

SARA LONDON

*Pilgrim*

She hoped her husband wouldn't mind that she wanted to lie down with Billy, spoon him right there in the hospital bed. Billy was another man, and that was always going to be hard, but really he was just a boy, and it would be nothing like the dream she'd had in her twenties that Bob Dylan was on top of her. True, Billy was just a character in a novel, but her husband was a writer and knew that protagonists were people too, flesh and blood, if they came out right. She planned to be gone for just one night. He could spare her for that, couldn't he? She'd simply lift the sheet behind Billy, right in front of the nurses and that annoying Professor Rumfoord with his jailbait wife and doubts about Billy's story of Dresden. Billy might not even notice the momentary cool draft at his back, but when he wept he would feel a kind of preserver around his waist, warm to the touch, soft against his spine, and she would feel him jiggle from the tear-making pump inside his stomach which drained his flooding insides just like the sump she and her husband used to drain the basement of rainwater.

She could feel Billy's spine buttons and bony bottom and the backs of his thighs vibrating along the front surface of her flesh spoon. He was cold. And then there was a pause in his movement because she, the preserver, was working and he was floating just above the gray depths of grief—for a moment. But the jiggling started up again. She'd taken everything off but her socks, to keep her terminally frozen feet her husband yelped about from making Billy's blue ones even colder. Billy fell asleep then, and she could sense him traveling, moving away from his body, even though you couldn't wedge a pencil between them. Someone placed that ridiculous coat over them on the hospital bed, maybe the history professor. It smelled like old cat. (How many Germans had shrugged into that coat?) Its mangy collar tickled her nose, but she held back the sneeze. She was confident that Montana W.— She had great respect for Ms. Wildhack, porn star or not. After all, she'd been a genuinely caring companion for Billy. You had to admire her cooperation under all

those observing eyes. And now she was, what? Home? Busy with the baby they'd crafted, such a hard job with all the eyes scanning for errors. The baby could turn out to be a little boy in the Nazi Youth with a neatly tied kerchief around his pink neck, or he could be a Green Beret, or a girl who straps grenades to her thin body and makes a proud video. God forbid a porn star.

She was sure now that her husband would be proud, actually. Pleased, anyway. It would shut her up about the glasses, her complaints that the world was dissolving into separate molecules before her eyes, fuzzy little planets swimming by. He, too, was getting harder for her to see without the lenses, which meant he might not be there one of these nights when she sat up and blindly felt the woody surface of the sidetable for the lightweight frames. (So light she'd once lost them in Spectacle Pond—life has its coincidences—they'd been on her head at the time of her immersion.) Billy knew what she was going through, though. So many years in the field, after all. His whole career was vision. The bifocals she was waiting for would nestle together two of the most important things: clarity and choice. Two very good hemispheres... (That was theft, she knew. But she was grateful to the old poets.) Though it didn't take restored vision to be a witness: Billy standing there wrapped in his curtain, staring with those vacant eyes at the coffin-like wagon and the drooling horse in the Dresden street. How filthy his silver boots! Then the bird, "poo-tee-weet"—Billy's answer.

She was glad for her intervention, though she wasn't sure she'd get him back, as she lay there with her arms looping his lungs—like breathing was a parenthetical thing. She'd have to decide whether or not to sneak away while he was out there. Let him go, or wait for his return and risk alienating the man who was intimate with invention and reality and had reason to want her home. It would not go over well. She'd better not tell. She'd make certain the musty odor from the coat was showered away. They had once met, after all. Long ago, and it was good.