

THE DELIGHT OF THE COUCH

There are some men, some places, and some times, with respect to which these practices can be made use of.

—Kama Sutra

First Posture: The Splitting of a Bamboo

With the boy in their bed, husband and wife lay on the couch, divided by pajamas. They would prefer to be naked, but the apartment is too cold for that. It's a matter of insulation, something to take up with the landlord the next time he comes around.

Nevertheless, a kiss: tight-lipped, hesitant, lacking amore. (Light from the kitchen falls on the dining room table, the fruit bowl empty of apples.)

He slides a hand beneath her shirt, hoping for reception. Since the birth of their son three years ago, she has become self-conscious about the sagginess of her breasts. She now has a tendency of saying, "When you make it big, you can pay for a lift. After the lipo, of course."

Of course.

One of the cats leaps onto the windowsill and pokes its head through the blinds. Soon it is caught and making a racket; for sure it will wake the child. The man steams over, grabs the cat by its hind quarters, and pulls it free of the blinds, two of which break in the rescue.

"That's your own fault for leaving them down," says the wife, covering herself with a blanket. "You know how he likes to look out."

"Yeah, but now everybody can see in," says the husband, reluctantly raising the blinds.

"See what?" asks the wife, and lifts the blanket for him to get under.

Second Posture: The Blow of the Bull

They kiss again, this time with more fervor. They don't kiss much anymore, at least not in the deeply sensual way he remembers. How they kiss these days could never be called "mouth play." It does feel good, however, to be kissing her in the semi-dark, without formality, at the start of the weekend. He almost tells her he loves her, but refrains.

A sound from outside—a stifled cry—pulls them apart. He gets up and goes to the window. In the front yard, two teenaged boys are kicking and punching another boy who is curled up in the grass. The man calls his wife over. Still wrapped in the blanket, she bangs on the window. Instantly, the attackers relent, the victim stands, and the three walk away as if it all were a movie and she had just yelled cut.

"We have to get out of this neighborhood," he says.

Every time something bad happens, every time a piece of trash blows into the yard, he complains about the sorry state of the neighborhood. They live near an elementary school, and it attracts the wrong kind of people at night. Packs of kids

roam the streets at all hours; sometimes he hears them laughing in his sleep. He tries to put himself in their shoes, tries to remember the kind of asshole he was when he was seventeen, but still they rile him.

And yet he knows he's merely talking when he says they have to move. They don't have enough money to afford a new washing machine. What makes him think they can afford a house in a decent neighborhood?

He'll be damned, though, if he lets his son grow up to be a zombie.

Third Posture: Fitting on of the Sock

So much for tender beginnings.

It is imperative that they get to it, that they skip the ritual and head straight for the sacrifice.

They succeed in getting their pants off, always a cumbersome affair. The act of Venus occurs once a week in their house, twice if they're lucky. It used to happen more often, and with greater intensity of feeling, but those days are legend.

"Daddy."

When he hears the boy's voice, the father doesn't go to him right away. He heaves a sigh, knocking his forehead against his wife's shoulder three times in exasperation. When he finally does get up, he neglects to put on his pants.

Half-asleep and shirtless, his son is standing on the bed.

"I've got my dirt friends," he says, mumbling in the voice of dreams. "All my dirt friends are here."

Daddy uncovers the tossed-off shirt and pulls it over his son's head, threads his bony arms through the sleeves. He lays him down and draws the covers up to his chin. He looks at his son and wants to be mad at him for a number of things, not excluding the most recent interruption. But he doesn't have the necessary anger. Instead of telling him that his pull-up reeks of pee and that he's too big to be sleeping in his parents' bed, he waits for the boy's breathing to steady and quietly returns to the couch.

Fourth Posture: Driving the Peg Home

She is sitting up, staring at the ceiling.

"Listen," she says.

He stops short of the coffee table, turns an ear.

The couple upstairs is having sex, the neighbors in 1B, the woman who looks like an Irish middleweight and the man who never speaks.

"First they want to take showers when we do," says the man, a little self-righteously, "and now this. It's a violation of the social contract."

He sits next to his wife and tries to block out the moans and grunts, but the ceiling is such that even the slapping of flesh is audible.

The woman puts on her pants and walks into the bathroom. She starts brushing her teeth, letting him know that it's over. The mood and the moment are lost-if they

were ever there to begin with.

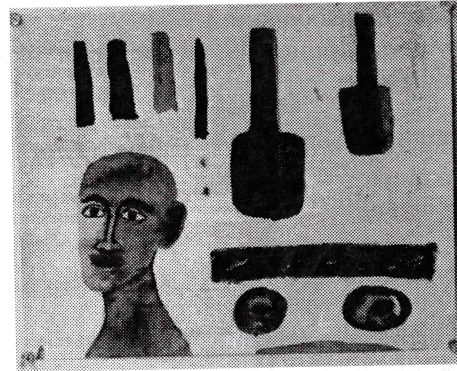
The sound of her spitting toothpaste into the sink does not decrease his desire for her. Maybe next week, he thinks, as the neighbors achieve crescendo.

The woman leaves the bathroom and gets into bed with their son, whose groggy words of affection the man cannot make out.

His body still pulsing with the anticipation of sex, he drapes the blanket over his naked legs, feels around for the remote control, and finds it between the cushions of the faded blue couch.

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REGARDING THE OTHER JOBS

It's neither pleasure nor grief to be mentioned in a poem somewhere. It's just words. It's another's need. Their imagination. You haven't won a prize. You're not even loved more than most. It's a poet's business. If a plumber could install love he would with every toilet. If a pilot had the language in him, he'd fly from feeling to emotion instead of Boston to New York. You're with a poet now. One of the perks is your name glowing from the lines or even blazing in the title if the mood strikes him. But carpenters would build your name if they could. Fishermen would trawl for it, stock traders buy a ton of it, soldiers protect it with their life. What he thinks of you is no different being in print than in bricks or woodchips or car parts rolling off the assembly line. Sure, you're as radiant as the north star. But you're also as efficient as a newly installed hot-water system. You're as tasty as a caterer's spread. And how can you know all this? Ask a poet not a cop.

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