Mundane Cruelty

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John and Mary live in a small house. The small house has a back garden but no front garden. The back garden is a sea of verdant grass. When you step out of the front door you step onto a small square of pavement and then you meet the road. There are many perks to living in the city but this is not one of them. The cars and trucks and buses do not slow down and do not stop. It is very dangerous. The back garden is long and narrow. John wants to pour concrete over the grass but is not allowed.

Mary is lying on the expensive sofa. She has two telephones on the go. She is working. Her face still holds last night's makeup, smudged. The ramifications of last night twist her stomach. Dehydration and hunger impinge upon her and her thoughts. She is wearing sweatpants and a college t. The penury of sleep pains Mary, exaggeratingly.

John is sitting on an old rocking chair, which he bought at an antique fair. He was "mugged" he says but he likes sitting in the rocking chair. The book he is reading, or pretending to read, is about Hell. His new obsession is Hell.

Mary yawns and then parses. John feels for the person having to listen to Mary. After the yawn Mary scratches her nose.

Sometime today John has to mow the lawn. It is in the 90s. It will reach 100. John hates mowing the lawn. John believes he is allergic to grass. He is allergic to grass. Mary tells John to hire somebody to mow the lawn. John thinks that hiring somebody to mow the lawn is a waste of money. Ever since John was "mugged" by the man at the antique fair over the rocking chair he has vowed never to be "mugged" again. The allergic reaction to grass is: 1. A runny nose. 2. Swelling under the eyes and tears. 3. A puce taint to the face and neck. 4. Headaches. 5. Toothache. 6. Diarrhea.

"Nobody goes to Hades anymore," says John. "Once upon a time everybody went to Hades. But now nobody goes to Hades. Death is still with us. We all die. But the dead no longer go to Hades. It is an easy place to find Hades. We know that the entrance to Hades can be found in Avernus, a crater near Cumae. Andrea De Jorio drew a map. The map shows you how to get to Hades and how to get back from Hades and he showed the interior of Hades. Andrea De Jorio was obsessed with Pompeii. The city is a city of sex and death. Heracles & Theseus & Odysseus & Aeneas paid a visit to Hades and returned."

Mary is busy with her telephone call. Work is all encompassing. Her brain is on the rack and the words are water flowing over a stretched towel entering the neverclosing rictus. She is drowning.

"When I am asked where I want to go I will tell them on my death bed to place the obols on my eyes for Charon and that I am off to Hades," says John.

He laughs tenuously.

Mary doesn't laugh. She heard but she finds John's pretentious talk silly and boring plus the telephone call she is now participating in is dealing with a multimillion dollar lawsuit.

This little charade of John's was merely camouflage, for John has a secret he wants to tell Mary, to spill, to unload. He bites his bottom lip. Sweat purls over his blistering skin. He reads a sentence and gains a modicum of equilibrium. The sentence is: Drexelius somehow pictured 100,000,000,000 burnt, flayed and gutted souls in the space of one cubic German mile.

John and Mary married just as Mary was accepted into law school. John was very happy for Mary and never complained because he knew that there would be a payoff and there was and everything worked out as planned. Mary worked hard for those three years and after passing the bar

joined John at the bank, although she works in a different department. Mary makes more money and has a higher position within the bank. She is a ban two and he is a ban three (banker jargon).

It's too early for a glass of wine but maybe not for a beer. They both quit smoking three years ago. There was talk of babies and cancer. Mary's mother "caught the cancer." Mary talks about cancer as though you can catch cancer like a cold or flu.

"It's time," says John not meaning to quote T.S. Eliot.

The neighbor waters his back lawn obsessively. John never waters his lawn but the water from the neighbor's lawn finds its way into John's lawn. There is a slight slope.

The secret is a kidney stone. The secret is a tumor. The secret is cancer. The secret has rabies and has razor sharp teeth and is eating away at John's stomach.

"After you have mowed the lawn we could go out somewhere to eat," says Mary. She feels guilty that she ignored John and his fatuous obsession.

"Yes," says John. "We could get sushi."

John's throat is boiling over with the secret. His tongue is swelling. His mouth is burning. It is as if some person, nefarious and Sadean, has poured battery acid into his mouth. His teeth ache.

"I could phone Kim and Alan and see if they want to join us," says Mary. Before John can nod his head in the affirmative or say yes she is already on the telephone with Kim. They work together at the bank.

"Kim, do you fancy sushi?" says Mary.

"…"

Mary looks at John and shakes her head and pulls a face of disappointment. John is relieved.

The secret is rhizomatic. The secret is a patch of mushrooms awakening in a quagmire. The secret is a corolla which is opening up to the sun and whose dust is filling the air causing: 1. A runny nose. 2. Swelling under the eyes and tears. 3. A puce taint to the face and neck. 4. Headaches. 5. Toothache. 6. Diarrhea.

John is just about to speak, his lips have parted, his tongue is animated, there are word-heavy words in his throat, he is about to liberate himself of the secret, to divest the secret, to share the secret, when Mary says: "They will meet us afterwards, after you have mowed the lawn, for drinks."

Mary is beautiful. I dapple her face with warts and zits and blackheads and carbuncles. She eyes me with anger and hurt. I ask her why she eyes me so. Mary shrugs her shoulders. I tell Mary to sit down. Mary sits down on a chair. The chair is old and squeaks like a mouse. I tie Mary to the chair with thick rope. I remove Mary's fingernails and toenails. I pinch Mary's nipples and remove her eyelashes and shave her eyebrows. I will commence after I have dealt with John to impregnate Mary. John is mine. So, I pull down his pants and kick him in the balls. John will not scream. I will once again kick him in the balls. The balls will swell. John will keep his lips shut and his eyes open. I will order John to turn. John turns. I kick John in the ass. John will move forward three paces. I will follow John and repeatedly kick him in the ass. I order John to turn and face me. I kick John in the balls, again. I order John to go out into the back garden and start mowing the lawn. I have decided to riff the pair of them.