

## **Alewives**

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Susan drove Paul to the train and as he kissed her, the strength left her body. "Have a good day," he said and smiled. "Get out and do something fun." He headed down the steps, his coffee and paper in hand, to the train that would take him to Chicago, to a life Susan knew was more real than her own.

She couldn't go home just yet. The house was too big, too empty, full of unused bedrooms. So she drove around town, past the apartments over the pricey boutiques and the stucco bungalows near the village center, up curving streets, down quiet, tree-lined lanes, past the new-money houses built on tear-down lots and the old-money mansions on Sheridan along the shore of Lake Michigan. With the sun in her eyes, she opened her window and smelled the piles of dead, stinking alewives choking the lakefront--nature gone berserk in an excess of fecundity--and she was glad that the rich had the worst of the stench. She closed the window, but the smell was in her bones and she couldn't leave it behind her. This town buzzed with fertility--fish in the lake, deer in the forest preserve, pregnant women pushing babies in strollers and dreaming of the next baby in two years.

Children with backpacks were starting to assemble on the curbs, waiting for the school bus while moms in tennis skirts carried recycling bins to the street, piled high with juice and mineral water bottles, the vodka and Chardonnay bottles tucked discreetly underneath. Unlike her, these women knew what to keep and what to throw away.

What would she do with her days now that she had recovered from the final miscarriage? "Join a bridge group, the Junior League," Paul said. "Redecorate the house; you're artistic. You have all day to do what you want. I envy you." Most days she didn't have the strength to change

out of her nightgown and robe until it was time to go pick him up at the station.

The crossing guard held her STOP sign aloft to let through a stream of school-goers with their neon-colored bike helmets. Healthy lunches had been fixed, permission slips signed, play-dates arranged, lessons scheduled, cheeks kissed--all was in order here.

She headed her car toward the expressway. It was backed up with commuters, people with things to do, people who needed the road, so she turned around and drove toward the lake again. Driving past the tennis club, she saw the clusters of women warming up, and felt a pinch of anger at their easy lives--kids in place, houses neat, friends in rectangles of four.

On Green Bay Road, black housekeepers and grocery clerks got off the northbound bus on their way to work. She passed trucks filled with crews of Hispanic men heading to groom the North Shore lawns. As she entered the city, there were mothers walking their children to school, helping them cross at the lights. Children played in school yards, chasing each other, scuffing in the dust.

Heading south on the Outer Drive, she stared at the reflection of the sun on the lake until she was blinded, then closed her eyes for a moment and blue clouds replaced the white ones behind her eyelids. She wished she could drive out onto the surface of the lake, smooth as a mirror, look deep into the water and find herself. The highway curved along past the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier, the pleasure boats, and Buckingham Fountain. The skyline of Chicago lay to her right. Paul worked there, hunched over actuarial tables, calculating risks, not thinking of her.

She passed the Art Institute where she had gone so many times to stand in front of the Chinese tapestries, to sit and breathe in the blue of the Chagall windows, blue as the Mediterranean. She'd gone to the miniature Thorne Rooms once but hated them, imagining she was trapped in one, a doll frozen with a tray of martinis, a metal shaker in her hand, and a roast in the oven.

She hated to shop. She had too many things already, too much money, too much security, more than she ever thought she'd have, growing up. There were women everywhere, women dressed to shop as if shopping were a job, a career. Women dressing up to have lunch, to do the job of lunch. Women, busy at their tasks.

What did she want now that children weren't possible? A job? Doing what? She'd been an art major in college. A painter. Paul wanted her to join a painting class at the Community House. But she had seen those displays of paintings of nice, pretty flowers, of sweet children, of brightly colored houses. She was afraid of her impulses--that she wanted to splash black paint all over them.

Past the Loop, she drove west on Taylor, turned south by the Maxwell Street Market, the stores with cheap men's clothes, shoes, and watches. On Ashland, she saw signs in Spanish and realized she was in Pilsen, famous for its Mexican murals. She drove around the dusty, trash-strewn streets until she saw a painted concrete viaduct. The murals blended, one into the next: panels stressing neighborhood cooperation; overlapping profiles of multiple colors--brown, tan, black, even pastels--all facing the same way; murals to Che Guevara; murals where the grotesque and fanciful mingled--some stylized, some realistic. She stopped in front of one long horizontal panel in whose upper half floated Aztec ancestors in full costume above the present-day Mexican-American descendants working in the bottom half--building houses, preparing food, tending to children. Around the border, skulls and skeletons danced, and in the center sat a woman with a brilliant flower growing from her head and a cut-away abdomen, a curled-up fetus visible within her womb. Susan stared at the mural for a long time, wishing she could enter this painting, become this woman, penetrate her mystery. She wanted to run her hands over the paint, and even opened the door of the car before remembering she was still in her bedclothes.

Settled back in her seat, she imagined painting her own mural, swinging brushes broadly and boldly, dipping her arms up to the elbows in

bright colors and swirling and smearing, mixing them, scraping her knuckles on the bricks, painting a huge, frightening figure--a Medusa, a woman, radiant and glowing, a woman turned inside out, her uterus red and raw, exposed, its hostile territory, its inhospitable landscape, its rocky slopes where nothing living could gain purchase--which would reject, slough off, abort. The woman was exposed as Susan had been, trussed up in the stirrups--her empty uterus, big enough for a crowd but empty and echoing. She'd like to perform her painting on the walls of the houses in her town--women with flaming hair and fire coming from their fingers; women who ovulate, abort, menstruate. Surprise art. Guerilla art. She'd leave her mark. No one would know she'd done it.

She felt pressure on her bladder and realized she needed to pee. She was forty-five minutes from home. Her blue velour robe wouldn't pass for a coat, especially with the slippers. No way could she walk into a fast food place. She must have been crazy to go out like this. She looked around in her car for a cup but didn't find one. When she pulled away from the curb, she heard the crunch of a bottle, then a pssst sound and knew her tire had blown. After sitting for a minute, she took out her cell phone and called Paul's work number. His assistant answered but said he was out at a meeting and would be tied up for hours. "No message," Susan said.

Hoping there was a gas station nearby, she drove slowly, the car bumping along. Fearing she was doing damage to the wheel rim, she pulled to the curb again, put the car in park. She looked around for people and, seeing none, stepped out of the car, darting beneath a viaduct into a dark corner where she pulled down her underpants, crouched, and let the pee stream out, praying she wouldn't be discovered. On the ground in front of her feet was a used condom. Standing up, she felt a line of urine run down her leg into her slipper and wiped it with her robe, wondering how long it would be before she'd be safe at home, showering.

Back at her car a man was leaning over, inspecting the tire. He looked about forty years old, strongly built, with a leonine head of hair; she could

detect the Aztec ancestry in his face. “*Señora, la llanta, no esta bien,*” he said, pointing. She shrugged, pulling her robe tightly around her. He looked at her slippers, then back to the tire. “*Tienes el gato?*”

What, a cat? she thought. She shook her head and then he pantomimed the action of jacking up the car. “Oh, a jack. No, that’s okay.”

He twisted his wrist in a key-opening gesture and then pointed to the trunk. Finally, she opened the trunk and let him find what he needed, though she imagined him stealing the car or mugging her when he was finished.

He took off his jacket and lay down on the pavement to work on the car. He seemed to know what he was doing as he lifted off the old tire and replaced it with the spare.

Susan sat on the curb and watched him, wrapping the panels of her robe around her legs, and kicking at the trash in the gutter.

“*Tienes dificultades?*” He pointed to her robe. “*Quieres escaparse?*”

“No, just driving around.” She pantomimed hands on the steering wheel and then pointed at her watch. “I lost track of time.” She could tell he didn’t believe her.

“*Por que este mural?*” He mimicked looking at the mural by putting his hands up like binoculars.

“*Yo, uh, artista.*” Groping for words, she wielded an imaginary brush in the air.

“*Ay, que bueno. You are pintura famosa?*”

“No, not famous.” She laughed, but it felt good to tell someone that she was an artist.

He smiled. “*Mañana famosa.*” He stood up. “*Terminado,*” dusting his hands off on his pants. “Drive careful.”

She fumbled in her purse to find money to pay him.

“No, no money,” he said. She pressed some toward him. “*No, gracias.*”

“*Gracias, thank you.*” She pulled herself up, careful to keep her robe closed. He offered a hand. It felt hard and calloused and covered with car dust. She resisted the urge to wipe her hand off. “Bye, *adios,*” she said as she drove away, feeling shaky.

She took the expressway back north, past the Loop, past the housing projects, and soon, saw the trees and grass of the North Shore. The closer she got to her exit, though, the tighter the bands of steel pulled around her chest. By the time she reached her house, she was nearly breathless. She could barely drag herself inside, where she fell into a chair, sweaty and exhausted. The rest of the afternoon, she willed herself to get up, take a shower, and get dressed. She needed to go to the hardware store before she picked Paul up.

At 6:05, Susan pulled her car into line behind the other shiny cars, minivans, and Jeeps with license plates like MOM’S CAB and bumper stickers advertising their honor students, soccer players, or their financial support for pandas. Across the street was the coffee house, where the Cub Scouts had painted the windows for Halloween--orange, green, and brown monsters, white ghosts, smeared on the panes in poster paint, dripping, messy. Susan liked the temporary disorder these paintings created. When Paul came up the stairs from the train, she closed the paper bag she bought at the hardware store.

That night, she waited until Paul was emitting little puffing noises, preliminary to his full-blown snoring. She slipped from beneath the covers and pulled on the black sweat suit she had laid out in the guest room before going to bed. Driving to the center of town, she parked a block away from the square which was totally dark since the town zoning prohibited neon. All signs were tastefully written in script or Gothic lettering. Even the McDonald’s was hidden in a fake Tudor building.

As she opened her car door, the fetid fish smell, blown in from the lake, filled her nose. She gasped, tried to breathe through her mouth. There were tiny explosions of excitement in her chest like when she was a girl on

her way to a birthday party. She thought of the rotting alewives and suddenly knew what she was going to paint. She shook up a can of red paint and sprayed a huge fish, a Flounder, with two crazy eyes on one side, then a Clown fish with stripes of several different colors along its flank. She painted an electric blue Caribbean variety on the window of the township offices and a Japanese fighting fish on the nail salon.

Her lungs stung with extra oxygen and the fumes from the paint made her eyes water. She found the smell of the paint and the rotten fish intoxicating, dizzying, also the wssss of the air as it escaped from the can. The spatters of paint settled in her lungs, choking her. When the cans ran dry, she loped to her car, where her skin prickled with cool air conditioning on sweat.

The next night, she brought along more colors. At first, she planned to paint only on windows, which were washable, but she became swept away with textures and surfaces and found that the paint spread without dripping on bricks and wood. On the window of the fish market, she painted a mackerel with swollen lips and a + for an eye, and waves of stink rising into the air. Each fish was more evil-looking, more bizarre--dredged from increasingly deeper levels of the ocean. The paint cans tumbled onto the sidewalk as they emptied. Maybe she could cover the whole block with fish before she ran out of paint.

In the pharmacy window, she caught the reflection of a blue flashing light but didn't stop, didn't run away. Instead, she popped the top off a new can, metallic blue, and started spraying a school of fish on the bricks of the sidewalk, the ones that bore the names of contributors to the recent street renovation project. The police car stopped and she recognized George, the officer who went to the elementary schools to talk about Stranger Danger, to tell the children how to dial 911. He had the most obvious toupee, wooly like an Astrakhan coat. She wished he had the nerve to go bald. "Mrs. Bolton, what's going on here?" he asked in a calm voice. "Can I take you

home?” Police were unfailingly polite to town residents, but a Mexican driving through town in a beater would get pulled over.

She said nothing but turned toward him, aiming her paint can at his toupee, offering silently to redo his image, to create a new man. All it would take was a dusting of paint and so much would be different.