

The Blood of Our Virtue Smells Like Dirt

by Jessica Fogal

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“I can be anyone you know.”

When she spoke, grey smoke eased softly from her parted lips; caressing her face and the strained tendons of her neck. I watch, fascinated, and until she exhales a quick stream that is caught by the fan and whipped around the stale room.

“An actress. A *model*. I don’t have to stay at that shithole, I just haven’t figured out who I want to be yet.”

The tips of her hair brush against the carpet when her jaw moves up and down. I follow the California-yellow locks from the ground up; past the dark greasy roots, her rippling forehead red from the blood rush of hanging upside down off the bed.

Her mouth is wide and painted royal blue, her teeth stark white in comparison as she bares them at the ceiling in thought. She can pass for a corpse pulled cold from the salty water of the ocean outside her window, frail and blue and perfectly preserved.

“What do you want to be?” She asks me.

“What do I want to *be*?” My stomach twists in a familiar knot of irritation. “Since when do we get to choose what to *be*? We just grow up and *are*.” I pause to watch a spider brave the open space of our conversation to dart from under the dresser to under the bed; perilously close to Carrie’s hair. I almost tell her but I don’t.

Carrie wraps her fists in the thin blanket that is the only thing on the bare mattress in the bare room, and pulls herself up, swinging her legs around so that she is sitting on the bed facing me.

Inhale. Exhale. “Fuck you. You’re so fucking depressing.”

I glance at the garbage can near the door to the bathroom. It’s full of my hair, and the absence of it is all over the back of my neck, my shoulders, my soul. A

cleansing. My fingers touch brown prickled tips against my scalp where brown smooth curls used to grow.

“I’m a realist. I’ve seen more of the world than you Carrie. You’re naive, a child.”

Her jaw falls open and her spine curves forward in that hollow gangly look she has, like the skeleton of some large bird.

“Did you just call me a *child*?”

I sigh and push up off the ground, my hips and lower back aching. Each breath tastes of ash and I walk the three steps to where Carrie’s cigarettes sit next to her on the mattress. They fell from the pack when she shifted her weight and now they pool in the dip against her hip, right on top of a light yellow stain and against the blue fabric of the dress she is wearing. The dress she hasn’t taken off in three days and counting. I suck gently on the end of one, lighting the tip with a dying flame from an empty lighter until smoke rushes past my tongue, down my throat, and the burn of it in my lungs makes my eyes roll back in my skull. I quit smoking for three days and I can’t remember why.

“Yeah sure, you can have one.” Now Carrie rolls her eyes. “Anyway, my dad isn’t going to keep paying the rent unless I “create a five year plan.” She holds two fingers up and digs them into the air. Then she flicks ash into a bowl placed next to her. It’s white with brown and orange flowers circling the rim, a chip on the lip with a crack that goes all the way through to the other side. Her finest china.

“Whatever the fuck *that* means. So it just got me thinking, you know? About what I want to do with my life. I mean, what’s wrong with that?”

I exhale through my nose and my eyes water with relief. “You know what you’re going to do with your life. You’re doing it now.”

“No, I mean as a career.”

“So do I.”

“Fuck that. No way. I am so outta here with that shit.” She tucks another cigarette behind her ear and leans over to the window ledge, catching an amber bottle between two long fingers and taking a short swig. Miller Lite. Only the finest.

“I used to want to be a teacher. Like a kindergarten teacher, ABC’s and shit.”

I laugh and it sounds like a bark. Carrie lowers her head and absently peels at the

label on the bottle, places the unlit cigarette in her mouth where it juts from her face like a handle.

“Carrie. You’re a fucking *stripper* at *The Bluebird*. A cheap scrawny little thing in an iron birdcage, your fingers gripping the top, your beak poking through the bars and oily pink feathers sprouting down your arms and between your legs.” Exhale. *Does everything that comes out of your mouth have to be so fucking epic?* Elliot’s voice cuts through my thoughts, razor sharp, out of nowhere. *Yes. Have you met my mother?*

She tries to light the cigarette that’s dangling from her frozen mouth, her palm cupped against an invisible wind, the scratched whine of the lighter as the pad of her thumb strikes down, down, down again in frustration. No flame.

She pushes up off the bed, her dress falling loose around her slim legs and juts of bone that is her hip, and stalks angry to the door, tossing the cigarette in the garbage can on her way. The one that carries my hair like a mother carries her child.

“Don’t be a bitch, you work there too.” She leaves the room and doesn’t come back.

I move to sit by the window, curl my fingers under the lip and push up, cigarette bobbing between my teeth and smoke distorting my view. A salty breeze pushes the sounds of the boardwalk into the room; the call of a man bent at the waist below the window, the call returned from a little ways down, the sharp roll of a skateboard speeding by, the chatter of excited tourists, the base and treble of Haitian rap and the deep accented voice pitching a CD, a cassette, a “five dollar donation, thank you very much.” All of this on top of the never ending chorus of seagulls, diving and fighting and floating on the wind, the soft white noise of waves breaking on sand far down the beach. And all of it magnifying the silence of the room I’m sitting in, the heavy smell of sweat under the tang of cheap tobacco and over-the-counter perfume. I chain smoke the last four of the abandoned cigarettes, giving life to one with the death of another, and watch as real life passes by the window, one 36x24 pane at a time.

I *do* work at *The Bluebird*. Tonight even. I think I should shower but change my mind instantly. The sweat on my skin makes for a powerful aphrodisiac, the shimmer on my upper lip the only makeup I’ll ever need. Men don’t need you to be more beautiful than their wives, just dirtier. My shift starts at nine.

Carrie doesn't own a clock, so I watch the woman north of the apartment building. She runs a narrow hole-in-the-wall that sells novelty clothing; west coast swag, Muscle Beach, I Ripped my Sleeves. She's the most aggressive hustler I have ever seen, her stoic features firm and lined straight across, from her right ear to her left. The fat in her arm swings forward and backward as she grips different items pulled down from their tacked homes on the walls, hats and socks, lanyards and t-shirts, and shakes them at tourists brave enough to enter. She smokes from a volcano right at the register and closes up shop every night at 8:30 sharp. Without fail.

I don't leave my spot at the window while I wait, the breeze running its warm fingers over my scalp, and revel in the feel of being touched in places I never have before; the skin on my head almost cold, shivers racking my spine as a gust pushes against the glass until it finds its way under and across my face.

When the woman begins her routine, I shut the window and move towards the door. I stop by the garbage can and lean down, slide my fingers through the soft pieces of me all piled up in a beautiful nest, and take the cigarette swaddled in the middle. I pull strands of hair that are wrapped around it and let them fall gracefully from my fingertips as I walk towards the door, a hidden path of my DNA in my wake, a liberated Hansel and Gretel.

When I step out into the breeze, I don't turn around to shut the door, I just let it swing behind me with a *bang*. The ending credits at the theater kind of *bang*; you don't have to go home but you can't stay here *bang*. Later, the irony of it all hits me, but not yet.

I slip into an opening on the walk that a boy on a bicycle made, and as tourists and locals alike shift back into their shoulder-to-shoulder grooves before he cut through them with a courteous ring of a bell, here I am, an intruder, unnoticed. One of the crowd but not, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"Where will you go?" I hear Elliot's voice again, the soft grainy pull of it making me turn my head to the right, the left, searching for his face in the crowd of strangers whose skin occasionally rubs against mine.

"I don't know, California seems like a good enough place." It's a memory, and I lose sight of the boardwalk as the soft orange glow of sunset cuts through the dim of his apartment across the hall from the one I share with my mother. The dust in the air dances slowly in front of me, and the pile of books that are on the coffee

table next to the window take shape, but his face doesn't.

I remember how he laughed then, short and low in his throat, full of cynical judgement that startled me.

“What? The land of perpetual sunshine and surfboards, women in bright pink sweatbands rollerblading to work. Is the appeal completely lost on you?”

“You know there won't be any snow at Christmas.”

“Since when do we celebrate Christmas?”

His face begins to form in my mind now, that cunning little smile, the dimple he only gets when he is telling a secret.

“Last year.”

I ignored his attempt at hatching that egg, running my fingertips along the edge of a book so old the cover was made of rough fabric, little white hairs of it growing long from the frayed binding.

“I can get a bike with a little teal basket in the front, wear my hair up high on my head with a cute bandana that matches my balloon shorts.” My arms began to twirl over my head, my fingers dancing around my hair.

“I can't decide which of your ideas of California I hate worse, the 80's version or the 60's.”

Someone ahead of me squeals with delight and just like that, the memory disappears. Slowly, like wet mist on a spring morning as the sun comes up. And now there is a heaviness on my chest, the kind of weight only memories have, and I miss him. I walk and I miss him until I bite my tongue to relieve the pressure, and *The Bluebird* peaks up above the crowd in the distance.

The sign is tricky, just as I am sure the owner intended it to be. It's huge, with clear light bulbs outlining the square shape of it, so that a tourist from afar would be drawn in, almost magnetically, sure that it's something special, something exciting and quirky they can take their kids to. Like the old-fashioned movie theaters that only played one movie at a time, the name of it spelled out in big blocky black capital letters inside that fabulous glowing square sign. It juts out of the blended

buildings ahead, a wart on the side of a beautiful mistress.

It is a kind of theater, I suppose. Except instead of *Benny & Joon* it reads something more like *beautiful women and I ugly one*. I rub my naked scalp and wonder who the ugly one is.

I make my way behind the building, passed the white stucco walls with their cigarette burns and crumbling offspring, and push through the back door. I am inundated in darkness and the smell of pheromones; the darkness that surrounds the Cheshire cat and the Queen of Hearts, I think, my own Wonderland. I laugh by myself because no one else can see me.

The purple velvet of the walls is crushed with the handprints of women with men at their hips, each fiber a new decision, a changed betrayal, a “choose your own ending” chapter book. Except all paths lead to the same ending in the Bluebird. I turn left, leaving the rumbling base of their siren’s song behind to push through the worn swinging doors of the dressing room; blinding yellow light highlighting the rust dripping down the cement walls and pooling in the corners. The blood of our virtue smells like dirt.

I’m early, and alone. I use my index finger to navigate through a pile of wrinkled clothing until I find something large enough to toss over the mirror and hide my reflection from my own greedy eyes, swimming from the nicotine high and my fight with Carrie. I put on my feathers, one at a time, deep crimson and royal blue; careful to avoid the hair under my arms. When I leave the room, my smell lingers.

The lights on stage are white, highlighting the sweat pooling at the base of my neck and behind my knees. The crowd sits in pockets of darkness under the iron bars of the *bird cage*, and I see Carrie to my right; her cage is 5 feet above my head and it sways with her jerky movements. A pink feather, bent in the middle, falls awkwardly to the ground and lands in the lap of a man whose eyes never leave my face. I brush phantom hair out of my eyes as I glide towards the man, stepping over his boots to wrap my knees around his hips and whisper in his ear.

Some nights I can’t pull apart the birdie and the girl in me, wearing each one like a cloak in the rain, a hat on the beach, and the smell of fresh leather coming from the man means tonight is one of those nights. Something subtle and familiar, a taste in the back of my mouth that I swallow into my stomach before I have the chance to remember what it was. And in moments like these, I am trapped.

But I ignore the twisting in my chest and move to the music, gripping the back of his seat until my knuckles are white, keeping my eyes wide and focused to distract from Elliot's face behind my dark eyelids. His breath on my neck. His voice cutting louder through my thoughts than I am used to, saying strange things.

"The weather is different here than I imagined."

The beat of a new song, the gentle sound of it under his feet and through his legs into mine.

"I forgot how cold it can get next to the water at night. Do you have a jacket for when you walk home?"

Now my eyes are shut tight, the pain of it growing with the thump, thump, thump of the beat.

"You lost too much weight. Are you eating?"

Stop. It's too much. The lights reflecting off the bird cages, the base in my throat, his voice from this man's lips. A Crescendo. A climax. A terrible choking.

"Look at me."

No.

"Look at me!"

"No!"

His warm hands wrap around my jaw and he brings my eyes to his; the familiar lines, the dip in his brow. I'm suddenly sick.

The carpet is worn and full of snags, tiny bundles of fiber that no one has bothered to cut with scissors. My heels catch, but I don't fall, I run, shouldering past sweaty bodies and walls that come from nowhere and everywhere all at once. When I reach the dressing room, with its familiar pools of rust and stink, I fall into the vanity with the cloth on the mirror and burry my face in my elbows, my warm breath suffocating me with every wet inhale. Every inhale that smells of him, the parts of him my arms touched when I danced on his lap like the side of me he never knew.

Something softly strokes my shoulder and I look up, some strange part of me craving the comfort of the life I ran away from, the lover I cut from my chest with my own fingernails; the pain that still holds me tight at night. But when I bring my face up to the light and my eyes search for his and my face is desperate, open and stained, I don't find him. For once, I don't see Elliot. Instead, my mother sits across from me and holds my stare, her eyes a reflection of the horror I feel inside. My mother, with tears that burn little red lines down her face, past the purple dips under her eyes, falling in between her cracked lips. She sits at on the other side of the vanity where the wall should be, gripping the cloth that was covering the mirror just moments ago, trembling, terrified. Her mouth opens and her dry tongue moves and her voice is quivering but loud in the pressurized silence of the concrete room. She says,

“Mom?”

And that's the last thing I remember.



Jessica Fogal lives in the beautiful Pacific Northwest (USA), where she's a full time legal assistant, amateur street photographer, and author. She's been published in The Ilanot Review and has had many prints showcased in art galleries such as Terrain Spokane, and continues to use her lifelong passions for performance, visual, and literary arts as an inspiration for her creative writings.