

Plucked

OLA KWINTOWSKY

Three seconds prior

Their bodies landed gently; Penelope watched as bubbles dispersed all around. She surged forward.

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Two minutes prior

The straw was thin but sufficient. It was far more inconspicuous than a fat snorkel.

She pushed both her legs against the corner to keep from floating – she'd need all the stealth she could muster.

The goggles fogged. But it didn't matter. She knew their routine and would be able to feel their presence without having to see them; she already felt they were nearby.

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Ten minutes prior

The Blood Red went on smoothly. She smeared two thick lines on one cheek. Two on the other. And a stroke down her nose.

She was still wearing last night's dress.

Her toes crushed the gossamer thin spider webs as she crossed the lawn. The rising sun caused everything to glimmer; a vibrant yellow hibiscus flower was spangled with dewdrops along its rim. Penelope didn't notice any of these marvels, nor did she smell the scent of the yesterday-today-tomorrow bush that filled the yard on a gentle breeze.

As she approached the pool a ghostly mist hovered above the water. Any other time she may have paused to admire the graceful movement of the water particles evaporating into a dance; she may have enjoyed how they swirled around each other and warped into fluid formations illuminated by the morning rays that snuck through the nearby trees.

Instead, she tossed her clothes aside and slipped beneath the surface, focused only on her mission.

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Five hours prior

Penelope paced the room and flung her pumps into the corner.

The outing was a waste of time. She looked down at her hands. They were covered in cuts and calluses. Her nails were cut short and the nail polish chipped. *Had anyone noticed?* She didn't care anymore. Her friends were a disappointment. Walter was a disappointment. When did they become so drab? Her chest was pounding, but it wasn't from the fake-champagne or the over-cooked *Confit de Canard*. It wasn't food induced but the sharp burn had begun in her stomach. It travelled to her liver and continued to spread like wildfire to her heart which pumped it around her entire body and inflamed her mind. The feeling taking hold of her being was an itch she couldn't quite reach – like a phantom limb, you feel it and sense it, but it's somewhere out of reach in the depths of your mind. The more she thought about it the more confused she became. Her mind whirled like a cyclone; she felt a lack of control and direction, it was pure instinct that pushed her forward. Tonight she was doing her best not to give in to lethargy. All the strategising and putting plans into action had drained her energy, but she was close to her goal. She could feel it.

Walter watched Penelope walk up to the window. The air seemed thick around her; her movements laboured and heavy. He was in bed already, hoping she'd join him. The dinner earlier was tiresome – normally he didn't mind too much, it was a routine catch up to keep in touch and stay connected with the old crew. Normally Penelope was good at the schmoozing. But tonight was a disaster. He could tell the others were trying to be patient with her. He ignored their worried looks and raised eyebrows. He couldn't deny it though; he'd also noticed the change in her – the way her eyes darted wildly from person to person, how she continuously bit down on her bottom lip, the manic way she picked at the skin around her thumb and her usual poised posture now sat slouched.

She stared out the window intently.

“What was with Charlie’s comment about me being *obsessed*?” She turned from the window and looked at Walter. “That was uncalled for. Don’t you agree? Rude even? And you didn’t say anything in my defence. He bangs on about shares and policies for hours on end – I humour him with questions, even though I think he’s boring as bat-shit – and he has the audacity to call me *obsessed*?”

Penelope returned her attention to the window, squinting into the night. The light from the full moon shone through the curtain, casting floral shadows onto her face; the lines morphed and twisted giving her a wild expression. Strands of loose hair escaped the unruly bun that had slid sideways from its intended position. Her eyebrows furrowed deeply as she moved her neck almost mechanically left-to-right and right-to-left, trying to see into the dark.

“He means well, Penny. You do have to agree though, you have become a little preoccupied lately.”

Her nostrils flared in response.

At first it was cute – her preoccupation – endearing almost. Walter was enjoying her being home early – she even spent time outdoors. He saw a side of her he hadn’t seen in years – adventurous, innovative, daring even – but now it was turning into an obsession. This morning he saw her commando-crawling along their lawn, so she could spy on them from behind the tree. It was an effort to convince her to come out tonight – in hindsight he shouldn’t have tried so hard.

It was beginning to take its toll on her – on them.

“Penn, it’s after midnight, come to bed?”

She ignored him.

Walter rolled onto his side and pulled the blanket over himself.

Two silhouettes appeared by the pool.

Penelope pressed her face against the window.

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A week prior

The coffee machine whirled into life. The smell of ground beans and warm almond milk filled the kitchen.

It was another sunny spring weekend. Penelope made her way over to the pool area. She was determined to relax today – sprawl out like a cat and soak in the sun. Maybe even go for a swim.

In a branch overhanging the lawn a magpie warbled. The tune was slow and melodic, a perfect welcoming to a relaxing morning – it was accompanied by the trilling of a couple of robins that flitted near the fence chasing each other in a loop-the-loop fashion.

Walter was halfway across the lawn when the birdsong was pierced by a scream. Penelope’s scream. He ran over with the coffees partially spilt and running down his hands.

“Duck muck!” Penelope shrieked, standing over the outdoor couch. “There’s duck shit all over my designer lounge!”

Two brown plump ducks floated in the glass pool. Walter, amused, went to inspect them closer. They didn’t like the attention, so they paddled across the length of the pool, hopped out onto the white tiles, left another nasty deposit behind them, shook their feathers and took flight. Penelope glared at them, unimpressed.

“There are a few ways to deter ducks from suburban pools. Walter? Are you listening?”

Walter had returned from a visit to the local bakery with their lunch. He was surprised to see Penelope still outside and impressed by her interest in the ducks. He couldn’t recall the last time she’d spent so much time outdoors and talking about something other than work. He settled next to her on the lounge as she read off her phone.

“According to Google-bot, we could get a dog.” She turned to Walter with raised eyebrows tilting her head sternly. He looked back nonplussed. “That’s obviously not going to happen,” she said, making sure there was no confusion about the insanity of the idea. “Another suggestion is to set up animal pool toys.”

“We could do that, right?” said Walter, treading carefully, unable to gauge her position. This was new territory.

“Don’t you think it will look garish? I mean we could give it a go. Better than getting a dog. Another option

is to place a net or cover over the pool – but the idea of the glass-walled pool was for it to be a feature of this house, not to keep it covered. They do also suggest a duck repellent.”

“How does that work?” he asked.

“Something to do with the chemistry ... probably stinks. People suggest getting water guns and scaring them through combat. How wild is that? Other options include an automatic pool cleaner or floating eyeballs.”

“Floating eyeballs?”

Penny exhaled sharply. She was up and making her way across the yard.

“Where are you going?” Walter called after her.

“Shopping. Are you coming?”

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Two weeks prior

Penelope exhaled wearily, releasing the tension from an arduous week. She had let go of two staff, prepared an international conference and reports of a length worthy of a novel. But now it was done. She could finally unwind. Tomorrow they would have their weekly dinner with the Polo Club crew, but all she wanted to do tonight was relax at home. A glass of wine and some take-out. That was exactly what she needed.

She pulled into their driveway – the sensor identified her car and the garage opened. Cruising the car into its spot, she unclipped her seatbelt, making sure the lambskin cover didn't rub on the delicate fibres of her chiffon shirt. She got out, plugged the Tesla in to charge and unclipped the top button of her blouse.

The door leading to the house from the garage was fingerprint activated. Penelope slipped off her driving gloves and watched the door open with a familiar shoosh. She slipped off her Louboutin heels, placed them in their designated spot and exchanged them for ugg boots. As her foot touched the soft wool, her arches screamed in relief.

The smell of sautéed onion and mushroom filled the hallway. Walter was in the kitchen prepping dinner.

“Hi Darling,” he called out to her as she walked in. “Hope you don't mind – I invited Charlie to join us tonight. He's by the pool. Give me a second and I'll be done here.” He tossed pasta into the pan and threw loose spinach leaves on top. “Oh, and before I forget, this came in for you,” he said, pointing to a small package across the bench.

Dumbfounded Penelope barely whispered a word.

They stepped outside, she swapped her uggs for Zimmerman slides before she crossed the garden towards the pool. Fairy lights lined the outdoor area and the blue pool lighting gave the glass pool a crystal appearance. Charlie was seated on the white lounge, his legs outstretched on the chaise, enjoying a beer. They exchanged a polite hello.

Penelope settled on the far end and unwrapped her package.

“Another lipstick, Penny? Really?”

“Not just any lipstick, Walter. It's an Ellis Faas.” She unboxed it from the luxurious box, pulling out a long silver casing.

Walter caught sight of the price. ‘Sheesh, Penn – that's the price of a good wine.’

Penelope pouted her lips. “Now Walt, don't be such a spoilsport.”

She unscrewed the lid and dabbed a touch of colour onto her palm. Blood Red. She admired the rich hue but didn't dare put it on. It would need a special occasion.

Author

Ola Kwintowsky recently completed an Honours degree in Creative Writing at the University of The Sunshine Coast, focusing on the connection between environmental narratives and sense of place. Currently, she is embarking on a PhD project, delving into the fascinating intersection of environmental writing and the creation of multimodal eco-novels through the incorporation of photography to deepen the connection with current environmental issues. Her previous publications can be found on HerStry, Arts Front, Sisters in Crime (book reviews) and SWAMP.