



The Blue Air Compressor

Stephen King

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The house was tall, with an incredible slope of shingled roof. As he walked up toward it from the shore road, Gerald Nately thought it was almost a country in itself, geography in microcosm. The roof dipped and rose at varying angles above the main building and two strangely-angled wings; a widow's walk skirted a mushroom-shaped cupola which looked toward the sea; the porch, facing the dunes and lusterless September scrubgrass was longer than a Pullman car and screened in. The high slope of roof made the house seem to beetle its brows and loom above him. A Baptist grandfather of a house.

He went to the porch and after a moment of hesitation, through the screen door to the fanlighted one beyond. There was only a wicker chair, a rusty porch swing, and an old discarded knitting basket to watch him go. Spiders had spun silk in the shadowy upper corners. He knocked.

There was silence, inhabited silence. He was about to knock again when a chair someplace inside wheezed deeply in its throat. It was a tired sound. Silence. Then the slow, dreadfully patient sound of old, overburdened feet finding their way up the hall. Counterpoint of cane: Whock... whock... whock...

The floorboards creaked and whined. A shadow, huge and unformed in the pearled glass, bloomed on the fanlight. Endless sound of fingers laboriously solving the riddle of chain, bolt, and hasp lock. The door opened. "Hello," the nasal voice said flatly. "You're Mr. Nately. You've rented the cottage. My husband's cottage."

"Yes." Gerald said, his tongue swelling in his throat. "That's right. And you're—"

"Mrs. Leighton," the nasal voice said, pleased with either his quickness or her name, though neither was remarkable. "I'm Mrs. Leighton."

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this woman is so goddam fucking big and old she looks like oh jesus christ print dress she must be six-six and fat my god Shes fat as a hog can't smell her white hair long white hair her legs those redwood trees ill that movie a Lank she could be a tank she could kill me her voice is out of any context like a kazoo jesus if i laugh i can't laugh can she be seventy god how does she walk and the cane her hands are bigger than my feet like a goddam tank she could go through oak oak for christ's sake.

*

"You write." She hadn't offered him in.

"That's about the size of it," he said, and laughed to cover his own sudden shrinking from that metaphor.

"Will you show me some after you get settled?" she asked. Her eyes seemed perpetually luminous and wistful. They were not touched by the age that had run riot in the rest of her

*

wait get that written down

*

image: "age had run riot in her with luxuriant fleshiness: she was like a wild sow let loose in a great and dignified house to shit on the carpet, gore at the welsh dresser and send the crystal goblets and wine-glasses all crash-atumble, to trample the wine colored divans to lunatic puffs of springs and stuffing, to spike the mirrorbright finish of the great hall floor with barbarian hoofprints and flying puddles of urine"

okay Shes there its a story i feel her

*

body, making it sag and billow.

“If you like,” he said. “I didn’t even see the cottage from the Shore Road, Mrs. Leighton. Could you tell me where—”

“Did you drive in?”

“Yes. I left my car over there.” He pointed beyond the dunes, toward the road.

A smile, oddly one-dimensional, touched her lips. “That’s why. You can only see a blink from the road: unless you’re walking, you miss it.” She pointed west at a slight angle away from the dunes and the house. “There. Right over that little hill.”

“All right,” he said, then stood there smiling. He really had no idea how to terminate the interview.

“Would you like to come in for some coffee? Or a Coca-Cola?”

“Yes,” he said instantly.

She seemed a little taken back by his instant agreement. He had, after 211, been her husband’s friend, not her own. The face loomed above Gerald, moonlike, disconnected, undecided. Then she led him into the elderly, waiting house.

She had tea. He had Coke, Millions of eyes seemed to watch them. He felt like a burglar, stealing around the hidden fiction he could make of her, carrying only his own youthful winsomeness and a psychic flashlight.

*

My own name, of course, is Steve King, and you’ll pardon my intrusion on your mind-or I hope you will. I could argue that the drawing-aside of the curtain of presumption between reader and author is permissible because I am the writer; i.e., since it’s my story I’ll do any goddam thing I please with it-but since that leaves the reader out of it completely, that is not valid. Rule One for all writers is

that the teller is not worth a tin tinker's fart when compared to the listener. Let us drop the matter, if we may. I am intruding for the same reason that the Pope defecates: we both have to.

You should know that Gerald Nately was never brought to the dock; his crime was not discovered. He paid all the same. After writing four twisted, monumental, misunderstood novels, he cut his own head off with an ivory-figured guillotine purchased in Kowloon.

I invented him first during a moment of eight o'clock boredom in a class taught by Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine English faculty. Dr. Terrell was speaking of Edgar A. Poe, and I thought

ivory guillotine Kowloon

twisted woman of shadows, like a pig

some big house

The blue air compressor did not come until later. It is desperately important that the reader be made cognizant of these facts.

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He did show her some of his writing. Not the important part, the story he was writing about her, but fragments of poetry, the spine of a novel that had ached in his mind for a year like embedded shrapnel, four essays. She was a perceptive critic, and addicted to marginal notations with her black felt-tip pen. Because she sometimes dropped in when he was gone to the village, he kept the story hidden in the back shed.

September melted into cool October, and the story was completed, mailed to a friend, returned with suggestions (bad ones), rewritten. He felt it was good, but not quite right. Some indefinable was missing. The focus was a shade fuzzy. He began to toy, with the idea of giving it to her for Criticism, rejected it, toyed with it again. After

all. the story was her; he never doubted she could supply the final vector.

His attitude concerning her became increasing]- unhealthy; he was fascinated by her huge, animalistic bulk, by the slow, tortoise-like way she trekked across the space between the house and the cottage.

*

image: "mammoth shadow of decay swaying across the shadowless sand, cane held in one twisted hand, feet clad in huge canvas shoes which pump and push at the coarse grains, face like a serving platter, puffy dough arms, breasts like drumlins, a geography in herself, a country of tissue"

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by her reedy, vapid voice; but at the same time he loathed her, could not stand her touch. lie began to feel like the young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart," by Edgar A. Poe. He felt lie could stand at her bedroom door for endless midnights, shining one Tay of light on her sleeping eye, ready to pounce and rip the instant it flashed open.

The urge to show her the story itched at him maddeningly. He had decided, by the first day of December, that he would do it. The decision-making did not relieve him, as it is supposed to do in the novels, but it did leave him with a feeling of antiseptic pleasure. It was right that it should be so-an omega that quite dovetailed with he alpha. And it was omega; he was vacating the cottage on he fifth of December. On this day he had just returned from the Stowe Travel Agency in Portland, where he had booked passage for the Far East. He had done this almost on the spur of the moment: the decision to go and the decision to show his manuscript to Mrs. Leighton had come together, almost as if he had been guided by an invisible hand.

*

In truth, he was guide; by an invisible hand-mine.

*

The day was white with overcast and the promise of snow lurked in its throat. The dunes seemed to foreshadow the winter already, as Gerald crossed them between the slate-roofed house of her dominion and the low stone cottage of his. The sea, sullen and gray, curled on the shingle of beach. Gulls rode the slow swells like buoys.

He Crossed the top of the last dune and knew she it-as there-her cane, with its white bicycle handgrip at the base, stood against the side of the door. Smoke rifted from the toy chimney.

Gerald went up the board steps, kicked sand from his high-topped shoes to make her aware of his presence, and then went in.

“Hi, Mrs. Leighton!”

But the tiny living room and the kitchen both stood empty. The ship’s clock on the mantle ticked only for itself and for Gerald. Her gigantic fur coat lay draped over the rocker like Some animal sail. A small fire had been laid in the fireplace, and it glowed and crackled busily. The teapot was on the gas range in the kitchen, and one teacup stood on the counter, still waiting for water. He peered into the narrow hall which led to the bedroom.

“Mrs. Leighton?”

Hall and bedroom both empty.

He was about to turn back to the kitchen when the mammoth chuckles began. They were large, helpless shakings of laughter, the kind that stays hidden for years and ages like wine. (There is also an Edgar A. Poe story about wine.)

The chuckles evolved into large bellows of laughter. They came from behind the door to the right of Gerald’s bed, the last door in the

cottage. From the tool-shed.

*

my balls are crawling like in grammar school the old bitch shes laughing she found it the old fat shebitch goddam her goddam her goddam her you old whore youre doing that cause im out here you old she bitch whore you piece of shit

*

He went to the door in one step and pulled it open. She was sitting next to the small spaceheater in the shed, her dress pulled up over oak-stump knees to allow her to sit cross-legged, and his manuscript was held, dwarfed, in her bloated hands.

Her laughter roared and racketed around him. Gerald Nately saw bursting colors in front of his eyes. She it-as a slug, a maggot, a gigantic crawling thing evolved in the cellar of the shadowy house by the sea. a dark bug that had swaddled itself in grotesque human form.

In the flat light from the one cobwebbed window her face became a hanging graveyard moon, pocked by the Sterile craters of her eyes and the Tagged earthquake rift of her mouth.

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said stiffly.

“Oh Gerald,” she said, laughing all the same. “This is such a bad story. I don’t blame you for using a penname. it’s-” she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes “it’s abominable!”

He began to walk toward her stiffly.

“You haven’t made me big enough, Gerald. That’s the trouble. I’m too big for you. Perhaps Poe, or Dostoyevsky, or Melville... but not you, Gerald. Not even under your royal penname. Not you. Not you.

She began to laugh again, huge racking explosions of sound.

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said stiffly.

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The tool-shed, after the manner of Zola:

Wooden walls, which showed occasional chinks of light, surrounded rabbit-traps hung and slung in corners; a pair of dusty, unstrung snow-shoes; a rusty spaceheater showing flickers of yellow flame like cat’s eyes; Tales; 2 shovel; hedgeclippers; an ancient green hose coiled like a garter-snake; four bald tires stacked like doughnuts; a rust), Winchester rifle with no bolt; a twohanded saw; a dusty work-bench covered with nails, screws, bolts, washers, two hammers, a plane, a broken level, a dismantled carburetor which one sat inside a 1949 Packard convertible; a 4 hp. aircompressor painted electric blue, plugged into an extension cord running back into the house.

*

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said again, but she continued to rock back and forth, holding her stomach and flapping the manuscript with her wheezing breath like a white bird.

His hand found the rusty Winchester rifle and he pole-axed her with it.

*

Most horror stories are sexual in nature.

I’m sorry to break in with this information, but feel I must in order to make the way clear for the grisly conclusion of this piece, which is (at least psychologically) a clear metaphor for fears of sexual impotence on in), part. Mrs. Leighton’s large mouth is symbolic of the vagina; the hose of the compressor is a penis. Her female bu lk huge and overpowering, is a mythic representation of the sexual fear that lives

in every male, to a greater or lesser degree: that the woman, with her opening, is a devouter.

*

In the works of Edgar A. Poe, Stephen King, Gerald Natley, and others who practice this particular literary form, we are apt to find locked rooms, dungeons, empty mansions (all symbols of the womb); scenes of living burial (sexual impotence); the dead returned from the grave (necrophilia); grotesque monsters or human beings (externalized fear of the sexual act itself); torture and/or murder (a viable alternative to the sexual act).

These possibilities are not always valid, but the postfreild reader and writer must take them into consideration when attempting the genre.

Abnormal psychology has become a part of the human experience.

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She made thick, unconscious noises in her throat as he whirled around madly, looking for an instrument; her head lolled brokenly on the thick stalk of her neck.

*

He seized the hose of the aircompressor.

“All right,” he said thickly. “All right, now. All Tight.”

*

bitch fat old bitch youve had yours not big enough is that right well youll be bigger youll be bigger still

*

He ripped her head back by the hair and rammed the hose into her mouth, into her gullet. She screamed around it, a scund like a cat.

*

Part of the inspiration for this story came from an old E. C. horror comic (boo), which I bought in a Lisbon Falls drugstore. In one particular story, a husband and wife murdered each other (simultaneous))- in mutually ironic (and brilliant) fashion. He was very fat; she was very thin. He shoved the hose of an aircompressor down her throat and blew her up to dirigible size. On his way downstairs a booby-trap she had rigged fell on him and squashed him to a shadow.

Any author who tells you he has never plagiarized is 2 liar. A good author begins with bad ideas and improbabilities and fashions them into comments on the human condition.

In a horror story, it is imperative that the grotesque be elevated to the status of the abnormal.

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The compressor turned on with a whoosh and a chug. The hose flew out of Mrs. Leighton's mouth. Giggling and gibbering, Gerald stuffed it back in. Her feet drummed and thumped on the floor. The flesh of her cheeks and diaphragm began to swell rhythmically. Her eyes bulged, and became glass marbles. Her torso began to expand.

*

here it is here it is you lousy louse are you big enough yet are you big enough

*

The compressor wheezed and racketed. Mrs. Leighton swelled like a beachball. Her lungs became Straining blowfish.

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Fiends! Devils' Dissemble no more! Here! Here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!

*

She seemed to explode all at once.

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Sitting in a boilin hotel room in Bombay, Gerald re-wrote the story he had begun at the cottage on the other side of the world. The original title had been "The Hog." After some deliberation he retitled it "The Blue Air Compressor."

He had resolved it to his own satisfaction. There was a certain lack of motivation concerning the final scene where the fat old woman was murdered, but he did not see that as a fault. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar A. Poe's finest story, there is no real motivation for the murder of the old man, and that was as it should be. The motive is not the point.

*

She got very big just before the end: even her legs swelled up to twice their normal size. At the very end, her tongue popped out of her mouth like a party-favor.

*

After leaving Bombay, Gerald Nately went on to Hong Kong, then to Kowloon. The ivory guillotine caught his fancy immediately.

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As the author, I can see only one correct omega to this story, and that is to tell you how Gerald Nately got rid of the body. He tore up the floor boards of the shed, dismembered Mrs. Leighton, and buried the sections in the sand beneath.

When he notified the police that she had been missing for a week, the local constable and a State Policeman came at once. Gerald entertained them quite naturally, even offering them coffee. He heard no beating heart, but then—the interview was conducted in the big house.

On the following day he flew away, toward Bombay, Hong Kong, and Kowloon.