LIFE BEFORE JUAN

Margare Atwood



LIFE BEFORE MAN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction: Surfacing

Poetry:
The Animals In That Country
The Journals of Susanna Moodie
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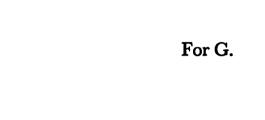
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Note: Lesje is pronounced "Lashia".

Instead of a part of the organism itself, the fossil may be some kind of record of its presence, such as a fossilized track or burrow.... These fossils give us our only chance to see the extinct animals in action and to study their behavior, though definite identification is only possible where the animal has dropped dead in its tracks and become fossilized on the spot.

- Björn Kurtén, The Age of the Dinosaurs

Look, I'm smiling at you, I'm smiling in you, I'm smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?

- Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky), The Icicle

Part One

Friday, October 29, 1976

ELIZABETH

I don't know how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail. And that's no way to make money.

I want that shell back, it took me long enough to make. You've got it with you, wherever you are. You were good at removing. I want a shell like a sequined dress, made of silver nickels and dimes and dollars overlapping like the scales of an armadillo. Armored dildo. Impermeable; like a French raincoat.

I wish I didn't have to think about you. You wanted to impress me; well, I'm not impressed, I'm disgusted. That was a disgusting thing to do, childish and stupid. A tantrum, smashing a doll, but what you smashed was your own head, your own body. You wanted to make damn good and sure I'd never be able to turn over in bed again without feeling that body beside me, not there but tangible, like a leg that's been cut off. Gone but the place still hurts. You wanted me to cry, mourn, sit in a rocker with a black-edged handkerchief, bleeding from the eyes. But I'm not crying, I'm angry. I'm so angry I could kill you. If you hadn't already done that for yourself.

Elizabeth is lying on her back, clothes on and unrumpled, shoes placed side by side on the bedside rug, a braided oval bought at Nick Knack's four years ago when she was still interested in home furnishings, guaranteed genuine old lady

twisted rags. Arms at her sides, feet together, eyes open. She can see part of the ceiling, that's all. A small crack runs across her field of vision, a smaller crack branching out from it. Nothing will happen, nothing will open, the crack will not widen and split and nothing will come through it. All it means is that the ceiling needs to be repainted, not this year but the next. Elizabeth tries to concentrate on the words "next year," finds she can't.

To the left there is a blur of light; if she turns her head she will see the window, hung with spider plants, the Chinese split-bamboo blind half rolled up. She called the office after lunch and told them she would not be in. She's been doing that too often; she needs her job.

She is not in. She's somewhere between her body, which is lying sedately on the bed, on top of the Indian print spread, tigers and flowers, wearing a black turtleneck pullover, a straight black skirt, a mauve slip, a beige brassiere with a front closing, and a pair of pantyhose, the kind that come in plastic eggs, and the ceiling with its hairline cracks. She can see herself there, a thickening of the air, like albumin. What comes out when you boil an egg and the shell cracks. She knows about the vacuum on the other side of the ceiling, which is not the same as the third floor where the tenants live. Distantly, like tiny thunder, their child is rolling marbles across the floor. Into the black vacuum the air is being sucked with a soft, barely audible whistle. She could be pulled up and into it like smoke.

She can't move her fingers. She thinks about her hands, lying at her sides, rubber gloves: she thinks about forcing the bones and flesh down into those shapes of hands, one finger at a time, like dough.

Through the door, which she's left open an inch out of habit, always on call like the emergency department of a hospital, listening even now for crashes, sounds of breakage, screams, comes the smell of scorching pumpkin. Her children have lighted their jack-o'-lanterns, even though there are still two days before Halloween. And it isn't even dark yet, though the light at the side of her head is fading. They love so much to

dress up, to put on masks and costumes and run through the streets, through the dead leaves, to knock on the doors of strangers, holding out their paper bags. What hope. It used to touch her, that excitement, that fierce joy, the planning that would go on for weeks behind the closed door of their room. It used to twist something in her, some key. This year they are remote from her. The soundless glass panel of the hospital nursery where she would stand in her housecoat for each of them in turn, watching the pink mouths open and close, the faces contort.

She can see them, they can see her. They know something is wrong. Their politeness, their evasion, is chilling because it's so perfectly done.

They've been watching me. They've been watching us for years. Why wouldn't they know how to do it? They act as though everything is normal, and maybe for them it is normal. Soon they will want dinner and I will make it. I will lower myself down from this bed and make the dinner, and tomorrow I will see them off to school and then I will go to the office. That is the proper order.

Elizabeth used to cook, very well too. It was at the same time as her interest in rugs. She still cooks, she peels some things and heats others. Some things harden, others become softer; white turns to brown. It goes on. But when she thinks about food she doesn't see the bright colors, red, green, orange, featured in the *Gourmet Cookbook*. Instead she sees the food as illustrations from those magazine articles that show how much fat there is in your breakfast. Dead white eggs, white strips of bacon, white butter. Chickens, roasts and steaks modeled from bland lard. That's what all food tastes like to her now. Nevertheless she eats, she overeats, weighting herself down.

There's a small knock, a step. Elizabeth moves her eyes down. In the oak-framed oval mirror above the dressing table she can see the door opening, the darkness of the hall behind, Nate's face bobbing like a pale balloon. He comes into the room, breaking the invisible thread she habitually stretches across the threshold to keep him out, and she is able to turn her head. She smiles at him.

"How are you, love?" he says. "I've brought you some tea."

Friday, October 29, 1976

NATE

He doesn't know what "love" means between them any more, though they always say it. For the sake of the children. He can't remember when he started knocking at her door, or when he stopped considering it his door. When they moved the children into one room together and he took the vacant bed. The vacant bed, she called it then. Now she calls it the extra bed.

He sets the cup of tea down on the night table, beside the clock radio that wakes her every morning with cheerful breakfast news. There's an ashtray, no butts; why should there be? She doesn't smoke. Though Chris did.

When Nate slept in this room there were ashes, matches, ringed glasses, pennies from his pockets. They used to save them in a peanut butter jar and buy small gifts with them for each other. Mad money, she called it. Now he still empties the pennies out of his pockets every night; they accumulate like mouse droppings on top of the bureau in his room, his own room. Your own room, she calls it, as if to keep him in there.

She looks up at him, her face leached of color, eyes dark-circled, smile wan. She doesn't have to try; she always tries.

"Thanks, love," she says. "I'll get up in a minute."

"I'll make dinner tonight, if you like," Nate says, wanting to be helpful, and Elizabeth agrees listlessly. Her listlessness, her lack of encouragement, infuriates him, but he says nothing, turns and closes the door softly behind him. He made the gesture and she acts as if it means nothing.

Nate goes to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator and pokes through it. It's like rummaging through a drawer of jumbled clothes. Leftovers in jars, bean sprouts gone bad, spinach in a plastic bag starting to decay, giving off that smell of decomposing lawn. No use expecting Elizabeth to clean it. She used to clean it. She will clean other things these days, but not the refrigerator. He'll tidy it up himself, tomorrow or the next day, when he gets around to it.

Meanwhile he'll have to improvise dinner. It's no large trial, he's often helped with the cooking, but in former times – he thinks of it as the olden days, like a bygone romantic era, like some Disneyland movie about knighthood – there were always supplies. He does most of the grocery shopping himself now, carting a bag or two home in the basket of his bicycle, but he forgets things and gaps are left in the day: no eggs, no toilet paper. Then he has to send the kids to the corner store, where everything is more expensive. Before, before he sold the car, it wasn't such a problem. He took Elizabeth once a week, on Saturdays, and helped her put the cans and frozen packages away when they got home.

Nate picks the dripping spinach out of the vegetable crisper and carries it to the garbage can; it oozes green liquid. He counts the eggs: not enough for omelettes. He'll have to make macaroni and cheese again, which is all right since the kids love it. Elizabeth will not love it but she will eat it, she'll wolf it down absently as if it's the last thing on her mind, smiling like a slowly grilling martyr, staring past him at the wall.

Nate stirs and grates, stirs and grates. An ash drops from his cigarette, missing the pot. It isn't his fault Chris blew his head off with a shotgun. A shotgun: this sums up the kind of extravagance, hysteria, he's always found distasteful in Chris. He himself would have used a pistol. If he were going to do it at all. What gets him is the look she gave him when the call came through: At least he had the guts. At least he was serious. She's never said it of course, but he's sure she compares them, judges him unfavorably because he's still alive. Chickenshit, to be still alive. No balls.

Yet at the same time, still without saying it, he knows she blames him, for the whole thing. If you had only been this or that, done this or that – he doesn't know what – it wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been driven, forced, compelled . . . that's her view, that he failed her, and this undefined failure of his turned her into a quivering mass of helpless flesh, ready to attach itself like a suction cup to the first crazy man who ambled along and said, You have nice tits. Or whatever it was Chris did say to get her to open the Love Latch on her brassiere. Probably more like, You have nice ramifications. Chess-players are like that. Nate knows: he used to be one himself. Nate can never figure out why women find chess-playing sexy. Some women.

So for a week now, ever since that night, she's spent the afternoons in there lying on the bed that used to be his, half his, and he's been bringing her cups of tea, one each afternoon. She accepts them with that dying swan look of hers, the look he can't stand and can't resist. It's your fault, darling, but you may bring me cups of tea. Scant atonement. And an aspirin out of the bathroom and a glass of water. Thank you. Now go away somewhere and feel guilty. He's a sucker for it. Like a good boy.

And he was the one, not her, not Elizabeth, who had to go and identify the body. As her stricken eyes said, she could hardly be expected to. So dutifully he had gone. Standing in that apartment where he'd been only twice but where she had been at least once every week for the past two years, fighting nausea, nerving himself to look, he'd felt that she was there in the room with them, a curve in space, a watcher. More so than Chris. No head left at all, to speak of. The headless horseman. But recognizable. Chris's expression had never really been in that heavy flat face of his; not like most people's. It had been in his body. The head had been a troublemaker, which was probably why Chris had chosen to shoot at it instead of at some other part of himself. He wouldn't have wanted to mutilate his body.

A floor, a table, a chess set by the bed, a bed with what they called the trunk and limbs lying on it; Nate's other body, joined to him by that tenuous connection, that hole in space