

Plastic Surgery



Toby Olson

The first time he saw Natasha, he was taken by her tall, statuesque figure and her Russian beauty. She had been a model (well, she still was then), and he found her awkward English and their brief conversation quite charming. They had met at a gallery opening, a strange and compelling showing of enhanced photographs of women's faces, and though he admired the faces of women, he found that he was unmoved by these depictions.

He was a salesman for Barrett and Johnson insurance company, indeed the Salesman of the Year (1983), and he was out on the town, still basking in the glory of that honor. Once they had spoken their few words, she was swallowed up by a crowd of admirers, and he had left and gone to a bar, in which he sat on a stool, a whisky close at hand, and thought about her and the inheritance he had just received, five million dollars from his cousin's uncle on the mother's side. He'd never met the man and had no idea as to why he'd become the recipient of such wealth. His name was Norman.

And so it was that they met again, in a park beside a giant maple tree encircled by a bench, the boards of which were dappled by sunlight and warmed and cushioned their bodies as they leaned

back against them, sweet sent of the tree's bark and the twitter of sparrows invisible among the branches and leaves above. The faint, cheerful voices of children in the distance and the gurgle of a fountain provided background music for their casual talk, softly punctuating the cool stillness of the day.

And that was it. A dozen or so dates, dinner and movies, six months, and they were married.

And things were just fine in the beginning. In their new life, they spoke often, but briefly, and very entertainingly. She was a wonderful cook, preparing, with great fanfare, various Russian dishes. She wore her model clothing around the apartment, a condominium that he had purchased a few years before, and he often noticed her posing before large mirrors, ones she had brought with her into their marriage. She had brought other things as well, expensive modern furniture, fancy lamps, bed linens. She'd pushed his utilitarian stuff aside or had gotten rid of it. He didn't mind these losses, nor the ones having to do with his clothing. She dressed him in designer stuff, up from shorts and jeans all the way to a tux for fancy parties, the ones they never attended now that she was struggling with her career.

Then she had plastic surgery. She'd said she needed it in order to get those now illusive modeling jobs. He understood this, and he was fine with it, noticing no changes of expression when she came home, hid in her room, then appeared one day in her new face. They were both forty-three years old. The jobs were few and far between, and she grew increasingly frustrated and angry about that. For some reason, angry at him as well.

For expecting it of me to cook only!? Lookit at me, this face! Still is beautiful? Why no jobs then? It is you I think. Holding me preventing. All times stupid! I say, lookit at me!

But he was not looking at her. He sat at his neat desk most evening, studying actuarial tables, settling claims, examining his new investments. And so her anger increased. He was five foot seven, and she would bang into his stomach with her hip, then stride of, as if she were moving down some fashion week runway. Occasionally she wacked him on the back of his head with her open palm or a wooden spoon. She worked out, palates, weights, miles on her stationary bike. She was six foot three, and that in her stocking feet.

Norman had often wondered about plastic surgery,

especially that designed to improve the faces of women. It was never some returning, going back to a time when one was younger, though that seemed most often to be the intent. What was it then?

He was thinking these things on his three mile walk, heading back home from the office, his only exercise, which he accomplished at a good pace, though on this day he could be seen limping slightly, from behind, his bowed legs more prominent than usual. He had felt blood on the back of his left knee upon awaking. She had leaned down and stabbed him there when he had approached too close while she was filleting the striped bass last night. *Get away you!* she had yelled at him. He thought she might have interfered with some tendon or ligament back there. The wound was quite painful.

But these women, he was thinking. In some of the worse cases and some of the better ones too, he had seen a sheen, a glowing of the skin that made it seem as if a thin sheet of polyester film had been tightly affixed there to provide a certain youthfulness that though apparent at a distance was no more than a subtle covering of the actual on closer examination. Some of the women seemed to know this as a bit of fakery and would look away. But this was perception only, Norman understood, a metaphor, and he knew the reality was quite different from that.

Walking. His leg aching. Limping. The small rise of the hump on his back more prominent as he motored slowly along. His natural tonsure, his scalp glistening with sweat. Two more miles. What was it that Natasha had seen in him? What did he see in her?

He knew that their marriage was nearing its final stage, that he no longer loved her, nor she him. In the beginning, and for a long while, it had been her beauty, her stature and presence. For her, he thought, it had been his money, then his honor, Salesman of the Year after all, though she had seemed a bit jealous at his success. She wasn't working, hadn't been for a long while now. Though she was still beautiful, she was too old, and the plastic surgery hadn't helped. She was enraged all the time now, and the brutality she inflicted upon him was, in reality, an attack on her own body. She felt she was falling apart and wished only that he would join her. These were deep understandings, as he trundled along, thinking of his leg and the ways in which he seemed to be losing the structures of his life.

He'd always been a man who valued order, both in his doings and in his person, but recently his client lists had fallen into a shambles. He was no longer out on the road visiting prospects, something other high level executives at Barrett and Johnson had never done. He'd been thought of as a wonder salesman, someone who stayed close to his clients, got down in the dirt with them. Kindly, yet shrewd, he managed to set records in lowering payoffs that otherwise might have been astronomical.

And then there was his dress and grooming. He'd stopped shaving every day, and would appear at work with a shadow of hair on his face. Some thought it was a style matter, the scruffy look, yet most were aware of some difficulty. His unkempt fringe of hair, his soiled and wrinkled clothing. Often he worked at home, in his study, and didn't make it to work at all. The top boss was watching him, cognizant of the facts and that he might be in serious trouble. Salesman of the Year was well behind him now. It no longer carried much weight.

He was passing a row of stores now in his slow perambulation, a gourmet food shop, its delectable wares, cheeses and prepared dishes, on shelves facing the window; a fancy fish store; a gift shop, various greeting cards, glass paper weights, display cases full of expensive soaps garishly packaged, tumblers, small ceramic frogs; and at the end of the row, a women's clothing boutique.

He paused, his knee was aching, and he was tired. And through the large plate glass window he spied a woman who stood out from the other customers and elegantly dressed sales staff. She was tall and slim and wore a fine linen sheath dress and had moved to a floor length free standing mirror that faced away from the window outside of which Norman stood. She was facing him, examining herself, and he could see her clearly. Perhaps forty year old, he thought, beautiful, and she had been touched by the surgeon's knife.

He had seen many women who'd had their faces professionally carved, and even looking at this one, whose operation had been of a very high quality and was for the most part invisible, he could tell that work had been done. He could see it in a tightness at the edge of her eye, an elevation of her cheeks, and the way she lifted her chin in order to display, even to herself now, her new neck.

Now he saw clearly what he had imagined he'd seen before. The warm voices and graceful gestures of such women were the same as they had been, though somewhat aggressive now, or mildly strident. Often they seemed subtly ventriloquised. When they spoke their words might be sweet or angry or simply fed up, but they floated on a soft red slide, which was the tongue, and their deliverance was fragrant and of cold, hard thinking and of deep understanding. This even while yelling.

And then he saw what he knew was the most important things: the eyes and the two faces. She was there in the window, and she saw him and she looked at him. Maybe it was his injury or his exhaustion. Maybe it was the coolness of the early fall day. Her eyes blinked once, then stared at him. And in their deep blue pools, hardly perceptible at first, he could see through to the other eye. He lowered his gaze to her face, and there, in it or through it or behind it, he saw the other, deeper face. The surface was a thin, beautiful, mask, and the vaguely seen, though strong and relaxed presence behind it was who she was, or not quite, for it was she who had wanted this improvement and was now both the mask and the spirit.

He felt he could speak to her, imagined that he had, and the more he looked and looked, the image of the one he was speaking to came forward and the mask became just that, something to see through. He'd been speaking to, and was now looking at, the spirit behind the mask, the controller. There came a moment in their reverse movements when the two faces came together. And there was the beautiful, fully integrated, woman. Then the two faces separated and the spirit took over again.

"I shoulda got the fuckin money. He was my uncle, not yours!"

He turned, and there was his cousin Fred, that bulky guy, a weightlifter who dabbled in cage fighting. And Norman could see that he was back on steroids once again. He was almost vibrating. He said nothing more, then lunged at him and began punching him in the face and body. It hurt like hell, and even though Fred came to his senses quickly, the damage had been done. A crushed cheek bone, a fracture of the patella on the opposite side of his damaged leg, his nose broken and pushed dramatically to the side.

And so it was that he was staggering up the stairs to his apartment on the second floor. He'd tried to wipe the blood away

with his shirt, but it had coagulated and was sticky and close to impossible to rub off. He reached the landing, then opened the door and entered into the living room, only to find her once again examining herself in one of her mirrors. She glimpsed his reflection to the side of her shoulder and turned.

My Got! What is happening to you? You are one big mess!

Her words were delivered out of kindness, he thought. But as she approached, a look of concern upon her face, he saw what he had seen in the shop window, the mask, and below it the character of the controller. She was there, the real Natasha, that face and those eyes that she had manipulated so successfully in the time of their marriage before plastic surgery. Now the manipulation was on the surface, and her real face had relaxed into the person she really was. It was a face of pure evil. He saw it in her burning eyes, in the blood rising in her cheeks.

She crossed the room, staring at him, smiling now, and reached down and lifted him up into her arms. Then she moved to the closed window, paused, and threw him into the glass.

They were only on the second floor, and he landed in a dumpster full of garbage bags that cushioned his fall. He was lucky to get away with only a cracked hip and a broken ankle, and these added to his other injuries made it necessary that an ambulance be called. His downstairs neighbor took care of this. Natasha was nowhere to be seen.

He was in the hospital close to a month, and his cousin Fred, still profusely apologetic about the beating, sat by his bedside every day as he recovered, and when he left the hospital, it was Fred who drove him to the studio apartment that he had arranged for.

It was a small, but nice enough place, and Fred went to the apartment with a rental truck and gathered what was left of Norman's furniture.

"She didn't say a thing. Not anything. What happened?"

And Norman told him the story that he had told the police. He had stumbled and his bum leg has given out and he had crashed through the window.

Fred was suspicious, as the police had been, but Norman stuck to the story, and in the end his version of the event was accepted.

He got a lawyer, then he contacted a plastic surgeon, and

before long he had a new face, was back at work, and had organized his affairs. He settled one million dollars on Fred. Natasha received two million and the apartment, and he was left with what remained, enough for a new condominium, a two bedroom in a high rise closer to work, and anything he might desire, a car, clothing, travel. He desired very little, just his work, a fine single malt Scotch, a little TV, and a good book for bedtime reading.

He knew the two faces were there now, but he never spent time before mirrors, and in a while he figured that the two had fused together, the controller had come to the surface.

And so it was that others began to noticed the openness of his new expression. They saw it as welcoming, in no way dissembling, and sincere. He acquired new friends, went dancing with a small graceful woman, vacationed in Cabo San Lucas. His smile was contagious. He became light on his feet.

He has seen me from behind my face, so out window. Crack hip, broking ankle. Not much.

This man Norman husband was fool. I put up all years! Some time I had wish for sledgit hammer!

Yes, was money. Now I have. Two million coming from uncle of cousin on other side.

I have it my house, my beemer, my model stuff clothings, my best furnitures. I have it not stupid fuck Norman.

I have it also my mirrors.

There I am now. Lookit at me.

I am so pretty!