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Let Me Tell You About a Man I Knew

Written by Susan Fletcher

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SUSAN FLETCHER

Let me tell you about a man I knew



virago

VIRAGO

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One

All morning she washes their clothes in the yard beneath the lime tree, the metal tub by her side. She hunches on a stool. She unfolds the wet clothes, rubs soap on them and scrubs the cloth against the wooden board. Rinses. Scrubs. Rinses. Wrings the water out.

After this, she takes the clothes and hangs them – on a rope, tied between the lime and the stone wall. She does this with care, a hand's width between each garment. Then with a forked branch Jeanne hoists the clothes so they find the high breeze and they sway above the flattened earth and their own shadows and the stool and the metal tub.

She pauses. Looks across the fields.

The breeze finds the hems of her apron and skirt.

Briefly, Jeanne thinks of closing her eyes – to feel this wind against her, to open her mouth as if drinking it. The mistral, she knows, tastes cool. But this is not the mistral. It's a warm southerly wind – and Jeanne goes back to the tub, grasps its two handles and lifts it until the tub rests against her thigh and like this she hurries unevenly to the west side of their house and the boundary wall where not much will grow except dandelions and moss. She strains, momentarily; then there's a sudden clattering sound and the tub is on its side and the grey water rushes across the

ground, runs the length of the wall. Jeanne stands, watches this. When she was young, with every upturned pail she'd imagine it – this water's path, its second life. Where now? What might it do? Jeanne would think of it – the roots, the dark and dark-scented world beneath her feet where worms and busy, velvety moles might feel this surge and pause in their tunnelling, tunnels that took this water to streams or the Rhône itself, or elsewhere. The sea? Could it find distant lands? Princes and kingdoms? Or could it – Jeanne's emptied bucket – make new trees and flowers grow? *Roses because of me.*

She thinks this now, as the water sinks away. Roses that, if pinned to her hair, would leave a rose-scented trail in her wake. They grow against south-facing walls, in June and July. She's cupped them, inhaled.

When the tub is empty Jeanne props it against the wall to drain. Walks back across the yard and goes inside.

They watch for the mistral in these parts. Mostly it's an autumnal wind – yet it came early last year, blew when the chestnuts were still forming. It cracked glass. It threw back every unlocked door so that the town banged on its hinges and livestock kept to south-facing walls. *Mistrau* in the local tongue. Wind of change, of shallow sleep. By November the hills were powdered with snow and, in the fields, there was sleet. Jeanne would see the bluish glow of Mont Gaussier in the afternoons as she walked back through the olive trees, clutching her shawl to her jaw.

'Spring will come,' Charles assured her. In March, green shoots pushed up near the gate; April was the month of dripping lanes and a frailer, younger bleating in the moving herd of goats. It's only now, in May, that there's enough warmth in the sun to dry clothes or walk without her woollen shawl

and so Jeanne moves from to room to room, unfastening the windows that have been shut for so long and pushing them wide so this new, warm air can find its way into the corners of their house.

Each window's clasp cracks at her weight, like a seal.

Each view is known to her. From the parlour, Jeanne can see the lane and the olive trees beyond. The kitchen, too, faces the lane – but its second, smaller window looks into the yard with its drying clothes, the lime tree, the wash-house and a hen. She opens this window; the hen looks up.

She climbs the stairs to the bedroom – their shared room with single beds – which sits above the parlour. She's higher now, can see more. More olive trees, in their rows; the eaves of Peyron's house, beside the hospital walls. If Jeanne leans out of this window and looks right she can see Mont Gaussier and Les Deux Trous and the five blowing cypress trees and she used to do this in her early married days – lean out, her hands on the sill and smiling, feeling the sun on her face. Her best view south. Beneath her, the road to Saint-Rémy. Sometimes she sees the tops of heads. The dusty spines of mules.

A second bedroom. It looks into the lime tree – green, dappled walls.

And there's a final room. Was it a cupboard, before they lived here? Or even a room at all? It's the highest part of the house, reached by three more steps, which means it feels safe to her – a little tucked-away land. It used to be the nursery. Here she cradled and fed and sang to each boy – and this made it her best place in the world, for a time. How they'd grasp her finger with all five of their own, how they seemed like fish with their soft, soft sucking sounds and round, reflecting eyes meant they seemed other-worldly to her, made for elsewhere. Jeanne rarely comes here now. But

when she comes she feels her heart fill up for them; it fills now as she takes five steps across the floor and pushes back the shutter so that the room fills with light.

Look. Her vegetable plot – where she tries to keep the crows away with spoons tied onto string. The ditch that mules drink from. The same white hen.

And there . . .

Jeanne lowers her hand from her eyes. The hospital. Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. From this room she sees it very clearly: a weathered ship in a sea of olives and grass. Its roof is bleached by sun. The pale-blue shutters on every window are locked, she knows, with rusting hooks that can pinch the skin and they're fastened each night, or in summer for shade – but they're unfastened today. Rows of them, thrown back. Each window, she thinks, is an eye. Or each is like a tiny cave that her boys might have pushed their fingers into, trying to find what hid in its dark. The pale-blue paint is old. It flakes, drifts down into the garden so that some of the patients have thought these flakes are butterflies or butterflies' wings, or snow. Carried them with shaking hands.

This old, known place. A garden of ivy. Its boundary wall and corridors, its cloisters and pines. The fountain that's thick with moss.

And him. A patient is sitting on a bench.

He's far away and partly in shade but Jeanne knows who he is. Hands in his lap.

The mistral can make them worse. All her life she'd heard this – that that wild autumnal wind can awaken grief or rage or bring up the fears which, since infancy, have been locked away. That it can call to the animal nature in a person who's always seemed calm. There are too many stories to count. In the hospital, the breaking of tethers; how a man beat his

chest until it bruised. But Jeanne can add stories of her own too – of how Laure would sometimes push herself onto her toes and sniff the air when the mistral was blowing. Or how, once, Jeanne had opened the nursery windows and, at that moment, a bird had flown in. Both black and bright. A hard, clapping sound. The bird struck the wall and her forearms and there was a draught from its panicking wings and the shedding of feathers, and in its wake Jeanne didn't see the blood on her arms. She only thought of Benoît – *my child*. But he was unmarked and unknowing. Sleeping on his side in his cool, black-feathered bed.

Her boys, too. They seemed more quarrelsome in the mistral season, more prone to injuries or strange, vivid dreams. And each of her pregnancies began with that wind – as if it woke a deeper, sleeping, wanting part of Charles.

In the afternoon she lifts the chairs onto the table and sweeps. Makes bread. Scrubs the kitchen floor.

By four, his shoes are polished. His books line up, in wait.

Jeanne is breaking eggs into a bowl when Charles returns. She hears him before she sees him. With half an eggshell in each hand she looks up to see him move through the drying clothes, brush past the hens and she sees, too, that he's frowning, which means his thoughts are elsewhere.

'Are they glad of it?'

'Of?'

'The sunshine, at last. Spring.'

He sits down, exhales. 'Of course.'

'Are they calmer?'

'Most are.'

Charles has coffee at this hour – sweetened, and in the brown cup that seems too small for his strong, veined hands. She offers it to him. 'So it's been a quiet day for you?'

He takes the cup. 'Quieter. But . . . '

She knows. It's too much work for him, even so. All these years at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole and he's growing old. He stoops sometimes. There's looser skin beneath his eyes. 'I saw Rouisson,' she says.

'You did? When?'

'Today. From the nursery window. He was in the garden, sitting on a bench.'

'Alone?'

'Yes.'

'And tranquil?'

'Yes. He seemed so. He was sitting perfectly still.'

A nod. 'He's much better these days. But I fear he'll always be here. Well, you know . . . '

Rouisson. Jeanne doesn't know them all by name – there are more than twenty patients – but she knows Émile Rouisson. He came twelve years ago – a short, strong man from the Languedoc who shook as if cold, spoke of angels. He'd lost his daughter and wife to a sickness – and lost them so suddenly that he came to fear losing more so he'd search for what he thought he'd lost – a pocket watch or coin. On his fifth day at Saint-Paul, Jeanne met him. On her way to chapel, she paused; this new, curious patient kneeling by the boundary wall, searching the undergrowth. He saw her, called out. 'Madame! Will you help?' He'd lost a silver key. Had she seen it? Did she know where it was? Jeanne shook her head but she crouched all the same; she parted the leaves and looked for silver amongst the soil and dark green. Then Rouisson grabbed her. He grasped her wrist and hissed, 'You took it! I know you did! Give it back!'

Jeanne has come to understand that most will never leave. They're like the ivy that finds its way onto the powdering stones, seeks out the cracks and takes hold. Even if they leave physically, something stays – an echo in their wake, their names scratched into the walls. But no, most will stay. Some are so undone that the world won't have them or they won't have the world, so they find their routines in Saint-Paul and live by them – their baths, their food, the doses of bromide, simple food and early nights, the soothing words of nuns. Perhaps they don't mend, but they don't worsen. Nor do they mind that the hospital is far poorer than it was. As for their families, they keep their sick, unfortunate ones at Saint-Paul because it is easiest to – a change might make them ill again, and other asylums would cost far more. And so, with time, the shapes and voices of these patients become as known to Jeanne as the outline of trees. There's Patrice who sings. The woman whose arms are scarred from her youth. Yves whose tongue protrudes as if his mouth is too full to hold it – too full of unsaid words or spit. Michel, like a bear – so strong and tall that they used to fear no straps would hold him if he chose to rage. But he's never shown rage. Jeanne has only heard gentle stories of Michel – how he reads in the library, or takes bread from the dining room to feed the sparrows that bathe in dust by the southern wall. There's Dominique who owns a child's doll. Once, there was a girl who claimed she ate an owl's heart so that she could see in the dark, hear mice – *One day I will fly . . .* – and it was Charles had to tell her no, she couldn't fly, and restrain her. As for Rouisson, he no longer loses things. He's too tired for it. Bromide and age seem to have brought a peace to him, even in autumn weather. Sometimes he sleeps on the floor of the corridors so they wake him like a child, lead him back. *This way . . .*

Rouisson won't go. Nor will Jeanne forget the colours that came to the bruise on her wrist after he'd seized her – ink-blue, apricot, gold. It troubled Charles. He turned her wrist over, studying it, and forbade her from the hospital after that. Ever since, Jeanne may only enter its grounds on Sunday morning, to pray in its chapel that smells of dark.

Charles looks up suddenly. 'The windows. Why are they open?'

'They've been closed all winter. I thought—'

'No, Jeanne.'

One by one, rules came. The hospital grounds are only one restriction from this neat, military man. His old army life has meant structure; his medical ways mean that he fears infections, fevers, broken bones. And so Charles ordered their sons in when it rained, forbade them from walking through the field with Breguet's bull. When there were rumours of the Cavaillon melons causing a sudden looseness of bowels he wouldn't let Jeanne walk near the stalls, told her not to touch their sun-bright skin in case she fell ill or brought the illness home. He's wary, she knows, of all things: of prowlers, fires, fast water. Meat must be cooked until dark. And so, for Charles, windows must be closed – all of them, even though it's the first warm day in half a year and the winter's been long, too long.

'Shut them, please.'

'Yes.' After all, he's seen far more of the world. He runs the asylum on his own, or so it feels. He's more tired than any patient, looks older than he is – and for a moment Jeanne thinks of touching the side of his face, of cupping it as she would a rose. Breathing him.

Instead, she closes the windows one by one.

*

Their meal is omelette with ham, and bread. His glass of red wine. Their home doesn't yet have gaslight so there's a lantern at either end of the table – his lantern and hers. By his light, he reads. By hers, she watches – how he cuts his food, places it in his mouth and then lays the fork down before turning to *Le Figaro* or *L'homme de bronze*.

She looks down. These plates bear a print of flowers – blooms that have no name, and that Jeanne's never seen in lanes or gardens or any place except on these plates and bowls. They're invented flowers, maybe. Even so, Jeanne feels she could pick them. She's looked at these plates and heard bees, or imagined the sun-warm underside of each bloom, and they seem to glow by candlelight as the paler flowers can. As old as their married life – for these plates had been a wedding gift. A second, undying bouquet.

'Salles,' he says, 'is coming to Saint-Paul. We must set a place for him.'

Jeanne pauses, looks up. 'He is? When?'

'Tomorrow.'

'To eat? Here?'

'Yes. Would that be difficult?'

These are Jeanne's thoughts, on being asked: that they've just eaten the last of the ham, the last eggs. And how much is in their vegetable patch? Not much, or enough. But there's the hen that's too old to lay, and the food in jars, preserved from last year. The market, if she needs it. 'No, not difficult. Why is he coming?'

'He's bringing someone.'

'A patient?'

'Yes.'

'A new one? Really?'

'Yes. Quite new.'

Jeanne turns back to the plate. The truth is that it's been a

long time since a new patient came to Saint-Paul – four years, at least – and arrivals are not easy. Patients don't always wish to come. Even if they do, they're often rushed with feelings as they step into the hospital's porch – failure or grief, a disbelief at being there. Some are as tired as children; others have no trust in the world and hunt for the lie, curse the nuns. And while they may have come from anywhere – Marseilles, or Avignon – most come from the same hospital in Arles where they can treat the visible wounds, the childbirths and open sores, but have far less to offer the wounds of the mind. Too few doctors, at Arles. They can't care for the disturbed or the insane. So they talk of the town of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, fifteen miles to the north – of its asylum that was once a monastery. A place with cloisters. Herbs.

'He's foreign,' Charles says. 'Dutch, I think.'

'Oh?' Jeanne looks up, hearing this.

'A strange man. Wild. And self-wounded, I hear – violently so.'

It will be a wound to the wrists, Jeanne's sure of that. To that smoothness of skin under her thumb, its embroidery of veins. With the women, they might choose the upper arms or thighs; long ago there was a far more secret wounding that took the patient back to Arles with an infection in her blood that killed her, in the end. But mostly it's wrists. 'Will he stay with us?'

'Salles? No need. The spare rooms in the hospital will serve him well enough. The nuns have been told. But we'll feed him.'

'Yes.' She nods. Salles, with his slow way of speaking. His smile.

With that, Charles yawns. He presses the heel of his hand to his brow and closes his eyes momentarily, returns to *Le Figaro*.

*

In the kitchen, Jeanne thinks this: *he comes from Holland. Dutch means he comes from there.* Her father had had a faded antique globe, the colour of parchment or yellowed bone. By the fireside he'd turn it and say, What would you like to see, *mon chou*? Anything. All of it. Lands where ebony came from or where volcanoes were or big, white bears or where camels trod through deserts with spices and rolls of silk on their backs. Holland, he assured her, was a flat, flat place – land claimed from the sea, which the sea wanted back. Dykes and walls built against it. A blowing sky.

Papa. Two taps of his fingernail. On finding a country, he'd tap it twice and say to her, See? Just there.

There must be better hospitals than Saint-Paul-de-Mausole. There must be asylums (although Charles is less fond of that word) where the director is well and the paint doesn't peel and the food's more than haricot beans. Where the fountain works, at least. Yet Salles is bringing this new patient here? Jeanne knots her apron, looks out at the fading light and can only suppose that Salles thinks the empty rooms and overgrown garden at Saint-Paul will suit this Dutchman, somehow.

She washes the plates, dries them. She slows in her drying, fingers the stem of a dark-pink bud. In the rue de l'Agneau, there was jasmine; she'd make crowns of it, walk home like a queen. Or she'd press herself into its soft, white curtain with her arms held out, embracing it – and she'd do this still, if there were jasmine here.

Dutch. She washes, dries.

When she glances up, dusk has deepened into night.