

FICTION

A STONE WOMAN

BY A. J. BYATT



At first she did not think of stones. Grief made her insubstantial to herself, she felt as if she were floating lightly from room to room like a moth. The apartment seemed constantly twilight, although it must, she knew, have gone through the usual sequences of sun and shadow over the days and weeks since her mother had died. Her mother—a strong, bright woman—had liked to live among shades of mole and dove. Her mother's hair had shone silver and ivory. Her eyes had faded from cornflower to forget-me-not. Ines had found her dead one morning, her bloodless fingers resting on an open book, her purchase eyeglasses down, as though she closed, a wry grimace on her fine lips, as though she had tasted something not quite nice. She quickly lost this lifelikeness, and became waxy and peaked. Ines, who had been the younger woman, became the old woman in an instant.

She buried herself with her work as a researcher for a major etymological dictionary, and she tidied love away. She packed it into plastic sacks—creamy silks and floating lawns, velvet and muslin, lavender crêpe de chine, beads of pearl and garnet. People had thought she was a dutiful daughter. They could not imagine two intelligent women who simply understood and loved each other. She drew the blinds because the light hurt her eyes. Her inner eye observed the final things over and over. White face on white pillow among white hair. Colorless skin on lifeless fingers. Flesh of my flesh, flesh of her flesh. The efficient rage of consuming fire, the handfuls of brown ash, which she had scattered, as she had promised, in the hurrying foam of a Yoda-shire beach.

She went through the motions, hoping to become accustomed to solitude and silence. Then one morning pain struck her like a sudden beak, tearing at her gut. She caught her breath and sat down, waiting for it to pass. It did not pass. It strengthened, blow on blow. She rolled on her bed, dishevelled and sweating. She heard the creature moaning. She tried to telephone the doctor, but the thing shrieked noisily into the mouthpiece, and this saved her, for they sent an ambulance, which took the screaming thing to a hospital, as

it would not have taken a polite old woman. Later, they told her she had had at most four hours to live. Her gut had been twisted and gangrenous. She lay quietly in a hospital bed in a curtained room. Numb and bandaged, she drifted in and out of blessed sleep.

The surgeon came and went, lifting her dressings, studying the sutures, prodding the walls of her belly with strong fingers. Ines was a crustaceous and shamefast woman. She did not want to see her own sliced skin and muscle. She thanked him for her life, unable to summon much warmth in her voice. What was her life now, to thank anyone for?

The anaesthetist came in to discuss what palliatives she might be allowed to take home with her. He said, "I expect you've noticed that there's no sensation around the incision. That's quite normal. The nerves take time to join again, and some may not do so." He, too, touched the sewed-up lips of the hole, and she felt that she did not feel, and then felt the ghost of a thrill, like fine wires shooting out across her skin. The anaesthetist said, "I see he managed to construct some sort of novel. People find odd, we've found, if they haven't got a novel." She murmured something. "Look," he said, "it's a work of art."

So she looked, since she would be going home and would now have to attend to the thing herself.

The wound was livid and ridged and ran the length of her white front, from the ribs to the hidden places below. Where she had been soft and flat, she was all plumpings and hollows, like an old cushion. And where her navel had been, like a button caught in a seam at an angle, was an asymmetric wheel with a little sill of skin. Ines thought of her lost navel, of the umbilical cord that had been a part of her and of her mother. Her face crossed into sorrow; her eyes were hot with tears. The anaesthetist misinterpreted them, and assured her that it would look much less angry and lumpy after a month or two, and if it did not it could easily be dealt with by a good plastic surgeon. Ines thanked him, and closed her eyes. There was no one to see her, she said, it didn't matter what she looked like. The anaesthetist, who had chosen his profession because he didn't like people's feelings and preferred silence to speech, offered

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