

The Complexity of Man's Underwear

The box is magenta; it's covered in silk, but it has some stains. It's lined in green on the inside – lovely; the colours complement each other. I've learnt from the painters that complementary colours really make each other stand out.

Recently, a new peculiarity has occurred, which I'd like to tell you about here. Whenever I came home after an evening out with people, having had a few drinks, the thought would strike me that I needed to take that magenta-and-green jewellery box out of its conventional hiding place in my wardrobe and place it under my bookshelf. I assume, the underwear is the first place where the thief would look for gems. I came home, took the box, and moved it. It was always open. I don't actually have that much jewellery, but I'm lazy with some details and keep everything I wear regularly in the upper compartment. That's why it keeps spilling out – the necklaces are too big for the little box. There's not much of value in there, apart from sentimental value. Pearls from my maternal grandmother, a silver necklace from my father's side, and things that have accumulated over the years. Lots of single earrings, because I've lost the other one, not because they got stolen.

If I didn't give in to this urge, I couldn't fall asleep, so even as I was drifting off, I had to get up again and rearrange. On the sober morning, humbled, I took the jewellery box out and put it back between my underwear in the wardrobe. A few weeks passed and the evening trip to the wardrobe and the bookshelf became an obligation. I'd walk into the flat, locking the door from the inside: my flatmate would be staying over at the boyfriend's and wouldn't come home anyway.

Then into my room, the wardrobe on the right, my shoes in the hallway. I take the jewellery box, walk over to the bed and, whilst lying down, place it under the bookshelf with my arms outstretched. Then comes everything else. On the sober morning, humbled, I took the jewellery box out and put it back to its original spot.

This choreography settled for weeks, until I went to Basel to work at the art fair and had to leave my jewellery behind. Instead of moving the box, I had to tell everyone about the story, to have some release of my anxiety of leaving the box behind. Every evening I'd have a beer at Renée's, and in the mornings the whole story telling would start all over again. One evening – it was perhaps the third evening in a row – I told the story of the jewellery box to an acquaintance, who was the first person in a long time to really *move* me. After I'd confessed to the compulsion – it helped that he was essentially a stranger to me, making it easier to admit nonsense – he just laughed and quite simply turned the whole thing on its heel. How obvious that such obvious things never occur to you yourself. He told me that the next time I came back, as soon as the thought of moving and hiding crawled up in my mind again, I should follow it. But hide it in plain sight, in the midst of the room. In the end, I can't compartmentalize anyways. Here comes a truism: *Only a thief thinks everyone is a thief and the unpredictable is the only real.*

Whilst thinking about the idea of control and theft, I came across a lovely piece in which a poet (a man) was undressing Emily Dickinson. I thought a great deal about how much I loved the poem, the way he undressed her, this *grand dame* of poetry. I've read very little of her work, but she seems to have been very tall and is said to be a virgin. I liked the idea of undressing a great poet, because the little-known poet would have to behave so presumptuously. I didn't like the idea of a man undressing a woman and thus exerting violence upon her, when she clearly never wanted to be undressed.

So I found myself torn between two feelings: a pleasure in undressing the giants, and a distaste for undressing a woman who didn't want to be undressed.

I will do it all: undress myself in this text, undress his poem, because he undressed her and then have a giant as the subject undressed. In my world, the author of the original, Billy Collins, isn't one yet. Instead, I keep *my* giants name for myself, but he is currently exhibiting at MoMA. There are many exhibiting there, so anyone can picture someone. Mine has a boxer's face, who first married in the 40s, but only because she had money and could make up for the pension that was no longer coming in because his parents had died. Much later, re-marriage happened and I admire the fiancé because the last great work depicts another woman's body. I wondered if the woman or the other woman lived longer.

First, the jacket. Grey, slipped lightly from his shoulders and draped over the back of a wooden chair.

His shirt, striped and made of cotton.

Unbuttoned, pulled slightly forwards. A more complicated business with the mother-of-pearl buttons. One by one, ten of them from the chest down to the belt. It takes ages.

Before my hands can part the fabric,

like a swimmer parting the water,

and slip inside.

He stands motionless beside the wardrobe; the shirt lies in a heap at his feet on the wide hardwood floor.

The complexity of man's underwear back then should not be underestimated, but he was quick at such things.

What I can tell you is this:

it was quiet, but the cicadas could be heard outside in the summer heat.

It's afternoon – in my experience, the best time for this sort of thing.

He stood up and leaned against the wardrobe door. It rattles; the wardrobe door's castors have wheels and can be rolled to the right and left to gain access to the clothes.

I can hear him sigh as finally –

just as some readers sigh when they realise

that hope has wings,

that reason is a plank,

that life is a loaded gun

staring at you with a yellow eye.¹

¹ Compare Billy Collins: *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's clothes*