

The Woman [Whom They Paid to Go Away]

By Christine Northern

The woman brings in the last of the boxes, gives the two boys who live next door a generous compensation for helping unload the last of the hastily packed belongings from her stuffed hatchback. Most of it was junk but she couldn't bear to sort it out. She takes a deep breath and looks around at the house that'd given her gooseflesh from the pictures, the house that, in a former life, would never be hers in which to hang her hat or drape her coat, pour a glass of wine or use the stone shower. She takes a deep breath and calms her inward spite and shame. "How can this be bad?" she argues aloud, "this is the ultimate revenge."

After the first week she is still maneuvering around boxes. The furniture has not come as planned, and after narrowly missing the cable guy for the third time, she is finally triumphant. She has set up only a laptop powered by stolen wireless network access and an unmounted plasma TV propped in the corner playing DVD's. Her kitchen is littered in plastic bags and takeout cartons. She doesn't think it proper to use the stove before she has a kitchen table. She checks her bank account. Four million, three hundred twenty two thousand, five hundred and fifty dollars and eighty six cents. She paid cash for the house, the debit has cleared. She smiles.

According to her 20 year plan, she will not have to work any job that pays more than \$5.50 an hour to maintain what she currently has in the bank. She knows she has to work. She knows she cannot inherit a life of uselessness just because some chumps that she once loved pooled together seven figures to get rid of her. "How much would it take?" Morgan had asked on behalf of them, quite seriously. She threw out a number, one that was to be interpreted as, "it's impossible for me to leave, because I love you," but was instead seen as more obstinacy. But she is not ready to go out there again, not ready to leave the romance of the newly crafted house heated by its own charms. She is not ready sacrifice too much in exchange for an identity, to argue and compete for her worth amidst another set of arms and legs and heads, a tsunami of grief and judgment, clawing at her squishy heart surrounded by halos that don't heal.

By the end of the month she thinks she could get used to doing nothing, though the small deficit in her 20 year planned budget is burning her mind at the edges. She goes into a frenzy and unpacks everything, spends 11 straight hours getting her house in order. Four of those hours are brain power spent making categories for her house, then for her belongings, and then matching them up: the kitchen, the

guest room, the spare room, the loft, the master suite, the bathrooms, the pantry, the dining room, the game room, the living room, the patio, the pool, the attic, the garage, the basement, the storage closets, the nook, the front yard, the back yard the crawl space. She spends ten minute increments thinking and at one point she cries. She is disheartened that her brain can't categorize things as fast as other people. She doesn't understand. She thinks that maybe she should alter her 20 year plan into a 40 year plan, take back the billiard table and lead a humbler life. The money won't make things right, the money won't bring her out from beyond the debt of irreparable flaws that she can't reach or see with three mirrors. At least, she thinks, she will always have the house.

When the billiard table arrives she decides to keep it. She realizes no one can hate a person who has a house like this, a haven to come to like this. Her old determination returns, her ferocious love. She is ready to do it, she is ready to go out and make new friends. She is so optimistic, so brimming with hope that she even thinks she'll find a mate. She studies the possibility so hard until her heart skips a beat, because she thinks she has actually heard his voice suddenly coming into the house, parking his car in the garage, ready to make his way through the door, through the kitchen and up the stairs to make love to her and be with her. She laughs at herself sheepishly. Her plasma tv is on downstairs.

She gets herself ready, conjures up the feeling and makes her way to...to...she does not know the city. Where's the best place to find friends, her friends? She goes to a bar, orders a drink and then returns home. With her will, she levies a rush of discouragement. Tomorrow is another day. She returns her sights to a job, a great place to connect with people, how did she overlook it? She sees lights on in the windows of her neighbors but quickly extinguishes the idea. They are not her kind of people.

The woman walks into an antique shop to answer a help wanted ad. They say they will call her. She likes antiques, and theorizes it would be good to have a job surrounded by the things one likes. She sees beautiful antique cigarette cases. Expensive. It would be just the thing to send back home to them and say, cordially, diplomatically, "I am doing well since you sent me away. It's helped me more than you know." It would be so classy. So much better than just the letter she'd been planning since the night of the meeting. They stood around her beneath the staircase in an arc, intervention style, not a single one too ashamed to look right at her. "How much will it take?" Morgan had asked on their behalf. Within three weeks they had raised the sum. She was made to promise never to return. She signed a contract wordlessly, with eyes so dry it was unhealthy. Yes. She should buy them with their own money, a gift they couldn't throw away or burn or scoff at. She was rich now, but they were still the same. They would have to think of her every day then. She buys them with a lackadaisical wrist, thinking the manager would be impressed and wonder

about her as she casually walks out of the store, smiling and needlessly shielding her eyes from the sun.

By the following month she has still not heard back from the antique store. She sends a few resumes online but decides to abandon the job search for a while. They usually call when you least want them to. She has begun to look forward to afternoons on the back deck. She prepares an elaborate snack of wine, gruyere and port salut cheeses, capaccuolo, prosciutto and artisan crackers, then watches the sun set. "You couldn't do this if you had a nine to five," she protests to herself. According to the tracking information, her cigarette cases arrived to each party without incident and she received only one response, a letter from Lisa. Not the one she was the closest to or loved the most, but was always one of those people she admired for being so basically good at all the right times. She reads the letter on the deck. As time passes it becomes easier to read the beginning paragraph, a brief summary of what's been happening with everyone that initially makes her cry to know; for Lisa it is merely a formality to ease her into the heart of the letter. The phrases she remembers most, the ones that pop into her mind right before it is time to go to sleep, are, in this order, "We were bloody from trying to reason with you," and "you need to take a long, hard look at yourself," and "we don't regret our decision," and "glad to see you are doing well" exclamation point. The woman takes a solemn sip of wine and contemplates the unmerited beauty bleeding colorfully across the sky. In her scorched heart is the bud of faith in the blank canvas of the future. She envisions herself on the deck reading the letter out loud to her new friends, friends who do not cringe in awkward, disingenuous scoffs. They are laughing and gasping and choking on their mai tais disgusted, disbelieving in such a blatant, disproportionate gall of humanity among the party lanterns.

The woman whom they paid to go away sees herself making a generous living and giving the money back with interest. She sees herself one day emotional but dignified, weeping from eyes that are vibrant, surrounded in that same way under the staircase, only now saying, "Thank you..

"Thank you for driving me to happiness."

© 2011, Christine Northern