

Spaces

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

I grew up in a big town in the middle of a big state, and for that reason, even today, large, empty spaces make my teeth steely, and my insides feel like an airplane wing being grounded on the factory line, metal sliding through metal. It wasn't that the spaces weren't beautiful--I remember the smells of blackberries wafting up the paths in the forest, burnt into the summer-heated dirt, and I remember the surprise of blue sky wafting out over the horizon, a big promise. I was a child then, and the fact that there were a bit too many spaces inbetween the houses, and too many houses painted white, just struck me as the particular theater set which happened to be my world. But I also remembered that whenever I took an intake of breath, the hollowness in my lungs seemed a bit too big, as if the emptiness of the town was inside me as well.

Today I live in a crowded place, on a city block in New York, where I push myself out of my apartment, scraping my shoulders on the paint-chipped door jamb, and then smell the shoes of my neighbor's family on the mat across from me. The doors in my building are all a dead silver color, but still each door seems to smell strongly of people who have treaded back and forth, some never coming back.

I liked the idea of some never coming back because I was always tempted not to come back myself. I worked as a cashier in the mornings for Super Joe's Supermarket on West 56th Street. I liked the owner, Joe, who sometimes dumped fistfuls of cherries by my cashier when he passed, with a long wink, his great eyebrows sailing in amusement. Joe wasn't much for words but his eyes sailed about the store as if on some trip around the world.

I too was on my own trip. Being a cashier wasn't my real occupation. My real occupation was at night, when I serviced writers working on their novels. It was a new business in New York, based in the idea that people who work on their own are highly stressed, and yet ambitious to remain alone. Our job was to give blow-jobs under the table, while the writers worked at their computers. We could also make jokes, and entertain, after the blow-job was finished, depending on what we felt would enthuse the writer, yet not distract him. We never dealt with women; the market was too new.

The marketing ploy was excellent. It was a subtle point, but writers, in a state of angst about writer's block, or their lone work conditions, often did the extreme and dropped the writing to call a friend to converse, or socialise. A mistake. And some while sticking to the writing, would pour that scotch, and then eventually stumble groggily from the desk, the same futile exercise repeated every day until they called us. What they needed was pleasure, not inebriation; company, not engagement; support, not presence. Harmony, we called it. Creative harmony.

Four of us worked in the agency---me, Laura, Janice and Patricia. We were not at all call-girls or prostitutes; we

were « Muses. » To work for the company, the qualifications were to be : AIS. Artistic, Intuitive, Spiritual. Nothing to do with looks or sensuality, the boss said, himself a writer and a Harvard Business School graduate. Writers don't want a hot blonde under the desk. They want their muse, who understands them, who does not intimidate them, who in no way distracts them. We were not to be too astonishingly female, but subtly female. And to get the job, we had to pass an office entrance exam, on literary passages.

The reason I took this job is because I write myself : I write inbetween purchases at the cash register. I always wonder why the other girls do not do anything like this inbetween clients. Often business is slow, especially between 2 and 5 in the afternoon, when our clientele---the maids for upper east side families---are off picking children up from school. The other girls just sat there, looking slightly dazed with their existence, or perhaps---as I knew all their stories---wondering when they would get married, and who would they invite to their wedding, and what they would say that night to their grumpy aunt, or how would they decorate their new apartment in Brooklyn.

I wrote poetry. I didn't want to publish the poems. I hated that feeling of showing and wondering what someone thought. The whole point of poetry was to be right there with the words, to fill the page entirely, to squeeze words in the margins, words that went cloppity-clop or lulled or feistily announced themselves, one after another, never stopping, until the page spilled forth. When I wrote a poem, the words kept coming, a family of children that got bigger and bigger and bigger, until I would start laughing, how good I felt.

Joe liked the fact that I wrote poetry on the job. He said his business was just a front for him to make things happen. He said he thought of life as one big commerce, making people and items move. He liked to be in the center of it. He wore a blue captain's suit, and he rollicked up and down the aisles, slowly, balanced on his rubber heels, adjusting cereal boxes here, or stopping to help older clients read the fine print.

« Writing a poem ? » he would say, keeping his fist closed in front of me. Then suddenly a chocolate cherry would drop into my hand.

Joe said it was okay I did not publish, and he thought it was fine that I had organized my life a bit like a sailing trip, with minimum baggage on deck.

He didn't know about my other job.

You see, I was not ambitious for myself, but I liked to see how it worked for others. I liked to have a balanced life, between my own inner wishes and the outside world, and this was my way of having a balanced life, without living it myself.

So while I was under the table, smelling that soapy smell that men have inbetween their hairy thighs, I would feel the tense muscles in the writer's legs, pressed against my head, and I would wonder how the feelings were shooting off, and where those legs were going next. I found it exciting to hear the tap tap tap as I sucked, rather like being back with my mother's breasts and wondering about what adults did in the world.

The writers were all the same to me : a bit scruffy, a bit hairy, a bit thin, a bit fat. Something was always a bit off, whether the smell of their cologne was too strong, or the droppings of their animals piled up in the corner, or their grey chest hairs overlavishly spilling out their shirts.

I liked how crowded the apartments were : glasses piled up, statues lumped in the corners, books spilling from bookshelves, old letters taped on the floor. Even the neat apartments were crammed with objects : wooden kitchen tables, long spoons, deluxe stereo-systems.

I felt guilty in the morning, back with Joe, in our zen supermarket, knowing how I had stuffed away bills the night before, all tight in my bottom drawer, and having the sweet aftertaste of the night's work still in my mouth. But I also felt charged with new poems. While under the table, with some clients, I got permission to look at a page or two of their writing, keeping my hand on the number, and my other hand on the sheet before me, rather like a composer who has become adept with score and wand. Some of the writers grew used to the feeling of their own flapping pages rustling against their thighs, and it excited them ; the words went tap tap even faster.

Some—taken by my literary interest--actually would ask me for criticism after the service, and we would talk about the work. All the clients had that option. We girls—we muses—were there for them. The writers knew they paid us well to be a complete muse. These were not fly-by-night would-bes ; these were workers of the word, writing for the major publications of New York : the New Yorker, Scribners, Vanity Fair.

One day I got Ray McArony, the famous writer who did all those novels about the down and out of urban centers.

Nothing down-and-out about his apt. The door to his apt opened with barking and an all-white pitbull with a red collar leaped out at me. The entrance way sparkled white--marble ceilings, marble floors---on the order of Hadrian's tomb in Rome. A chandelier hung in the middle, three strings of red crystal, maybe an art deco item. In the corner of the hall, a plant-fountain was gurgling water and spewing up smoke as well, through the incense holder.

The door had opened by itself, evidently by a spring. I stood there with the dog barking, until I realised it was up to me to go on to the next room by myself.

It was a vast living room, high ceilings like in old French homes (not very New York at all) with paintings running up and down the walls, some Renaissance, some contemporary, and right in the middle, behind a great black desk, a man with his hair cut short against a rather youngish head, black angular glasses on his nose, the only thing moving being his jowls, which went up and down as if he was eating his own insides. The man continued to type, with big hands. So he was one of those, I thought, not quite knowing what I meant. My skin began to tingle, a sign for me, always, of something, but I didn't know what.

I said nothing, I was never to say anything unless told to.

He tapped a bit, I stood a bit. I had done some theater in my youth, and this was one of the exercises we did, to establish presence by keeping a pose. I kept mine, he kept his. I might be a cashier, but I know what I'm doing.

He looked up eventually. He did not smile. He stared, evidently assessing me, and evidently relieved I was not very attractive, so he didn't have to waste any time being charming. Then he pointed to the space under the table. Obviously he had had other girls before.

My talents of intuition are strongest under the table. It is then I am free to feel what I feel, without being self-conscious of the man's gaze. My intuition told me this man was in a tight spot. His feet pressed into the floor, in their black patent Italian leather, as if aiming for a lift-off to outer space. The knees bent stiff. Nothing moved.

This man needed something, and needed it badly.

I unzipped in my expert way, like a mother dealing with the ninetieth diaper. And I searched around for that item. I admit I always searched with half-confidence that I would find anything, because sometimes the lumpy item was so curled up, and pushed to the side, it took some dexterous movements to fiddle about and whip it into a more central position, and then give it some texture and form.

The desk was absolutely still. The man was not in the midst of any great chapter. The man was stuck. The man was in pain. I understood him, I felt sorry for him. This is how I felt sometimes at my cash register, inbetween poems.

We had a technique for stuckness in men. It was advertised. Our fingers were to encircle the top edge of the penis, with our knees bent on the shoes, and our forehead bent forward. Uncomfortable for us, but with proven results. With our fingers and feet on these pressure points, fully embracing, we created a sense of total protection, a sense of a womb from which the creator could then feel at ease to shoot forth from his 2nd and 3rd chakras. This might sound wacky, but it worked, and among the enlightened of New York—especially its scribbling intelligenza---this was the mantra that replaced all scotch.

I did it.

Nothing was shooting forth, either between the knees or at the computer.

I sucked a bit harder. It was a bit dry, a bit tasteless.

I felt a kick against my chest. The man had kicked me ! It did not hurt, but it was highly unorthodox.

The kick happened again, hard against my bones.

It was an ugly moment. It suddenly struck me that this sweet life I was living---its easy patterns of day and night ---might not be so sweet. Also if this moment is so ugly, maybe the rest of my life is ugly as well. . It was a shocking moment, but I could handle it.

I got up from under the table.

«Excuse me, » I said. « No kicking. »

I had my hands trembling at my sides as I peered under the bushy eyebrows of the guy to find some glimmer of eyesight there. Some moral consciousness.

« Don't interrupt, » he said—and he gestured under the table.

But the dog had squeezed under there first. Alarmed by the ruckus—and this soft spoken interaction was ruckus in the mausoleum of this living room (our voices echoed)---he had bolted through the room and now was squeezed against his master's legs.

« Not with the dog, » I said.

I reached over and touched the man's arm, somewhere in the folds of the white pressed shirt. He looked so helpless there, so heavy in his masculinity ; he needed help, he needed my help, I could help him from above the table.

« You seem stuck, » I said. « Maybe you want to talk about it. »

He winced and swatted out at me. « Shut up, just shut up and get under the table. Just sit there. Don't do anything. I don't want you to touch me. Just sit under the table. I won't kick you, sorry, didn't know you were so sensitive. The other girls let me.... »

I wondered if I had been more attractive, whether he would have bothered to use the word « please. » My enlightened friends tell me I am ridiculous for thinking appearance matters, but I know that on the few occasions I

have had a make-over and hair cut, that men suddenly seem slightly more pliant, slightly more interested.

Except for guys like Joe, of course, he was always affable, neither too interested, nor disinterested.

I stood there. Should I go back under the table ? If I did not, I would very well lose my job. There were plenty of muses in New York. And a couple clients had complained once that I was a bit too jerky, pulled a bit at the wrong moments, and one had even accused me of being talkative because I recited a couple of his words under the table, to encourage the man, as I had thought hearing his own words would make him soar with confidence, a trick that usually worked across the board.

But to go under the table now! How could I face my morning job, sit cheerily at my cash register, write my poems, stare at the aisles full of colors and boxes, with a memory of being squeezed under a desk, between these colossal legs and next to a white pit bull, kicked ?

I am not claustrophobic ; I do not mind being squeezed in small spaces, in fact I prefer it. It erases my memory of all those spaces in my hometown, the long walk to school past quiet houses, the return home to my empty house with my father in his wheelchair watching television, the muffled sound of a baseball hitting a mit after flying across a dying autumn baseball field.

I like the intimacy of wood, of legs, of carpet.

I got under the table, feeling how comfortable it was to squeeze there between the legs, and I kneeled there next to the dog, thinking, this was a good decision.

But then nothing happened. No kicks. And I was not allowed to even pull down the man's pants, nor search, nor do any of my accustomed activities under the desk. After a few minutes of being still, with the guy being still, with the desk being still, I began to hyperventilate. I hit my head against the top of the desk. I reached over for the dog, and hugged it.

Perhaps I hugged this dog too hard, because he began to howl, and squirm out of my grasp, but I held tighter, onto his flat white and black skin, holding onto it even though it was so smooth, it was hard to dig my fingers in.

Above, on the desk, I began to hear a tap tap tap. The feet began to move in their shoes, a slight rumble in the body. I dropped the dog, and the dog squirted out of the desk. I reached for the zipper. I unzipped. Slowly, tap tap tap.

The kick hit me in the stomach, and I shot my head up against the desk.

Suddenly there was a big arm under the desk, yanking me out.

« Get the hell out of here ! »

And just as quickly, I responded.

« You write shit,» I said.

I knew this man's work. He blabbed about his existential angst, his inability to feel good about himself, despite the beautiful girls he could screw in department store dressing rooms, girls with fathers who « owned Connecticut » he said. I even knew that his whole apartment---eclectic red, purple and marble it was---had been designed not by him but by some high ranking designer friend, because he didn't even have the courage to decide his own space. It had been written up in Architecture Digest

The man began pushing me out towards the door. I enjoyed it. It gave me something to resist. Usually I do not have any struggles in life. No one seems to think so much of me as to get angry at me. No one actually has ever called me up and given me those pained discourses I read in Dostoyevsky, or in ladies journals. All my conversations, my entire life, have been pleasant.

This was the most unpleasant encounter I had ever had .

The dog joined in, barking at my heels. Its white body was smooth and athletic, perfect, a source of pride and joy, a breed apart. I kicked it fully in the middle of its body, bull's eye ! The dog shot backwards.

I hadn't expected the violence to return. I hadn't expected to find myself crashed against the marble, my head cracked open. I knew it was cracked because I could feel a line of something hard and steely coming from my forehead, and it was not a barette too tight, and I could feel something throbbing under it, and my legs were not where they should

be, upright, but they were curled in a strange place. And I had my eyes closed, and knew this was all happening, and I kept my eyes closed, and thought, this is interesting.

In meditation they teach you to listen to sounds. I had no choice, since I could not open my eyes. I heard a muffled sound of footsteps, a touch phone being rung. I heard a sound of the dog. It was funny how much I hated that dog's whiney voice. A screech. Worse than metal on metal.

It was pretty dark and comfortable, with my eyes closed, and the feeling of pain against my head made me feel as if I were safely in a tight space, not too big, and just right enough for me to feel all alone, wrapped and smothered. The only sense of space I got was from breathing : a hollowness of air entered my body and made it feel less protected, more connected to the outside, that big space. I liked it more without the breath. It was getting darker and darker, and the black had actually begun to shoot off lights in my eyes.

I heard a door burst open, and then the clatter of male footsteps. Men always sound so heavy and impatient. They sound too heavy on this earth. A few reached down and I could feel I was being slid into a cot, or was it a sack. Not sure.

I wondered what kind of poem I would write about this experience tomorrow in Joe's supermarket. I wondered what Joe would think of my new poem. He never knew where these poems came from, but he loved them, he said, and when it was a particularly good poem, he opened up his box of candies from Belgium, that he kept on his own desk,

and he would bring me one, usually a cherry covered with chocolate, and I would eat it and feel good, very good, although chocolate, to be quite honest, makes me sick.