

The Immaculate

Erwin Mortier

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Last night I dreamed he was home again. I was standing at the stove in the back kitchen, the lid rattling on top of the pot of potatoes. The cat was eyeing the bacon on the counter. At my calves, my daughters were whimpering with frustrated hunger.

I heard him at the back door, stamping the dirt off his soles—like a calf kicking, testing the strength in its legs.

How long had I gone without hearing that sound? His vehemence, his youth, a fire I could never calm and even fueled.

It can't be, I thought, but there he was, already standing in the long narrow hall between the back kitchen and the rest of the house, his strapping form wedged between the walls and the ceiling.

"Andrea," he said when he saw me. "My sister and my mother."

I hugged him, kissed him. On his cheeks the taste of soil. His hair, his tough blond locks, were clodded with dried mud.

I said, as casually as I could, that dinner was almost ready.

He shook his head.

"I want to get cleaned up," he said.

I heated kettles of water and filled the zinc bathtub.

When he stepped out of his clothes, first unlacing his boots, then pulling off his socks, and then his pants, I turned away.

My daughters squealed with pleasure when he lowered himself into the tub and fooled with their fingers in the lukewarm water. He took their hands, as soft and plump as pincushions, between his thumb and index finger and rubbed their palms, circle after circle.

"Never seen these kids before," he said.

My daughters gaped at him, this man assaying their soft, supple hands in his own calloused fingers, until he let them go and said, "Rinse my hair, Andrea. Rinse my hair clean."

He bent forward, lowering his chin to his breastbone, and waited.

I filled jugs and emptied them over his crown. He gripped the edge of the tub with both hands and steeled himself for each gush that washed over his scalp.

"Keep rinsing, keep rinsing, Andrea," he said over and over.

It sounded like a prayer for forgiveness, or redemption, a cry for a cleansing deeper than his skin, his pores, the roots of his hair.

"Rinse me clean, rinse me clean." He said it again, and again.

The mud left rust-brown streaks of grime in the folds of skin on his throat and along his shoulder blades and trickled down into the soapy water where his knees poked out and now and then I caught a dim glimpse of his sex.

He kept repeating that I should wash his hair.

But I had no more water, no more hot water.

I kneaded his shoulders, to offer him something, to wipe away the streaks of mud. His body felt soft. His muscles gave under my fingers.

"Don't, Andrea," he stammered. "Don't. I'm working on being born."

"Then what should I do? The water's getting cold."

"I miss him—our father."

"Our father? Our father? Our father's been dead for so long."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. It's been so long already."

The more I kneaded his flesh, the more it fell apart beneath my fingers, like lumps of soft cheese or white clay in my clenched hands. My arms sank into the tub up to the elbows, and at the bottom my hands found nothing but sand, white sand that scraped against my fingertips.

My daughters screamed when they saw my distress, and I woke with a jolt.

Outside it was still dark.

The things a person dreams.

All morning his voice has echoed through my body. It's giving me stomach cramps. My morning meal of bread, a soft-boiled egg, a swipe of butter, and a mug of unsweetened coffee loiters in my gullet.

"Andrea. Andrea."

He pokes me in the back, between my shoulder blades, as if I'm a door on which he's knocking, powerless to open it. But who is inside, and who is out? Who can draw the bolt?

For so long now he's lived in my backbone, my sore wrists, my stiff hip, all my weak spots.

"Andrea, my sister and my mother."

Why, oh why, does he want to dwell in my belly too?

Under my palms, again and again, the rasp of his blond hair, coarse with dried soil, and the heavy fabric of the uniform jacket I slid off his shoulders, as if hands have a memory of their own, as if my skin thinks different thoughts from my head.

His jacket and shirt held the smell of his sweat: sharp, sour, a man's sweat. The frayed threads of his shirt ripped open, baring his pale back, when he tried to pull it off over his head, too restless to release himself buttonhole by buttonhole.

I've never known him to be anything but restless, unquiet. He was three years younger. He was forgiven whenever he stormed into the kitchen in his clogs or his boots and crammed hunks of bread into his mouth with his stumpy fingers, and even when he left a trail of soil and manure behind on the tiled kitchen floor.

He knew our mother wouldn't protest; our father would never give him what he had coming. He was a gift of God, the long-awaited son who had survived his delivery and the illnesses of childhood.

And me, then? What about me?

I was the mistake, the missed opportunity. The daughter who should have been a son.

"Andrea," our mother often told me, "means strong as a fella."

She would say it in the twilight hours, the gray zone.

Once every few days she would rouse me early in the morning. In the winter it was still dark; in the summer, the sunrise hung over the roofs like a promise, or an ill omen. She took me down to the milk cellar, where the milk rested in tall churns, bathed in cold water, so that the cream would separate.

"Milk has to rest," she said. "That brings out the best in it. Hold that bowl straight. Don't spill any."

She scooped off the cream with a wooden ladle, never more than we needed for ourselves. With each scoop she poured into the bowl, she ladled her worldly wisdom into me.

"Womenfolk should be tougher than the thinnest, toughest thread, tougher than a fella, tougher than a spider."

Toward the end of the summer, the female spiders hung in their house of threads between the barn and stable rafters and in the window frames. Every night they would eat their old webs while releasing new threads from the abdomen, preparing for the arrival of the males who would rob them of their maidenhood. They would suck the vital juices out of the flies, butterflies, and mosquitoes they had trapped in the summer months and stored like mummies, wrapped in thread. They needed to fatten up before laying eggs.

When I touched a twig to one of their webs, making a tiny vibration, sending shivers through that threaded network, the spider would set out from the heart of her necklace to find her food, her fate. They would not survive the winter. Only their children, numerous and nameless, the silken cocoons domed with still more silk, the white pillows of sleeping progeny in the corners of window frames, would linger like a daydream.

I wrapped him in thread like a mummy.

At the roadside, I waved flags and saw him off. I was a woman, a breeding machine, planting the larvae of my envy in him. He was the straw man who would break the chains of my womanhood.

"You're dreaming again, Andrea. I can see it. Your arms are sagging. Hold the bowl straight."

I don't know why her voice is reaching me now, in these twilight hours, clearer than when I was little. I don't know how old we need to get to take in the very earliest things, the very first smells, the very first sounds.

It felt cool, the bowl did, and was too large for my hands, as hard to grasp as our mother's belly just before she give birth, when she asked the maids to cover her with cool wet cloths, and I felt the stirrings of my long-awaited brother.

She let me lay my hands on her belly before the maid draped it in linen.

"It's a son," she said, "I know for sure. Daughters aren't this ornery. Feels like all the life in his dead brothers has gone into him."

He kicked her in the kidneys, turning around and around under the taut skin of her motherbelly as he descended to her pelvis and she placed a pillow against her back to ease the pain.

Under her nightgown sloshed her breasts, blue-veined and swollen, her nipples as brown as a bruise on an overripe apple.

She did not hide herself away from me. She was not prudish, but modest. We were farmers. In our own yard heifers were calved and mares were mounted. Rams tugged ewes and cats had their kittens in the same straw where the piglets spewed out of the sows. All things that breathed, bleated, brayed, or bellowed were sure to rut and bear young, to grow up, and sooner or later to be led to the slaughter.

When he was older, six or so, and I was going on nine, we would sometimes play bull and cow, or mare and stallion, in the bleaching field behind the house where our mother and the maids would spread out the bed linen and underwear to dry.

He would tell me to crawl through the grass on all fours and creep up on me. He would straddle my hips, press his crotch against my buttocks, and let me go again.

The maids would giggle.

Our mother—not angry or disapproving, but practical—said, "Andrea, my child, there'll be plenty of time for that later."

She went on with her work. In the blue-green grass, she pulled the corners of sheets and pillowcases straight and adjusted the legs of my father's long underwear, which held the curves of his thighs and calves no matter how often she laundered it.

"My daughter will bear more than enough in her lifetime."

The maids fell silent or sucked in their laughter. They were women, like me, but I hadn't yet been initiated into womanhood.

By then the long-awaited one was dancing through the tufts of grass in his socks. He pulled himself up on the limbs of the alders by the waterside and crowed with laughter.

Why wouldn't they ever scold him?

All she did was shout, "Marcel, don't forget your clogs. Why are you always chasing after whatever pops into your head, like a stupid mutt?"

But he was childhood, his life still unwritten on his skin. Sons were freighted with expectations, daughters with ancestral sins.

His clogs lay lost in the grass at my feet, empty and gaping, as if yawning and stretching in the noonday sun. They must have moldered away somewhere on a hayloft or been thrown into a stove, and all I have left of the linens now are the most delicate cotton napkins, on which our mother spent weeks intertwining her monogram with our father's after they were engaged. The E of Emilia winds around the T of Théophile, more or less the way she allowed him into her bed and body—first dragging her feet, then yielding to him completely.

Her father said, "Make him wait. Let's see if he stays the course."

My own father, my father-to-be, hung around at the fence on Sundays, his moustache trimmed and waxed, his hat in his hand, back and forth, back and forth, along the hedge and the fence beneath the lindens, where the light was nectar dripping from a thousand blossoms that buzzed with bees and fruitfulness.

"So I made him wait," our mother says. "Until we were fit to burst with impatience and even my father couldn't stand the sight of it."

It must have been the summer of 1911, "when the world was still the world," as our father put it.

He seems so young now for that moustache. It perched on his upper lip one night like a butterfly and spread its wings in their wedding portrait, which hung beside her bed till the day she died. They stand there like two pillars of dark salt. Our father holds up one arm for our mother, who lays one hand on his forearm while the other clasps a simple bouquet of budding jasmine blossoms. She has pinned her hair up; it protects her like a helmet. Under her chin, the full length of her neck is concealed by the collar of a blouse, so strait-laced, it seems, that it strains to cover her cheeks, her arms, her whole face, as if the blouse were no made thing but an overgrowth.

Only her necklace, which slides down over the slope of her pent-up breasts to dangle freely above her waist, creates the illusion of spontaneity—that and her fingers in the crook of our father's elbow, loose and confidential, unlike his near-clenched fist. "He has power and strength in his arms," her fingers say. "But I hold a tough patience inside me."

"Yes, he saved up a long time for that moustache," she sometimes said when we looked at the photo together. She said it with a slight smile that offered a fleeting look at her inner life.