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The Alabaster King

Nicholas O. Rosenberger

Gettysburg College, roseni01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

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Author Bio

Nick Rosenberger is a first-year. He enjoys Chinese food, reading books, listening to music, vinyl, chopping wood, tea, the outdoors, and social justice. If you share these interests, tell him, and he will be friends with you...maybe.

The Alabaster King

I sink to the hardened ground as warmth betrays my skin. My body protests the cruel torture and begins to shut down. The cold is agonizing, but the pain serves as a reminder that I am alive. The frigid air slowly suffocates me, until I submit to its icy embrace and close my eyes sinking into a restful sleep. A violent shiver crawls through my frail body, like an electric current passing through a wire. Still, I remain at rest even as the blood in my veins is replaced by sheets of ice. It took me a second to remember how I ended up here: I started drinking and I never stopped.

It was morning and I trudged through the dewy grass as first light began to stir the world to waking. Far off in the distance lights flickered on, illuminating windows, like fireflies ushering in the night, only in reverse. The scene around me started to spin until the horizon had melted away and there was only sky. At the first taste of bile I dropped to my knees. I didn't fight the urge to vomit. When my stomach was empty I collapsed onto my side gasping for air until the retching subsided. My throat burned and hot tears slid down my cheeks. Wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my coat, I forced myself to stand up. Freshly cut grass clippings clung to my hands, until I brushed them off onto my pants. I stumbled onward, but there was no place for me to go, eventually I found a bench. A gentle, but persistent nudging stole me away from my drunken dreaming. An old woman continued to prod me until I surrendered half of the bench to her. She reached into a worn brown satchel and retrieved yarn and a set of knitting needles. Wrinkles spread over her face and suddenly she reminded me of a squirrel. The needles clicked together rhythmically and created a makeshift lullaby.

I woke up hours later with the sensation of carpenters in my head, sawing and pounding. I had to face the cement and asphalt wasteland that lay before me. Standing shakily, I started the trek. As I emerged from an alley, a diesel truck roared by me and left behind a dark cloud whose pungent fumes burned my nostrils. Fighting off a fit of coughing I strode on slumped and wearied. Somehow I made it back to my apartment and up five flights of stairs, only to find that my key was missing. My body wouldn't take any more requests and I passed out in front of my door.

This time when I woke up, I was inside an apartment. Confused and still groggy I rolled over onto my stomach and nearly fell off the couch I was lying on. A voice coming from my left warned, "Be careful you don't fall off." It was a kind voice. There was a heavy wool blanket wrapped around my body and tucked under my chin and on the floor my coat was neatly folded and placed next to my shoes.

"How long have I been sleeping for?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but I found you passed out against your door

... I remain at rest even as the blood in my veins is replaced by sheets of ice.

a couple of hours ago.” The voice wasn’t familiar to me and it was difficult to separate her face from the shadows of the sparsely lit room. I reached behind me and felt around for my glasses; while I was searching, a dim light filled the room. When I looked up, I saw that the walls were painted in warm earthy tones that reminded me of my childhood. I absorbed it all and allowed myself the brief comfort afforded to me by nostalgia. I am seven years old again, racing wildly through endless fields of corn, pushing stalks out of the way, with my father in hot pursuit, as laughter and joy come bubbling up from inside of me. I hear him calling my voice, but I can’t tell where it’s coming from. The sun is high in the sky and it warms me to my core. My father’s voice has faded away now and I can’t tell which direction will take me back home. Just as panic begins to set in, my father sweeps me off my feet, into his arms, and tickles me. He smells of morning dew and the fields, scents which he never could seem to wash off. I could smell them on him even after we sold the farm and moved to the city and years later as we laid him to rest below the ground.

I finally located my glasses and put them on. They sat crooked and the frame was slightly too large for my face. The scratches that covered the lenses made everything in my world look worn and ruined. In the pale light flowing from the lamp, I recognized the face of my neighbor, Katy. In the four months that I have been a tenant here, I’ve only seen her a handful of times, and even then, I never spoke to her. She sat silently, sipping a cup of steaming tea from a chipped ceramic mug. For the first time, I studied her face. She was young, or at least younger than I had initially thought, only a couple of years older than me. Her features weren’t striking in any way, but there was a beauty in the subtlety of the way they were put together. And there was something else; she radiated this indescribable essence of clairvoyance. I felt as though she already knew more about me than I could ever surmise about her. “Do you believe in God?” she asked me.

The weight of her question caught me off guard, “Like a bearded man in flowing robes, or some higher power guiding us?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Well, which one?”

“Both.”

“No, I stopped believing a long time ago.”

“I do,” she said. “Would you like some tea?” I nodded my head and she rose from her seat and padded into the kitchen. She retrieved a tea kettle from the stove and filled it with fresh water. She began humming softly to herself, but I could tell she wasn’t aware she was doing it. “What kind of tea would you like?”

I said, “Whatever you have is fine.” She proceeded to rattle off a list of about ten different varieties of tea. I asked what she would recommend and she told me that she was partial to lemon with a bit of honey, but that she had something more exotic if I was in the mood. I wasn’t. For a few minutes neither of us said a word and we were left alone with our own thoughts. When she finished steeping the tea, she discarded the bag and approached me with a misshapen mug, which she informed me that she had made herself. This time she sat down next to me, with her legs crossed, leaning against the arm of the couch. Again, she stared at me and continued to sip her tea. I brought my own mug up to my lips in an

attempt to avert my eyes from her gaze. "Do you play chess?" she asked.

"I haven't in a long time," I said.

"Do you have a chess board?"

"Somewhere, I do."

"I don't know how to play, but I love to look at the pieces. Would you teach me?" I didn't know how to respond. I wanted to get back to my apartment and the bottle of Jack I left on the kitchen table. Somehow I agreed to dig up the board and bring it over as soon as I finished my tea. While I was asleep Katy had gone to the doorman, explained my situation, and returned with the spare key. She accompanied me over to my apartment, despite my attempts to dissuade her. I dug through my closet searching for something I had left behind at an earlier stage of my life. And as I dug through two and a half decades of acquired possessions that represented my life, there was not one thing I was proud of. Near the bottom of a tattered cardboard box was the antique chess set I had been searching for.

I took the pieces out one by one and set them on their squares. I explained the rules, told her the name of each piece, and demonstrated how they could be moved around the board. I didn't tell her what my father told me the first time he taught me to play chess, which was: Chess is war and the objective is to crush your opponent's mind. That afternoon we played the first of many games. When the game had ended we both sat back and surveyed the board. Katy sighed and said, "Sometimes I think that I feel too much."

"Most of the world has the opposite problem."

"Does it ever seem like you feel too much?"

I said, "I wake up every day and pray for apathy." I packed up the board and retreated to my apartment. Once there, I sat in an arm chair and massaged my temples, waiting for sleep to come over me. I glanced at the coffee table and lying near the edge was a stained legal pad and a pen. I reached out and retrieved the pad and pen, treating them like a delicate set of china, liable to fall and fracture into a thousand pieces. I flipped to an open page and stared down at the lined paper. At first the nakedness of the stark white page offended me, but then the words began to flow from my hand and through my pen. Over the next few weeks things started to change. For the first time in the longest time, I stopped drinking and started writing again.

Katy stared intently at the chess board in front of her. We'd been playing nearly every day for two weeks and each day the game was becoming more drawn out and my inevitable victory wasn't so inevitable. I had begun to notice something; while we were talking, occasionally she would counter my attacks without a thought, in a single decisive movement. Other times, I could see her hand almost drawn toward a piece that would have struck me a devastating blow, only to pass it by and make a rookie mistake. "Have you ever dreamed in the third person?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"I did once," she said. "I was in a wooden row boat with William Faulkner. We were in the middle of a lake and I was rowing the boat, but there was only one oar. When I looked out across the water I saw glass and I realized we were inside a bottle. My psychiatrist said that it meant I was afraid of dying."

"Katy, how long have you been playing chess?"

"They say I was a child prodigy," she said without changing her tone.

"Why did you lie to me?"

"Would you have listened to me if I had told you the truth?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're twenty-five and burned out. You couldn't stand the cruelty of the world so you gave up and poured your life out one glass at a time." I stared at her, but didn't speak. We resumed the game. I moved a piece. She moved her own and I knew it was over before she had a chance to say, "Checkmate," but instead the words that came out of her mouth were: "Kevin, I'm dying." I watched my king topple in slow motion, like I was viewing the Zapruder film. I went back to my apartment and sat down to write. In the past few weeks I had filled every notebook in my apartment and every scrap of paper. I'd begun to write on the walls and the floor. What looked like chaos was actually perfectly ordered. I picked up where I left off, above the molding in my living room.

I returned to Katy's apartment the next day with the chess board under my arm. She quietly explained to me that she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer three years ago and that complete remission was extremely rare. Somehow I knew that the thing she craved most was normalcy so I gave it to her. We both pretended that everything was fine and that no one was dying, even when a hospice care worker moved in. As the weeks went by Katy's state rapidly deteriorated. I continued to write. I finished my novel the night Katy died. I stood over her and held her hand; in the other she fingered a chess piece. "We all have a destiny in life," Katy said, "and mine was to help you realize the greatness inside of you and to let it out."

"That's bullshit."

"It's not. Life is a mystery, don't act like you understand it." She pressed the alabaster king into my hand and breathed her last breath. I kissed her forehead. Back in my apartment on my kitchen table, covered in dust, sat the bottle of Jack Daniels I had been too afraid to touch. I drank it, and then walked to the liquor store, leaving my notebooks neatly stacked on the coffee table. I grabbed the first bottle off the shelf and told the clerk to ring it up. I headed for the park and slumped down against an ancient oak tree.

If there's one thing that Katy taught me, it's that there can be beauty in the downfall. I dig in my pocket for the alabaster king. My stiff hands claw at the frozen ground. I place the king in the hole and heap up a mound of frost-covered dirt.