

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Joseph Giordano
Deepest Desire

MELISSA WALKED IN. "You're always in front of the mirror."

Elizabeth brushed fingertips through her Brunette, French bob. She had on a St. John knit, white shoulder top with an orchard tinted midriff, three quarter sleeves, and navy, knee length skirt. On her feet were Jimmy Choo, *Lance* sandals, heels with ankle straps. She turned to Melissa, twenty years her junior. "The young and old are obsessed with mirrors. The young love them. The old hate them."

"You're not old."

"Not yet. But when I am, you'll be gone."

"Oh, please. Our love is not that shallow."

Elizabeth gave Melissa a look that said, "You'll see."

The two women were in their Upper East Side, Manhattan apartment. Furnishings were contemporary. Melissa was an interior designer. She'd come in from her jog. Her blonde hair was on top of her head. She had on a black tank top and leotards.

Melissa took off her sunglasses and said, "How did your day go?"

"It may have been the most extraordinary day in my life."

"Are you serious?"

"Sit, and I'll tell you."

"Melissa grabbed a towel, daubed her face and put it around her neck. She sat on the brown leather sofa and pulled her knees under her.

Elizabeth took the cream armchair and crossed her legs. She said, "I'd gotten away from my trading desk before noon. I was on the Wall Street subway platform, and I spotted a woman who looked unsteady on her feet. At first I thought she was drunk and normally I'd keep my distance, but there was something about her that held my glance. The wind of an oncoming train hit my face, and the woman moved closer to the ledge above the track. I always step back on the platform, so a careless crowd can't push me over the edge. But something told me not to move. Sure enough as the train's light flashed from the tunnel, the woman took a stutter step toward the onrushing cars. There was no time to scream, and I wouldn't have been heard above the roar of wheels on steel. I lunged toward the woman, grabbed her by the shoulders, and pulled her away. We fell backwards together in a very unlady-like plop onto the platform. The woman's bag opened. Makeup, her wallet, everything, spewed onto the cement, but people were piling into cars or rushing for the exits, and no one stopped to help. My bag was still on my arm, but my behind hurt from the thump. I have a huge purple bruise across my butt cheeks.

"That's cute."

"Melissa, it's not funny."

"Sorry."

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"Anyway, the woman came out of her daze. She blinked at me, and I said, 'That was close.' We struggled to our feet, tried to regain our dignity, and straightened our clothes. I helped her retrieve things and put them back in her bag. She said, 'I'm so sorry. Thank you. I don't know where my mind was.' She took my hand in hers. She clung to my arm. The earnestness in her eyes and the profuseness of her thanks made me uncomfortable. She said that I had to let her show her gratitude and asked me where I was going. I was non-committal and said it was really nothing, but she wouldn't allow me to move more than a few feet from her. The next train came and we stepped on. I was headed for the designer shops on Madison Avenue and when I got off at my stop, she followed me all the way to the street. We walked together and when we passed that little Italian trattoria in the fifties, she insisted to treat me to lunch. I really wanted to get away, but she was so sincere, I agreed to go inside."

"Is this going to be the story on how I acquired a rival for your affections?"

"Don't be silly. Just listen."

"Okay."

"So we sat down, and she ordered a bottle of Dolcetto."

"Oh no, you drank?"

"It went right to my head. But I needed a glass of wine after all the excitement in the subway."

"So you had a conversation with her?"

"Yes. She turned out to be one of those rare people who ask about you and seem genuinely interested in your response. I finished my second glass of wine, and the subject turned to something very interesting."

"Oh my God. Two glasses? After three, you cry. What did you talk about?"

"She asked me what was my deepest desire?"

Melissa straightened on the couch "Elizabeth, this woman was hitting on you. What did she look like?"

Elizabeth sat back in her chair. She laughed, "You know, I really can't tell you."

"Oh c'mon."

"She had large, dark eyes, very captivating. And she smelled like white narcissus. The rest is a blur."

"You enjoyed the perfume of a woman with captivating eyes, and she asked you what was your deepest desire? I don't like where this story is going. Did you fall in love?"

"Stop. She had hypnotic eyes, that's all."

"How old was she?"

"I don't know. Not young if that's what you're asking. But not old either."

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"Okay, what did she wear?"

"Oh my goodness, I can't tell you."

"Elizabeth, you sat across from this woman, and you can't tell me what she wore? You pride yourself on being able to name a woman's designers from head to toe plus all the accessories."

"I know. But my mind can't focus on her image."

"Did the wine cause you to blank out?"

"No. I remember the conversation. Just not the details of how the woman looked."

"Was this woman an enchantress? Did she have a magic wand?"

Elizabeth's face furrowed. "Don't tease. Do you think I enjoy selective amnesia?"

"What was her name?"

"I don't know."

"Of course." Melissa crossed her arms. "So you played this game with her? I'm definitely jealous."

"It wasn't like that. We'd shared a sort of near death experience. I felt a bond. Anyway, yes, I reflected on her question."

"Did you get three wishes or only one?"

Elizabeth looked at Melissa and spoke slowly. "She didn't offer me any wishes. She wanted to learn more about me. She asked me an intriguing question. So I drank some wine and tried to answer."

"She was flirting with you, and you liked the attention."

"It was just an idle afternoon's fantasy."

"Okay, so what did you tell her was your deepest desire?"

Elizabeth leaned forward in the chair. "Well, my first thought went to money. You can't be too thin or too rich, right? But I was afraid that she might interpret that as a hint I wanted some sort of monetary reward for pulling her back on the platform. Then I reflected seriously on the question. We don't have major material wants. We're both professionals. We make good incomes. We've decided not to adopt, so there's no children's future to consider. So I decided that money really isn't at the top of my list."

"So the Gulfstream Jet and private island in the Bahamas were off the table. Pity." Elizabeth raised her eyebrows.

Melissa said, "Please continue."

"Then I thought about health. You're young, you think you're immortal, but when

you get to be my age, you realize bad things don't just happen to other people. You know my mother died of ovarian cancer, and that can be hereditary. That's why I enrolled in that periodic screening group at Sloan Kettering."

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Melissa moved to the ottoman at Elizabeth's feet and took her hand. "You're the healthiest person I know. You're in fabulous shape, Pilates toned. I love to run my fingertips across your abs."

"Well I did think to myself, don't be a hypochondriac. So I didn't say 'health.' I was stumped, and asked her what she thought I should want?"

"How did she respond?"

"She said that our deepest desire comes from our core. It's not a matter of what she would want or what someone else would want for me. It's entirely personal. She said I needed to discover what it was for myself."

"Seems logical. Then what?"

"I tried to turn the question around and asked what she would want?"

"Good."

"She said something very curious. She said she'd wish for nothing. I looked into her eyes and believed she was sincere. She was content. That gave me a momentary pang of envy. But she wasn't going to help me answer the question. I took a sip of wine and thought that maybe I should answer like her, and say 'nothing.' Would that be the truth or would I be trying to impress her as she had me? Then I realized I did want something, and it's related to you."

"How so?"

"You know that I love you."

"And I love you."

"I feel it. But even so, when we pass younger women I sense you glance at them, and I think, one day you'll leave me. I'll get too old. My looks will fade. You'll linger under some sense of obligation, but eventually you'll wander. Then I'll be alone."

"Elizabeth, I'm hurt you'd say that."

"I know, you don't feel it now." Elizabeth caressed Melissa's cheek. "I believe you. But you haven't faced the reality of our age difference. But some day you will."

"I'm not going to leave you."

"Well, this fear led me to understand what I desired. I told her that I didn't want to grow any older. I wanted to stay the age I am now."

"You desire immortality?"

"Oh, no. I don't want to live without you. But I don't want my physical or mental state to deteriorate. Okay, I'm vain. I want to remain looking as I do now."

"Well that's terrific. And what happens when I get old? You want to be the one who leaves me?"

"You're missing the point. I'm not looking at other women. I've passed the time when a firm butt in a short skirt would turn my head. Have you ever felt I wanted to cheat on you?"

"No."

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"Exactly. Anyway, I told her that my desire was not to grow older."

"What did she say?"

"She just nodded. We didn't even order food. I had to get going. She paid the check, and we left the restaurant. We didn't exchange phone numbers. I watched her back as she walked down Madison, and I felt like I'd left a confessional. I'd gotten a load off my chest, and my spirit was lifted."

"That's a very strange story."

"That's why I wanted to tell you."

That evening while she was cleansing her face before bed, Melissa smiled into the bathroom mirror. She thought, it's so like Elizabeth. Spin some elaborate parable to make a point. Elizabeth had seen my wandering eye, but she'd never confront me. No, tell me some fairy tale to let me know that she wasn't blind. I mean, a story about an anonymous woman whose face Elizabeth can't remember, and whose outfit she can't describe? Her deepest desire? Melissa almost laughed. She admired Elizabeth's innovativeness to come up with such a tale.

That night Melissa had a dream. She was in a nightclub with a rotating ceiling strobe that cast diamonds of light across her face. She sat at a small, round table in the shadows away from the stage. Sitting on her right was the blonde Melissa spotted every morning getting a non-fat latte at the Starbucks near the office. On her left, was the brunette with the black, ostrich attaché case who got on her subway car. The blonde wore an orange bikini. The brunette had on a tight, gold lamé dress that stopped at her thighs. The music in the club was so loud, it reverberated in her teeth. The two women moved in close to her, and she felt the warmth of breath on her face, lips and the tickle of tongues in her ears. Their hands were on her knees and moved slowly up her inner thighs. She closed her eyes and allowed her legs to part to their caress. Above the music, a loud sob caused her to jump. She saw Elizabeth standing before her. Elizabeth was dressed in a hooded, blue cloak, and she had the sad look of a renaissance Madonna, distressed but resigned to a predestined fate. Elizabeth's eyes welled with tears. Melissa shoved the two hands away. "No, no, Elizabeth," she said and awoke.

Melissa's neck was wet and her heart felt like it would burst from her chest. She tried to slow her breathing. Okay, she thought, she was attracted to other women. But she'd never cheat on Elizabeth. They'd shared too much. She loved Elizabeth and a betrayal would destroy her trust. She wouldn't risk that for an hour's lustful bliss. Melissa's heart rate slowed, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. The sun had cracked the horizon, and a muted light entered the window. Melissa looked across the bed. Shadows played on Elizabeth's face, which was twisted in a grimace. Melissa quickly slid over. Elizabeth's body was cold and stiff. Melissa cried, "Oh dear God." She climbed to her knees and shook Elizabeth, but she didn't wake up. Melissa wailed, took her lover in her arms, and held her close. Crying, she called 911, but when the EMTs arrived, there was nothing they could do.