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Published in This Magazine

MORE FRUIT (excerpt)

Every week, I go to an office above the bird store to talk to Madame La Shrink, a doctor with a long French-Polish name I can't pronounce. I slump on the upholstered couch and talk. She perches on a leatherette swivel chair and writes, her pencil-line eyebrows fluttering up and down her forehead as her pen swoops across the page.

She begins with a recap. Although I often forget things she tells me I have said, she claims we are heading toward a 'brayke-troo.'

"Kiri, we begin." Her pointed finger descends swiftly into the notebook. Her lips tighten. "Last week, you had forgot where you were going on the bus. You lost your purse two times. At the office, you vomited the blackberries. You have again heard nothing from your boyfriend. Your father sended no more pictures. You can not remember your mother. Your career, which you have builded so careful, looked ready to break apart. And you think, day after day, of the fruits which will not be in the store all the long winter."

"Hmm," I nod, feeling reduced, yet strangely relieved.

"Now, tell me," she says, closing her notebook and stacking her fists neatly on top. "Do you see a pattern?"

"A pattern?"

I adjust my pantyhose, nibble off a hangnail, flick it to the floor. "I don't know," I finally say. "Maybe the tumour is blocking my thinking."

"Kiri, we do not know if there is a tumour. We leave out tumours for now. So." Her eyes intercept my wandering gaze. "I see a pattern."

We are facing each other across the small room. I shift on the lumpy pillow and pull myself upright. "Look, I didn't ask Rikard not to phone me. I don't purposely forget the past – I was only ten years old when my mother died. And I don't choose not to see my father. I don't even know where he is – his girlfriend wrote from somewhere in Thailand to tell me he was ill. These are just objective facts."

Her etched eyebrows dart together. She drops her chin to her chest and the pen stops. And I hadn't even begun to tell her about the spongy peaches.

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Since Rikard left six months ago, everything I eat is raw, portentous. I haunt the aisles of our old grocery store, teasing my brain with the aromas of food, trying to recall.

I urge my nose to conjure the forgotten list from the display before me: brown bananas, bruised apricots, unshaven strawberries, gashed raspberries... I try to remember the rest. Was it a round Gouda, a square cheddar, a triangular brie? I wander over to the coffee grinder, grasp the lever, listen to the clatter, the brrr, inhale the bitter dust. I clutch my bouquet of pink carnations.

Apricots and raspberries gathered, I add apples and white bread and I return home.

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Jean drops by like she does at the office. No call, barely a knock before flinging open the door at the foot of the stairs.

“Kiri! I’m coming up,” she calls, skipping up the splintery steps. Her orange lipstick, rosewood hair, jauntiness, are an affront. I am sitting in the dark cutting my toenails in a room blanketed in dust. Dickensian as my faded bridal gown. I have not vacuumed since Rikard left.

She yanks up the blind, swivels around, focuses on the bed where I’ve abandoned the nail clipper amidst a scattering of apple cores.

“Come on Kiri, let’s sketch out the first few pages, take a crack at the colour scheme.” She says this as if web-design is real design. As if Javascript is poetry.

“I’m not Picasso,” I say.

“I know. But someone has to jump-start your talent.”

I roll my eyes. “A woman’s work is never done.”

She drives me to a restaurant with striped awnings and I submit to Special Number Three from the morning menu. It comes topped with crunchy strawberries and a sleek white coagulate.

“I am,” I say.

“What?” she glances over her fork.

“Ungrateful.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No,” I turn over a strawberry to reveal its mushy grey-brown flaw, “I did.”

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I stayed here – to keep a job, complete a project, fashion a career. I am a virtual map maker. I plan, plot, connect the dots. I am constructing a bridge between people’s dreams and the available world. On my office door hangs a sign: Kiri Parker, Web Design.

Rikard left to be an explorer. He does not use maps; he simply opens his eyes and rides the available currents. He has gone across the globe without an assignment or a home office. He may come back with a correspondent position, a travel book, a film – or nothing. He may not even come back.

Rikard skews the world around him: my words, his vision, all matters of possibility and fruition. His commercial photographs feature: fur coats and jewellery, cakes and crystal, dancers and actors, CEOs and presidents. These things are easy to understand, their unity. But even in these photographs, he conjures something more. He infuses his still lifes with the magic of Matisse's pears.

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A 'date' with Rikard went like this: I am asleep in my apartment. Around midnight, he climbs in the window and lands on the end of my bed, breathing heavily. I do not wake up screaming because I am accustomed to this invasion. He flashes in and out of my life like he flashes in and out of my dreams. Against the silhouette of the open window I slowly open my eyes, feel him slide up my body, unbuckling his belt. My lips are sealed with his warmth. He rolls over me, drops raspberries onto my tongue. Perspiration bursts through my pores.

Afterwards, we do not sleep. I follow him out the window, giggling, to his black Lincoln where he blindfolds me, rubs a cut lemon onto my wrists, then drives off toward the highway, to where, I can not guess.

On new year's eve, he deposited me in a glitzy roof-top restaurant packed with cocktailers and I had to slip through shadows in my negligee while he photographed the band. Last summer, he hoisted me up onto a gritty floor. Smell of hay and garbage and motor oil. Sawdust poking my thighs. He unblinded me. "Nineteen twenty-two," he drawled when I opened my eyes. Night shone in the frame of a boxcar doorway. We were in the rail yards, Rikard twisting open a can of beans.

I did not inquire about railway goons or watchdogs. With Rikard you can believe such things will never touch you because with him everything is different. Sex, for example: with Rikard it is not something you strive for, work up to, draw out over numbing glasses of wine in the artificial decor of a Queen Street bar. It is a given, like breathing.

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Rikard could perform the most beautiful shaves – splashing water, glittering razor, happy hum. He left his little porcelain bowl, the real bristle brush, a half-empty can of lime-scented shaving cream. Every Sunday morning, I squirt a ball of foam into the bottom of the cup, beat it up to a froth with the brush. I shut my eyes and inhale. But I still cannot recall the feel of his cheek, afterwards.

This morning, I flung the nearly empty can against the shower wall. Then I whacked the glob of foam into the toilet.

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