

Phantom of Love, a story by Dylan Brody

Contributed by Dylan Brody

In 1985, on Halloween evening, I went to hear Susan Sontag speak, although I didn't want to. My roommate asked if I had plans and I told her I was going to hear Sontag at NYU. She said, "Why didn't you tell me? That sounds really cool!" And then, "I wish I could go. I was going to invite you to this stupid costume party I have to attend for work." Had Emily not said that it sounded really cool, I would have abandoned the plan instantly with her to a costume party. I would have abandoned the plan instantly to go anywhere with her. I would have abandoned any plan. But she had said that the lecture sounded really cool and I did not want her to think me the kind of man who would forsake a really cool academic lecture to attend a costume party that she deemed stupid. I could not stand to be that man in her eyes. Emily had the sort of thick, curly hair that makes men want to drive their fingers deep into it and that inexplicably makes women want to get it straightened. Emily frequently cursed and complained while she brushed it out, but she refused to cut it short. She had always loved it, she told me, and when she lost her right arm, everyone from family to physical therapists told her in casual, matter-of-fact tones that she would obviously have to cut her hair now. She refused because she had always loved her hair and she did not want one traumatic injury to entirely redefine her. She leaned against her bedroom doorway and cupped the stump of her right arm in her left hand. It was her version of crossing her arms and while it may have felt like a way of hiding the nub, it actually drew attention to it. The remnant of her right arm was a constant source of fascination for me, though I tried not to allow that to become obvious. She had, over the previous few years, grown reluctantly accustomed to stares and I certainly didn't want her to feel like a spectacle when she was in her own home, when she was around me. Still, I was always aware. Sometimes, when she had had a little too much wine or much too little sleep, she would glance at something and her stump would twitch before she reached for the object with her left hand. For the barest instant a look of surprise and then sheepishness would cross her face. Then that would be masked by her deep-dimpled smile. An almost identical dimple appeared at the end of her little arm when certain muscles flexed. I noticed. So, instead of going to a costume party dressed as a swashbuckler with my beautiful, one-armed maiden at my side, I dressed in an academic tweed jacket with suede patches on the elbows and took a subway to the Village. I stopped at a favorite comic book store to look over the latest releases and then walked through the gleeful streets of Greenwich Village Halloween toward the lecture hall. I emerged from the store into the crosstown wind, stepping directly into the path of a pedestrian. Sexy Bo Peep, cross-dressed for the holiday in heels and white thigh-highs with powder blue bow-ribbon garters, apologized for bumping me. I apologized in return. She was tall, several years older than I, in my twenty-first year. She was shaved so close, and made up so exquisitely that a young man might be fooled for a moment, or a minute, for an hour or a few drinks if he were inclined to allow himself. I felt the confusing ambivalence of attraction and mild homophobia. The figure from fairy-tale fetish fantasy made eye contact and smiled, seeing the conflict in my eyes, the flash of young lust combined with the slight, involuntary retreat of my pelvis as I realized her true gender. She saw it all and was not offended. She nodded, just a little, almost coyly and suddenly, inexplicably, I felt very, very close to her, warmed, accepted. I wanted to tell her that I wished I could be so brave, just dress up to expose my desires, that I could walk the world even for one day out of the year as myself and let others react as they would. I wanted to say, "I am in love with my roommate but I cannot tell her. I want to hold her and comfort her, to feel strong and protective." There was so much in my mind. Feelings cascaded: Shame that I could find pleasure in the source of Emily's pain; self-loathing that I might be turned on by her trauma; rage at my feminist family for denying me any sense of manliness; guilt for my strength, my body, the wrongs committed by my gender as a whole; envy for the beautiful man who stood before me, his package surely tucked and taped to allow the illusion to remain for a time as the costume peeled away, the disguise he wore to express his true identity. I returned the smile and said only, "Wow. You look good enough to confuse a straight man." He said, "Aren't you sweet!" and blew a kiss to me over his shoulder as he moved on down the street. That night, Susan Sontag spoke of the role of the artist and the work of the photographer. She said that photography is ultimately an art form of editing. A photograph seems to be a simple document of visual fact, but the photographer determines not only what is seen, but what is left outside the frame. Often, she said, the real beauty, the real revelation lies in the mystery beyond the fact presented, what is left unseen, what is cut off. She was quite brilliant and I was tremendously glad to have heard her speak, if not to have chosen her over the costume party with Emily. On the subway ride back uptown, I decided to reveal my love to Emily, but something had happened at the party. I never found out exactly what. When I got home, she had already changed out of her costume and wore a long NY Knicks tee shirt that she used as a night gown. She was sad, sniffing, her arm wrapped around her knees, a Flintstones juice glass of wine on the table beside her half empty. She said she didn't want to talk about it. I didn't push it, though I did say that I wished I could have been there with her. It was true. I wished that, whatever had happened, I had been there to protect her, to defend her, to win her heart with an act of chivalry and kindness. I wanted to move to her now, to wrap myself around her, to whisper warm reassurances into her ears. I recognized a moment I could turn into a seduction, but it felt as though I would be taking advantage of her in a time of weakness and I could not bear to be that man. So I sat with her and let her talk about the things she talked about and not whatever was really bothering her. Occasionally she tugged at her short right sleeve, wrapping it around the end of her stump and then releasing it when she picked up the wine. When she sipped from the glass it seemed to me to be half full. Her toes flexed and then gripped at the leading edge of the seat cushion. A week later she told me that she hated the city, that she was moving back to Glen Falls. She apologized for leaving me such short notice to find a new roommate and then she was gone. Now, I tell stories for a living. I dress up in carefully chosen, interesting cufflinks and use words to weave images together so tightly I can stand unseen behind them and seem to lay myself bare. I will claim in radio interviews and cocktail party conversation that I tell these stories in hope of freeing us all to dress as ourselves, to peel away our pretense until it seems that every one of

us stands naked beneath a halogen street lamp, crying out the secret names of our most deeply dungeoned demons. That claim, though, is a lie. When I reveal these secrets of mine, these shame-laden longings, these sighing, screaming, sleep-stealing loose threads of my frayed psyche, it is with one true motivation only. I peel off my disguise in the hope that one night, one of these desperate flares will light the sky at just the right angle, that it will create a moment of translucence. I stand behind these tapestries and hope that somehow, through the dense fabric of distracting imagery, my own shameful truth is implied clearly enough that it becomes perceptible at the very least as a phantom sensation.