

The Vase

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The Vase

Miranda painstakingly checked off the last line, entered the sum in her adding machine, hit the total key and slumped. Somewhere in the half mile of tape was a transposition which concealed thirty-seven cents from her. She could stand it no longer. She left her desk, went to the ladies room, bathed her eyes and returned. She sat and stared at the listing in front of her, but did not see it.

What kind of yard or thread could cause fabric to throw light like that? The woman's dress was not metallic. She would have liked to have touched the dress, rub it with her fingers, but didn't. She knew she would go to that woman's house. She had to find out more about her and her clothes. The dress shed blue light when she had lifted her hand and orange light when she had sat down. She was glad she had invited the woman to sit with her in the restaurant, when she could not find a seat elsewhere. What did she say her name was? She took out the napkin the woman had written for her and looked at it again. Alurmida it said, one name only. She would go to see her tomorrow. The woman had told her to come whenever she was ready, and she was ready. The dress cast red at moments and yellow lights when Alurmida walked, and a greenish blue when she pulled the door open to leave. Miranda went back to her work, to the task of the elusive finding thirty-seven cents.

Miranda walked up to the only house in the cul-de-sac without a lawn, pebbles and straw surrounding patches of flowers and herbs. She rang the bell. Alurmida answered and was wearing the same type fabric in a different dress. The light show her dress produced was even more dazzling than Miranda had remembered it.

"Welcome, I am glad."

The room Miranda entered was large, belying the outside of the house. Miranda felt the room going up and up, followed the feeling with her eyes and grinned. "That's interesting," she mouthed.

"What?"

"The rafters", she replied.

"Yes. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No thanks."

"Alright then, come." Alurmida led her through a door opposite the front door, and into a room cluttered with looms, sewing boxes and plants. One wall was completely covered with a ceiling to floor drape, and Miranda felt her sense of space altered, as that should have led to the interior of the house, perhaps a bathroom or foyer.

"Sit here, you will start with this loom." She indicated a small loom with a low stool in front of it. Miranda touched a spindle and frowned, she had no idea how a loom worked. She picked up the shuttle, turned it over in her hand and looked at Alurmida questioningly.

"All your questions will be answered." She had the feeling the woman spoke of more than cloth weaving. A wonder crept over her. She did not ask many questions, as Alurmida explained the various uses of the different parts of the loom. The women worked and talked very little. Alurmida instructed Miranda mainly by example, using words only as an adjunct to her actions.

"I think we should stop now," said Alurmida. Miranda looked at her watch and was surprised to find two hours had passed. She looked at what she had done and was very pleased. Under her hand lay the beginnings of a beautiful piece of cloth, about twenty-four inches wide, and Alurmida had said it would be as long as she wished it to be. It did not cast as many rays as Alurmida's clothes, but in time she would weave fabric as lovely.

"Now, would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh yes," she breathed suddenly thirsty and feeling a bit of hunger.

Alurmida made them both cups often. They sat in the room Miranda had first entered and talked. That is to say Miranda talked and Alurmida encouraged and listened. She spoke of the dream of owning her own accounting firm, of maybe having children, of the garden in which she had lost all interest only recently, or her aunts, her mother, and her very distant brother. Miranda heard herself, but was unable to stop herself from talking about herself. When she finally ran out of words and stories, she lapsed into silence. She was a feeling of deep relief, and could not quite explain exactly why.

Miranda spent most of her evenings, and her weekends at Alurmida's house weaving fabric. She had finished her first piece, made from it a shirt, and was well into her second piece, which would be wide enough to make a dress. She barely noticed that she had given up going out and was seeing less of her friends.

The day was Thursday they had just finished working and had sat down for their ritual tea before Miranda went home. They had developed a communicative silence when Alurmida said, "I can't be here tomorrow, as I have to finish an assignment at work."

"Oh."

"Could you come early Saturday, say about seven o'clock?"

"I guess I could, but you know I really like to sleep late on Saturday mornings."

"I know, but it is very important that you come early in the morning."

Miranda had come to take every word that Alurmida spoke literally. The woman was pleasant and a lot of fun, but on the business of making cloth and sewing she was always serious.

"Okay, I'll just act as if I'm going to the office and get up."

"Good. See you at seven then."

Miranda felt disappointment; Alurmida had never dismissed her so abruptly before. She wondered on her walk home if she had been offensive in anyway. Then she reminded herself that for the first time since their meeting, the other woman had seemed distracted, not her usual focused self.

At 6:57 am. Saturday, Miranda rang the doorbell, feeling very pleased with herself. The door opened immediately. Alurmida stood with one hand on the door knob and the other akimbo. She was wearing a shimmering blue dress draped in descending folds which gave off various shades of blue on the way down. It captured exactly the sky on a bright winter's day. It dazzled. Miranda stepped into the room and Alurmida closed the door.

"Hi. That's gorgeous." said Miranda pointing at Alurmida's headdress.

"You are early. I made tea."

"I had coffee already thanks."

"That's alright, have some tea anyhow."

The women sat in their usual places and drank their honey sweetened tea. A blue candle burning on the table provided the only light in the curtain darkened room. Silence entered and stayed, until Alurmida spoke.

"I must go away."

"Oh, are you going? I mean when?"

The nutmeg colored woman chuckled. "You mean both so I'll answer both. Where I do not yet know, and when is after you are finished your lessons. Speaking of which, let's start now."

Miranda, upon entering the weaving room, headed for her stool but the other woman's voice stopped her. "What you need today is behind that door."

"But I thought we were..."

"What you need is behind that door."

Miranda had never seen that wall. The drapes, always drawn, were now opened, pulled to one side. In the far corner was a door.

"Go get it," Alurmida urged from her just entered the room position inside the other door. Miranda turned the knob and pulled, nothing happened.

"The other way," said Alurmida.

Miranda pushed and the door swung opened. She stepped into sunshine, tall grass, lemon scented air and low music. She turned with a question on her lips, but the door, the room, and Alurmida was replaced by the same vista as was before her. She sat down; her knees would no longer support her weight.

Miranda sat for what seemed to her to be a long time. Her thoughts were ending in question marks and unfinished sentences. Her ears were the first to notify her that something had changed. The low music which she had first perceived to be flutes and violins, now sounded like voices, and instead of surrounding her as it had first appeared to be doing, it came from a specific direction. "Behind that hill," she spoke aloud. The sound of her voice released something, Miranda started to cry.

After a few moments of tears mixed with extreme self pity, she got up and walked toward the knoll and the music issuing from behind it. It was closer than she had thought, and easier to climb. Very soon she was on top of the knoll looking down on a very verdant valley. Small plots, circular in shape, were teeming with vegetation; she did not recognize most of it. The sight she welcomed most was the buildings. In what appeared to be the center of the valley were a circle of buildings, conically shaped with orange colored roofs. She ran. Down the hill and into the circle created by the buildings she ran. Reaching the center she looked around her but could not see any doors. Again Miranda sat.

The chanting was now closer than before, coming from the buildings she thought. All around her the sound grew and grew. She placed her head in her hands and closed her eyes. What is happening to me, she thought.

The building immediately in front of Miranda opened. A chocolate and cream colored woman stepped out. Her hair was braided in geometric patterns studded with glistening beads. Her flowing robe was a replica of her patterned hair. The woman smiled and held out her hand toward Miranda.

"Welcome. You stayed so long over the hill, we wondered if you were ever coming."

Miranda noticed two things at once, the chanting had stopped and all the buildings were

opening, issuing out women in varying shades of brown, all with exquisitely braided hair. It was difficult to look at anyone or anything in particular. It was all so new and strange. The women approached and sat yogi fashion in a circle around her.

The woman who had first entered the circle spoke. "You are from the land of gadgets and technology, so in order for you to understand the matters before us, we created substance. Please find peace."

Miranda found her tongue. "Who are you? Where am I, what is this place?"

"So many questions. You will understand all that you must know. First we eat, this is a time of rejoicing."

From somewhere behind Miranda a voice started singing. She listened intently. The sound filled the valley. The others took up the refrain in a chanting singsong 'call and response' mode. They sang of creation, not the way she had known it, but different. Of destruction also they sang. The song described a new, exciting, peaceful place to live. A longing stirred deep in her for this place. The soloist ended her story and the chanters continued for a while longer.

A building to her right opened and more women forming a procession came out bearing trays full of fruit, nuts and pitchers. These were set in the space in front of Miranda and the women in the circle. The bearers then took places behind the first circle, sitting in the same fashion as the first group.

"Please eat, you are our guest," said the woman who had first spoken.

Miranda took a fruit that looked like a peach and bit into it. Surprise lit up her face. It did not taste like a peach. The texture was much finer. In the center was a large pit which prevented Miranda from biting all the way through the fruit. The juice streamed from the puncture made by her teeth, down through her fingers and unto her hand. The women laughed. For the first time since her arrival Miranda relaxed. She laughed. The combined laughter swelled up, roared off the surfaces of the buildings, bounced off the hills and returned to the group, who picked it up and laughed all the more. A link formed. They eat and drank from the pitchers a clear liquid that tasted like peppermint tea, spiced with cinnamon. The cinnamon being perceived rather than tasted.

After the repast ended the soloist took up her song again. She sang of construction and growth, of abundance and joy. Miranda joined in the chanting. It occurred to her that she was happy. The thought floated in her mind, she savored it and relished it for a while, then let it go for the sake of living this happiness. The singing turned to dancing, which turned back to singing. The woman who had first entered the circle clapped her hands and the singing faded away. She spoke as if from far away.

"I am Philema; we are the monitors of your stay here."

"How long am I to stay?" Miranda had no doubt she was not on a casual visit to this unique place.

"Until you are finished what you came here to do."

Alurmida had said the same thing only hours ago. So much had happened. She wondered if her aunt would miss her, and report her as missing. What would Mr. Braddock say when she did not show up for work on Monday? Would they call the police? She shook her head.

"It is only natural," Philema said. A phrase Alurmida had used often.

"You will remain here for a while as there is much you must learn."

"I'll stay as long as you let me. I like it here."

"How long you stay depends on you. Come, you must wash and rest."

Philema rose and led Miranda to the structure from which she had emerged earlier. As they approached the building opened, they entered a round room bare of objects, and carpeted with soft living grass.

"This is where you will bathe and sleep," she told her.

"Where is the bathroom?" she asked, not seeing any door leading out of the room.

"It is where you can find it."

Then Miranda heard it. Softly at first, then louder as if from behind the wall she was facing. The room then closed behind her shutting out the welcoming circle.

"That's a waterfall. Where is it?"

"There." Philema pointed to the empty wall facing Miranda.

"I don't..." her voice trailed to silence as before her stoop a rock wall with sparkling water flowing down its face. The sound and sight of it astonished and delighted Miranda, causing her to smile broadly.

"You may now bathe."

Miranda stripped, vowing to herself not to ask any more questions.

"How then will you know?" Again the woman spoke to her thoughts.

She handed a bar of soap to Miranda. It smelled of roses and violets. She stepped into the pool of water at the base of the waterfall and was pleased to find it warm, just above room temperature. She washed her hair and scrubbed her body with the cloth Philema had handed her. She played in the gurgling water feeling like a child, then stepped out onto the grass rug and into a large towel Philema held for her. It was hooded; covering her from head to toe. She patted her body and looked around determined to see where everything was and where all this came from. The waterfall faded sound first and was replaced by a low bench with a stool behind it.

"Sit and I'll dress your hair." She had no comb in her hand. Miranda pushed back the hood from her head and found her hair dry, and with her childhood texture, all the processing had gone. She sat on the bench still wrapped in the towel. Philema sat on the stool and started to braid her hair. She used only her fingers. Soon Miranda's hair was as intricately styled as all the other women she had seen in the circle.

"You may rest now." Philema rose and sat yogi fashion by the wall that always acted as a portal. Miranda was about to curl up on the grass rug, when the other woman pointed. Beside the wall was a bed, turned down and inviting. Miranda lay down planning to think on all that she had seen and done, but fell into a deep sleep without dreams immediately. How long she slept she was not quite sure, but upon awaking, she felt as if she had slept for eight hours. She was rested.

Philema was in the same place watching her when she opened her eyes. "You are rested?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good, we will repast, and your lessons can begin."

The food was there, as was water to wash, a toothbrush with toothpaste on it. The mint in the

toothpaste was very familiar, although Miranda did not see a tube. They ate the fruits and nuts and left the round room.

Outside the women of the festival were waiting. The group walked into the fields. This established the pattern they would follow. As the days flowed by she learned from the woman of the festival, and the evenings were spent in storytelling, singing and dancing. They taught Miranda as Alurmida had done, by showing her. She learned to grow food, weave intricate patterns in fabric, harvest crops, and that all she would ever need to survive and thrive was available to her. Her big lesson was the making of delicate ceramic pots. She mixed the paint to paint the beautiful patterns on the outside. She learned to code lessons in the patterns, and to turn every material at hand into useful objects.

Upon leaving her chamber after one of her sleeping times, she found no one in the circle. "Where are the others?" she asked Philema who had followed her out.

"They are at work. Come with me." Philema took her hand, and they walked in silence for some distance. Miranda breathed deeply and sighed.

"You are happy here?"

"Yes, very."

"Your returning time is near."

"I know."

"That is a measure of your progress."

They sat at the base of a large tree.

"No one will believe me."

"True."

"How will explain my absence?"

"Some things should never be explained."

"I have been gone a long time... months."

"Have you?"

"So much has happened, it seems like months."

"Don't worry; you'll know what to do when the time comes."

"I really don't want to go back."

"Your work is there."

While they spoke Miranda absently began molding the soil at their fingertips. Soon she had a mound of moist clay in her hands. They arose without speaking and walked to the potters shed; Miranda still holding the clay. The wheel was near, she pulled it toward her. Idly, almost, she sat at the wheel and placed her mound of clay on it. Very soon she had spun a vase. She carved the women planting, reaping, weaving, sewing, singing, and dancing with her finger tips. At the neck she showed the circular buildings, using the mouth of the vase as the circle where they all met.

"I may as well fire and paint this." For the first time since she started working with the clay, she acknowledged the work in her hand. She summoned the kiln and fired the vase, cooled it quickly and painted it. Using the unique drying system she had learned, she aged the vase, it now appeared to be centuries old.

While Miranda was working on her vase, Philema had taken her hair out of its braids and redone it. They left the potter's shed and walked, Miranda carrying her newly made vase cradled in the left arm. They had circled the buildings and were headed for the knoll Miranda had first scaled to find Philema and the women of the festival. The others came from all directions. They were chanting the same music Miranda had first heard them chant.

They gathered at the foot of the knoll, chanting and rocking in time to their chant. Philema reached into her garment and extracted Miranda's watch. She gave it to her. Miranda took it, her eyes tearing, and placed it on her wrist. She did not look at the face of it she did not want to know time in this timeless moment.

"The leaving time is now?" she asked more of herself than of Philema.

"Yes, it is now."

The tears that were misting Miranda's eyes flowed over the rims and down her face, splashing on her dress. She did not raise her hand to her face as they came to her one by one and hugged and kissed her. She did not sniffle. Her eyes continued to flow. Philema was the last to hug and kiss her.

"You have strength enough to survive," she said. She pulled from her clothes a handkerchief and wiped the crying woman's face. Philema hugged Miranda and her vase very tightly, stepped back, looked into her face and hugged her again. She handed Miranda the handkerchief and walked away to join the others. Miranda's eyes followed their backs, which became shadowy as her eyes again lost control of themselves. She wiped her face and blew her nose.

Miranda climbed the knoll and reached the top. She turned for one last look at the happy valley. All the women were standing with their backs to the village watching her. There was neither movement nor sound. She raised her hand and fluttered the handkerchief in farewell, turned to face the lemon scented field she had first entered. In front of her was her house. She looked at her watch, it was eight and daylight told her it was morning.

Miranda patted her hair with its beautifully intricate patterns, clutched her vase, wiped her still watery eyes with Philema's handkerchief, and stepped up to her front door.