

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush before Bed

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Translated from the Italian by Lawrence Venuti

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6 July 2000

3:25PM

Diary,

I'm writing in my shadowy room plastered with Gustav Klimt prints and posters of Marlene Dietrich. As she levels her languid, haughty gaze at me, I scribble across a white page that reflects the sunlight seeping through the chinks in the blinds.

It's hot, a dry, torrid heat. I hear the sound of the TV in the next room, and my sister's tiny voice reaches me as she harmonizes with the theme song of some cartoon. Outside a cricket screeches like there's no tomorrow, but inside a soft peacefulness has descended upon the house. Everything seems safely enclosed in a bell jar of the most delicate glass, and the heat weighs down every movement. But inside me there's no peace. It's as if a mouse were gnawing away at my soul, so gently that it even seems sweet. I'm not ill, but I'm not quite well; what's worrying is that "I'm not." Still, I know how to find myself: all I need do is lift my eyes and fix them on the reflection in the mirror, and a soft, peaceful happiness will possess me.

I admire myself before the mirror, and I'm transported by the figure gradually emerging there, by the muscles that have assumed a firmer, more defined shape, by the breasts that are now noticeable beneath pullovers and bob gently at every step. Ever since I was little, my mother has innocently wandered around the house nude, so I've grown accustomed to observing the female body, and a woman's figure is no mystery to me. Still, an impenetrable forest of hair hides the Secret and conceals it from sight. Often, with my image reflected in the mirror, I slip my finger inside, and as I look into my eyes, I'm filled with a feeling of love and admiration for myself. The pleasure of observing myself is so intense and powerful that it immediately turns physical, starting with a twitch and ending with an unusual warmth and a shudder, which lasts a few moments. Then the

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

embarrassment comes. Unlike Alessandra, I never fantasize when I touch myself. A while ago she confided to me that she too touches herself, and she said when she does it she likes to imagine she's being possessed by a man, hard, violently, as if she were going to be hurt. Gosh, I thought, and here I get excited simply by looking in the mirror. She asked me if I also touched myself, and my answer was no. I absolutely don't want to destroy this pillowed world I've constructed, a world of my own, whose only inhabitants are my body and the mirror. Answering yes would have been a betrayal.

The only thing that really makes me feel good is the image I behold and love; everything else is make-believe. My friendships are fake, born by chance and raised in mediocrity, utterly superficial. The kisses I timidly bestow on boys at my school are fake: as soon as I press my lips on theirs, I feel a kind of repulsion, and I bolt whenever I feel their clumsy tongues slipping into my mouth. This house is fake, so far removed from my current state of mind. I want every picture to be suddenly torn from the walls, a freezing, glacial cold to penetrate the windows, the howling of dogs to replace the crickets' song.

I want love, Diary. I want to feel my heart melt, want to see my icy stalactites shatter and plunge into a river of passion and beauty.

8 July 2000

8:30PM

A commotion on the street. Laughter fills the stifling summer air. I imagine the eyes of my peers before they leave their homes: bright, animated with yearning for a fun night out. They'll spend it on the beach singing songs accompanied by a guitar. Some will wander off to spots cloaked in darkness to whisper infinite words into each other's ears. Others will swim tomorrow in a sea warmed by the dim morning sun, guardian of a maritime life that

is yet unknown. They will live and learn how to lead their lives. OK, I'm breathing too, biologically I'm on track. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid of leaving the house and facing strange looks. I know, I live in perennial conflict with myself: there are days when hanging out with the others helps me, and I feel an urgent need for them. But there are also days when the only thing that satisfies me is to be alone, completely alone. Then I listlessly drive my cat from the bed, stretch out on my back, and think. I might even play some CD's, almost always classical music. I perk up with the music's help and don't need anything else.

But that racket outside is tearing me to pieces: I know that tonight they'll live more deeply than me. I shall remain inside this room, listening to the sounds of life, listening till sleep welcomes me into his embrace.

10 July 2000

10:30AM

You know what I think? I think starting a diary was the worst possible idea. I know what I'm about, I understand myself. In a few days I'll forget the key somewhere, or maybe I'll just decide to stop writing, jealous of my thoughts. Or maybe (this isn't so implausible) my snoopy mother will pore over the pages, and then I'll feel stupid and break off my tale.

I really don't know if it's such a good thing to unburden myself. At least I'm distracted.

13 July

Morning

Diary,

I'm happy! Yesterday I went to a party with Alessandra, who

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

looked very tall and thin on her spike heels, beautiful as ever, and as ever slightly rude in the way she talked and acted. But she was affectionate and sweet too. At first I didn't want to go, partly because parties bore me and partly because yesterday the heat was so stifling it stopped me from doing anything. But then she begged me to go with her, so I went along. We traveled by scooter and sang till we reached the suburb in the hills, now transformed by the scorching summer from green and lush to parched and shriveled. The town of Nicolosi had gathered in the piazza for a huge festival, and the asphalt, cooled by the evening, was covered with booths selling candy and dried fruit. The little villa stood at the end of a narrow, unlit road. When we arrived at the gate, Alessandra started waving her hands and shouting, "Daniele, Daniele!"

He walked up very slowly and greeted her. He seemed rather handsome, though I couldn't make out much in the darkness. Alessandra introduced us, and he gave me a limp handshake. He murmured his name very softly, and I smiled, thinking he might be shy. At one point I distinctly saw a gleam in the darkness: his teeth were so white, so amazingly bright. I squeezed his hand harder and said "Melissa" a little too loudly. Maybe he didn't notice my teeth weren't as white as his, but maybe he saw my eyes brighten and shine. Once we had gone inside, I noticed that in the light he seemed even more handsome. I walked behind him and saw the muscles ripple on his back with each step. At five foot three I felt very short beside him; I also felt ugly.

When we finally sat down on the armchairs in the living room, he was facing me, slowly sipping his beer and staring straight into my eyes. I was embarrassed by the spots on my forehead and by my complexion, which seemed much too fair compared to his. His straight, well-shaped nose looked just like the ones on Greek statues, and the veins that stood out on his hands endowed them with an awesome strength. His huge, dark blue eyes cast a proud, haughty gaze at me. He asked me a stream of questions while displaying utter indifference. Instead of discouraging me, it made me bolder.

He doesn't like to dance, nor do I. So we stayed by ourselves while the others loosened up, drank, and joked.

A hush suddenly fell upon us, and I wanted to fix it.

"Beautiful house, isn't it?" I said, feigning self-confidence.

He just shrugged his shoulders. I didn't want to be pushy, so I remained silent.

The moment for intimate questions had arrived. When everybody was busy dancing, he moved even closer to my chair and started looking at me with a smile. I was surprised and charmed, expecting him to make some sort of move; we were alone, in the dark, and now quite favorably close to each other. It was then that he asked me, "Are you a virgin?"

I turned crimson and felt a lump in my throat as a thousand pins pricked my brain.

I answered a timid yes, which immediately made me turn away my eyes in order to quell my immense embarrassment. He bit his lip to repress a laugh and confined himself to a cough without uttering a single syllable. Inside me the reproaches were loud and harsh. "He'll never pay attention to you again! Idiot!" But in the end what could I say? The truth is that I'm a virgin. I've never been touched by anyone but myself, and I'm proud of it. Still, the curiosity is there and it's very strong, particularly a curiosity about the nude male body. I've always been prevented from getting to know it: when a nude scene comes on the TV, my father grabs the remote control and changes the channel. And when, just this summer, I stayed out all night with a boy from Florence who was on holiday here, I didn't dare put my hand on the same place where he had already put his.

Then there's the desire to experience a pleasure produced by someone other than me, to feel his skin against mine. Finally there's the privilege of being the first among girls my age to have a sexual relationship. Why did he ask me that question? I haven't even thought about what my first time will be like, and I'll probably never think about it. I want only to live it and, if I can, cherish a memory that forever remains beautiful, a

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

memory that will keep me company at the saddest moments in my life. I'm thinking Daniele could be it, or so various things have led me to feel.

Last night we exchanged phone numbers and during the night, while I was sleeping, he sent me a text message. I read it this morning: "It was great to be with you, you're very pretty, and I want to see you again. Come to my house tomorrow and we'll go for a swim."

7:10PM

I'm perplexed and upset. The outcome I'd been unable to anticipate till a few hours ago, was rather harsh, even if not entirely disgusting.

His vacation home is very beautiful, surrounded by a verdant garden and a myriad of the freshest and most colorful flowers. The sun's reflection shone in the blue swimming pool, and the water was so inviting you could just dive in. But today, of all days, I couldn't: my period stopped me. Under the weeping willow I watched the others diving and playing while I sat at a little bamboo table holding a glass of iced tea. Every so often he would glance in my direction and smile, and I would cheer up again. Then I saw him climb up the ladder and come towards me, the water slowly trickling down his glistening torso. He swept back his soaking hair and sprayed droplets all around.

"I'm sorry you can't have any fun," he said with a slightly ironic tone.

"No problem," I answered. "I'll just get some sun."

Without a word he took me by the hand as he grabbed the cold glass and set it down on the table.

"Where are we going?" I asked, laughing but a little worried.

He didn't answer. Instead he led me to a door at the top of a stair, lifted the mat, picked up a set of keys, and inserted one into the lock, watching me with a keen, crafty look as he did it.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked again with the same concealed worry as before.

Once more no answer, just a faint laugh. He opened the door, pulled me inside, and closed it behind me. The room was extremely hot and dimly lit by the glimmers that filtered through the shutters. He leaned me against the door and kissed me passionately, making me savor his lips, which tasted like strawberries, and were nearly the same in color. His hands were planted on the door, and the muscles on his back were taut. I could feel them hard beneath my hands while I caressed his back and ran my fingers up and down it, just as the demons were running up and down my body. Then he took my face in his hands, broke away from my mouth, and asked me softly, “Would you like to do it?”

I bit my lip and answered no, because a thousand fears suddenly invaded me, faceless, abstract fears. The hands he had placed on my cheeks exerted more pressure, and with a force he may have wanted, in vain, to translate into gentleness, he pushed me farther down, abruptly showing me the Unknown. I now had it before my eyes, it smelled male, and every vein that crossed it expressed such power that I felt duty-bound to reckon with it. It entered my lips presumptuously, washing away the strawberry taste that still impregnated them.

Then all of a sudden there was another surprise: my mouth filled with a hot, sour liquid, thick and plentiful. My sudden start at this new discovery gave him a slight twinge; he grabbed my head and pushed it towards him even more forcefully. I heard him panting, and there was a moment when I thought the warmth of his breath reached all the way down to me. I drank the liquid because I didn’t know what else to do with it; my throat emitted a soft gurgle that embarrassed me. While I was still on my knees, I saw his hands drop. Thinking he wanted me to raise my face, I smiled. But he just pulled up his bathing suit, and I heard the noise of the elastic against his sweat-soaked skin. I then stood up on my own and looked him in the eyes, searching for some reassuring sign that might brighten me up.

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked.

Still tasting the sour liquid, I answered yes, a glass of water. He left and returned a few seconds later with a glass in his hand. I was still leaning against the door, looking curiously around the room after he had switched on the light. I observed the silk curtains and the sculptures, as well as the various books and magazines scattered across the elegant sofas. An enormous aquarium projected its sparkling light on the walls. I heard noises coming from the kitchen. I felt neither worry nor shame, just a strange contentment. Only later did shame assail me, as he handed me the glass indifferently and I asked, “Is this really the way it’s done?”

“Of course,” he answered with a derisive smile that displayed his beautiful teeth. Then I smiled and hugged him. While I was smelling the nape of his neck, I felt his hands behind me grasping the handle and opening the door.

“Let’s meet tomorrow,” he said, and after a kiss that was sweet for me, I went down to the others.

Alessandra looked at me and laughed. I flashed a smile that immediately disappeared as I lowered my head: my eyes filled with tears.

29 July 2000

Diary,

I’ve been going with Daniele for more than two weeks, and already I feel very close to him. It’s true that his behavior towards me is somewhat rude, and never does a compliment or a kind word issue from his mouth: only indifference, insults, irritating laughter. And yet the way he acts makes me even more tenacious. I’m certain the passion I feel can make him all mine, and he’ll soon recognize it. During the hot, monotonous afternoons, I often find myself thinking of his taste, the freshness of his strawberry mouth, his muscles firm and rippling like

massive fish. And almost always I touch myself, experiencing awesome orgasms, intense and brimming with fantasies. My passion is overwhelming, I feel it beating against my skin, wanting to get out, to unleash all its potency. I have a crazed desire to make love, I'd do it right now, I'd keep at it for days on end, till my passion is completely out, finally free. I know intuitively I shall never be sated anyway; after a short while I shall reabsorb what I have dissipated only to surrender it anew, in a never-ending cycle, always the same, always exciting.

1 August 2000

He told me I'm not capable of doing it, I'm not passionate enough. He said it with his usual mocking smile, and I left in tears, humiliated by his response. We were lying on the hammock in the garden, his head resting on my legs as I gently caressed his hair and gazed at his eyelashes, quite thick for an eighteen-year-old. I ran a finger across his lips, wetting the tip a little. He awoke and shot me an inquiring look.

"I want to make love, Daniele," I blurted out. My cheeks were flaming.

He laughed so loudly he lost his breath.

"Give me a break, babe, what is it you'd like to do? You're not even capable of sucking me off!"

I looked at him, perplexed, humiliated, I wanted to sink into his well-manicured garden and rot beneath it while his feet trod on me for eternity. I fled, angrily screaming, "Asshole" and violently slamming the gate. I started the scooter and took off, my soul in ruins, my pride crushed.

Is it so hard, Diary, to let yourself be loved? I didn't think it was necessary to drink his potion in order to secure his affection; I thought I had to yield myself completely to him, but now that I'm about to do it, now that I desire it, he mocks me and drives me away. What can I do? Might as well forget about

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

revealing my love to him. I can still prove I'm capable of doing what he doesn't expect. I'm very stubborn; I'll get my way.

3 December 2000

10:50PM

Today's my birthday, my fifteenth. Outside it's cold, and this morning it rained hard. Some relatives came over, but I wasn't very hospitable, and my embarrassed parents told me off when the others left.

The problem is that my parents see only what they like to see. When I'm bubbly, they share my delight and seem amiable and understanding. When I'm sad, they stay at arm's length and avoid me like the plague. My mother says I'm a zombie, I listen to funeral music and the only thing that amuses me is to shut myself up in my room and read books (she doesn't actually say this, but I can read it in her look). My father knows zilch about how my days unfold, and I haven't the slightest desire to tell him anything about them.

Love is what I'm missing, an affectionate caress is what I want, a sincere look is what I desire.

School was also hellish today: twice I was caught unprepared (I've lost the desire to study) and I had to put up with the Latin lesson. Daniele torments my brain day and night and even inhabits my dreams. I can't reveal to anyone what I feel for him, they wouldn't understand, I'm certain.

During the lesson the classroom was silent and dark because a lightbulb burned out. I left Hannibal crossing the Alps and the well-trained geese in the Campidoglio waiting for him, and turned my gaze towards the steamed-up windows and saw my opaque, hazy image: without love a man is nothing, Diary, nothing at all (nor am I a woman).

Melissa P

25 January 2001

Today he turns nineteen. As soon as I awoke, I grabbed my cell phone, and the beep-beep of the buttons resounded in my room. I sent him a happy birthday message. I know he won't respond with thanks; maybe it'll give him a chuckle. He won't be able to restrain himself when he reads the last sentence I wrote: "I love you, and that's the only thing that matters."

4 March 2001

7:30AM

So much time has passed since last I wrote, but nearly nothing has changed. During these months I dragged my feet, burdened by my sense of the world's inadequacy. Around me I see only mediocrity, and the mere idea of going out makes me feel ill. Where would I go? With whom?

Meanwhile my feelings for Daniele have intensified, and now I feel like I'm bursting with the desire to make him mine.

We haven't seen each other since the morning I left his house in tears. Only last night did his phone call break the monotony that has dogged me ever since. I'm hoping with all my might that he hasn't changed, that he's stayed exactly the same as that morning when I made my acquaintance with the Unknown.

Hearing his voice awakened me from a long, sound sleep. He asked me how I was getting along, what I did during these months; then with a laugh he asked if my tits had grown, and I answered yes, even though it isn't really true. After running out of words to fit the occasion, I told him the same thing I told him that morning: I wanted to do it. Over the past few months the lust has been agonizing. I touched myself till I thought I'd go out of my mind, experiencing thousands of orgasms. Desire took

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

possession of me even during school hours when, certain that no one was watching, I straddled the iron support of the desk and leaned my Secret against it with a gentle pressure.

It was strange he hadn't mocked me yesterday; in fact, he remained silent while I confided my longing to him. He said there wasn't anything weird about it, it was normal for me to have such desires.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "since I've known you for a while, I can help you realize them."

I sighed and shook my head. "In eight months a girl can change; she can come to understand certain things she didn't before. Daniele, why don't you tell me the truth, that you don't have any cunts available, so all of a sudden (and finally, I thought!) you remembered me?" I was letting everything out.

"You disappeared! Do you want me to hang up? There's no use talking to a girl like you."

Afraid he would once again slam the door in my face, I yielded, uttered an imploring "No," and then said, "OK, OK. Forgive me."

"Now that you're using your head," he responded. "I've got a proposal to make you."

Curious about what he was going to tell me, I egged him on childishly. He said he would do it with me only if nothing came of it, if there'd be nothing between us but sex, which we'd seek out only when we had the desire for it. I believed that in the long run even a porno novel might metamorphose into a tale of love and affection, which, absent at the start, could develop with practice. And so I prostrated myself before his will insofar as it complied with my whims: I shall be his little sex toy with an expiration date; when he gets fed up, he'll just get rid of me. Seeing that my first time would involve a true and proper agreement (though without a document that confirms and bears witness to it) between one party who is much too cunning and another who is much too curious and eager, I accepted the terms with a bowed head and a heart on the verge of exploding.

I'm hoping, however, for a positive outcome because I

want to preserve the memory of it forever. I want it to be lovely, brilliant, poetic.

3:18PM

My body feels destroyed and heavy, incredibly heavy. It's like something very huge has fallen on top of me and squashed me. I'm not referring to physical pain, but to a different kind, inside. I didn't feel any physical pain even when I was on top.

This morning I took my scooter out of the garage and went to his house in the center of town. It was early, half the town was still asleep, and the roads were nearly empty. Every so often some truck driver would blast his horn and toss me a compliment. I'd smile a little because I thought other people could perceive my happiness, which always makes me more lovely and radiant.

When I arrived at his house, I looked at my watch and realized I was tremendously early, as usual. So I sat on the scooter, opened my book bag, and took out my Greek text to go over the lesson I should've reviewed in class this very morning (if only my teacher knew I cut school to go to bed with a boy!). I was anxious, all the same, and leafed back and forth through the book without being able to read a word. I felt my heart pounding and the blood flowing through my veins, racing beneath my skin. I laid down the book and looked at myself in the rear-view mirror. I thought my pink teardrop glasses would charm him and my black poncho would knock him dead. I smiled, biting my lip, and felt proud of myself. It was just five minutes before nine; it wouldn't be a big deal if I buzzed early.

Just after I pressed the buzzer, I glimpsed his naked back in the window. He raised the blind, scowled, and said with a hard, ironic tone, "You've still got five minutes. Wait there; I'll call you at nine on the dot." At that moment I laughed stupidly, but in thinking it over now, I realize he wanted to send a very clear message about who was setting the rules and who had to

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed

follow them.

He came out on the balcony and said, "You can enter."

On the stairs I smelled the odor of cat piss and flowers left to wither. I heard a door open and dashed up the steps two at a time because I didn't want to be late. He'd left the door open, and I entered, softly calling him. I heard noises in the kitchen and headed there, but he came to meet me and stopped me with a kiss on the lips, quick but pleasurable. It brought back his strawberry taste.

"Go in there," he said, pointing to the first room on the right. "I'll come in a minute."

I went into his room, which was an utter mess. He had obviously just rolled out of bed. The walls were covered with license plates from American cars, posters manga cartoons, and random photos from his trips. On the bedside table stood a photo of him as a child. I touched it gently, but he put it face down, telling me I shouldn't look at it.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me around, giving me the once-over. Then he complained, "What the hell are you wearing?"

"Fuck off, Daniele," I replied, wounded once again.

The phone rang, and he left the room to answer it. I didn't quite hear what he was saying, just muffled words and repressed laughter. "She's waiting for me. I'll take a peek and tell you."

At this point he put his head around the door and looked at me before he went back to the phone and said, "She's standing next to the bed with her hands in her pockets. I'm going to screw her now, and I'll tell you about it later. Ciao."

He returned with a smiling face, and I responded with a nervous smile.

Without saying a word he lowered the shutter and locked the door to his room. He looked at me for a moment and dropped his trousers, remaining in his underwear.

"Well?" he said with a scowl. "What are you doing still dressed? Are you going to take off your clothes or not?"

He laughed as I got undressed, and once I was naked, he nodded and said, "Not bad, after all. I've made a deal with a good-looking cunt." I didn't smile this time, I was nervous, I looked at my pure white arms shining in the faint sunlight that came through the window. He started kissing me on the neck and gradually moved lower, over my breasts and then the Secret, where already the river Lethe had begun to flow.

"Why don't you shave it?" he murmured.

"No," I said just as softly, "I like it better like this."

Lowering my head I noticed he was aroused, and so I asked him if he wanted to begin.

"How would you like to do it?" he asked without hesitation.

"I don't know," I answered with a twinge of shame, "you tell me... I've never done it."

I lay down on the cold sheets of his unmade bed. Daniele flopped on top of me, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, "Get on top."

"Will it hurt me to be on top?" I asked in a tone that was almost reproachful.

"Who cares?" he exclaimed without looking at me.

I clambered on top of him and guided his lance to the center of my body. I felt a slight pain, but nothing terrible. Feeling him inside me didn't provoke the frenzy I had expected. On the contrary, his sex just gave me an annoying, burning sensation, but I felt obliged to stay glued to him like that.

No groan issued from my lips, which were clenched in a smile. Letting him see my pain would have meant expressing those feelings he didn't want to recognize. He wanted to make use of my body, not penetrate my light.

"Come on, little one, I won't hurt you," he said.

"Don't worry, I'm not afraid. But shouldn't you be on top?" I asked with a faint smile. He sighed and agreed, throwing himself on top of me.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked as he started to move slowly.