

THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS

By Ruth Jespersen

Felicia, a girl who worked that she might live, working as an olive-stuffer for the Fat o' the Land Food Company, desired a foxfur coat. Every night when she walked home from her job at the Fat o' the Land Food Company she would stop at the window of the Gracious Living Specialty Shop and admire the foxfur coat. That is, she began by admiring it . . . but at the end of two months she was staring at it with a hard, intent, grim expression, her lips trembling slightly. The foxfur coat was beautiful.

When Felicia spoke of the coat to her roommate, Hilaria, her head turned aside, her eyes cast down as if in shame, the way a person speaks of something which has become extraordinarily meaningful to him, Hilaria exclaimed:

“A foxfur coat! Why, you have to pay an arm and a leg for a thing like that. Felicia dear, where do you get such notions?”

Felicia tried to explain. “Well, you see, a foxfur coat would . . . Everyone needs something beautiful in his life. It would mean . . . but perhaps you're right.”

Hilaria looked at her friend's troubled face and advised more gently:

“Put it out of your mind. Try to think of other things.”

Felicia took this advice very seriously and did try to think of other things, and sometimes she succeeded. But always, walking home from her job at the Fat o' the Land Food

Company, she would be forced to draw near the window of the Gracious Living Specialty Shop where the coat, of a fur that was thick and silky and red, hung upon the incomplete torso of a redhaired mannequin. At the sight of it she would freeze with tension.

Glaring at it, she would reflect:

“You have to pay an arm and a leg for a thing like that.”

To which she would add:

“My, but it's beautiful. . . !”

And she would make stroking gestures with her hands.

The longer Felicia thought about the foxfur coat, and sometimes she thought extremely logically, the more deeply convinced she became that she deserved it.

“I deserve it! I've earned it! I have a right to it!” she would tell herself boldly.

She grew familiar with every seductive detail of its appearance. In her mind the coat was hers, and because this had happened, after a while she was no longer afraid.

One night, coming home from her job at the Fat o' the Land Food Company, Felicia went into the Gracious Living Specialty Shop.

Half an hour later she was seen again in the street. Above the sumptuous collar of the foxfur coat her face glowed in its pale loveliness. Softly gleaming she strode through crowds of strangers.

Under her proud head Felicia held the top of the coat together with her left hand, her fingers voluptuously clutched in the warm, tender fur. The other sleeve dangled limply, swinging behind her in the night wind as she walked.

Hilaria forced her to take off the coat, and made her admit what was only too obvious. Felicia's arm had been neatly and

efficiently amputated at the shoulder.

Standing in the middle of their furnished room, her red hair catching the blaze of the bare electric light bulb which hung on a wire from the ceiling, what was left of her graceful body clothed in an old dark cotton dress, she looked in profile like one of those cheerful armless mannequins in shop windows. What had been done to her was shocking to see. But

Felicia made light of it, murmuring:

“Oh no, it's nothing, nothing really.”

And she took up the coat again and put it on and patted its fur with her left hand.

“What a marvelous bargain, Hilaria! You have to pay an arm and a leg for a thing like this, but it cost me only an arm. Wasn't I lucky?”

She danced about the room and tried to look at the coat in the little mirror which hung on the wall, and got up on a kitchen chair to see its hem swirling about her legs.

But Hilaria was skeptical, saying:

“The most expensive thing I ever bought, a small Philco portable radio, cost me only an index finger, cut off just below the knuckle. I wouldn't want to pay any more than that. And even that—I don't know. . . .”

She gazed down at her hands and then at her friend and began to cry.

Felicia gave her an unsympathetic smile and said thoughtfully:

“You complain too much. What do you expect, eh? This is the way things are. Probably we ought to be more agreeable about it and learn to accustom ourselves. I've already accustomed myself to it, I think, and believe me, I'm much

happier this way. Learn to accept. And if there's anything you still can't like, *ignore it*. Actually we should be grateful. Highest standard of living in the world, did you know that? You can get a lot of joy out of your life if you have the right attitude. There's beauty all around us, Hilaria—have you noticed the magnificent Christmas tree in front of the Stock Exchange? And look at the beautiful fur coat I bought! Ah!” She nestled her chin in it, and continued:

“No buts about it, it's easier as well as pleasanter to smile. It takes fifty-six muscles to make a frown and only thirteen to make a smile. Did you know that?”

Felicia wore the coat on the following day to her job at the Fat o' the Land Food Company, and on Saturday night she wore it to the movies with her boyfriend who was a shipping clerk in the stuffed-olive department there, and on Sunday morning she wore it to church. In it she was happy.

LATER

The foxfur coat had become matted, wet looking and dank, and was beginning to shed its hair. But this did not account for Felicia's increasing depression. Often she would walk slowly along the wintry streets in the mornings and afternoons and evenings—for she was no longer working—and look at the people and say to herself:

“Almost everyone has two arms. But I have only one. . . .”

Day by day her dissatisfaction mounted.

“I am incomplete, and this ridiculous coat does not hide it. . . .”

One night she returned to the Gracious Living Specialty Shop. Taking off the foxfur coat she threw it at the proprietor's feet and shouted with all her might:

“Give me back my arm!”

“What's all this about?” he asked. Quickly he picked up

the foxfur coat and hung it on a rack marked: *Drastically Reduced*.

When Felicia explained, the proprietor seemed surprised. He took a step forward and said to her, spreading out his hands:

“But it's not my fault, young lady. Besides, what do you want with two arms? Look at you,” and he looked at her up and down with an unctuous leer, “you still have one arm and two legs, you're very well set up as you are. Who needs two arms, actually? Just think. You can still have a lot of fun putting polish on the fingernails of your left hand.”

“But—I am no longer stuffing olives for the Fat o' the Land Food Company,” cried Felicia, “and I must work—I need my arm, so give me back my arm.”

“You should have thought of that before you got yourself into this.”

He turned away, but Felicia followed him, demanding in a loud angry voice that her arm be returned to her.

“Did anyone force you to buy the coat?” asked he, whirling around to her with his arms folded across his chest. “Did anyone hold a gun to your head? No! You made this transaction of your own free will. Your right arm was the price of the coat, clearly printed on the tag— quite a bargain at that—and you were willing to pay it. Maybe you didn't realize at the time how much you were paying, but that's no concern of mine.”

“I want my arm! I never wanted your shoddy coat, not that much . . . not that much. I miss my arm, my arm that I was born with and that grew as I grew. My arm that came out of my mother. My beautiful, strong, warm, downy, trained, intelligent arm,” she mourned, and shouted the question: “Where is my arm? I demand you tell me where it is!”

“The arm is in cold storage upstairs in the office, but it no longer belongs to you, young lady. We never make refunds

on merchandise after five days or if the price tag has been removed. Business is business in the Gracious Living Specialty Shop. You wanted the coat, didn't you? It's too late now."

And looking into his face, Felicia saw that it was indeed too late. She sighed deeply a few times, then asked the proprietor to find her coat, as she desired to leave.

The proprietor searched all over the shop for Felicia's foxfur coat, but strangely enough he could not find it.

As she turned to leave the shop, the proprietor spoke to her.

"Never mind, young girl. Maybe you'll grow a new arm!"

He then added thoughtfully:

"Care to purchase a new coat to replace the one you lost? This one over here, this fine foolproof Persian lamb, is a lot cheaper. Price only one human hand."

Felicia went out. Shivering, she walked along the street with the sleeve of her thin dress dangling emptily at her side and blowing a bit in the night wind, and as she walked she glanced up at the wintry stars and asked herself:

"Will there be anything *left* of me by the time all this ends . . . ?"

Suddenly she turned and retraced her steps. Standing in the brilliantly lit doorway of the shop she tossed back her flaming red hair and cried out with all her strength:

"I'll remember this! I shall not forgive you for what you have done. And neither will my friend forgive you, eh? Cannibals, we know you, and we are inexorable. *We shall remember you!*"

Shuddering with the cold, she added in a lower voice:

"But I think I'd better take that Persian lamb after all,

because it's really too awful out without a coat. Or maybe you have something cheaper, say in a mixture of rayon and reused wool, that would not cost more than a thumb. . . ."

- Ruth Jespersen

Ruth Jespersen was born in 1922. She was educated at Queens College in New York City and at the Sorbonne in Paris, from which she got a degree in French literature in the late 1940s. Two collections of her short fiction, "The Strange Ordeal of Edwin Banquo and Other Stories" and "Pop and Other New York Tales," were published by small presses in her lifetime, as was her masterpiece, a long novel called "The Blink of an Eye." In all, at her suicide in 1997, she left a remarkable body of work including half a dozen novels and close to 200 short stories.

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