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William Wandless

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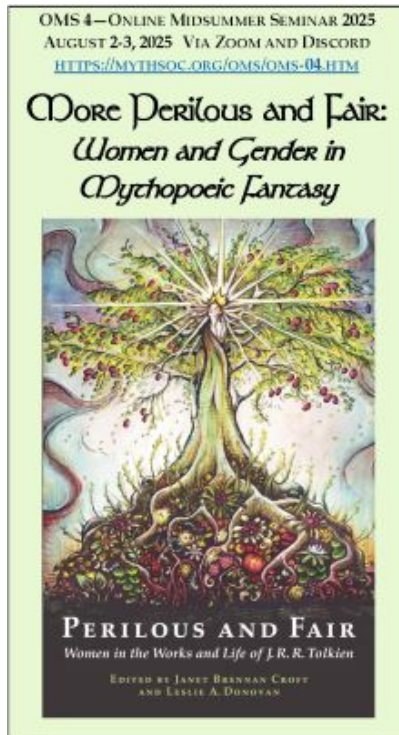
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Juice

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Juicę

by William Wandless

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” Chad replied. He took a cleansing breath and turned to face the woman he had discreetly watched all class. *Namaste, you gorgeous creature*, he thought.

She saluted him with her water bottle. “Great session,” she said.

Chad smiled and ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks,” he said. “It was a real pleasure sharing space with you today. Your energy is so bright you were practically glowing.” The only other man in the class dawdled near the exit, pretending to put his gear in order while he gawked at her. *Amateur*, Chad thought, breaking eye contact with her only long enough to glance at her lips.

“That’s sweet of you to say,” she said with a sunny smile. She patted her forehead with her towel, pulled herself to a kneeling position, leaned forward, and offered him her hand. “Rori,” she said, “Rori Kinkaid.”

“That’s a beautiful name. I’m Chance, Chance Chastain,” Chad said. *I should use that one more often*, he thought. *It makes me sound like an action star*. He unfolded his crossed legs and rose in a single practiced motion, helping her to her feet in the process.

“Lovely to meet you, Chance. Are you new to the class? I’m sure I haven’t seen you before.” Her gaze slowly traveled the length of his body from his thighs to his face. “I would have remembered,” she said with a quirk of her lips.

“NSE,” Chad said, pretending not to notice. “New Studio Energy. I was feeling like I’d reached a plateau over at Body by Bodhi. The lights over there seemed, I don’t know, a little dimmer somehow. I needed an infusion of new juice.” He rolled the muscles of his shoulders, flexing unobtrusively, showing her what he brought to the bargain.

“I hear you,” she said. She chewed her lip and glanced over her shoulder. The instructor looked to the two of them, nodded, smiled, and slipped out. “Would you indulge me for a moment?” Rori asked when the room was empty.

Chad nodded. *Here we go*.

Rori took two steps forward, reached out to Chad, pressed her palm against the swell of his chest, and closed her eyes. She exhaled, trembling perceptibly. “A violet aura,” she said. “Warm, creative, and sensual. And energy off the charts. Of course.” She opened her eyes and withdrew her hand reluctantly.

Of course. Chad spread his hands. “May I?” he asked.

Rori nodded, and Chad cupped her shoulders in his hands as he rifled through his mental catalog of colors. “Blue,” he breathed. “Royal blue. Romantic, intuitive, passionate. And a little bit spontaneous?” He smiled dreamily and opened his eyes, releasing her shoulders. “I might have known.”

He smiled; she smiled. Rori turned and began to roll up her mat. Chad did the same, facing Rori and holding his breath. *Wait for it*, he reminded himself. *Wait for it*.

Rori finished and tucked the mat underneath her arm. She tilted her head and considered Chad, her face flushing slightly. “I never do this,” she said, “but would you like to go get coffee, Chance?”

Boom. “Tea?” Chad asked. “This evening? I’ve got a volunteer shift at the animal shelter this afternoon, but after that I’m all yours.” Chad winced inwardly, wondering for a moment if he had overshot the mark.

“All mine,” Rori said with a nod and a smile. “It’s a date.”

They agreed on a time and destination and parted at the separate entrances to the locker rooms. Rori ran her fingertips along Chad’s forearm as they said goodbye. As soon as she was out of sight he raced to his locker, grabbed his bag, and darted to his car. He had worn his all-purpose Business Boho after-yoga outfit to the studio, a getup that worked for the majority of women, but Rori might require a more precisely tailored look.

Chad climbed into his car, pulled off to the side of the parking lot, and plucked a compact pair of binoculars, a notepad, and a pen from the glove compartment. When he saw Rori come out of the studio, he bared his perfect teeth in something like a smile. “Called it,” he muttered to himself.

Most women just changed into a fresh tank top and a new pair of yoga pants; Chad only had to assign them to the Uggs and non-Uggs divisions before he made his move. Another ten percent dressed in business chic. They were usually too high maintenance and too clingy for his tastes, but worth attempting if his bank account had dipped a little low. The trophy boytoy was an easy part to play, but it took him off the market for a few months at a time.

Rori, however, wore an off-the-shoulder, flowing hippie dress in a blocked red and orange print. It was perfectly cut, clinging to her curves, and a long slit showed off her lithe legs. She carried a sling handbag and wore sandals with long straps that snaked up her calves. Chad ignored the just-unfashionable-enough-to-be-fashionable floppy sunhat that highlighted her hair and focused on the pendant she was wearing. It looked like a fly made out of an iridescent stone that caught the light—a signature piece, he was sure, so he made a note of it in his pad. His Business Boho look would have definitely been far too corporate for this golden goddess. He probably could have pulled it off, but he had made the right call.

Chad drove home and got to work. He had about four hours to dial in the details. A quick hunt through Rori’s Instagram account scored her birthdate, her favorite poet, and her favorite order at the Climbing Ivy tea bar; in ten minutes he had worked up a new birthday and new favorites of his own. He skimmed a few astrology pages to round out his revised star chart, then turned to searching for the pendant. Nothing in the usual Boho boutiques looked quite like it, but he saw enough specimens to identify the gemstone in question. He shook out his own box of accessories, selected a bracelet adorned with alternating green beads, and selected an off-white linen tunic with sleeves just short enough to show it off. He built the rest of his outfit around the shirt, opting for distressed jeans, a vintage blazer, and his go-to hand-stitched leather shoes. “Easy on, easy off,” Chad said when he had settled on his look, firing at the grinning man in the mirror with finger guns.

Chad took a power nap, showered with his lemon verbena soap, carefully gelled his hair so it looked tousled, and dabbed a little ylang-ylang essential oil on his wrists. He was dressed and ready with fifteen extra minutes to spare—plenty of time for him to get to Climbing Ivy early so Rori could arrive fashionably late.

He picked a table out in the open with an indirect view of the entrance, set out his well-thumbed copy of *Milk and Honey*, and took a little time to bask. He had earned it. One young woman gawked at him and nudged her friend so she could take a look. She peeked, and they whispered. A twentysomething woman near the window kept looking up from her laptop and trying to catch his eye. An older woman in a tight skirt passed by his table, claimed her tea from the counter, and passed by again, this time much closer, her hips swaying. Chad stretched and smiled.

In a booth to his right a young man in a plaid shirt and khakis furtively eyed the woman with the laptop. He caught her looking at Chad, glanced at Chad himself, and sighed. He gulped down his tea, stuffed his tablet back in his bag, and took off. *Nothing personal, kid*, Chad thought, *but no self-respecting woman can bring herself to get the ground chuck when there’s filet of Chad on the menu.*

Chad pretended to read his Rupi Kaur and thought about the legions of men in plaid out there. Part of him was naturally grateful for the contrast, but it was hard not to pity them. They would fail and fail again. They would set their sights a little lower and fail some more. They would read books about Picking Up Chicks, books that likened the pursuit of women to a quest, a dance, a game of chess, a game of chance. They would try a few new moves and fail in brand new ways.

What Chad knew—what he had always known, at a bone-deep level—is that most men are fundamentally dumb. They imagine relations between women and men as a chase, think of themselves as Cro-Magnon hunters and women as dimwitted prey they can win with clever tactics. What they never seemed to think through was the logic of their metaphor of choice. Tricks and traps are great if the hunter wants to pick off the weak, slow, sickly, and stupid, the undesirables at the back of the herd. If men aspire to anything better than that, Chad knew, they have to conceive of the matter differently.

By the time he was midway through his teens Chad knew what he wanted: he didn’t want girls but goddesses—smart and sexy, talented and tempting, accomplished and super-hot. He knew a handful of boys

who had the same tastes and temperament, but they, too, were fundamentally dumb. To land a goddess, they assumed, one had to become a god, an Adonis. They almost figured it out. They hit the gyms and the salons, bought the clothes, cars, and other props, taught themselves to preen and strut, and then went out prowling just like all the other knuckleheads. Those boys wanted to pick and choose the terms of worship, but Chad understood that's just not how goddesses operate.

To earn the attention of the goddess class Chad had become a suppliant. He had hit the gym and the salon, of course, and bought the clothes, car, and props, but he imagined all the things he brought to the table as offerings rather than bait, tools, or weapons. While other men were stalking their prey, he was studying them to learn the right prayers and to make the right invocations; he was garlanding the best-looking bull for the altar and hoping the goddesses took notice. When he paid attention and performed the rites properly—and he had learned to do so with impressive consistency—the goddesses came to him.

Chad was roused from his reverie by the arrival of Rori, and he rose to meet her, ready for the ritual. She embraced him in greeting, he fetched their tea, and they settled in for the ceremonies.

"You look radiant," he said, which was both true and almost always the right overture. She was wearing darker colors, a scarlet dress with diagonal black accents, but she was even more luminous than she had been inside and outside the studio. A self-styled hunter would fix on her anatomy or accessories, but Chad wanted her to know he acknowledged her glow.

She accepted the compliment gracefully and offered her own in return. "The room is brighter with you in it, Chance—you boost the good vibes," she said.

Perfect, Chad thought. We're on the same wavelength; we speak the same language.

They talked about her afternoon, which she had sunk into cleaning and other dullness, and Chad decided to make his second venture. "If I were a betting man," Chad said, "I'd guess you were a water sign. A Pisces?" If it did nothing else it would hopefully steer Rori away from asking questions about the animal shelter he never actually visited.

"On the nose!" Rori replied with delight. "And you," she said, clasping Chad's hand and squinting at him intently, "you must be a Scorpio."

"How on earth did you know that?" he said with real surprise. As Chad Dombrowski he was actually an Aries, a sign he had learned long ago is incompatible with just about everyone, but Chance Chastain was a Scorpio through and through—the best pairing he could find for a Pisces. It was an impressive guess on Rori's part and a good sign of how the evening might go in its own right.

They talked about their moon signs and rising signs with enthusiasm, her signs authentic and his tailored to mirror and complement hers, and Rori held his hand even when they rose to refresh their tea. Rori tugged at his tunic sleeve playfully and at last noticed Chad's bracelet when they returned to the table. "Malachite?" she asked.

Chad nodded. "To open up the heart chakra," he said, gently squeezing her hand, "and for recognizing magic when I find it." Rori blushed, and Chad smiled. "The other is aventurine, to remind me to acknowledge and honor opportunity." *It's also matte enough to make my eyes pop, he thought, but the first two will do.*

"Tell me about your pendant," Chad said. "That's labradorite, isn't it? But I don't recognize the charm."

Rori lifted the charm from her chest and offered it to Chad. It was warm in his hand. "It's a cicada," she said, "my little reminder, a symbol of patient change and transformation. And you're right, it's labradorite." She leaned back, and the cicada leapt from Chad's hand and landed in her cleavage. "It keeps me open to serendipity, to lucky discoveries, to good energy wherever I find it."

She smiled; he smiled. Rori slid her cup away with the tips of her fingers. "What do you know about feng shui?" she asked.

"Just enough to be dangerous," Chad said with a grin. *By which I mean almost nothing at all.* He knew the bare-bones basics—putting certain things in certain places to free up the flow of energy in a space—but it was not his strong suit. It could be endlessly finicky, and the underlying concepts left less room for interpretation than astrology or tarot cards, which he leaned on more often. He had spent time with a few feng shui believers, however, and their homes had been blocked out in simple sectors with clean lines running between them. Rori's clear preference for square and diagonal patterns might be enough of a hint to help him

bluff his way through. He kept on smiling, working out the phrasing of a follow-up that would sound at once knowledgeable and noncommittal.

“Remember what you said about Bodhi’s studio? That the lights seemed dimmer? Well, the lights at home have felt a little duller lately, too. Could I persuade you to come back to my place and help me get my energy straightened out?” Rori asked.

But let’s not overthink things, Chad thought, rising from his chair.

The drive to Rori’s place was fairly long and winding, a fact for which Chad was grateful. He followed her convertible closely in his Lexus, a feng shui tutorial booming through the speakers as they left the lights of the city behind them. Doing research on the fly was less than ideal, but he wanted to have a little fodder for any conversation that might unfold between the door and the bedroom.

They arrived at the rear entrance of what looked like a sizable split-level. “There’s a pretty border garden in the front,” Rori said as they neared the back door, “but the effect is a little more dramatic if we go in this way.”

It certainly is, Chad thought as he watched her hips move as she scaled the six steps to the upper level. “I can’t wait,” he said warmly.

And the effect *was* dramatic. Chad felt the pull of the house immediately, as if a cord had snaked through his ribcage and someone was tugging him inside. He held the frame of the door for a moment and felt the house drawing him in even more insistently. “That’s amazing,” he said.”

Rori crossed the room and drew the curtains back, revealing a sliding glass patio door. “I know,” she said. “I fell madly in love with the energy here; as soon as I found it I knew I had to have it.”

Once he was inside the strange sensation ebbed away, and Chad closed on Rori and looked over her shoulder. Even in the moonlight the view was breathtaking, with the silhouettes of only a few rows of dark houses on lower terraces standing between Rori’s home and the ocean. Rori took him by the hand, slid the door open, and led him out to the railing of the patio, where the view was even more spectacular. “You’ll have to see it at sunrise,” she said, resting her hand on his.

Chad turned toward Rori, lifted her chin with a finger, and kissed her expertly. She pressed her forehead to his chest for a moment, her hands on his waist, and pushed herself gently away. “I’m going to go downstairs and slip into something a little more comfortable,” she breathed. “Don’t go anywhere.”

You do that, sweetheart. “I won’t,” he said with a warm smile.

Rori slipped back into the house, and Chad leaned on the railing, reflecting on his evening with profound satisfaction. Once again his respectful and reverent attitude would find him bedding down a goddess, a testament to the righteousness of his yielding, modest method. Somewhere out there the man in plaid was settling in for a night of sad masturbation, but Chad would soon earn the rewards he had earned and deserved for keeping the faith.

Chad drifted back inside and instantly felt the draw of the house once again. He wanted to poke around a bit, to get a feel for the kind of life Rori led, but the flow of the house tugged him toward the stairs down to the lower level. He noticed a luxurious living area, an elegant dining room, and a well-stocked bar, but they seemed to him somehow distant, incidental. More than anything he wanted to go where Rori had gone.

Chad descended a wide flight of stairs, the sound of his footfalls muffled by deep, soft carpeting. Most split-levels he had visited in the past had seemed spacious and airy, with open concept design pressed as far as it could go, but the atmosphere as he neared the bottom felt somewhat denser, closer, more intimate. And there was no mistaking the flow of the house, however concerned about it Rori might be. The magnetism felt more intense with every step, as if he was being pulled bodily toward the mouth of a river by a constant current.

When he reached the foot of the stairs Chad had a choice: he could veer to the right, where the rooms beneath the patio must be, or he could curl to the left, where the flow of Rori’s home seemed to be urging him. *This is the way*, he thought, trusting the tug of the current. *I can always explore tomorrow morning, when Rori has come*. He snickered inwardly and smoothed his hair.

Chad turned left, and it felt as though he had been lifted and buoyed by the current. He flowed and floated forward and downward; Rori’s home grew blurry around him, and when he reached out to the walls

of the hallway to steady himself his hands touched nothing. The air was scented with incense and jasmine, and the descent felt both giddy and exhilarating. He was fearful and eager, and his heart pounded as Rori rose up before him.

She was naked, regal, and radiant, burning with an ivory fire that pushed back the warm, intoxicating darkness. The light of myriad stars converged in her, and her brilliance was reflected, refracted, yet undistorted, as if it had passed through innumerable limpid crystals. Chad approached her, was borne to her, and as his energies ebbed, leaving him and flowing into Rori like a living thing, like some essential nectar, her radiance flared.

In the hollows of his mind and memory his voice joined a chorus of a thousand thousand anguished and abandoned men who moaned of her glory. “When you tread the meadows of the dead, my little light,” an enthralling, awful voice intoned, “you may tell them that your offering was acceptable, that you dallied with the dawn, that Aurora found you worthy for a while.”



Light Figure, by Meg Moseman