

15 . . .

They plunge, their damp bodies fused, pounding furiously, in terror, in joy, the impact is

I, Martin, proclaim against all dooms the indestructible seed

Martin does not take the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, as is his custom, but, reflecting upon it for once and out of a strange premonition, determines instead to walk the fourteen flights. Halfway up, he hears the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash from below. He hesitates, poised on the stair. Inscrutable is the word he finally settles upon. He pronounces it aloud, smiles faintly, sadly, somewhat wearily, then continues his tedious climb, pausing from time to time to stare back down the stairs behind him.

Clarice Lispector

One of Brazil's most original and celebrated writers, Clarice Lispector was born in a small village in Ukraine in 1920, then moved with her parents to Brazil when she was two months old. At twenty she began working for Agência Nacional (the Brazilian news agency), but in 1943 she left Brazil for sixteen years upon marrying a career diplomat. For her first novel, Close to the Wild Heart, published in 1944, she won a Graça Aranha Prize, awarded by the Brazilian Academy of Letters. In addition to novels and stories, she wrote regular newspaper columns. She died of cancer in 1977.

Lispector does not fret over the uncertainties of life in her work; she celebrates them. The French writer and theorist Hélène Cixous writes of Lispector, "If Kafka were a woman; if Rilke were a Brazilian Jewish woman born in the Ukraine; if Rimbaud had been a mother, if he had reached his 50's; if Heidegger had been able to stop being German, if he had written the Novel of the Earth . . . It's in this ambiance that Clarice Lispector writes. There, where the most demanding works breathe, she advances. There, further ahead, where the philosopher loses his breath, she continues, still further, beyond all knowledge."

"The Fifth Story" deals with the most mundane of incidents: a woman wakes up to discover her residence infested with cockroaches, and she kills them. But she doesn't know how to tell the story or what it means to have killed these creatures, so she tells the story five times in order to approach some resolution. That's a literal reading of the story, but this story resists literality. At its heart, its sensibility is highly poetic and mythic, and in some ways metafictional (a story about telling stories), though to attempt to categorize this story is futile and ultimately does it a

disservice. We recognize that Lispector illuminates the ambiguity and uncertainty of the human condition.

The Fifth Story

This story could be called "The Statues." Another possible title would be "The Killing." Or even "How to Kill Cockroaches." So I shall tell at least three stories, all of them true, because none of the three will contradict the others. Although they constitute one story, they could become a thousand and one, were I to be granted a thousand and one nights.

The first story, "How to Kill Cockroaches," begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches. A woman heard me complain. She gave me a recipe for killing them. I was to mix together equal quantities of sugar, flour and gypsum. The flour and sugar would attract the cockroaches, the gypsum would dry up their insides. I followed her advice. The cockroaches died.

The next story is really the first, and it is called "The Killing." It begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches. A woman heard me complain. The recipe follows. And then the killing takes place. The truth is that I had only complained in abstract terms about the cockroaches, for they were not even mine: they belonged to the ground floor and climbed up the pipes in the building into our apartment. It was only when I prepared the mixture that they also became mine. On our behalf, therefore, I began to measure and weigh ingredients with greater concentration. A vague loathing had taken possession of me, a sense of outrage. By day, the cockroaches were invisible and no one would believe in the evil secret which eroded such a tranquil household. But if the cockroaches, like evil secrets, slept by day, there I was preparing their nightly poison. Meticulous, eager, I prepared the elixir of prolonged death. An angry fear and my own evil secret guided me. Now I coldly wanted one thing only: to kill every cockroach in existence. Cockroaches climb up the pipes while weary people sleep. And now the recipe was ready, looking so white. As if I were dealing with cockroaches as cunning as myself, I carefully spread the powder until it looked like part of the surface dust. From my bed, in the silence of the apartment, I imagined them climbing up one by one into the kitchen where darkness slept, a solitary towel alert on the clothesline. I awoke hours later, startled at having overslept. It was beginning to grow light. I walked across the kitchen. There they lay on the floor of the scullery, huge and

brittle. During the night I had killed them. On our behalf, it was beginning to grow light. On a nearby hill, a cockerel crowed.

The third story which now begins is called "The Statues." It begins by saying that I had been complaining about the cockroaches. Then the same woman appears on the scene. And so it goes on to the point where I awake as it is beginning to grow light, and I awake still feeling sleepy and I walk across the kitchen. Even more sleepy is the scullery floor with its tiled perspective. And in the shadows of dawn, there is a purplish hue which distances everything; at my feet, I perceive patches of light and shade, scores of rigid statues scattered everywhere. The cockroaches that have hardened from core to shell. Some are lying upside down. Others arrested in the midst of some movement that will never be completed. In the mouths of some of the cockroaches, there are traces of white powder. I am the first to observe the dawn breaking over Pompei. I know what this night has been, I know about the orgy in the dark. In some, the gypsum has hardened as slowly as in some organic process, and the cockroaches, with ever more tortuous movements, have greedily intensified the night's pleasures, trying to escape from their insides. Until they turn to stone, in innocent terror and with such, but *such* an expression of pained reproach. Others—suddenly assailed by their own core, without even having perceived that their inner form was turning to stone!—these are suddenly crystallized, just like a word arrested on someone's lips: I love . . . The cockroaches, invoking the name of love in vain, sang on a summer's night. While the cockroach over there, the one with the brown antennae smeared with white, must have realized too late that it had become mummified precisely because it did not know how to use things with the gratuitous grace of the *in vain*: "It is just that I looked too closely inside myself! It is just that I looked too closely inside . . ." From my frigid height as a human being, I watch the destruction of a world. Dawn breaks. Here and there, the parched antennae of dead cockroaches quiver in the breeze. The cockerel from the previous story crows.

The fourth story opens a new era in the household. The story begins as usual: I was complaining about the cockroaches. It goes on up to the point when I see the statues in plaster of Paris. Inevitably dead. I look toward the pipes where this same night an infestation will reappear, swarming slowly upwards in Indian file. Should I renew the lethal sugar every night? like someone who no longer sleeps without the avidity of some rite. And should I take myself somnambulant out to the terrace early each morning? in my craving to encounter the statues which my perspiring night has erected. I trembled with a depraved pleasure at the vision of my double existence as a witch. I also trembled

at the sight of that hardening gypsum, the depravity of existence which would shatter my internal form.

The grim moment of choosing between two paths, which I thought would separate, convinced that any choice would mean sacrificing either myself or my soul. I chose. And today I secretly carry a plaque of virtue in my heart: "This house has been disinfected."

The fifth story is called "Leibnitz and the Transcendence of Love in Polynesia." It begins like this: I was complaining about the cockroaches.

Translated by Giovanni Pontiero

A. B. Paulson

A. B. Paulson lives in Portland, Oregon. His odd but funny novel *Watchman Tell Us of the Night* was published by Viking-Penguin.

We have all taken tests that look like the one printed here with the title "The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality: a diagnostic test in two parts," and we notice immediately the fidelity with which Paulson has crafted the look and feel of it. In our daily life we read newspapers, road signs, cereal boxes, letters, advertisements, greeting cards, bank statements—and in all that reading we often lose sight of the occasion of the reading. Paulson's test, re-framed as a story, makes the tests we take (and take for granted) seem strange, new, and bizarre.

The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality: a diagnostic test in two parts

(1) Name:		(2) Social Security #:	(3) Sex:
Last	First	Middle	
(4) Permanent Address:			
Street	City	State	Zip
(5) Position for which you are applying:			This space for office use only.
			A B Total