

rachel levy



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so red

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CAKETRAIN
[a journal and press]

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For Jessica Alexander and Glenn Levy

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i have taken her ostrich

He said, "I have taken her ostrich."

"You mean hostage," I said. "A kidnapping."

"A settlement," he said. "Are you stupid?"

We were in Munich, celebrating his divorce.

"We're not celebrating," he said.

We were in Munich, replaying his honeymoon, which happened in Zurich.

"Repairing," he said.

"Zurich," he said. "Her choice."

We were sitting in a pub. He made a perfect pile of mustard on his plate.

"Zurich," he said. "Hideous city. Hideous. Disgusting. Shocking. Truly shocking. But I wanted Munich. I've always said. If I've said it once. I wanted Munich. I wanted Munich. Munich."

He smiled, winded.

I was given gray sausages, thin, long clouds, but I didn't order them. The sausages were damp. I asked are they meant to be damp. Then I said something smart.

"I'd like to get what I want."

"Are you stupid?" he said. "You are stupid."

silk, fur and leather

I told him I am appealing in silk, fur and leather.

He told me I am not so unusual in that regard.

I crossed my arms and said I wanted a drink. He asked what kind, and I said he's probably never heard of it.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want a Diki-Diki," I told him.

He returned with two glasses of light beer.

He told me he wants to get a blond dog and name it Lager. I told him Diki-Diki is a better name. "It's more original," I said.

"Why is it okay to pet people's dogs," I asked, "but it's not okay to pet their children?"

Often I was wrong.

often i was wrong

Behind him there were whiskey bottles, shelves of whiskey bottles.

“You know what?” I said. “We have so much in common. I’ve never been to Auschwitz. You’ve never been to Auschwitz. Let’s go together!”

No answer.

So I said, “You know what, you shit? I’ll go alone.”

I really called him a piece of shit.

Often I was wrong. Often I am wrong.

We cut through the park. It was the hour when mothers stroll their young to sleep. It was easy. I patted the head of a blond-haired baby! I received no scolding.

I told him to give it a try.

munich with the lights dimmed

He booked us separate rooms, but they connected.

He was annoyed.

“What’s the point?” he said.

“It’s like one big room.”

“I’m a married man.”

“Not anymore.”

He said, “For the time being. In Munich. Why is this so difficult for you to understand?”

It was mid-day, bright, like he told me it would be.

“Germany is bright, and Munich? Glistening. Truly glistening. You’ll see.”

“Glistening?”

“Dazzling. Glittering. Glowing. Golden. Ablaze. Blazing. Burning.”

I told him I imagined Munich with the lights dimmed.
Doesn't everyone?

I told him I'm probably no different from anyone else.

a bad tourist

He was hunched in a square of sunlight on the edge of the bed, lashing big boots to his feet.

He said, "You're wrong. You're very wrong."

I didn't have boots. What was I to wear?

"You're a bad tourist, aren't you?"

Was I?

He had a photo of his ex-wife, wallet-sized. He slid the photo into his breast pocket.

some joy

I found some joy in fervent repetition but never in public. I found some joy during my loneliest hours.

This was my joy, to say to myself, “I know him, and he is mine. I know him, and he is mine. I know him, and he is mine. I know him, and he is mine.”

Which is why the photo disturbed me, but what could I do? Become the Old World monk, refuse our heliocentric universe?

No.

partially yours

“I’m off,” he said, and he made for the door.

“You’re taking her photo?”

“Please,” he said. “Please try to understand my words. I’m restaging our honeymoon with a photo of her in my pocket. Albeit in Munich. Deliberately in Munich. Zurich was a stupid decision, and I blame myself. I partially blame myself for caving to her desire. She is extremely beautiful. You do understand, don’t you? It is impossible to confuse the photo of a person with the person herself. Her photo will serve as my anchor, and though I may give myself wholly to her, I am not entirely lost. I can also be yours, partially yours, forever.”

It was his style to hide nothing. It’s what I liked about him, and I considered myself fortunate.

back to the bed

I called him back to the bed.

I'd already bathed myself completely. I'd gone all the way with respect to my grooming.

He wore his oat-colored pajamas.

I affectionately set my drink on the nightstand.

The light from the window was skittish, but who cares?

jonquil

Once, half in jest, I proposed another color.

The Macy's had fallen into an unusual state of disorder. There were children marching in the racks, yanking down the clothes as if to play at fornication. They could have been Germans. They could have been heathens. They possessed no sense of the law.

I snapped my fingers about his ears and eyes to rescue his focus.

"Jonquil?" I asked, because I was pointing at a yellow pair of pants.

"No," he said, and I felt my shrill heart leap, felt a warmth come over my loins.

"Don't you know me by now?" he asked.

eager to shade

I'll skip to the parts where I imply sex.

I unbuttoned his oatmeal shirt. He helped with his pants and his underwear.

The sun disappeared. The room was eager to shade. Some clouds moved, collided, exploded.

I didn't care about the weather.

I tended to my own undressing.

the petting zoo

He re-lashed his boots to his feet.

The laces were red. Little metal hooks held the laces in place.

“Like hostages,” I said to him.

“Don’t make up stories.”

I crossed my arms and told him I wanted to go to the petting zoo.

“I want to touch an ostrich,” I said.

Why did I feel ill? The sausages. The beer. The Bavarian sunlight. The very German sunlight.

The sound of the glockenspiel.

He said, “If you should leave the hotel, please remember to lock everything up.”

under the linden

I went through the gate, 'round the oaks, under the linden.

I found him at the pub.

He told me to go. He said, "Go!"

"Come on."

He said, "Go!"

"I'm happy to see you. Come on."

He said, "In Vienna, a woman your age knows how to iron a shirt, but you're dumb."

an idea came up

“You know what?” I said to him. “There’s a party on Sunday!
With German food! Will you come?”

No answer.

“Will you come?” I kept raising my hands to my head.

We were at the pub. There were dogs there. There were two
or three little dogs. I always ran away from little dogs.

I ran to the hotel, and then I had to sit down.

An idea came up: I should sit on his lap.

they gallop like cantaloupes

We stayed on the first floor.

“I like it here,” he said, “except for the noise.”

“Germany should be quiet,” I said.

Once I imagined it like that.

“The others,” he said, and pointed at the ceiling. “They gallop like cantaloupes.”

“You mean gallop like antelopes. Or do you mean roll like cantaloupes? Do they roll around all night like cantaloupes?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

please try again

“Are you wearing flesh-tone stockings,” he asked, “or are your legs bare?”

“You tell me,” I said. He was gripping my thigh.

“Shit. I messed it up. You are supposed to touch my hand to your thigh so I can see for myself.”

“But you’re already touching my thigh.”

“I messed it up. You have to go. You have to come back another time so we can try it again. Can we please try again?”

a splitting headache

I always feared little dogs.

“You know what?” I said to him.

“What?” he said.

Then I had a splitting headache. I had to sit down.

“Relax,” he said.

He had a little dog that he carried all the time under his arm.

He would pat my head.

the way he liked to live

Through the gate, 'round the oaks, under the linden, would he come?

Would he come to the pub or a party with German food?

To Munich: would he come?

In Munich, I wanted to go to Poland.

To Auschwitz: would he come?

He ran out of the bath without a towel. He had his little doggy with him. That was the way he liked to live.

“You know what?” I said to him. “I feel good doing this.”

“Don’t make up stories.”

“Do you feel good doing this?”

there were boundaries

He stood at attention, and his penis stood at attention.

There were boundaries, but we didn't believe in bullshit like that.

He ran and got a long electric cable. He whipped me with it. The plug hit me in the head, and it felt good.

If we had finished there, we would have felt a great sense of relief.

too quick

He ran out of the bath without a towel.

We gathered around the bed.

He screamed.

I looked at him and said, "It was too quick."

"You know what?" I said to him. "I think that we didn't do it!"

above the sexual

It's not the past that interests me.

I'm trying to recreate the scene.

Above that. Above the sexual.

I was sitting on the bed with my leg pulled up.

That intrigued him, but he resisted.

I said, "It's okay."

No, that's not what I mean.

He behaved just like a lover.

And I said, "You don't have to show me."

I said, "You don't have to show me anything."

I'd never been shot dead, so I asked.

I said, "How should I fall? Backwards or forwards?"

I couldn't see a thing, so it was difficult to decide.

fiction **99** us

“*A Book So Red*’s linguistic singularities, formal contractions, and world comprised of the existential non-sequitur coalesce into an astonishing aesthetic teratoid: the vacuum-packed denarration. The narrator’s skewed, oblique and painful relationships teach us the only real comedy is the sound of laughter in the dark all the way down.”

Lance Olsen, author of *Theories of Forgetting*

“Rachel Levy is a wizard—gory, tender and wickedly funny.”

Noy Holland, author of *Bird*

“It’s as if Rachel Levy put the carcass of the novel on the butcher block: choice language cutlets remain.”

Sara Levine, author of *Treasure Island!!!*

“Heartbreaking, horrifying, beautiful and ugly, the narrator of Rachel Levy’s *A Book So Red* explores her world from the inside out with the precision of a mapmaker. From Munich to an American farm to Berlin and through a cast of characters, the one constant is her miraculous and astonishing voice.”

Myfanwy Collins, author of *The Book of Laney*

“Rachel Levy, here in what might at first appear to be a pint-sized collection of fractured miniatures, offers us instead heaving-with-feeling fictions that are elliptical and driven by suggestion, though what is most fully and singularly revealed here is a world where much is said—too much, this too might be true—so that what is left unsaid, what the speaker chooses to tell just us—her listeners in this sequence of most private tellings—takes on the heft of a bedside confession.”

Peter Markus, author of *The Fish and the Not Fish*

A Book So Red was the winning manuscript in the 2014 Caketrain Competition, as judged by Peter Markus.

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