



NARRATIVE

STORY OF THE WEEK



Thomas Rayfiel is the author of six novels, including *In Pinelight* (2013) and the Eve trilogy, which consists of *Colony Girl*, a *Los Angeles Times* Notable Book of the Year, *Eve in the City*, and *Parallel Play*. He grew up in suburban New Jersey before receiving a BA from Grinnell College. His screenwriting credits include projects for Sydney Pollack, Arthur Joffé, and Maroun Bagdadi. Rayfiel lives in Brooklyn with his wife and their two children.

She Was Beautiful

A STORY

BY THOMAS RAYFIEL

“I WANT TO MAKE you come with my mouth.”

He nuzzled the words into that unnamed space where shoulder shades into neck. She squirmed both away and into him, unsure anymore if this was real. It conformed too closely to a fantasy she was just now having and had never had before. His hands steadied her, helped her through a doorway. She was shocked at how wet she was. She was forty-five. This did not happen.

His lips moved around to the hollow of her throat, then down, the buttons on her shirt softly giving way. *Peeled fruit* was her last thought before another being, a part of her that had been forming in readiness this entire time, took over. When words broke the surface of her consciousness next, his head lay panting on her thigh. She reached down and tousled his wiry black hair.

There was gray in it. She found his ear and traced its interior. He shuddered, picked up the scent again, and traveled the inside of her arm until his weight was crushing and her legs had decided, all on their own, never to let him go.

“We can’t do this,” he said.

His penis was so insistently *there*. Yet he went on.

“We haven’t done anything yet. Nothing we can’t take back. But if I make love to you . . .”

If?

His strength. His smile. She looked in vain for some part of him not to fall in love with. He took her hands and stretched them far above her head. His feet pulled hers in the opposite direction until she was impossibly elongated. She felt the delicious rise of her breasts. Her hips, her pelvis, broke free of their everyday concerns. His eyes hovered, blue.

I was beautiful, she realized, several hours later, cleaning up

after dinner, listening to her daughter clomp around the room in time to silent music. For that moment, I was beautiful. They had done nothing more. He heaved himself up. She lay there. This sheet, she had thought mechanically, is like the Shroud of Turin. It will have this experience imprinted on it for all time. Yet simultaneously she was making plans to wash it, along with everything else he had touched, most of all herself.

And now she had spent the evening with her husband, with her child. She had cooked asparagus and chicken. He was upstairs, two floors away, on the other side of the building. An invisible tether connected them. It gave the most amazing tension to her tiniest movement. She felt it tug with every step. She bent over to put a pan away and almost gasped.

You are going crazy. In bed tonight, if she slept with her husband, what would it do? Would it sever the connection, cancel out what had happened? (Although nothing had happened. That was what he seemed to think.) Or could she apply this newly discovered sensuality to any encounter? Bottle it. Store it. Dispense it as needed. Like a cold remedy.

You're forty-five, the voice reminded her, a bell tolling. And while occasionally, when their daughter had a sleepover or if they both woke early on a weekend, they still had sex, it was more a reference to past love, touching base with long-established feelings. It was good. Good in the moral sense. She remembered a philosophy course she had taken in college. A discussion about Good as opposed to Right. The professor told her, after class, that she had a talent. He'd said— The cord gave a slow, steady pull. She found herself at the end of the hall, approaching the door, as if being reeled in.

Hooked. Her mind traveled with the image. Hooked like a fish, lifted out of her element. Can't breathe. Spinning in strong, twisting light. Huge hands approach. But that was death. That was not what she wanted. She wanted to come. "I want to make you come with my mouth," he'd said. My god, a hook was just half a wedding ring.

She got the trash and went outside. The lights were on in his apartment. She crossed the street to get a better look. There were no silhouettes, no leaking notes of music or talk. He was too high up. All she could do was look at his ceiling and breathe in his smell. Although that, she corrected, was the smell of the city's

garbage, cooking in summer heat. There was something cocaine-ish and rotting and impossibly stimulating about it. She sniffed deeply, straight down into her lungs, as once, years ago, she had snorted powdered lines on a mirror and seen a stranger's face appear—the face she wore now—all smudged reflection. 