

HIGH TIDE

I STAND BACK and I see myself as if I were her, the woman who walks looking down, watching the pavement as she walks. She is carrying a package. (I know it is a full-length mirror that is now wrapped in brown paper.) Like the mirror, she looks very fragile. She is a woman suited for a medium shot, or better yet, a close-up of her face. She walks, watching the feet of passers-by. Her background is made up of facades of old, unkept houses, some empty, and run-down buildings. One would not go to this area to appreciate architecture. The only pleasing sights are some Parisian awnings decorating the stores and beauty shops. It would be better to see her against a neutral backdrop, carrying with great care her just-bought mirror.

She approaches what seems to be her house. There is nothing worth mentioning about the outside of the house—a few people in the doorway and some noisy children vying for attention. They do not amuse her. The man is waiting for her in her apartment, although he should be somewhere else. He doesn't look happy. His forehead wrinkles in a deep frown.

I remember that when she returned—no matter after a short or long while—the man would get sullen, and his words, dry and cutting. I also know that he used to tell her: "When two people love each other they don't need anyone or anything else. They melt into each other." She accepts the man's judgments—well, almost all of them. Nevertheless, she knows that she feels both alone and that she needs sometimes to be alone. And that at times she needs to be with other people, although still alone. She knows it would be difficult for anyone to understand this, and does not expect anyone to.

Now she is going to try to hang the mirror on the inside of the closet door; but first she nails the brackets to the wood. The man walks back and forth from the dining room to the bedroom, watching. She sets the hammer down, takes the mirror, and tries to fit it between the brackets; two of them are too weak and don't support it enough. The man approaches and disapproves of the work with a gesture. She places the mirror again on the bed and picks up the hammer. He follows the woman's every movement. She hammers the loose brackets; but one of

her fingers receives a blow that makes her gasp for air, her open mouth in the shape of pain, her pale lips apart. The man says, "All women are helpless."

Now they are close to each other. Now her eyes are alone, occupying limitless space and time. Suddenly a light comes over them. He approaches her, tries to comfort her, to excuse himself. Now she is crying and does not want him to say anything. They remain silent, but from a neighboring house, music is heard, and it grows louder. He says, "If I could do it, if I could only use my hands. . . ." she tries to soothe her injured finger; she caresses it and cries. He says, "Does it hurt? . . . at least you *have* fingers to hurt." She does not answer, but goes on with her work, hammering the brackets again. But he stays there, watching her. And his eyes annoy her. She says, "Weren't you going to visit a friend?" He says, "Does it bother you that I am here in my own home? Don't forget, this is my home." She stops pounding and waves the hammer, as if to break the mirror. He continues, "Have you forgotten, did you forget that I hate to look at myself?" Now she wants to leave but he holds her back: "Let's do things right, please," he says, "I am going to show you how to place the brackets. Can I direct you?" She says, "No, not now. Why do you want to be responsible for what you can't do? Why do you want to be responsible for me?" He says, "You're hurting me." She leaves him, but she only gets to the elevator. It stops at her floor, but she lets it go.

She returns, and knocks at the bathroom door, calling his name. He does not answer. He is facing the cabinet and a glass of water. In his hand, in his only hand, he has a pill. It is strychnine. Now he places the pill next to the glass of water. With great difficulty he pulls down his pants and sits on the toilet. On the other side, she bangs the door and begs, "I am not going to stop knocking until you open up!" Suddenly, she feels a pain in her finger, stops knocking, and soothes it. On the other side, he continues to sit on the toilet, crying silently.

He gets up and places the pill on the sink. He picks up the green plastic glass, spilling the water. He drinks the few drops that are left. He pulls up his pants, sits down, and hears her say, "This is childish and ridiculous. I know you are not going to do it, you didn't do it before, and you won't do it now. So don't waste time locked in there." She walks away from the door with noisy steps and then falls into an armchair. She shouts, "You're worse than a woman!" He answers, "With this body I am like a woman; and like a woman I am going to

kill myself.” She says nothing. He waits in vain for her to say something and then adds, “If I were really a man, a whole man, I’d have a gun and I’d load it with a bullet, and with steady aim I would shoot myself.” Now she waits for him to say something else, but he says nothing.

She winds a clock, sets it. He again fills the glass with water. At last she says, “I’m going to give you five minutes—no more than five minutes—to come out. After that I am going to hang myself from the light fixture with a clothesline. And I will do it. Then when you decide to come out, you’ll see my tongue hanging out at you. And that’s going to be the first picture you see when you come out of there. Me, with my tongue out.”

He puts the pill in his mouth, but immediately spits it out. Quickly, he pulls his pants down and sits on the toilet again. Now she goes to the bedroom, picks up the mirror, and sees her reflection. She fits it in the brackets on the closet door, making one side enter first, and then the other. The mirror is crooked because some brackets are weak. She stands back, turns a little to the right, looks at herself, and smiles. She straightens and begins to examine her face, first one side, and then the other. She looks at herself straight on and sticks her tongue out. She looks at her tongue. Then she examines her neck, pressing it a little with her hand, smiling.

She unbuttons the first few buttons of her blouse. Her clavicle bones protrude a little. Then she takes off her blouse, and observes her arms and then her stomach. Then, she stands back and looks at the total picture of herself. She reaches her arms backward and unfastens her bra. She crosses her arms in front of her breasts. Little by little she opens them, and, smiling at herself, feels her breasts.

Then, she unfastens her skirt, holds the skirt outside the mirror’s periphery, and drops it. She turns around and looks at herself. “He’s in the bathroom”—she thinks—“he’s already taken the pill. The strychnine takes effect and he is falling, immersed in the persistent, rancid odor. He falls and hits his head on the edge of the bath. His head splits in two like a pumpkin.”

Serious now, she faces the mirror naked. She looks at her feet and raises her toes. The pores of her legs are very dilated, of a red-violet color. She looks at her legs and remembers a dream, a dream that makes her smile. In that dream, she found herself lying naked on a table. From the pores of her legs small eggs came out like sprouts. She had to catch them very delicately in order not to break the shells. If a shell broke,

what was inside would die. On each side of her was a cardboard box: in one she left the whole eggs, and to the other she threw those that were no good. Horrible egg-fetuses were rotting in the box of rejects. The last egg that left her pores broke open. The living fetus tried to pick up its head, but its neck was broken. It could only balance itself for a few centimeters before falling dead.

She thinks again of the man locked in the bathroom, and of herself when she opens the door and finds him in a bath of blood. She thinks of the horror of the blood. But then looking in the mirror, the image of herself erases the horror. Now she smiles, embraces herself, and looks at her image with her head inclined over her shoulder. Now she and the mirror's image are one. The warmth of her breath blurs the image. Her lips remain imprinted on the mirror; her breath disappears little by little like a footprint in the sand.

Now the doorbell rings. She covers herself and goes to the intercom. She hears a voice announcing someone's arrival and then the noise of water running in the toilet. The man in the bathroom is seen, again flushing the toilet. He comes out and greets the visitor. The visitor asks the couple how they have been. The man answers that everything is fine, thank goodness.

*translated by Carolyn Harris and Marilyn Chin*