

A Velvet Glove

By
Lawrence Buentello

Felicia told him, When I grieve the world seems more alive, because all the beautiful objects in it appear so far away. I've known people who have died, and with each death I've received a new appreciation for the world. I see new colors, and the different shades of colors I've known before. I inhale new scents, I hear new sounds like music composed for people hungry for beauty. Am I morbid for deriving something new from the dead? My parents are dead, and my grandparents. When another person's heart stops, or when disease takes them, or when some violent accident silences the body, is it only grief we should experience? Or should we also experience the spirit that leaves the body and enriches the landscape that nourishes the living?

He was removed from her, though they lay in the same bed. She reached to touch his arm, but he didn't respond. She left her hand poised beneath the fabric, neither holding his forearm nor pulling away. They were naked together, they had just made love, but they were not in the same universe; he waited for the moment to pass, for the physical sensations and the intellectual reality of his feelings to return. It was an interesting moment; she, pouring out her heart in a maelstrom and he, falling away from her, as if some lodestone had suddenly reversed its gravity.

She had been speaking since their bodies had moved apart, her voice accompanied by the swirling wind and the tree limbs caressing the dormitory walls. She seemed to possess an endless repertoire of romantic beliefs, and he listened silently to them all, his lips pressed together and his eyes following the pattern of stray lights on the ceiling. She said all these things in an attempt to define her philosophy of the dead, or perhaps to display her intelligence for speaking of deeper matters; in any event, he didn't believe her. Perhaps, he thought, it was easier to have a manifesto to embrace when someone that you love dies. Though he thought that it might be something more, he couldn't really define it; he wasn't a very spiritual person. She was entirely spiritual; she was thin and blonde, so blonde that her eyelashes and her brows glistened in sunlight, giving her face an aura; her blue eyes would vanish into the light, her lips disappear, too, as if she were constantly moving in and out of a mist. She believed in everything spiritual; perhaps not believed, but embraced all the mysticism a mind could sustain. She wasn't beautiful, but she seemed as if she were just about to burst into beauty, a plain child

growing into sensuality. She was beyond changing, though; perhaps she knew this and wanted to feel beautiful in some way, and bringing the beauty of the world to her, no matter how mystical, was the best way.

She said, *Everything can be beautiful, all things can produce a special effect in life. Don't you think so? Don't you think that our bodies together create something beautiful?*

He moved his hand from behind his head and slowly began separating the strands of her hair in the dark; she seemed to perceive this as a sign of affection, and moved closer toward him. But he only meant it as a distraction, as something to do while his thoughts fell into coherent designs. They were alone in his room, and his roommate was away; he enjoyed the solitude, even though she was pressed under his arm. He kept sliding her hair through his fingers.

He said, *I suppose.*

She raised her head, and he avoided looking into her face. He knew that he would see the same bewildered expression, an expression which incorporated hope and dismay all at once. He didn't want to see it, even in the shadows. She said at last, and her voice was soft and without force, *Why don't you love me?*

His fingers lost their motion, then his hand fell to the pillow. He heard his own breath in the emptiness of the room.

Why not? she asked again.

Every woman loves a velvet glove, she said. Every woman loves to feel a velvet glove shelter her touch with an elegance that can't be experienced in any other way. Even sex shares no comparison. Flesh on flesh is sensual, but the artificial softness, the gentleness with which the hand is gifted is unlike anything a woman can feel in her life. All the rest is so ordinary.

He gave her a cockatiel for her birthday, in a pretty brass cage shaped like a bell; it was expensive. She thanked him, and feigned gratefulness; he knew that she felt his gift held no sincerity. She set the cage by the window in her apartment, and the sunlight mixed ethereally with the bird's grey and white feathers; when she sat in a chair by the cage the girl and the bird both vanished in and out of a haze. He thought that they were beautiful together and just in that moment, in that single moment he thought that he might be able to love her.

Though he remained, she decided to leave college a month after her twenty-first birthday. He was a dedicated student; he was a stoic, he wanted success in a world which offered the most to the least and the least to the most humanly gifted. He wasn't a spiritual man, he wasn't chained to Godly beliefs or philosophies that made martyrs of the poor. He was finely attuned to the politics of the world, and the world spoke to him in terms of academic achievement, connections and the correct telephone numbers in a pocket organizer. When he graduated she sent him a rose. Along with the rose, a fresh red rose with petals like the folds of a fiery evening dress, she pinned a card.

The card read, *Why can't you love me?*

He wanted to say, *I love your kindness, and your sense of the dramatic and the way you re-create the world for yourself. But you're too much of a dreamer, too much of a philosopher and I don't think that the world offers much to people who can't deal with reality. You're like a collection of soap bubbles floating through the air, your beliefs are*

interesting to experience but they aren't permanent. They're all so fragile.

And he imagined that she would reply that she needed someone to love, and he would reply that stoics and dreamers aren't compatible.

And they would go round and round endlessly, but he avoided it all by never replying to her card.

She wrote to him when he moved to the West Coast; she wrote him letters explaining the new discoveries in her life, and sent pictures of herself with the cockatiel haloed by sunlight and dazzled by the gaudy drapes in the small apartment. He grew tired of her eventually, he knew it was inevitable; she couldn't live beyond her romantic youth, and he was achieving so much more. He was a young businessman, he was an up-and-coming, he was an executive, he was a man with a future, a future offered by institutions that he quietly idolized. His hair was still brown and his face still lean and handsome. He often caught the sight of himself in mirrors, dressed in an expensive navy-blue blazer and shined leather shoes. How narcissistic he felt, how foolish; but the image that he saw legitimized his philosophy. He was what he had wanted to make of himself, and he was happy. In his own way, he was happy.

Felicia wrote, The cockatiel is dead. I'm sorry, she was a beautiful bird, though she never said much, and I thought that they were supposed to be so talkative. Now she's dead. She was your bird, and I loved her as much as I loved you. But when she died, I realized that I didn't love you anymore. Is that sad? I'm sorry. But I'll try to find something beautiful in her death, and in the death of my love for you. Is it possible? It must be, because I believe that it is. I just don't see anything new yet. If you see anything beautiful, please write me and let me know. It's just so sad.

Many years passed before he learned that she had died.

His hair was laced with grey reflections; the flesh of his face was heavy with achievements, setbacks and compromises. He had wanted to visit his old college campus, he had wanted to feel the nostalgia of his youth and hear familiar voices. He had never written back to her in those early years, he had always wanted to open the door to the future, not keep the doors open to the past. Those times were too distracting. But he discovered, through one of his fraternity friends, that Felicia was dead. She had died in a car crash that many people thought wasn't an accident at all. She was thirty-six years of age at the time and left behind no artifacts.

After settling his luggage in the hotel room he left to search through newspaper articles in the downtown library. But he couldn't locate the story of her death. *How brief when one dies*, he thought, *the impression that one leaves.*

Before he left the city he visited the cemetery; he wasn't remorseful or sorrowful, he was strangely puzzled, because he wanted to know why someone who professed a philosophy for the dead had decided not to wait for the natural causes that would eventually take her. She always seemed so full of fantasy, so rich with a talent for legitimizing life. He knelt, and placed a rose near the stone. After so many years, after her death, he had returned her gesture. Why couldn't he love her? Was it because she would have impeded his design for life? She was always too

full of dreams, and never realized how difficult it was to find a place in society. And how could he love her when they both valued something completely different in life?

Perhaps, if he had loved her, he would have eventually grown to hate himself.

She was sitting on a gingham blanket spread out on the grass on the day that she spoke of the velvet glove. They were picnicking in the park, quietly beside one another, watching the ducks which adorned the nearby pond. She sat with a book in her lap, imitating the literary effete; her pose was sentimental, and he watched her glow in the sunlight like a Madonna.

She said, *A woman wears a velvet glove infrequently. All the most wonderful experiences in life must be experienced only rarely, because the sensation dulls so quickly. It must remain special always.*

He watched her; she was beautiful when she spoke of such things, though they were usually things that he didn't comprehend.

But, she said, through a shy smile that he would always remember, sometimes you just can't help yourself.