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Thomas Tessier

Food

"It's almost over now," Miss Rowe said, more to herself than to Mr. Whitman. There was a faraway look in her eyes, but her mouth struggled to form a smile and her voice was bright with anticipation. "Don't worry, though. I'll be fine."

Almost over? What did that mean? Mr. Whitman preferred not to think about it. As far as he was concerned, it was just a typical summer Saturday. The August heat had eased a bit, and there was a sweet breeze in the air. Other people would go swimming or shopping or would watch a baseball game. Mr. Whitman and Miss Rowe would do what they usually did on Saturday afternoon. To look at it any other way would be too frightening.

"But you aren't well," he was compelled to say. "I mean, you're experiencing pain now, real pain. I can see it."

"No," she replied without much conviction. "I know what I feel, and it's not pain. Not really." Miss Rowe quivered dismissively, adjusted herself on the mattresses, and tried to change the subject. "What did you bring for me today?"

Mr. Whitman ignored that. "I do think you should let me get a doctor. You ought to be in a hospital, but the least you can do is have a doctor examine you."

"Absolutely not. If you do anything like that, I'll never speak to you again."

Miss Rowe said this not harshly but more as a pout. Unfortunately Mr. Whitman knew it was also the truth.

He was incapable of dealing with her on any terms other than her own. His sense of duty wasn't as strong as his fear of destroying the friendship they shared.

Mr. Whitman crossed the room, picking his way carefully through the debris, and stood for a few moments by the open French doors. He enjoyed more of the breeze there, but the backyard was a distressing sight. The lawn hadn't been mowed in weeks. As if on cue, someone's power mower started up and whined steadily in the distance. The garden at the far end of the yard didn't quite exist. Mr. Whitman had cleared and spaded a patch for carrots and tomato plants, but he had never gotten around to putting them in. The bare black soil sprouted a few weeds instead. But he had been busy, he told himself. Miss Rowe had taken over his life that summer.

"What have you brought?" she asked again.

"Oh, Balzac," Mr. Whitman answered distractedly. He had almost forgotten the book he held in one hand. Every Saturday afternoon he read a story to Miss Rowe. Balzac was one of her favorites, and his. Today he intended to recite "Facino Cane," a tale he practically knew by heart but which never failed to move him deeply.

Miss Rowe's face showed pleasure, but she was unable to speak. At that moment she was eagerly cramming a thick slice of Italian bread into her mouth. The sight was too depressing for Mr. Whitman to bear, so he turned to the volume of Balzac and flipped through its pages. It wasn't just the bread, nor the generous layers of brandy pâté and cream cheese that coated it. Food: that was the problem, the whole wretched problem. Miss Rowe was a compulsive eater. Nearly all of her waking hours were devoted to the consumption of food. She was half his age and, by his conservative estimate, triple his weight.

Their strange relationship had begun six months earlier when Mr. Whitman had moved in and become her neighbor. They were a couple of refugees from the outside world, occupying the two ground-floor apartments in a converted Victorian house on the outskirts

of Cairo. Not the Cairo in Egypt, but rather a country village in the central part of eastern Connecticut, where many towns have oddly incongruous names, like Westminster, Brooklyn, and Versailles.

Mr. Whitman had never married, but he had saved and invested his money shrewdly over the years, so that when he reached the age of fifty, he was able to retire from his editorial job in Manhattan and leave the city behind him. He could please himself and do what he wanted, which was to deal in rare books. Mr. Whitman's specialty was crime, true and fictional, though he loved all literature. He had a respectable collection which he kept in the two-room shop he rented in the village. He also had a dozen or so truly valuable books in a safe-deposit box at the bank. Mr. Whitman didn't make much money at this business, in part because he hated to sell any of his books and invariably overpriced them. But money had ceased to be an important factor in his life, and he was happy to spend several hours a day in his shop, surrounded by his collection, listening to public radio on the FM and tending to a very small mail-order trade. He discouraged off-the-street customers by keeping the door locked and the shades drawn. He was in the process of compiling a catalog of his collection, but in a leisurely fashion. More often than not, he would push the lists aside and settle back to lose himself in a book. Mr. Whitman knew he would never be able to read everything he wanted to in one lifetime.

Miss Rowe was something of a mystery to him. She disliked talking about herself, but she dropped occasional hints. Her only relatives were a couple of cousins on the West Coast. However, Miss Rowe had come to Cairo from Boston, where something unspecified had apparently rocked her life about a year ago. An accident, an assault, an emotional trauma? Mr. Whitman had no idea. Whatever it was, Miss Rowe had come to stay in Cairo with enough money to do nothing . . . but eat.

When Mr. Whitman first met her, she still moved around a bit, going out to buy what she wanted or to

drive the back roads and take in the countryside. But now it was virtually impossible for her to leave her apartment. These last few months had seen Miss Rowe put on weight at an alarming rate. Clearly she was approaching the six-hundred-pound mark, if she hadn't already passed it. She had arranged for several area food stores to deliver groceries to her, and fresh supplies arrived daily.

Her apartment had been transformed into a center for this remarkable consumption. Furniture was literally pushed out to make room for the essentials. A schoolboy with a perpetually dazed look on his face came around every afternoon to dispose of the piles of trash that Miss Rowe produced, while she spent most of her time reclining on an arrangement of four king-size mattresses, stacked two across two, and an array of pillows. She covered her epic bulk with overlapping sheets so that only her head, shoulders, and arms were visible.

Around her and within easy reach, like a ring of sophisticated equipment in the intensive-care unit of a hospital, waited a microwave oven, a hot plate, three small refrigerators, a toaster, a blender, and a bookshelf that held plenty of paper plates and plastic tumblers, forks, spoons, and knives. Then there were the garbage sacks and the cartons of food.

Mr. Whitman was used to all this because he had become a frequent visitor, as fascinated as he was appalled by Miss Rowe's extraordinary way of life. In the beginning they had argued, often heatedly. He would tell her she simply had to go on a diet and get help—whatever it took to stop her from gorging herself incessantly. But Miss Rowe would have none of that. She was happy and positively cheerful about her habits. Mr. Whitman took to reading to her from articles and books on the subject of bulimia, compulsive eating. But Miss Rowe refuted these expertly, pointing out that she never vomited, never purged herself with laxatives, and never suffered any guilt or depression. In short, she wasn't bulimic.

She just enjoyed eating.

Mr. Whitman persisted, explaining over and over the dangers, the very real threat, to her heart and health. But again Miss Rowe smiled away his warnings. "Your body tells you," she would say calmly while devouring another can of spiced apple rings. "Most people don't pay attention to their bodies, but I do. I really do. When it tells me to eat, I eat. When it says enough, then I'll stop." Her body, it seemed, urged her only, always, to eat.

Mr. Whitman then adopted a different tactic. He told her about his past travels to Europe and Asia, his vacations in Mexico and the Caribbean. He would go on eloquently and at length about the sights he'd seen and the people he'd met. But travel seemed to hold little interest for Miss Rowe, and in desperation he began describing some of the food he had eaten abroad. He didn't like doing this, but he reasoned that if she were sufficiently intrigued, she might want to do some traveling herself to sample foreign cuisine—and then she would have to impose some dietary discipline just to be able to undertake any trip. That also failed, however. Miss Rowe loved food, but indiscriminately. The thought of toad in the hole, coq au vin, Arnold Bennett omelets, prawn vindaloo, Creole crayfish, and five-snake soup aroused no excitement in her. She was perfectly happy to zap in the microwave three or four chicken pot pies fresh from the freezer section of the supermarket and tamp them down with pickled herring, some hot dogs, and a quart of applesauce. Miss Rowe was not averse to good food, but she had no time for extraneous effort.

Although his concern never diminished—on the contrary, it continued to grow—Mr. Whitman did begin to concede the struggle after a month or so. The arguments were pointless, in the sense that they achieved nothing. Miss Rowe's confidence was unbreakable, her appetite supreme. Mr. Whitman could see himself turning into a nag, and that wouldn't do. Besides, by then he liked the girl too much to fight with her. He would still try, with a remark here, a caution there, to get through to her, but he had come

to accept her as she was. He hardly realized it, but she had quickly become very dear to him. She was practically the only other person in his life.

The power mower continued to drone down the street, but the breeze had died for the time being. Mr. Whitman sat on the room's only chair and found his place in the book.

" 'I was living at that time in a little street you probably don't know . . .' "

Miss Rowe closed her eyes and listened contentedly. She chewed marshmallows because they were quiet. Books had never interested her, but she loved to hear Mr. Whitman read stories to her. He was very good, seldom stumbling over a word, and he could be dramatic without sounding hammy. No one else had ever read to her, not even when she was a small child, so she had nobody to compare him with, but all the same, she knew he was the best.

" 'I don't know how I have been able to keep untold for so long the story I am about to tell you . . .' "

He lit a cigarette when he finished the Balzac tale. He had made a point of telling Miss Rowe the first time they chatted that he limited himself to ten smokes a day, thinking she might find a way to apply his example to her own situation. But while she saluted his willpower, she did not take up the suggestion. Now they talked about the story and the author, with Mr. Whitman carrying most of the conversation and Miss Rowe saying that "Facino Cane" was beautiful but so sad—and how many cups of coffee did Balzac drink every night? Finally Mr. Whitman was ready to conclude his visit.

"Please come back and see me again this evening," Miss Rowe said when he stood up.

"Sure. I'll look in later," he promised, but then it occurred to him that there was something odd in the way she had spoken. Some extra hint of urgency. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes," Miss Rowe replied, but with pro forma assurance. "It's just that I'd like to see you again. This evening."

"Fine. Well." Mr. Whitman started to go.

"Something's happening," she whispered breathlessly, to hold him there a moment longer.

"What is it?" Mr. Whitman asked. Now he was worried.

"I don't know. I just feel . . . different. Like something's changing inside me. But it's not bad," she added hastily. "It feels good, in a funny way."

"You can't judge things like that by yourself," he said sharply. "I really do think you need to see a doctor. It could be your heart. Funny signs often mean there is something very unfunny just around the corner."

"No, *no*." Then Miss Rowe made an effort to restrain herself and went on daintily, "I will not be poked and prodded and tested and otherwise treated like a freak. Next thing you know, I'd be in the *National Enquirer*. As it is, I worry all day and half the night that word will get out through one of the delivery boys and I'll be besieged by reporters, photographers, curiosity seekers, and self-important doctors. I couldn't bear it." She hesitated, then brightened. "Anyway, I told you: I feel good, not ill. In fact, I've never felt better. I'm tingly all over."

Mr. Whitman sighed unhappily. The whole thing would be nonsensical if it weren't fraught with danger. Tingly all over, indeed. He couldn't imagine what that meant in the context of her general health. And the remark that something was happening: What was he supposed to make of that? He knew Miss Rowe had a penchant for the dramatic and was always trying to make something out of the sheer uneventfulness of her daily life. That's all there is to it, he tried to persuade himself.

But she did look somewhat different. Miss Rowe's face had a little more color to it than usual. She appeared to be slightly flushed; her cheeks were pink, whereas they were usually rather sallow because she spent all her time indoors.

Mr. Whitman and Miss Rowe touched each other rarely, and then only when their hands met to exchange something. But now Mr. Whitman had to be

decisive. He sat on the edge of the mattresses and placed the back of his hand on her forehead.

"Are you running a temperature?" he asked, to make his intentions quite clear.

"Oh," she said, perhaps a little disappointed. "I don't think so."

"Hmmn." Mr. Whitman marveled silently at the feel of her skin. Miss Rowe's head was not as large as a beach ball but gave the impression that it was. He had expected it to be soft and spongy with so much fat, but it was surprisingly firm. Although there were layers of jowls pleated below the jawline, the forehead was smooth, nearly taut. The texture was silky and supple. Mr. Whitman discovered he was reluctant to take his hand away. "Perhaps just a slight temperature," he announced, though he was not at all certain.

"I think you're imagining it," Miss Rowe said with a girlish smile. "But it's nice that you care. I don't know what I'd do without you."

You'd just keep on eating, Mr. Whitman thought sadly. But he smiled back at her, for he was truly fond of the young woman.

"Take it easy," he advised her. "You know, I wish you would eat more fruits and vegetables and go easier on the junk food." He had delivered this message countless times.

"Oh, but I do," Miss Rowe insisted enthusiastically. "Did I tell you that I made a Waldorf salad this morning? I did, all by myself."

"Well, that's good," Mr. Whitman responded, his face achieving something like a grin. She was so proud of herself for managing such a trivial feat that he didn't tell her a Waldorf salad was not only healthier but a step up in taste.

"I'm surprised more people don't realize just how good a salad can be for breakfast," Miss Rowe went on.

"Yes."

Mr. Whitman left then; otherwise, he would be stuck there for a long and expanding rhapsody on salads, breakfasts, and food in general. He went directly to his shop in town and picked Rufus King's *The Lesser Antilles Case* and Kirby Williams's *The C.V.C. Murders* for his Saturday night and Sunday afternoon reading treats.

Back in his apartment, Mr. Whitman filled a pilsner glass with cold beer and looked through the few items of mail he'd found at the shop. Nothing of interest except a catalog from a dealer in St. Paul. He soon pushed the catalog aside and lit another cigarette.

Miss Rowe worried him. If something happened to her, if her heart suddenly gave out, he would be morally responsible. Now he wondered if he wouldn't also be legally at risk for failing to bring her to the attention of some medical authority. He had no idea what the law said, if anything, about a situation like this. Would he be liable to a charge of negligence? Or even negligent homicide?

It didn't seem fair. Miss Rowe was, after all, an adult, and as such, she was responsible for herself. She was compulsive but not mentally incompetent. Should his loyalty be directed to her as a personal friend, accepting her as she was, or to her health and well-being? The two should not be mutually exclusive, though in this case they seemed to be, and Mr. Whitman thought that sooner or later he would have to discuss the matter with a physician—or a lawyer. But he would mention no names, at least until he had received some guidance. It was a matter that demanded clarification.

Later, when the sun was gone but darkness had not yet settled in completely, Mr. Whitman tapped on Miss Rowe's door and entered her apartment. There were no lights on and it was hard to see, but he was aware of her stirring as the sheets rustled softly. Perhaps she had dozed off for a while.

"Turn on the lamp." Groggy, she struggled to elevate herself against the pillows.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"No, not at all. Come in."

Mr. Whitman switched on the light and took his seat. Her eyes were puffier than usual, he thought, her complexion even more flushed than it had been that afternoon.

"Come closer," she said. He slid the wooden chair nearer to her bed, wedging himself between a refrigerator and the shelves of paper plates. "No, not there. Sit next to me on the bed, please. I'm feeling kind of down."

Mr. Whitman perched himself cautiously on the edge of the mattresses. He was surprised that Miss Rowe didn't suffer blue moods more frequently. It wasn't right that a young woman in her twenties should lead such a solitary, reclusive existence. And no matter how strongly she denied it, the constant eating had to take a psychological toll. Mr. Whitman wondered if her high spirits were finally beginning to weaken.

"You're so good to me." Miss Rowe took his hand, squeezed it, refused to let go. Her grip was warm and strangely inviting. "I wish I could thank you in some way."

"Oh, don't be silly," Mr. Whitman responded with a nervous smile. "The funny thing is, only a few minutes ago I was thinking that I've really been quite negligent about you."

"That's not true. Far from it. You've been just the person I needed. Without you, I don't know if I could have . . . well, you've made all the difference, believe me."

She squeezed his hand again. Odd, Mr. Whitman thought. It was almost as if she were comforting him.

"I must look awful," Miss Rowe went on. "I haven't looked in a mirror in ages. Do I . . . look awful?"

"No, of course not." She wasn't begging a compliment, but Mr. Whitman naturally wanted to answer as positively as he could. "You do look tired, though, and as I've told you before, you need to make some changes in—"

"I *am* changing," she interrupted, looking away from him but also tightening her grip on his hand. "I *am* changing."

"Good. Well, good." Mr. Whitman didn't know what else to say because he didn't understand what she meant. He had the vague feeling that she was

trying to edge him closer to something. "Can you tell me—or would you like to tell me—what happened?"

"When?"

"In Boston."

"Oh." She looked at him again and smiled. "Does it make a difference? What would you say if I told you that I killed someone? My family, for instance."

"I wouldn't believe it," he scoffed. The idea was absurd.

"You see? It doesn't make any difference."

"But something did happen," he insisted. "You must tell me, Frances. It'll be good for you to talk about it with a friend you can trust."

They rarely addressed each other by their first names, and Miss Rowe seemed touched. But she merely shrugged and gave him a bewildering smile.

"That's just it," she said quietly. "Nothing happened."

Mr. Whitman found that hard to believe, although there was nothing deceptive or evasive about her manner and tone of voice. On the contrary, they carried the weight of truth.

"I want to talk to someone about you," he told her finally. "I'm sorry if it upsets you, but I have to, and this time I mean to do it."

To his surprise, Miss Rowe didn't object. She nodded slowly as if to say she understood, and she even pulled his hand closer to her. "Not tonight, though," she said. "You won't do anything tonight."

"Well, no," he allowed. It was the weekend, after all, and he probably wouldn't have any luck getting a doctor or a lawyer, even if he tried. "But first thing Monday morning."

"That's all right."

It seemed too easy, and for a few moments Mr. Whitman wasn't sure that he'd actually said what he meant, or that she had grasped it. Not that it really mattered; he knew what he was going to do on Monday, and already he felt better about things.

"Lawrence."

"Hmm?" He had to swallow to clear his throat. "Yes?"

"Would you lie down here next to me on the bed?"

Her voice was tiny and distant, painfully vulnerable.

"I just need you to be here with me and to hold me for a few minutes."

Mr. Whitman couldn't speak, but he felt an emotional surge that made his body tremble and his cheeks redden. He slipped off his loafers. She must be terribly lonely, he thought. She needs comfort, a little human warmth. He stretched out on the mattress and moved tentatively closer to her enormous bulk. Miss Rowe pulled him closer still, until the length of his body pressed against hers. She handled him easily, like a toy doll, so that he had one arm across the expanse of her middle and his head on her breast. Then she seemed to sigh and to settle, and they stayed that way for some time.

Mr. Whitman was glad that she was under the sheet and he was not. He was paralyzed—caught in a state of diffuse, but undeniable, erotic tension. Perhaps he needed this human warmth, too, and the contact was all the more exciting because it was essentially chaste. He stopped thinking about it and let himself enjoy it, drifting along dreamily, half awake, until it eventually occurred to him that he had been lying in her embrace for quite a while.

The air was cooler. The French doors were still open, and it was dark outside. Miss Rowe's breathing was slightly congested but regular, and her arm fell away from him when Mr. Whitman stirred. She was asleep. He moved carefully, picked up his shoes, turned off the lamp, and went back to his own apartment.

He had another beer and smoked a cigarette. He couldn't sit still. His feelings were alarming, exciting, and above all, mysterious to him. Did he love her? Yes. But not as a lover—although, he had to admit, there was a disturbing new physical element to it now. The feel of her body and her touch lingered on him like a tactile afterglow. He almost believed that if he looked in the bathroom mirror, he would see it on his hand and cheek, a radiance, an aura.

Then a shocking thought came to him. She was

beautiful. Miss Rowe, Frances, the nearly six hundred pounds of her, was truly beautiful. And not in spite of her massive size but because of it. The one thing about her that had frightened and even repelled him now struck him as nothing less than miraculous. Maybe she did suffer from a dangerous compulsion, but wasn't it also a sign of her strength and courage, her quality and character?

Mr. Whitman drank three more bottles of beer and didn't bother to count the cigarettes. His mind raced from one thought to another, uncovering pockets of illumination where there had been only uncertainty before. Yes, he loved her. In all ways. He would take care of her, more devotedly than ever, but without trying to change her. He would keep her alive, healthy, happy; there were ways. The discipline of a love, a better diet; somehow it could all be made to work. In a way, he had to surrender to her for her to surrender to him.

Mr. Whitman glanced at the clock, but he didn't care that it was after eleven. He wanted to see her again, tell her things. And to be with her—for the warmth and peace of her all-inclusive embrace.

At the door of his apartment, he hesitated one last time. Was he making an idiot of himself, a pathetic, middle-aged joke? Was he drunk, deluded, hysterical? No, he decided; and, anyway, he didn't care.

Mr. Whitman listened at her door and heard sounds of movement. He tapped, got no response, and then knocked a little louder. Still nothing but those peculiar noises, muffled and unfamiliar. He turned the handle and went inside. The room was dark, but moonlight through the open French doors provided some faint definition; his eyes began to adjust.

Miss Rowe was writhing on her makeshift bed like a person lost in an increasingly uncomfortable dream. She appeared to be asleep, but Mr. Whitman felt a shiver when he noticed that her eyes were half open, glassy, unseeing. She made sounds that were strangled in her throat. A fever, he thought, or convulsions. Something terrible was happening; of that he was cer-

tain. He banged his knee against a refrigerator and crushed a carton of cheese crackers underfoot as he approached the bed, but Miss Rowe gave no sign that she recognized his presence. Her movements were becoming sharper and more violent by the minute, thrashing and jerking.

Mr. Whitman put his hand on her forehead and was startled to find that she was not feverish but unnaturally cold. Her skin was slick with moisture, her hair smeared back on her skull. More than anything, he was frightened by how cold she felt. It was all wrong. But there was something else. The skin itself felt different. It was hard, almost scaly.

Then her head turned again and caught the meager light. Mr. Whitman saw that her eyes had changed. They were closed now, swollen so tightly that it was nearly impossible to make out the thin slits on either side of her nose—itself so broad and flat now that it looked as if it had been pressed, squashed to her face. She continued to toss and squirm but with her arms tight to her body and her legs rigidly straight together, as if she were tied from her head to her feet.

The noises emanating from her grew in intensity and as she shrugged free of the sheet, Mr. Whitman saw that her jowl-ringed, flabby neck was somehow changed. It melded smoothly into her shoulders, as if there were no real neck there at all. And the skin, like that of her face, was so pale, it was almost a brilliant white, shiny and hard.

Mr. Whitman shook with fear, but he could hardly move. He managed to put a hand on her shoulder—the round slope where her shoulder had been—and again he was shocked at how cold she felt. He had to do something, but that thought was nothing more than a disembodied voice in his brain. Miss Rowe escaped the sheet. Naked, he realized dimly, she's naked. But her body had lost its features—breasts, hips, buttocks—and become a long, large, tubular thing. She was not Miss Rowe. She was something more or less than human. The word, Mr. Whitman thought insanely, is *larval.*

She was struggling on the bed, heaving and shrugging her entire body as if she were trying to escape that place. Mr. Whitman clambered across the lower part of the bed as he realized she was trying to move away from him. It seemed that the most important thing was for her to remain where she was and to get expert help. It was the only way she might overcome whatever terrible illness had seized her. But Miss Rowe would not stay still. She squirmed vigorously, rolling and flipping herself, advancing off the edge of the bed. She was so big—for an instant Mr. Whitman was frightened by the sheer, naked size of her as she reared up at him.

I love you, he thought hopelessly. He leapt at her, arms spread wide, his legs pushing with all the strength he could manage. He hoped to embrace her and get through to her, to force her back onto the bed. Their bodies met and froze together, Mr. Whitman clinging to what once had been Miss Rowe.

"Frances," he gasped, dizzy with love and fear. "Frances."

The moment lasted only a second or two, but seemed much longer to Mr. Whitman because it was his last. He thought she recognized him in some way—his warmth; his physical presence, if nothing else. But then whatever forces held her drove Miss Rowe over him with irresistible power, and Mr. Whitman was bent back like a blade of grass as she surged and slid on her way. The appliances around the bed, the cartons of food, and the shelves were all knocked easily aside like hollow stage props. Picking up speed, Miss Rowe slithered out into the night and was gone.

In the morning the delivery boy found the French doors wide open. There was a trail of sticky wetness across the back lawn, a wide, unbroken ribbon that snaked through the grass to the unused garden plot. It looked like a tunnel had been dug there, and then had collapsed in on itself. A huge mound of soil had been turned up, and this dirt had the round, nodal appearance of digested earth.

Of Mr. Whitman, there was not a trace.