

INTERRUPTION

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from the collection Baboon, available from Two Lines Press

When the doorbell rang in the middle of the day—a Wednesday, it was drizzling, he was listening to the radio and was about to start reading—he felt strongly that he was being interrupted in something important. It rang again. He got up irritated, opened the door, and a woman forced her way into his apartment. She shoved him aside with a lot of force and before he knew what was happening she was in his living room, where out of breath she dropped down on the corner of the couch and began crying loudly in distress. He'd never seen her before. She looked like she was from Thailand or maybe the Philippines. At first he spoke kindly to her, asking her what she wanted, what was the matter. When she didn't respond he took her carefully by the shoulders and tried to pull her up. She slapped his face, yelled something incomprehensible, and wailed as if in great pain. He stepped back in shock. And grabbed her again, this time by the arm, harder, with more anger than shock; she gasped when he pulled. She bit his thumb. He grabbed her hair and pushed her to the floor. She

flailed her arms and legs, he lay on top of her, and she tried to stick her fingers in his eyes. She kneed him in the groin. He doubled over and let go of her hair and she crept back to the couch, where she again broke down and cried, now more like moaning and whining. He went into the kitchen. Down in the alley the super was sweeping. The pretty red-haired downstairs neighbor came up from the basement laundry room and stuffed a bulging garbage bag into the trash can. He closed the window. His fingertips tingled. It had turned quiet in the living room. He stood in the doorway and watched her. His temple pulsed, and it felt like everything was swelling up inside him. She had neither socks nor shoes on. She was slumped over and her eyes were closed. He thought she was sleeping and approached her carefully, wanting to get her out. She jumped up and pointed to the window. He followed her gaze. A fat blonde woman stood there looking up and down the street and then headed downstairs to the entrance of the basement and slammed the door shut. The woman gave him a confused look. "Bad woman!" she yelled, tapping on the window with her index finger. He resisted the sudden urge to grab her by the neck and squeeze hard by taking a deep breath. Then she flung her arms around *his* neck. She smelled of cheap perfume and sweat. He blocked his nose and tried to push her away. But she held on tightly. "Please help," she whispered, "please help, big problem." He went slack, felt almost listless. She let her head rest on his chest a moment. She sat down. Her jaw fell open. Her teeth looked as if they had been flung into her mouth. Her feet were unusually small. She scrunched up her toes, as though she were going to pick up a pencil off the floor. "I go home," she then said, staring him in the eyes. "Yes," he answered and sunk heavily onto the other end of the couch, "get the fuck out of here." But she didn't move. "Go home," he said, nodding toward the door. She lay down. He could hear her breathing. Her shin brushed against his. A heavy truck drove by rattling the windows. Then he was unsure; maybe it was a bus.

He went back to his books. He turned off the radio. He looked over his notes. He got up again and drank a glass of water. Headache. His eyes wanted to close. He felt dead tired. He looked over at the couch, but there she lay motionless on one side sleeping. He went in the bedroom, which was quiet and cool. He lay on the bed, but was unable to relax.

Some time later he lay down on the bare wood floor. When he woke up he could hear banging in the kitchen. His back was stiff. The woman was in the middle of doing the dishes. Some water was heating in a pot. She gave him a big smile. He noticed that she had washed the floor and hung up the clean dishtowels. "Very nice," she said, and nodded and smiled again. He shook his head in defeat. Then he pulled himself together, and with determination, nudged her toward the hall. She didn't say anything, but it was almost impossible to budge her. He didn't get it, she was so small, he used all his might, and still there was an incomprehensible resistance from her; he huffed and puffed. When he at last got the front door open, she clung to the doorframe, and as he struggled to pry her hands loose, his upstairs neighbor, a real hefty guy, came down the stairs, and she began shouting. He couldn't see any other way out so he pulled her back inside and shut the door. She went right back into the kitchen and continued doing the dishes. He stood by the window. His stomach felt like a huge trembling hole. A stout bald man came up from the basement in the building across the street. He scratched his groin and unlocked his bike.

The hole in his stomach now felt like hunger. He grabbed his jacket and went to buy some groceries. When he returned, she clapped and shrieked with joy; she took all the food out of the bag and started to cook dinner.

Later in the evening he went out and got a good chunk of weed. He sat down on a bench by the lake and smoked. He went over what he would say if he called the police. He wondered if he could ask someone to help him get rid of her. The thoughts drifted away just as they arose. One duck swam around in the middle of the lake. The rain had stopped, the cloudless sky was bluish-green and light. When he got back, she was lying on the couch watching TV. She didn't look up when he walked into the living room, and he didn't say a word. He locked the bedroom door behind him, spread out on the bed, and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning he had completely forgotten about her. The curtains fluttered a little. He had dreamed about the red head, that he was fiddling with her ears, and he had felt calm and relaxed. He went into the living room to find his cigarettes. There she stood with one leg flung up on a chair. She was lathering herself with his moisturizer, and one of his towels, clearly wet, lay on a chair. "Good morning, sir," she said with a huge smile. Her stomach was thick and she had short legs. A long scar twisted up from her pussy and continued past her navel. He went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. The toothbrush was wet. He made do with rinsing his mouth. When he went to make coffee, he burned himself on the pot. It was full. She came running in with a wet cloth for his hurt hand and poured him a cup. She had also cooked rice and some egg concoction that had a smell that nauseated him, but she on the other hand was hungry. "You buy good curry, I make good food," she said, nudging him. Then she laughed out loud. He went right up to her. "Listen," he said intently, "today you will go home. I don't want you here, do you understand? You have to go home." "No, no," was the only thing she said. A glimmer of a smile flashed in her eyes and disappeared again. "No, no, no."

It felt like ants were crawling in his veins. He had a hard time breathing. Down in the street the super was sweeping.

He crossed the street and tried to look in through the tinted window in the basement across the street. A “Closed” sign was hanging on the door.

He met with some of his fellow students to compare notes, and as usual he was quiet, chain smoking; a great uneasiness that ironically made him sit motionless, locked in the same position. He had to go to the bathroom but he didn’t get up. On the way home after they were finished Claes caught up with him. He heard him say something, but it wasn’t until Claes grabbed him and looked directly into his eyes that he understood what he had said. “What’s the matter with you, are you sick?” he said. “Are you sick?” But he couldn’t get the words out. He couldn’t say a foreign woman had moved into his apartment against his will. It sounded completely ridiculous. So instead he mumbled that he had stayed up reading most of the night. Claes kept staring at him. “You *are* sick,” he said smiling.

When he got home, she was washing his clothes in the kitchen sink. She worked like mad. And the clothes that she had already wrung out were hanging here and there from the furniture dripping. He saw that she had washed all the windows. And she’d put on a pair of his socks that were way too big. He came close to picking up a chair and smashing it right in front of her face.

He bought curry. She was a pretty good cook. He taught her how to use the washing machine in the basement. He got her to be quiet while he was reading. But he still couldn’t concentrate. He got a blanket from the attic so that she had something to cover herself with at night. She cut her hair with the kitchen scissors. One morning he saw her grooming her pubic hair with his razor. And it was not until, one Friday evening, when Claes and Jakob dropped by unannounced and quite drunk, a complete surprise because they had never done

that before, to see if he wanted to go out drinking, that it became really complicated. “You fucking better come out for a beer with us, you nerd.” “Hallo!” she chirped, waving the dishtowel. He grabbed his jacket, and hustled them out. She followed them into the hallway and watched with sad dewy eyes. Then suddenly she turned on her heels and closed the door behind her. They stared at him mystified. “What’s going on? You have a girlfriend?” Down at the local bar, after they had ordered beer and were sitting at a table, Jakob said: “I didn’t know you liked foreign pussy,” and then Claes sprayed beer out of his mouth at him, and they both lay over the table, screaming with laughter. He laughed with them. They ordered more beer. A couple of young women sat down next to them. He thought about the red-haired neighbor. One of the women pressed her thigh against his under the table. When Claes and Jakob got really drunk, a fit of vulgarity came over them. But then he also got drunk. “She could be my mother,” he yelled, “but I sure as hell don’t want to suck those sagging foreign tits!” The two women looked horror-struck at him. He saw himself clenching his fist and hammering down on the table so that glasses and bottles tipped over.

She was lying on the sofa sleeping when he got home. He could see her back and the top of her crack.

Late one afternoon he almost collided with the fat blonde across the street when she came stomping up from the basement. She hissed at him: “Watch out, idiot.” Then disappeared down into the depths again. He knocked on the door. Immediately, he had second thoughts and was already on his way up when the door opened. A young Thai woman with many clips in her hair stood in the doorway. “Come, come,” she said, motioning with her hand. He didn’t move. Another woman came up from behind to see. They said something to each other and began to giggle. “No afraid, come, come,” the one with the clips said. Now he

could just make out the fat blonde in the dark. She was taking the groceries out of the bags. When she saw him she came right over. She shoved the others aside. "Do you want some or not?" He shook his head and hurried away. "You better learn how to make up your mind," she yelled after him. He was already a good bit out in the street. "We can't run to the door day and night!" He walked around the block before he went home. He met the super on the stairs, who smiled suggestively. "Well," he said, "they're a bunch of really sweet girls, huh?" He leaned forward. "And talented." Now he was right up to his ear with his smacking lips: "And you can get it from them for hardly anything." He shoved the super aside and tumbled up the stairs. The super yelled after him: "It's nothing to be ashamed about!"

He smoked one joint after another, but he still wasn't able to calm down. The woman sat in the kitchen playing solitaire. She was wearing his bathrobe. He visited his parents. His mother had made pea soup. They sat in the dining room. His mother told him about his cousin who probably had had a child. His father cleared his throat several times. Through the open door to the garden, he caught a glimpse of his old swing moving ever so slightly in the plum tree. He said nothing about the woman back home. Then the cat came into the room and rubbed against his leg. His parents watched him silently, as if they expected something from him, but he couldn't figure out what it might be. The cat purred delightedly, and in some way it was embarrassing, the animal's open enjoyment, the golden sunshine hitting its fur. Back home the woman sat on the windowsill staring down at the street. One of her legs swung in the air. The kitchen was a mess. He ordered her testily to clean up the kitchen. She obeyed with a sigh. He saw the girl with the clips put a piece of cake on a paper plate and a glass with orange liquid out on the sidewalk. She closed her eyes and raised her face toward the evening sun. It looked as if she smiled, but he wasn't sure. He closed the curtain and took a joint from the desk draw. He lay down

on the couch and put on the TV. When she was finished in the kitchen she sat down next to him and lifted his head onto her lap. She caressed his hair with mechanical movements, and he let her do it.

He met the red head on the bus. He tried to hide, but when they were both about to get off, she noticed him and said hi, and a little while later when he was waiting at the red light, she came up next to him, said hi again, and when he felt pressed to look up, she asked if he had gotten a roommate; she had met the woman in the laundry room. He shook his head. But she continued: "Is she your girlfriend?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"It's my cousin."

"Your cousin?"

"My second cousin."

"But she doesn't speak Danish?" He took a deep breath.

"My uncle and aunt live in Malaysia."

"In Malaysia?"

"Yeah."

The light turned, they began to walk, he picked up his pace, but she caught up. "She seemed sweet. How long is she staying?" He caught her glance and noticed that her eyes were gray; he had always thought they were brown. "Not so long," he mumbled. Then she stopped asking questions, they walked in silence, after awhile she lagged behind. He turned the corner, and when he passed the basement stairs across the street, the four paper plates

with cake and candy were still there on the sidewalk. She apparently noticed that he had slowed down because she stopped and said:

“It’s an offering. Those people must be Buddhist.”

“Who?” he asked with a strong desire that she would say out loud what was going on in the basement. “The girls,” she answered, “haven’t you noticed them?” He shook his head, cut across the street and unlocked the door. She slipped in with him. Loud music boomed in the entranceway, and as they went up the stairs it became clear to him that the music was coming from his apartment. She found her keys in her bag. Then suddenly she turned toward him and looked him in the eyes while she listened carefully for a moment, and then came her intimate, restrained, inquisitive question: “Is that your cousin’s music?” He hurried up to his apartment. She had wound his wool scarf around her breasts and a towel around her waist. She danced barefoot and wildly around the apartment. The music was earsplitting. The room smelled strongly of sweat. There was an empty bottle of rum on the table. She shrieked, yelled, jumped up and down, stamped, howled, swung her arms round and round. Her eyes were red. He turned down the music. She jumped up on his back and beat him with small weak fists, while bawling drunkenly. “Music, music! Idiot!” Her voice rose up to higher octaves, now in her own language, which he couldn’t identify. He grabbed hold of her and carried her into the bathroom. She grunted and became heavy. He put her in the shower and turned on the cold water. She tried to stand, but slipped, she cursed and threatened him. And it sounded as if she had swallowed her own howl when the water gushed down over her. He left the room closing the door. An hour later, she still hadn’t come out; it turned out that she was sleeping on the floor. On her back with her thin legs parted. She snored. He could see right up her red, shiny cunt.

He sat at the kitchen table eating pizza lost in thought about how a big coffee spill made the past week's notes illegible. But there were no thoughts. He lifted the papers up and let them float down to the floor. Then she came slinking in. She crawled under the table, pulled off his socks and began massaging the soles of his feet. She took every single toe into her mouth and sucked on them. He looked up and stared ahead. She let go of the toes with a slurping sound and began pressing and squeezing. When she was finished she came out from under and stood smiling broadly at him, then stuck a finger inside her cheek, tilted her head and went to put on a kettle of water. She suddenly laughed to herself as though she'd just thought of something very amusing. It was tremendously hot in his feet and legs, he'd never experienced such a burning sensation in his body before. He opened the drawer and lit a joint. Slowly he pushed the drawer closed with the palm of his hand, while saying: "If you're still here tomorrow morning I'll call the police." She looked at him provocatively with her chin raised. She didn't say a word. She continued to watch him while he smoked, she stood there completely still with the teapot in one hand, and a white cloud of steam rising up from the pot, slowly pulsing in the air. He went into the bathroom to study his face in the mirror. He looked up his nose. He let his hand glide over his chin. Then he took a cup from the kitchen and headed out. She sat at the kitchen table drinking tea. She still had the wet towel around her waist.

He knocked tentatively on the downstairs neighbor's door. Two pearls glowed on her earlobes. Now her eyes looked blue. He asked if he could borrow some sugar. When she disappeared with the cup, he stepped a little into the entryway and from there could see that she had a whole bunch of green plants both on the windowsills and floor. He thought he

heard a bird chirping in there; maybe it was just his imagination. “Say hi to your cousin!” She smiled. On the way down the stairs he poured the sugar into the left pocket of his jacket.

She didn’t leave. She lay on the couch and watched TV all day. Neither of them said anything. He felt inspired. In the evening he called Claes, who was probably unpleasantly surprised and didn’t know what to say. He invited Claes out for a beer and said there was something he wanted to talk to him about. Claes hesitated. But he didn’t care, he pushed and persuaded, it was important, he said, and in the end, the defeated Claes reluctantly agreed. It was warm out; a fine green summer light hung in the air until late evening. He touched the sugar in his pocket, letting it sift between his fingers, then collected it in a fist, opened his hand and licked it off his fingers. The sugar melted on his tongue. Claes looked shy and uneasy about the whole thing. They had never been alone like this before. He told Claes that he had serious problems with a couple of women. They both wanted him and sought him day and night. They were clearly obsessed with him. He was at the end of his rope. He spoke loudly and with confidence. At first, Claes stared incredulously at him. Then he gasped in amazement and leaned forward. “But. But, do *you* want *them*?” he asked impressed, almost in awe.

“No. Not really.”

“But, are they *hot*?”

“I guess so.”

Claes grinned widely. His face softened. “What if I just take them off your hands?” A warmth like when she had massaged his feet spread over him. Now that he knew he was so sought after, Claes had clearly changed his view of him. He sensed the new respect, and it was easy for him to take it on: even the way he lit his cigarette was different now, with far

more elegance and experience; he leaned back in the chair and slowly lifted the lighter, while Claes followed his movements with an almost voracious gaze.

He threw the keys down on the kitchen counter and looked into the living room. She wasn't lying on the couch. He turned on the lights and looked in the bedroom for her. She wasn't in bed, or under it, or under the table in the living room. He even looked in the large wardrobe in the entryway. But she was gone. He lay down naked on the floor and fell asleep. The next day he noticed that a few bills were missing from the desk drawer where he usually left his weed money. His passport was also missing. His toothbrush, a stack of CDs. He opened the refrigerator and noticed the curry paste and a little piece of dried up ginger. The next day he felt cheated and hunted down, and kept going over to the living room window to look for her, but she never showed up. The paper plates looked so pitiful on the dirty sidewalk, the offerings, which apparently were left there for a deity to find between the dog excrement and the over turned bicycles.

One morning, when she had been gone a week, he got more stoned than usual and knocked on the basement door. The fat blonde opened it. "Yeah?" she just said. He stretched his neck to look over her shoulder. But he couldn't see anything moving inside. Then she obviously became tired of waiting.

She slammed the door without saying a word.