

Histories of Damage

by Dolly Laninga

Margot called to break her news just as nutrition services delivered Javier's lunch. Rose wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder while she arranged his chili and peach pie on the plastic tray, making sure the spoon was within easy reach. Into the receiver she idly commented that she thought the old building would have been gone by now, or at least condemned: had been swiftly declining even when she and Margot were pupils there. When the nurses needed to change Javier's bedding, Rose helped him into the chair, only half-listening to Margot describe the bureaucratic hoops she'd jumped through to ward off the wrecking ball. Margot reluctantly let Rose off the phone when it came time for Javier's walk up and down the hall, but only on the condition that Rose meet her at the building, look around and hear the great plans for it.

The next afternoon, while her husband slept, Rose took a taxi to the dance hall where she and Margot had taken after-school tap and ballet lessons. In the thirty years that had passed since then, the two had rarely been in the same location; Rose and Javier worked as program directors for a humanitarian NGO, which relocated them to a new desperate situation every few years. But Margot was a tireless letter writer who always kept up with these moves, and so whenever Rose was within a few hundred miles she tried to show the same dedication. Rose and Javier had been in the city for two weeks before Rose could bring herself to notify Margot, because she knew that leaving a message with Margot's secretary meant a meeting was inevitable.

Upon arrival Rose paid the driver and emerged to stand at the foot of the stone steps. At the top, framed by the looming entrance, Rose could see Margot's pale figure about, pacing in anticipation of showing off her treasure. Margot was the president of a charitable foundation—the family money of a dead husband—and had thrown herself into the role. She was always planning functions and discovering new poster children for MS or some such thing; this purchase of their old school was what she called an “investment.” She liked to throw elaborate galas, and this was a dramatic a building as she could get. Javier called her phone calls and letters Rose's “society summons.” He never bothered to hide his bitterness.

At the top of the stairs Rose only had time to note that Margot was now

the type of person who wore linen suits before being snatched up and pinioned in her bony embrace. “How are you? You look like death.”

Rose leaned back in Margot’s arms to look her in the eye. She smiled as best she could. “Can’t complain.”

Margot drew her heavy brows together, her eyes darting around Rose’s face. She placed a dry hand on Rose’s cheek. “Somebody ought to be taking better care of you.”

“Hmm, wonder who’ll see to that. Maybe we can mobilize your people—I’m fresh out of entourage.” Mostly her voice was tired, but there was a note of warning. In the awkward moments that followed Rose wondered if they were going to have one of their stock arguments—if she was going to have to defend past choices or justify her marriage again.

But Margot just sighed, briefly squeezed Rose’s elbows. She whirled abruptly and tugged open the heavy door. “Oh my God, Rose, wait till you see this place again. It’s still so beautiful. I don’t know that I ever appreciated how gorgeous the window casings and lead-lights were.”

“Of course you didn’t—we were thirteen, at the oldest.”

“I cannot *wait* to show it off to the board. They’re going to flip.”

They passed through the vestibule of the great building. It was a tall, narrow room, like an elevator shaft, almost; Rose remembered standing under its vaulted ceiling. The two girls used to experiment with the eerie acoustics, throwing their little-girl voices up to the cold heights, listening to the altered tones fall back to their waiting ears.

Entering the lobby, Margot spread her hands wide, raised her face to the domed ceiling. “Stunning. It is still stunning in here.”

Rose noted that the front desk, which had formerly been an imposing sweep of oak and inlaid marble but which, deconstructed and stripped of its stone and gilt, now resembled a pile of kindling. “Um. Well? It needs a little work, Margot.” She stooped to examine some deep, parallel gashes in the floor.

“Looters?”

Margot pouted. “I know it’s rough. I think some kids got in here, or squatters. And look!” Margot trotted to the far end of the lobby, to the east staircase. “Look at the banister! Who does something like that—and what for?” A sizeable section had been removed, apparently with some kind of saw.

Rose studied the handrail’s unvarnished core, visible on either side of the gap. It looked like two pale, smooth faces. *Javier, when you fell back asleep this morning I wedged myself next to you in your bed and watched the news. A bridge collapsed in St. Paul yesterday—had you heard? There was no crumbling into pieces, no slow spread of decay—just two clean cracks and a WHUMP! Flat in the riverbed. When I lifted my hand from your chest, your skin was bruised. The nurse came in and yelled at me for getting too close. She asked me if I was*

trying to infect you with something.

Margot sighed. “Where on earth am I going to get that re-made? I have to fill that gap somehow—though it will probably have to be just a whole new railing.”

Rose ran her fingers along the smooth finish of the wood as she mounted the stairs. *Javier, I’m falling in love with anything that falls apart cleanly. Residue should be outlawed. No messy edges; no creeping rot allowed.* When she reached the gap where the excised section had been she tried to suspend her hand at the same height until she reached the other side—ignoring the loss. She asked Margot, “But what about authenticity? What about keeping the character of the hall you’ve loved for so long?”

“Well certainly I want it to look the same, or at least have the same kind of *feeling*, you know? But the idea for renovations is to replace as much as possible and cover up what’s too expensive to fix. Unfortunately this way’s kind of a gamble—I mean, you just can’t trust these old structures to hold up. They’ll give out on you at any time.”

Margot continued trotting blithely up the stairs, leaving Rose to trail behind the rest of the way, out of breath and slightly queasy.

Though the floor now groaned and creaked alarmingly, the practice room still looked much the same. The mirrors were intact, and the handrails still clung to their screws, albeit at a precarious angle. Rose shuffled her sneakers across the ancient scuff marks, the spindly cracks and dimples in the floor where hundreds of little girls had clattered in decades past. *Javier, you have these new and scary sores. What are they? They are not like scars, the rewards for surviving a tough life. They look like a body giving in. They look like little secessions, like little promises your body’s made to Death. The name the doctors have started to give them sounds like an old-time dance step, like taps in time on a varnished floor.*

“I think we’ll have the auctions in here. Perfect, right?” Margot tested the floor around her with her right foot and frowned. “But this floor gives in to pressure so easily. I’m pretty sure the sub-flooring’s okay—well, at least the joists should be fine. The guys I commissioned to check this place over had to prove some kind of structural adequacy, you know?” She bounced a little where she stood. “I guess in this climate I should at least strip down past the plywood? I bet it’s pretty water-damaged by now, just from 150 years of humidity.” She looked up at Rose. “But once I tear out all this outdated crap underneath, what should I lay overtop? They have this really great vinyl now that looks and feels exactly like tile—something very dark, I’m thinking. And with the windows there, it should be so much more dramatic. I mean, this floor was never meant to take the abuse it did, and for so long. Don’t you think?”

Rose had not been paying attention, but instead was retracing the grooves in the floor. She dredged up an old dance step from her memory. *Javier, we lean on too many things. Our serious self-made structures are a kind of refuge. Human deal-*

ing—like bureaucracy and hotel policy—never admits to this kind of decay. And that protocol—this building—these ideals—they don't even care, do they? Do they know how much we need them? She looked up when she registered the question in Margot's voice and nodded mutely.

Margot launched another inquiry while Rose did a slow time step in 5/4. "And what do you think of the mirror? I'm torn." When Rose only shrugged, Margot pursed her lips. "It's like, it would be nice to sort of retain the atmosphere of a ballroom, you know? But at the same time, I just wonder if it's too gaudy. I don't know." Margot glowered at the mirror, looking it up and down as if its reflection revealed evidence of gaudiness. "It might be too big a pain to tear it down. And it might be dangerous—like, what's even behind there?" Margot tapped the glass. "I guess you never really know what's underneath until there's a problem."

Rose said, "No, you certainly don't." She studied the new depth of her wrinkles in the mirror. *Javier, have you noticed how many people fall in this trap? They die, misled by their trust in noble deeds and hard heavy things—but internal structures stand firm for no cause. They have no concept of perseverance, will decompose in secret but look fine until they collapse, indifferent to how many people go down with them.*

There was an angry buzzing from Margot's purse. She held a finger up for Rose to wait while she took the call. Rose wandered out of the room and down the hall. As little girls, the two of them had investigated most of this building's square footage, including back hallways and hidden maid's closets. When she passed a closed door she couldn't place, she tugged on the handle and went inside.

Three windows stretched from floor to ceiling along the exterior wall, framing their view of the parking lot in double Gothic arches. Weak four o'clock light filtered through the dusty panes, revealing the room's demure past: though stripped of its Oriental rugs, the floor was still smooth, bearing no scratches or pockmarks. Rose remembered that this was where the staff had held invitation-only receptions for important performers, and where board members met to deliberate the fates of their faculty. A colossal fireplace loomed in one corner, a wrought iron screen standing guard before its cavernous opening.

Flanking the raised hearth, two female statues bore the mantle's weight. Rose studied one caryatid's profile—a towering monument in her memory, but now it reached only to her shoulder. They didn't face each other, but confronted the room with a parallel gaze. Her memory fumbled for a filmy recollection, a faraway afternoon: she and Margot, sneaking out of class, running into this room. Rose traced her fingers along the caryatid's cheek, down the elongated neck, then hesitated over the exposed breast. *Javier, this one was mine—the other was Margot's. I clung to her, to the grooves of her drapery, waiting for the moment when Margot and I would peek out at each other and dissolve into giggles. Back then there was just a painting propped up in a wooden stand before the opening, and when we got older we would*

crouch behind it, learning what can happen in the dark.

Rose leaned on the statue, rested her forehead on it. *Javier, life attacks like a battering ram. Life is like rhythmic assaults, increasing in speed and intensity until I cave.* She wrapped her arms around the statue and closed her eyes. *Javier, sometimes I want to get away from you. I want to be safe inside something again, to feel enclosed on all sides by warmth. I never let you probe this far inside—but this is who I really am.*

After a while, the statue became warm as a human—Rose had shared her heat, her energy, and now when she pressed her face to the marble it felt like skin. She was taking comfort from stone. She should probably call her husband, let him know she was coming back, and say goodbye to Margot.

Rose dialed the number as she walked back to the practice room, but Margot was no longer there. When he picked up, Javier passed the phone onto the doctor. Her husband didn't want to talk to her. He was receiving news. The doctor was giving a name and personality to the new malady they'd discovered. Rose listened, thanked him, and hung up. She sat cross-legged on the groaning floor near the top of the stairs.

Javier, your infrastructure is caving in. Javier, your body is poisoning itself. They are going to drain your toxic rivers and I don't know if I can bear to see the shell when they're done. But all this cutting, all this aggressive drugging amounts to painting the rooms of a building that's already decomposed.

"There you are! I have been all over this place, trying to find where you got off to." Rose watched Margot climb the stairs, watched her shoulder, hips, calves appear.

Javier, I know that body better than I've ever known yours. After they annihilate you with their medicine, I don't know if I can get to learning a new one. I don't know that I lean on another man.

"Rose, what's the matter?" Margot crouched in front of her, put a hand to her forehead. "You look like you might pass out. Dehydrated? You need some water?"

Margot had a birthmark on her pale throat. Rose stared at it and said, "I talked to the hospital." She spoke in a monotone. "He's got a new one. A virus."

Margot's hands warming her knees. Rose said, "It spreads like fog to every cell, see. And there are ways to drive it back, but they take too long."

Margot's dimpled chin. Rose said, "In the meantime his body will fall in on itself, be gnawed away."

Margot's concern, ever focused on her. *Javier, I ran away with you because it was easier, then. Now what have you got to offer me?*

They went outside to get Rose some air and lowered themselves like old ladies onto the cold front steps. The sun was low to the horizon behind the hall, and in the street before them everything looked aflame, outlined in a thick, crayoned black. The forefront of Rose's mind noticed how brilliantly the cars and storefronts shone,

bronzed with the setting sun. She noticed that they were all edged in the promise of nighttime.

It felt right, Margot there at her elbow. *Javier, I've gotten old. Now I'm too tired to name what I need or what I can stand. But then—I knew then that to commit to her was to embrace a lifetime of scorn, to the endless work of changing people's minds. And it was too hard. It was so exhausting to leave a mark on the world, and so I let you lead me, I let you fill the expectations.*

Rose turned and studied Margot's profile—the long ski-jump nose with nostrils ever flared, the pouted lips, the fierce eyebrows. “Margot, what is the point of this? All this work—what is the point of covering up the decay? It's natural for things to break and to rot—entropy, you know? So why bother with all these sloppy fix-ups?”

Still looking into the street, Margot raised her eyebrows and said, “Well, I hope they're not *sloppy* fix-ups—I just can't afford to renovate entirely.”

“You know it'll fall in on itself, eventually. You know that, right? Old things—things with histories of damage—will eventually reveal their weaknesses. Then you just have to run away when it crashes down.”

There was silence between them for a moment, and Rose knew Margot had realized what they were talking about. “Well. Maybe I'm just willing to work harder on it,” Margot said. “Maybe all it really needs is more attention, more dedication.”

Three doors down from the post office across the street was a tanning salon. Rose watched a minivan pull up; it double-parked for a moment and expelled three girls, all about 12 or 13 years old. She said, “You know, probably the only way to do it is purge everything. Burn it. Leave nothing behind and pretend it never existed.”

A longer silence. The orange glow faded; the black outlines bled shadows, which crept over everything. Absorbed in watching the onset of night, Rose was surprised when Margot spoke again. “But you never told me—you could've at least *told* me, Rose, that you didn't want—that you couldn't, anymore. I wouldn't have made you say why, even.”

An older woman stepped through the salon door onto the sidewalk and paused to rummage through her purse. She extracted a pack of cigarettes. By the light of the woman's Zippo, Rose could see all the lines on her face. “You can't rebuild on top of the old, Margot. The tiniest cracks will reach out and multiply. Pretty soon you accumulate a lifetime of ruins.”

The tanning salon woman lazily paced the sidewalk as she smoked. Rose thought about lighting a cigarette, the hissing crackle and the acrid kiss of smoke.

“And don't build anything to last, because it never does. Make it temporary and artificial—and don't expect it to mean too much, or the same thing to both of you.”

A delivery van pulled up and the woman with bronzed wrinkles got in; as they drove away the woman and the driver did not speak to each other. They both watched the van pass. “Rose. Didn’t you ever love him?”

Rose leaned slowly forward, falling in slow motion. She rested her forehead upon her knees, spoke to the ground between her legs. “The thing everyone wants is something miraculous. They want it like a religion. They want it to make life mean something.

“But I swear, that doesn’t work. I swear it’s more grounded—it has to do with tax breaks and brands of coffee. And even if it’s working okay for you, you’ve still got to impress your grandparents, to show them what they want to see. Don’t surprise anyone by telling them the truth.

“Even if you find your miracle, it’s hard to get other people to believe in it.” Without lifting her head, Rose fumbled for Margot’s hand. She pulled it close, held it to her face. *Javier, you weren’t my first and you weren’t my only, but if I thought it would help, I would pray. I would sacrifice a lamb for you, a fatted calf. I want a miracle for you but I just don’t believe enough.*