

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

“Everything a Woman Should Have” – Caitlin Myer

Caitlin Myer · Wednesday, August 20th, 2014

*A story from **After the War**, a collection of stories, currently in progress, by writer Caitlin Myer.*

Her family was coming home tomorrow. Her husband and her children. Juni had her hair done and went to the market. She would need to put together proper meals now, had been eating like a savage while they were gone, just whatever she put her hands on, all hours of the day.

At the market, an older gentleman saw her try to reach a jar of sweet pickles on a high shelf and lifted it down for her.

What an unusual print, he said.

Oh, she looked down at her dress and smiled. I got it in Colorado, she said. On her honeymoon. A town in the tops of the mountains, where you could hear laughter from miles off, echoed off the walls of the valley.

It's lovely, he said. Was there a particular reason you chose it?

The question surprised her.

It reminds me of a quilt my mother made, she said. She gave it to me before she died. Do you see this figure? It represents infinity. My mother believed that she and my father would be together forever, even after they died.

She put the tips of her fingers over her mouth. She didn't talk this way often. Ever. But there wouldn't be another today. Her husband had written, My body feels like you've been torn from my side, like I have an open wound where you used to be. I am wounded, he said.

Juni's son used to tuck his head under her arm, his shine-black hair burrowed into the hollow of her armpit. She felt simple void where her children's bodies once fit against her own. She wished for something full and human as a wound.

She was a different person, alone. Clean as a rocket. Her family safe outside the country, she chose to stay close to the action. She had to witness everything, turn it into words for the outside world. One day she stepped back just before a bullet zipped the air in front of her face and pinged the stop sign so loud her head felt like the dome of a bell for hours. She opened her flask and took a long drink, because this is what you do. She seemed to take in air through her wide-open eyes. I am

alive! her mind sang.

And her children had just gone on with growing up. Emma near ten and her own Eric eight. Eight! Impossible. Juni had made up their beds in the living room of their apartment. More than enough space when they were small, but now? They couldn't sleep in the living room forever.

The man who had reached down the pickles was checking out at the cash register beside hers. She fitted the handles of the bags into her hands. She'd gotten a bit carried away, more food than she'd meant to get.

Let me help you carry those things to your car, he said.

Thank you, no. I'm walking.

With all that? He laughed, and took off his straw hat with the silk band. He held it to his chest. Allow me to give you a ride, will you?

She started to shake her head, but then she thought, Why not? The war is over. Try to trust someone. His left hand showed the way into his car. A wedding ring, two pieces of gold, woven together. His linen jacket had only a single crease, across the back.

His car was luxurious.

I have everything a man of my age should have, he said. She told him to turn left.

A wife, he said. A grown son. A beautiful house. Simple things. You're too young to remember what it was like before.

What do you mean, she said.

We thought it was our right, he said. These things were assumed. A house. An afternoon trip to the market. People saying hello on the street.

He looked at her. You trust me to know where you live?

No, said the wartime voice inside her. But she saw a picture of that other time, Emma and Eric able to go anywhere they liked. If her father was still alive, he would be the same age as this man.

She wanted to trust him. Her family was coming home, and the wars were over, and we all needed to learn how to live now.

Here, she said.

I apologize, he said, But may I use your bathroom?

In peacetime, you trust your neighbors.

Of course, she said.

He helped her carry her groceries up the stairs. She unlocked her door, and showed him the bathroom. He didn't close the door. Well, that was odd. But she went to the kitchen, put her bags

on the counter. Put away the milk and eggs. She carried wrapped pieces of chocolate into the living room, placed one on each pillow. He came out of the bathroom and stood close to her. Tall, she thought. She came up to his chest, barely.

He put one large hand on her breast.

She flinched. Was he joking? She pushed it away.

Oh, excuse me, he said. Then he put his other hand on her other breast.

No, she said. I – . She pushed his hand away.

I apologize, he said. He put his hand on her breast again. She pushed it away.

I don't –, she said.

Of course, he said. It's okay. He gathered both of her wrists into one hand and sat her down on Eric's bed. She tried to free her hands, and he held on for one one-hundredth of a second, just long enough for her to know it cost him no effort, then he let go.

Pardon me, he said. He gave her a mild smile.

I need to –, she said.

Yes. I should go, he said, and sat on the bed. She got up. He pulled her down. She got up.

I'm terribly sorry, he said, and pulled her down.

What are you –, she said.

She would remember this like a song, like she's onstage. She sings all but the last word, and the audience fills it in while she points the microphone out into the dark.

I need to –

Go, they say.

Please don't –

Touch, they say.

What are you –

Doing, they sing.

They love her, and she them, and together they make the song whole.

He burrowed his hand fast between her legs, two thick fingers inside her dry vagina, his arm coming out from under her skirt like a sudden growth. She shook her head, and pushed at his arm, at this growth. He let her push it away.

I only want to look, he said. I'm a visual person.

He stuffed his hand between her legs again, again the fingers.

She pushed it away with both hands and tried to stand up. He held her in place.

No, I am sorry, he said. He got up. She took in a breath, relieved. He began to unbuckle his belt.

Oh, she said. And waved her hands in front of his crotch. A warding-off gesture.

He held his hands up toward her, palm out.

Don't worry, he said. He opened his pants, then lay down on the bed, pulled her down. He took her hand and placed it on his penis, through his shorts.

I see you're sensitive, he said.

She had been trying to see his eyes. Maybe she could understand what was happening if she could look him in his eyes. But there was nothing there. She looked into his eyes and she might as well have been looking at a dinner plate. Nothing. Nothing. Still nothing.

She was very tired. She had been waiting for the moment things turned violent. She was ready for that. She could poke his eyes. Knee to the groin. Upward slam to the nose that would drive shards of bone straight into his brain and then he'd be dead. She'd had the training. But her brain had been tricked. It thought this was just an uncomfortable discussion. She pictured him screaming, pushing blood from his eyes, and that picture obliterated her children, it took up all the space in their room. Emma and Eric.

The man was still talking. She lay on the bed and looked at the wall while he held her hand against his penis and squeezed. He squeezed her hand which squeezed his penis, and then very soon his penis got hard and she felt a rushing through it. He held her hand in place for a minute longer, and then they sat up.

She kissed him on the head. She didn't remember him taking his hat off. He was bald. She kissed him on the head because she was embarrassed for him. He got up and went into the bathroom. He left the door open again.

She stood up and straightened her dress. She heard the faucet running. His hat was on her bookshelf. Too high for her to reach. The water stopped, and she watched his hand take the hat.

I hope I haven't transgressed, he said.

Oh, she said.

She locked the door behind him. She thought, I am tired of drinking. I can't do this anymore, not when they are home. I don't really want a drink. And she poured herself a large glass of bourbon.

She smoothed out the wrinkles in the bedspread, found the piece of chocolate on the floor and replaced it on the pillow. She sat down in her little armchair and looked at the bed.

I did it wrong, she thought. I don't even know how to be a woman. The war correspondent Juni Sloan would have done it differently. She would have mauled his face for daring to touch her. The mother, too. The mother would have killed him before he came near her children.

But this woman, this soft, tentative creature? She didn't deserve to be alive.

Her family would be here tomorrow. She should cry. That is what a woman does. She opened her mouth to cry, then shut it again.

Featured image by the author from her [Night Walk](#) series.

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