

The Alchemists

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The first few rays of sun sliced through the kitchen window, hitting my back and climbing up my neck. “Stephanie,” I called, “it’s almost time.”

Stephanie came from her room, uncharacteristically silent, and took a seat next to me at the small table that sat in the middle of the kitchen. “Emily,” she said, choosing her words carefully, “do you still want me living here?”

“Well,” I said, “to be honest, I think you should move back in with your mom or with another friend. My family’s going through a lot right now, and I think it would be better for both of us.”

The shock showed on her face, in the pursed lips and the eyes opened wide, staring at me as if the entire world had narrowed down to the words I spoke. She had expected me to deny it, to assure her that I wanted her to stay and that the bond we had was beyond reproach. It hurt to watch the image she had of the two of us, our friendship, shattering into tiny, sharp pieces. She nodded curtly, dropped her bag, and tore down the hallway and up the stairs to my mother’s room.

I followed her a minute later, Stephanie’s sobs echoing in the stairway. I stood in the doorway, looking at Stephanie, whose face was buried in my mother’s shoulder, and my mother, stroking Stephanie’s back with a distant manner. My mother turned to look at me, her eyes distant and hard. She shook her head. I turned around and went down the stairs and caught the bus just as it was pulling up in front of my house.

Due to difficulties with her mother, Stephanie had been living with my family since August. My mother had unofficially adopted her into the bosom of the family, treating my friend with an open affection that I had never received from her. I had confided in my mother back in December, but she had refused to acknowledge that I no longer wanted to live with Stephanie. I could barely stand to look at my friend anymore, let alone share a desk with her in Spanish class. For the month of March, I worried about Stephanie and my mother, every waking moment feeding my nervous anxiety. I found my

thoughts drifting to them even as we read the stories of Jorge Luis Borges in Spanish class.

“In my childhood I was a fervent worshipper of the tiger,” I mumbled to myself, reading the English translation of the two-paragraph long story, “Dreamtigers,” that we had been given, along with the original Spanish, to compare the translation. “Not the jaguar . . . but the true tiger, the striped Asian breed that can be faced only by men of war, in a castle atop an elephant” (294). As I struggled to connect the labyrinth of Spanish words to the clear-cut English in front of me, the image of the dreamtiger took shape in my mind and resonated deep within me:

I would stand for hours on end before one of the cages at the zoo . . . My childhood outgrown, the tigers and my passion for them faded, but they are still in my dreams . . . As I sleep . . . I often think: *This is a dream, a pure diversion of my will, and since I have unlimited power, I am going to bring forth a tiger.* (294)

I felt sorry for the lone dreamer, the tiger-seeker who believed with his whole being that perfection, all of his dreams and hopes, could be realized through sheer force of will. His relationship with the tiger is one of naïve admiration. He wants to possess the animal itself, to take the physical and turn it into something that is entirely his own. The dreamer’s desire was in a way my own as I struggled to attain the perfect relationship with my mother while she and Stephanie developed their own exclusive relationship of which I wasn’t a part. My mother treated Stephanie like another daughter while I was the house-guest kept at a polite distance.

Borges’s tiger, however, is a creature not content when confined to a cage. It cannot be caught in dreams:

Oh, incompetence! My dreams never seem to engender the creature I so hunger for. The tiger does appear, but it is all dried up, or it’s flimsy-looking, or it has impure vagaries of shape or an unacceptable size, or it’s altogether too ephemeral, or it looks more like a dog or a bird than like a tiger. (294)

The dreamer’s fondest hope is to bring forth the tiger—to control its strength, to love and admire it. But the result is always the same: disappointment as the tiger we create bears no resemblance to its ideal counterpart. The perfection we imagine possible cannot be called into being in the real world, just as the narrator does not have full control of his dreams. I sympathized

with the dreamer; I felt his frustration as my own. I had my own dreamtiger: the vague hope that with Stephanie gone, through sheer desire and force of will, I would win my mother's affection for Stephanie and be transformed into the object of my mother's love. In looking back, I realize this dreamtiger never existed in the first place. My desire to be in Stephanie's place—ironically, that of an outsider in my family—was my attempt to chase after an ideal relationship that couldn't exist in reality.

I squinted down at the page, filled with words I didn't know. I tasted the way the phrases rolled on my tongue. Images of the tiger pulsed through my head, vague and half-formed. My gaze drifted towards the comfort of the English, but somehow the Spanish on which my voice stumbled was richer, more complete than the translation. There were shades of another author in the English where the translator had chosen to expand a phrase or to change a word entirely, and I felt that something had been lost in taking "Dreamtigers" out of its original form. Just as the dreamer in the story struggles to bring the tiger to life and fails to capture it fully, so the translator had labored over these two paragraphs, snatching at words, discarding some, reaching for others, creating a different beast over which he had tried to maintain the same control and authority that Borges had mastered in the original. That was how it appeared to me—perfection in Spanish, entire lines unknown and unexplored, unlimited in their potential, only to be made flawed, to be created anew by another, into a less perfect creature: a dreamtiger, a mere shadow of the first. That was how I saw myself, as the translator, the creator, the dreamer, wrestling with my ideal—the relationship with my mother I saw so clearly in my head—and yet I was unable to give it the life I had invented for it. My image of perfection was stuck in the dream world, but I believed I could force it into being simply because I wanted it so badly. I believed that all I needed to do was act, and when Stephanie left, my idea would spring to life. I had read but not understood the nature of dreamtigers.

Months later, at the beginning of my freshman year in college, I attended an opening at the Museum of Arts & Design. The exhibition was called "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting," and showed artwork using fibers and other materials with lace or delicate patterns. I was immediately attracted to a dazzling satin ball gown with hundreds of red and blue threads running over its surface to simulate the veins and arteries of a body underneath. The thread itself had reflective tape knitted into it, causing the entire dress to glow eerily when the light hit it from a certain angle. I saw both inside and out at the same time, a private and public admission of what lay beneath the surface. I

stood in front of the dress for several minutes, the crowd murmuring and whispering as they gave the artwork a cursory glance and moved on. I usually think of clothes—especially fancy dresses—as a front, a means of covering up the little insecurities and cracks in the surface that take so much effort to hide, but this one was different: while its surface shimmered and reflected the lights of the gallery and my movement as I walked past, I could see every stitch and frayed detail of the cotton veins curling over it. I loved it for its imperfections, for its unflinching honesty, for its ability to wear its flaws on the outside. It was the artist's vision of the dress, translated from some nebulous form into physical being, and no one else's.

I wished my mother had been there to see the dress, to marvel at it and spend long minutes gazing at it, and then, with the same admiration in her eyes, turn to me. We had spent years in the same house living in our own, separate bubbles—tiny worlds in which our fondest visions and myths of dwelling in harmony were preserved—but with Stephanie's arrival, the image I held of my mother in my head could not survive. I felt pain in seeing her and Stephanie interact with smiles and hugs while I retreated to my room, a knotted mesh of emotions tumbling through my mind. What I could identify was not so much a feeling as it was the intuitive knowledge that something had snapped, shattered, and was beyond repair. These same sensations rushed back to me in the gallery. To me, the dress showed the difference between the imagined, flawless relationship and the relationship in reality: the beauty of the ideal can be brought to life, but the person who dreams it into existence has flaws as well which come through in its formation, in the veins of the dress. But what of the dress beforehand, the first, perfect dress the artist dreamed? Did the artist look at her creation and feel the loss of limitless potential, did she know intimately what she had compromised in translation, and afterwards did she feel affection for the vessel in which she had tried—and failed—to transfer her ideal?

For the duration of Stephanie's stay with my family, I had on the wall in my room a painting entitled "Useless Science or the Alchemist," by Remedios Varo. It is an oblong painting in which the alchemist, a lonely figure swathed in the checkered floor that falls around him like fabric, huddles in the shadow of a giant machine that looms behind him. The Alchemist is wearily absorbed in his task, which is to turn a small wheel connected to the machine. He has wasted away searching in vain for something he will never discover—the philosopher's stone, the elixir that will grant immortality. His face is blank aside from two largely shadowed eyes pointed heavenward, perhaps asking about the purpose of the machine. It was a piece that I had always been

attracted to. As I stared at the painting, the lone figure dwarfed by the towering machine of his own creation, I felt a stab of recognition. The situation with my mother and Stephanie had the same effect on me as the creation of the machine had on the Alchemist. Both of us continued our daily work, physically weary but motivated by the promise of perfection, unsure as to what exactly we were in the process of creating. Our machines, our ideals, our hopes, grew in strange shapes behind us, overwhelming us.

I recall the night I told my mother I wanted Stephanie to leave. My sisters and I sat down to discuss the situation in my mother's bedroom. She lay down on her bed, staring up at the ceiling with deadened eyes, and slowly rolled over until the pillow smothered her entire face in its cotton embrace. Kevin, my mother's boyfriend, put his hand on my mother's shoulder, shaking her slightly, saying, "Clare, you have to get up."

I asked for my mother's help, and without warning she sat bolt upright, her eyes wild and distant, springing from the covers, pillow forgotten. "Do what you want," she said, wrenching the door open to leave.

My lungs deflated, expelling stale air, and I stood motionless. I felt no ray of inspiration, no surge of relief, no warm embrace. It was a hollow victory that served only to reveal the cruel trick I had played on myself: in one fell swoop I lost, once again, that image of my mother I had protected and nurtured before and during Stephanie's stay, never to be regained. In its place I saw the gap between what I believed to be the right action and what my mother believed: a deep chasm neither of us was prepared to cross. She had her image of perfection, an intimate relationship with Stephanie, which I had severed, while mine was to have my mother back. Yet however much I wanted to deconstruct this machine of my own making, my bubble-world was gone. My mother was a woman with human flaws, and the relationship I sought to regain with her had never existed in the first place. Just as I had destroyed Stephanie's fictional image of our shared relationship, in that moment, my mother ended mine.

The crux of the matter lies in a conversation my mother and I had the summer before I left for college. The thread of our discussion had been dropped, and she was about to go off to bed, when I asked her, dead serious: "Have I been a good daughter?" She looked at me head on, startled, her mouth half-parted. "Of course," she said, unaware of the courage it had taken for me to speak. It seemed to me that she had no idea what had led me to ask such a question, and her voice rang with warmth. I burst into tears.

It was not the scene of affection I had imagined with my mother. By that time I had given up on ideals, and yet I treasure her response, the way she

looked at me, as if it were that very moment in which the ideal had formed, perfect and pure. My mother wasn't perfect, but moreover, the image she had of me was not what I had expected it to be, or even hoped it would be. I too wanted to become faultless in her eyes, and no doubt she wanted to be seen differently as well. Knowing that, at least, makes my relationship with her easier—perhaps she too felt that at times she had failed, that she could have done better, and that if one more piece would fall into place, the dreamtiger would appear.

But what happened to the ideal I had crafted beforehand, the image of my mother that never awakened, the woman I had tried to make perfect in my eyes? It lingers, the way dreams are recalled during daylight hours in disjointed images, limitless and perfect and untouched by the real world. Yet as translator, creator, and writer, the nature of these dreamtigers becomes clearer: by definition they are not easily caught, just as in the translation from thought to ink on paper the words are not what we believed we would write.

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