

*Translation by Anne Milano Appel*

The best part of the chase is the kill. This was his opinion at least, confirmed by years and years of successful hunting, dozens of quarries stalked, flushed out and killed. Every moment of the pursuit was exciting of course, and there was also the satisfaction of seeing his technique improve from one occasion to the next, his eye sharpening so as to be able to pick out a suitable victim from among many: the right one, the one who would let herself be stalked, fleeing gracefully and later struggling to the very end.

Because, as everyone knows, you have to be sportsmanlike in the chase and allow the prey a fair chance to play the game a little, otherwise where's the pleasure in it?

All of it exciting, all of it satisfying, but the really priceless moment was that single, exquisite instant in which the adversary realized that there was no longer anything she could do, no place she could hide, no way to escape, no ultimate resistance she could put up. It was in that instant of desperate surrender, of complete awareness that the end was imminent, that he experienced his greatest pleasure, a pleasure prolonged in the killing that immediately followed and was its natural conclusion.

His hunting ground was the subway.

Hundreds of prey traveled it every day, and he, dazed by such a profusion of God's abundance, traveled with them, back and forth on the red line, then the green, the yellow and so on, until he identified the only one who, he knew, would offer him the greatest enjoyment.

Usually he preferred young women with an intellectual look, who carried a book with them on the subway and seemed a bit distracted.

But they had to be exceptional, very fit and spry, capable of fighting and, above all, of being aware.

No fat ones, or slow-witted, sluggish ones for him, those bovine types who are even slow to realize when they are dying. He had tried a couple, many years earlier, when he was not yet such a skilled hunter, and he still remembered them with a vague sense of disgust.

No, he wanted them alert, quick, agile as gazelles, ready to struggle to the end, to fight tooth and nail for their lives, otherwise he didn't enjoy it.

He especially despised chewing gum. More than once he had had to reject a quarry who was perfect from every other angle, only because she was chewing an obscene glob of gum.

He had no preferences as to color and race, but since the eye too wants its share, he liked them pretty, even beautiful if possible. And if, at times, as an unexpected surprise, he would discover during the actual chase that she also had a beautiful voice, then, well, this one for sure was a super-quarry!

The stalking might last for days.

He would pick her out in the subway, after a long selection process, then begin to follow her trail, tracking down her lair and her favorite spots. This phase varied a great deal, from a few hours to almost a month.

There were some prey who were so appetizing that he wasn't able to resist and killed them right after choosing them, in a savage surprise attack in the first suitable place. When this happened, he preferred to use his bare hands, or at most a knife.

Afterwards, however, he remained frustrated, the urge for a nice, long, satisfying hunt unfulfilled. Because even if the best part was the kill, the rest was also precious; and so he tried to ration out the waiting, savoring it on his tongue like the bouquet of a fine wine.

Because pleasurable moments were few and far between in his other life, in this exciting nocturnal life he had learned how to make the feelings generated by a good hunt last, even in memory.

When he wasn't too impatient or deathly famished, he preferred stalking her at length, learning everything about her. For days

and days he would eat where she ate, have a cappuccino at the same cafe, possibly after she left it, follow the same routes, browse in the same bookstore, choose a seat in back at the movie theater where she'd gone with her friends.

He would enter the elevator when she was coming out of it, and savor her scent that was foreign to him.

He chose the same product from the frozen foods case.

He looked out from the same balcony to admire the sunset the following day.

Always one step behind her, one breath in back of her.

Then he would know somehow that it was time to stop. Perhaps she would begin to sense a vague uneasiness, like a shadow behind her back, or maybe he had simply had enough of it, no special reason, like you tire of any game. At that point, knowing her as only he knew her, it was easy to station himself at the right place at the right time, a place and time that for her unfortunately would turn out to be tragically and irreparably wrong.

Even on these occasions he rarely found effective alternatives to his bare hands or a knife, but it was all much slower, without any urgency or anxiety, at least not on his part.

Once in a while he allowed himself some small improvisation, like a transparent plastic bag, to be able to look through the film of condensation until the very end.

Or a nail scissors, or knitting needle.

Once, he remembered with pleasure, he had used a garrote fashioned from her nylon stockings, and on another occasion a large hairpin had demonstrated its versatility.

Hands however were his favorite, because only they allowed a real hand-to-hand struggle, and the ability to steal the last moan from her bluish lips.

Sex, of course, was optional.

It would come before the rest, a hasty exchange they submitted to, numb with terror and almost thankful, thinking that it was all he wanted from them, and that afterwards they would be out of danger. Damaged, defeated, humiliated, but alive.

And so they yielded like tender orchids, but his real orgasm occurred in the instant in which they understood that it wasn't over, that it was only just beginning.

And they always understood it, though always way too late.

Afterwards, he would be satisfied for a while.

Sometimes a month, sometimes a year. On some occasions only a few days.

Then he would resume the chase.

Night after night, day after day, train after train, he would look for her in the crowd of commuters, pick her out, and the game would begin again.

And so that night too, a little late for his usual rhythms, he thought he had found her, sitting at the back of the subway car, alone and a little sad, her gaze lost in space.

He changed his seat to see her better: she had ugly fingernails, all bitten down, which bothered him more than a little, and a run in her stocking as well. Definitely beneath his standards.

He was considering the idea of finishing her off swiftly, a quick bite to feed his craving for death prior to a longer, more substantial and more satisfying hunt, when the train stopped, people got off and on, and with them, *her*.

Her, his real prey. Not the other one, not that dull, lifeless female specimen who as far as he was concerned could go on biting her nails over in the corner. She was safe, at least from him.

He wanted this one.

At first glance she could perhaps be considered just ordinary, not too beautiful and not too old, nothing that would make her stand out in a crowd.

But for a well-trained eye like his, however, recognizing the qualities that would make her the perfect quarry of an exciting chase was mere child's play. Already he felt a shiver of excitement coursing beneath his skin. Maybe he wouldn't be able to wait, maybe he would take her that very night, or maybe he would try to make her last a long time.

She was tall, almost as tall as he was, and a little older than

the average age of his young women. Thirty-two, thirty-five, but very fit.

The elongated muscles of her thighs and calves outlined beneath the lightweight fabric of her pants showed that she was athletic, a jogger or tennis player maybe, or a swimmer, she had strong, straight shoulders.

Perhaps a dancer. He toyed with this idea, he had never had a dancer before. He studied her furtively. The posture of her back, her feet with heels together and toes slightly parted, the fluid, graceful movements. She was a ballet dancer all right, he decided with satisfaction. A dance instructor, given her age.

Fine then, she would dance for him.

What he liked most about her was her composed sense of confidence, a strength of character, the backbone that only a sports discipline can provide. She would fight long and bravely before giving in, but her surrender would be total, the defeat of an animal that has met a stronger enemy.

She wore her dark hair pulled back in a soft, somewhat untidy chignon on the nape of her neck.

Her hair was long; he would enjoy wrapping it around his wrist and yanking it, yanking it until he made her scream.

She wore glasses, reading glasses, because she took them off when she closed the paperback she was holding and put it back in her shoulder bag. Her eyes, now naked and defenseless, roamed over the entire car, jumping from face to face, as if she were looking for someone.

He quickly lowered his gaze, though for a fraction of a second their eyes met.

A fraction of second too long, he didn't like his prey to notice him too soon, she could become alarmed.

But no, she was unruffled, standing with one hand on the railing and the other in her bag, her gaze now distracted as it wandered in the dark beyond the window glass. She hadn't paid the least attention to an ordinary man, seated a few rows further up, mixed in with other ordinary men, not too good looking, not too

old.

He followed her that evening and the following week, savoring the desire he felt for her. He discovered where she lived, a decent building on a respectable street, and where she worked, downtown.

He had been mistaken about her profession, she worked in an office, in a position of some responsibility, a manager perhaps. On two afternoons a week, however, she taught dance to children in a gym, where she later stayed and worked out until evening.

He followed her to the movies, where she went with three rowdy girlfriends who were not as attractive as she, and felt a shiver of excitement when she grazed his leg in the dark as she returned to her seat after going to the bathroom.

He watched her when she went shopping. She chose clothes that were comfortable and loose-fitting, and she bought a lot of fruit and vegetables, but also good-quality meat.

He was fascinated by her, he very nearly wanted to stalk her forever.

Sometimes she would stop, on the bus or on the subway, or in the middle of the street, once on a flight of steps. She would stop and look around with that same encircling gaze he had noticed the first night, as if she were looking for someone.

She never noticed him, for one thing because he was extremely careful by this time. He decided it was just a habit, the curious mannerism of a woman who was somewhat myopic.

Twice he was about to seize her near her home, but he held back. He wouldn't have been calm and composed enough to play a drawn-out game with her.

The area around the gym, however, was deserted at night, and he decided that he would wait for her there the next time.

He made the decision with some regret, because he knew that he would have to search long and hard to find another like her.

On Tuesday night she left after her workout as usual, or maybe a little later. The few shops were all already closed and she set off quickly down the street.

He followed her at a distance; he knew that after two blocks she would turn off down a dark, winding backstreet that came out on a main thoroughfare, where she would catch the bus that would take her home. But not that night.

She entered the narrow street, her sports bag bouncing at her side, and disappeared into the darkness.

He waited a few seconds, then he slipped in behind her. The alley was long and dark, and curved twice. There were garbage bins stacked up on one side, and no windows, since it skirted a small factory and a store. No witnesses, the perfect place. The sounds of evening traffic were much further on. The knife was in his pocket, but he wouldn't use it, at least not to start with.

He turned the corner and found her facing him, her eyes flashing in the darkness.

"What do you want? Why are you following me?" she asked. It was the first time he had heard her voice. A little husky and somewhat arrogant, with a tremor in it, perfect as she was.

"You'll understand soon enough" he smiled, and pulled out the knife. The beauty of it was being able to change your mind. He would subdue her with the blade, and then...

"So that's it." He saw her smile, and her body, that had at first been tense, relaxed imperceptibly.

He registered this fact with confusion, then he didn't have time to notice anything anymore. He found himself on the ground with her dancer's ankles tight around his throat, his right arm twisted unnaturally beneath him. And the knife?

Where was the knife? In her hand, glinting in the dark like her eyes. The eyes of a savage beast.

"I wasn't sure, you see. I would have been sorry if you had been just a common, innocent skirt-chaser. I have exacting tastes, I'm afraid."

Her teeth were very white, only now did he notice this; with fascination and horror he watched the pink tip of her tongue darting between her lips, licking them like a cat.

Or perhaps like a panther.

“It’s been an amusing week. You didn’t disappoint my expectations. It’s so thrilling to lead your type around while you think you are the hunters. I love every moment of it.”

She smiled again and tightened her grip.

He was unable to move. Tears of pain and fear filled his eyes. Those sharp teeth moved close to his ear, as the knife began to shift slowly.

“Every moment. But what I love more than anything, the best part of the chase, is the kill.”