

Five Dollars

The Kenyon Review

NEW SERIES • Volume V • Number 1 • Winter 1983



The Assination

By Tricia Tunstall

Every Sunday morning that spring, she went riding in Central Park. In her leather boots and tweed jacket, with a riding hat and a silk scarf, she rode the same route each time. On the same fields, the same trees, she measured the mounting gradations of green and heat and light.

At the stables they always gave her the horse she liked best: a huge gray whose solemnity hid a hostile streak. She enjoyed the small treacherous impulses beneath his good manners. And she could out-guess him every time. She knew when he would veer with deadpan grace under a low branch, and she would duck just in time with equally casual assurance. She could tell when he planned to swing abruptly off the path and break into a homeward gallop. She would give him a small, sharp cut with her crop, and he would obey the warning. They proceeded together in stately sobriety—serene, handsome, and locked in invisible battle.

The park was filled with promises of violence. Along the western stretch old women walked their dogs, who quivered with the bitter anxieties of their mistresses. She feared the dogs, their yelps and their nasty faces. Then, when she rounded the southern curve of the bridle path, there was a bench where a man with a shrunken left arm usually slept. Once the man had wakened when she rode by and had shouted an obscenity after her. It had never happened again. But she dreaded him. He slept with the good arm holding the mutilated one on his chest like a shotgun.

Often, she encountered teenagers on roller skates or bicycles, roaming in packs with their radios dribbling streams of disco music. The two of them, she and her steed, sailed past these noisy gangs like ghosts, invisible beneath their own private bell jar filled with the satin air of another century. But they taunted her sometimes. Then she and the horse left off their subterranean contests. He would trot steadily, enormous and lithe; she locked her hands at the base of his neck. She seldom cantered. She loved the solitary etiquette of posting.

The high point of her ride always came when she circled the reservoir. There was a young, swarthy man with a mustache who rode at the same time she did on Sunday mornings. He rode a smaller horse, a chestnut, and he rode very well. The first time she saw him he had raised his hand and tipped his hat to her as she passed. It was a gesture that seemed to her at once noble and deferential. She felt how lovely a sight she was, flushed and clear-eyed, erect with elegant reserve, the skyline to the east stretched like a banner behind her slim body.

Every week since then she had seen him there, on the path circling the reservoir; and every week he had saluted her. He was always riding counterclockwise, so she always rode clockwise. His little horse would come careening along, mud flying like sparks, and he, sitting easily in the saddle as though motionless, would lean forward slightly when he saw her. As they drew abreast of one another she watched him covertly. His hands shifted; the right hand gathered the reins. The left began a slow journey toward the hat brim. At last, she would glance at him. His fingers touched the brim, and her mouth quivered in an allusion to a smile. Then he was past. And she would ride on around the reservoir, sweating a little and cooing at her horse.

She waited all week for this encounter with an expectant agitation she was hardly aware of. Often, late in the weekday afternoons, she would sit at an open file at the office and think of him. She never wondered where he lived or what his name was, or why he rode so well. She simply imagined over and over again the moment of his appearing in the distance on the bridle path and cantering toward her, his buttons gleaming in the light, his left arm beginning to lift. She treasured the thought of all that was unspoken between them: admiration of one another's grace; disdain for the vulgar, horn-bleating, fume-spraying machines in the streets beyond the park; belief in the beauty of velvet hats and shining buttons.

The image accompanied her like a charm, or a prayer. Each week she went to test the charm again. Each week he was there, and tipped his hat.

One morning in May, after a long rain, the park was busier and prettier than she had ever seen it. The dark brim of her riding hat hung like a poised camera shutter over the path before her. In the shy spring sunlight the new leaves wobbled and uncurled. The path was muddy and full of pigeons. On one side stretched the boat lagoon, reflecting the southern skyline in trembling disarray: the Essex House staggered, the Barbizon leaned into the Plaza.

She looked out over the paved road that ran parallel to the path, over the ball fields and grassy hills and the water. She could feel the steady pulse of the great park, the heavy green heart of the city. The whole vista was in motion: hundreds of bicycle wheels turning, hundreds of revolving rowboat oars, hundreds of roller-skating legs gently stroking, stroking . . . she thought of the boat pond where the miniature sails fluttered, the carrousel where the lacquered ponies dipped and rose. Every movement, she felt, locked into every other: knees went up and down, oars traced slow circles, in exact and endless collusion.

And she was doing her part. She posted in an ecstasy of rhythmic restraint. At the core of the whole bustling machine, she was certain, was the salute—a left arm going slowly up, then slowly down. It was the coiled spring that kept the day ticking.

As she approached the reservoir, she straightened her back in anticipation and slowed her horse to a walk. The path ahead was empty. She let the horse relax and patted his sticky sides.

Three-quarters of the way around the reservoir the man on the chestnut horse had not come. She grew worried; he had never been so late. She strained her eyes down the path. Then she heard a voice behind her.

“Hello. Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

She stiffened in shock and did not turn for a moment. It was impossible that the man should be riding clockwise. It was impossible that he should be beside her, and speaking. But she turned finally and looked at his horse next to hers. She stared at the soggy shadows of sweat on the chestnut neck.

“We sure have been lucky with the weather this spring,” he said. “Nothing I hate worse than muggy weather.”

After a pause he continued. “But you won’t stop coming when it gets real hot, will you?”

She glanced up briefly and saw that his mustache grew thinner when he smiled.

“You’re a real regular. I never knew anybody as regular as I am. It’s a kick.” He watched her wrap her fingers in her horse’s mane. “You don’t talk much,” he observed. “Don’t tell me you’re shy. You never struck me as the shy type.”

She stammered something then. “Ah!” he said. “She talks. The lady talks.” The mustache grew thin as an eyebrow. “She rides well, she looks great, and she talks too. I wonder what her name is.”

“Vivian,” she lied.

“And mine, although you haven’t asked, is Andy.”

The tips of her fingers were purple. Suddenly she blurted, “I have to go—” and frightened her horse into a gallop. But he was right behind her, spurring the little chestnut.

“Hang on!” he called. “What did I say wrong? Hey, Vivian! Talk to me!”

He was a daring rider, and he crowded her horse to the edge of the path till she had to rein him in. She said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

He settled his horse into a brisk walk beside hers and leaned back in his saddle. “So you come here a lot, or what?” he asked.

“I come here quite often.”

“No place I’d rather ride. Whole state of Ohio isn’t as classy as this little lawn right here to ride in. Don’t you think so?”

“I’ve never been to Ohio.”

“Well, believe me, you’re lucky.” He stretched his arms in comfortable boredom at the topic of Ohio. “Place is the pits. Nobody there but farmers and music students. You’d hate it,” he ended confidentially.

She was silent.

“Of course I don’t imagine you’re likely to go there. You stay around the city mostly, I’ll bet. After all, I see you every single Sunday.”

She looked at him finally. “See me every Sunday?”

“Well, I mean, that’s the only time I come here, is Sundays.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said softly. “I’ve never seen you here.”

“Never seen me? Of course you’ve seen me! I’m the one you always pass coming the other way. You always sort of smile. That’s me.

She pulled her silk scarf tighter around her throat, and shook her head. “You must have me confused with someone else,” she said.

“You’re the one who’s confused,” he said uncertainly.

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “I never smile at anyone while I’m riding.” She turned her head away, and the wind splashed one end of the scarf against her cheek. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I really—I really do have to go.” She dug her heels into her horse’s sides. He heaved himself into a trot.

The man watched her go. She posted with perfect regularity. Her brown velvet hat slipped forward a little, and her hair flared out behind her like a bright rudder.

He shook his head and turned his horse. Slowly, carelessly, he began to ride counterclockwise around the reservoir.