

FIRST HUSBAND

The first husband was a doctor who lived in Gramercy Park and consumed large amounts of MDMA and refined cocaine from Bolivia. He worked hard and played hard, which was the way he answered to anyone who asked him what he did in life. The hospital where he worked featured an aquarium also tubs, pools, and water-filled containers brimming with jellyfish, squids, and small petroleum-colored sturgeons. The tubs in the open-air atriums sometimes overflowed and doctors on cigarette breaks observed the stray fish flopping around the concrete yard. They picked them up with their bare hands (no gloves!) and replaced them in their pools.

There was a big square-shaped pool inside. The doctors swam in it during breaks because the water released tension. These people performed surgeries every day. They flipped noses inside out, replaced hip joints and prostates, lifted faces, and removed gallbladders. They needed to unwind.

The first husband's name was Maurice and he was a doctor. Sometimes his everyday shirt collars popped out of the gown making him look slightly unprofessional. This made some of his female patients believe he was somehow available. Like, "Look at me I'm a doctor, but I am also a person."

One day he found a stray fish flopping around the concrete floor of the open-air atrium. He brought it back to the inside pool and placed it in the first lane. The fish was glad to be back in the water and, though initially disorientated and scared,

it soon began to move about again, forgetting its recent trauma. Maurice took his clothes off and stood on the edge of the pool in a pair of red Speedos. He stretched his arms and moved them in circles to get his blood and muscles warm. Then he dove in.

His wife observed him from the elevated walkway that overlooked the pool. She thought he looked like a normal first husband at first. Not like someone she would want to divorce. But the fact that he was her first husband implied the existence of a second, maybe even a third husband, and this made her sad. That his suits and clothes, his Franciscan sensibility with fish and patients, would not be part of her future existence was inconceivable. The worst part was not knowing when it would all happen. This world would not be hers someday: the pool, the fish, the husband, the emergency rooms. All gone from her life. And she would re-marry. Possibly to an artist, someone who could not save her ass if she needed it to be saved.

She looked at her first husband swimming in the pool. Her eyes swollen with tears. Initially she thought that might have been the reason why she could not recognize him completely. Something was different now. She dried the tears. There was something murky in the pool. The water moved in small waves, and it was the color of gasoline.

The fish her first husband had saved from the concrete garden had reproduced itself, multiplying into hundreds, thousands of fish. Lap after lap, as

the first husband swam, a school of petroleum-hued fish followed him like tiny disciples. They squirmed and dipped under and around his arm with every stroke. They multiplied by the second, pushing him to swim faster.

The wife saw the red from the husband's Speedos disappear beneath the surface. Right then the frantic stream of fish in the water ceased to move and began floating motionless; the surface of the pool became dark with their bodies. "He must have drowned", she thought in terror. Maybe he was swimming too fast, maybe he had not digested his food properly. He was not there anymore and a sense of sudden, irreversible loss came over her. She remembered how her husband spent days at home lurking in a suspicious penumbra. There were greys and browns in their life together. As a first wife she had imagined a life of blood red together, corridas, excursions to Pompeii, but it had not been so. She remembered everything he apologized for in the last week: a long, unstructured list.

She looked at the pool. The water was stable and she knew she was wholly responsible for her husband's disappearance. She ran down the elevated walkway towards the pool. The water had dried out. The fish vanished down the drain, swallowed into the hospital grounds. On the floor lay her first husband, pale, motionless, and rigid. The string that held his Speedos together had come undone and he was partly naked. She began to cry, unable to touch him as her chest knotted up. She kneeled, her heart pounding, and felt a distant kind of pain. Her

first husband seemed so far away now. Like a purple, inanimate being. He had taken a suitcase and gone on a trip he would never come back from. He had gone away with his Speedos and thousands of fish. Gone on a train, with black curls falling damply on his face.