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RUST ON WHITE PORCELAIN

by Katherine Graham

The door closed, I was alone. Sweat slid down my sides, forming moist blotches on the brown muslin. Closing my eyes, I listened, in a moment rising to stand naked before the broken window. The sky was gone, engulfed by murky black clouds that clutched the heavens. I prayed they wouldn't slip and crash to the earth. Through the trees, a smear of silvery light danced off the dead weight of the night. Silhouetted against the halo was the owl, circling lazily, then lost in a flash. The moon was gone. I prayed for the rabbit.

The lamp glass cracked, the bulb burned black, I groped for my clothes. A brown cockroach watched me dress, then scurried out of sight through a slit in the hardwood floor.

His face was still flushed to a scarlet glow. He checked lifeless meters, flipping switches now and again. Hopping among the amplifiers, he nuzzled them into the proper positions on the naked floor. More switches flicked. He dove behind the machines for a moment, only to return to the switches. Soft red lamplight reflected from his white shirt as he quietly scampered about, occasionally rubbing his crimson nose. Satisfied, he plugged in a twelve-string guitar. More switches, then vibrations filled the room. I saw this, smiling.

The water ran several minutes before it cleared. A rusty stain darkened the white porcelain, and I wondered whether it could ever be removed. My mouth was dry. I drank from a grimy glass.

People came, I smiled. The odor changed and I prayed. The owl screeched, just once. More people came. I stepped outside to find the moon, but it had gone. My body shivered, reeking of sweat.

The crowd grew slowly, steadily, like fungus on a decaying stump. A slimy ceiling suffocated above the swirling soot. Guitars screamed, people screamed, and I was alone.

Come, your Highness. The Lord must not be kept waiting. I followed.

The cockroach watched as I mechanically shed my sopping clothes, only to slip into oblivion beneath the flesh. A pounding rhythm set pace for my heart. Outside, Silent Night played on. Only for the clouds, the moon was gone.

Gone, sweet Virgin, you must arise. Your royal court is filled. Dress in red satin, the Prince awaits your countenance of modest purity.

I stood by the broken window and absorbed the quivering halo. The owl was gone and I prayed. The owl returned. I smiled.

Dress in red satin. I dressed. My curls brushed the over-hanging moss. It clung.

Your Prince there awaits. The room gasped for air, guarding the motionless clusters of life. All was quiet, the guitars had died. A murmur filled the room, replacing the lost vibrations. Someone sobbed softly in the corner. I prayed.

Shadows hid the breeze, the night was passing on. I waited, listening to the clouds. The owl was still, all was still. A grey stream of light penetrated the matted sky. Gradually it whitened, eating a crack between the clouds. The moon appeared. I screeched, I cried, but it remained planted in the mud.

The halo dissolved. At my feet tiny red ants crawled through the tufted white fur that lie caked in the earth. I prayed for the rabbit.