh-lit cigarette, and the bed was still again.

I am alone. There is no one here but me.

Pants, shoes, sweater. Her purse was on the desk across the room, her key card in it. She got her feet into her boots and stood. Her purse, the key. She slipped around the foot of the bed, careful to keep her back to him, still unbelievably silent. *Isn't he going to try to stop me? Isn't that what happens next?*

He can't stop me. He does not exist.

She turned to face him and did not collapse. She opened her mouth to speak and thought that now would be the one opportunity she had to squander every lie, to empty herself of everything but the truth. Right now: she could reel off every possible reason why a woman would do what she had just done, every shameful justification--she could let them spill from her lips like sewage, all of

them out, every rationalization exposed and done with. A hundred lies, a thousand. Every. Last. One.

"I have to go now," she said, shocked to hear that her voice sounded the same as it always had, as it had when she'd called her husband and father to let them know she'd arrived safely. *Safe*--as devoid now of meaning as *happy*, as *wrong*. She was incapable of abstraction. "Everything is fine, but I have to go," she said again, as though he had tried to stop her, as though he were there at all.

She looked around the room to be sure she was leaving nothing behind--there were clothes thrown over the upholstered chair, the empty bottle of wine, a pack of cigarettes and ashtray on one of the night stands, a black leather briefcase open on the table by the curtained window, topcoat tossed over it, and in the middle of all this a man, smoking a cigarette in bed, naked, the sheets pooled at his waist. This man smoked and regarded a woman, fully dressed but disheveled, who stood across the room from him, by the entryway. She was amazed at the familiarity, the ordinariness, of it all, this scene repeated a hundred times, a thousand, on any given day: the hotel room and the people in it anonymous, nothing to set them apart from any other couple in any other room, in any other world. Except. Except.

She thought of Daniel, of his hands, his closed eyes, and loved him.

I'll remember this. A girl always remembers her first time.

She felt something in her shudder, crumble, and the broken parts were like ash, like dust.

Francesca tucked her purse up under her arm, unlocked the door and slipped out into the hallway. She eased the door closed behind her and stood, listening for any sound, any movement in the

room. There was none. She closed her eyes and saw the room empty, untouched; the bed made, hangers empty, glasses mouth-down on their paper doilies. She saw this, and she understood how easy the next time would be.

