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Furthermore, She Had Never Read Anais Nin

One night at dinner, Mrs. Cutting remarked that she thought that she would write a romance novel and become famous. She said it just as they were finishing the chocolate mousse. At the time, the remark had seemed frivolous, and Mr. Cutting had paid little attention, although later he would have total recall about the remark, the mousse, the angle of the sun as it vanished over the redwood deck outside, and exactly the way Mrs. Cutting's lips had been pursed as she spoke.

The Cuttings were a handsome couple in their mid-forties. They were childless, a fact that Mrs. Cutting sometimes regretted but put aside as a situation over which she had no control. She secretly suspected that Mr. Cutting's sperm count was low, but when she had suggested that he have it checked, after having been told by her gynecologist that she appeared to be perfectly normal, he sank into a silent, sulky depression. With only minor reluctance, she let the subject drop and filled her time with gardening and decorating, telling herself that one couldn't have everything. She was lucky to have a husband who provided for her so well.

"You certainly are the smart one," their friends were fond of saying. "No children to tie you down. How did you manage to be so clever?"

"Just lucky, I guess," the Cuttings would say, sometimes in concert.

Mr. Cutting was a staunch man of sturdy build. A football player and fraternity man in college, he subscribed to the theory that a healthy body made a strong mind, and he worked out three nights a week at the Valley Crest Tennis and Racquetball Club. Mrs. Cutting was less energetic and occasionally stole a moment behind the Japanese Andromeda in the garden, rapidly puffing on a cigarette. Despite the political unhealthiness of the act, she felt a sense of liberation as well as a pleasant dizziness when the rush of tobacco smoke hit her lungs.

Mrs. Cutting had been in a sorority in college, a happy association that had led her to believe that women should consciously expend time and energy establishing and maintaining female bonding. She belonged to the garden club and the Junior League, and she had recently joined a writing group that was scheduled to meet each Wednesday night at the home of one or another of its members. For quite some time now, she had felt a tiny discontent, some mild feeling that life was dashing past her without her having made her mark, except perhaps in the dirt of her garden or in the carefully maintained collection of Ming vases that filled the shelves in the dining room. She hadn't expressed these feelings to Mr. Cutting, of course, because-well, to be frank with herself-he wouldn't have understood. Mr. Cutting's business deals provided him with a vigour and excitement that nourished his particular soul. Life for him was a series of tactical strategies that were always carefully thought out and executed. He was a very successful man in his arena.

Their relationship had been spawned in college. It was a solid friendship that had never given way to crass or loose passion. They made love at least once a week, of course, but that was totally normal. In their entire marriage, they had always made love in bed, never in odd places like the kitchen or on the beach, or in public restrooms at restaurants as Mrs. Cutting had recently read about in one of the polls that tallied up the sexual realities and fantasies of the middle classes.

Having been a virgin when she married Mr. Cutting and being a staunch advocate of marital fidelity as preached in the forties and fifties, Mrs. Cutting really had no gauge on which to measure the excitement and variety of physical

passion. She knew what she knew and that was all. The constant barrage of articles on sexual foreplay that peppered the women's magazines that she idly leafed through at the beauty parlour, as well as the often unattractive and common people who constantly disclosed their sexually aberrant behaviour on the television talk shows that she occasionally tuned into by mistake, presented ideas that both puzzled and distressed her sensibilities. She had read only snippets of D.H. Lawrence in college, and none of her friends had ever disclosed anything about their sex lives to her. Furthermore, she had never read Anaïs Nin.

The first meeting of the writers' club was to be held at Harriet Levy's house, and Mrs. Cutting felt a kind of breathlessness as she rang the bell. Harriet, with her dark hair swept dramatically up in a topknot, embraced her as she entered and drew her immediately into the living room which was, in decorating terms, eclectic—a mixture of cocoa mats, good oriental rugs, and beautifully restored antiques that rested comfortably beside several distinctive modern pieces. One whole wall of the living room was an abstract mural in the style of Jackson Pollack, but on the adjoining walls there were portraits in heavy gilt frames. The people in the pictures, surely ancestors of Harriet, were olive-skinned with abundant heads of dark black hair.

Harriet was a tall, handsome Jewess, and she wore a caftan which Mrs. Cutting learned was made of cloth of a New Zealand aboriginal design. When Mrs. Cutting described the scene later to Mr. Cutting, she just couldn't get over the originality that Harriet Levy had displayed so casually. The caftan was proof of her opinion. Anyone else would still have been stuck in the African mode, but Harriet had the boldness to go Maori.

"Les Girls," as they later referred to themselves, were already out on the deck, sipping from tall iced glasses of cappuccino topped with dollops of cream and chocolate sprinkles. There were twelve of them—just the right number, as Harriet so rightly pointed out, to balance the psychic energy that was so important to serious writers.

It was proposed, voted upon, and passed that they would all begin by writing romance novels, and Harriet handed out neatly photocopied and stapled articles that she said clearly delineated the nature of the genre. They were, however, not to worry about the confinements of the genre. They were to relax and allow their inner energy and creativity to burst forth from the source deep within.

"You know, ladies, that we must all spend some time reading romance novels so that we have a sense of what editors are buying," Harriet added with a nod of her head.

For a moment, Mrs. Cutting panicked. At that point, it had never occurred to her that she might publish anything. She had not even written anything before. But Harriet quickly assured her that their main purpose was to plumb the depths of their creative passions with no thought of remuneration save the cleansing of the soul. Mrs. Cutting was quite relieved.

"Now, go home and read, read, read," Harriet said in her low, rich voice. "We'll have wonderful discussions at our next meeting."

Harriet hugged Mrs. Cutting enthusiastically at the door and whispered how pleased she was to have met her and how thrilled she was that the group was going to be so compatible. Mrs. Cutting felt a tingle of pride that this new experience was to be hers and hers alone.

Mr. Cutting was asleep when she arrived home which was disappointing in one way, but quite satisfying in another. She poured herself a sherry and curled up on the soft leather couch with the articles that Harriet had given her. Again, she thought how sweet and organized and original Harriet had been, and she smiled as she read, bathed in the waters of female bonding.

The next morning, Mrs. Cutting went immediately to the bookstore and purchased ten romance novels.

"Going to do a little reading, I see," said the man behind the counter. "Oh, not just reading," smiled Mrs. Cutting. "A little writing as well."

As soon as she had uttered the words, she felt like an overblown fool.

Hoping that he had not noticed the smugness in her tone, she glanced shyly over at him and was relieved to see that he was more interested in fitting the books into the shiny plastic bag than he was in anything she might have said. Harriet had said that in order to be a writer, one had to declare one's intentions, but Mrs. Cutting guessed that she would have to practice adopting a writer's persona until it became natural for her. Harriet was such a good role model in that respect. Her confidence in herself inspired confidence in all "Les Girls," thought Mrs. Cutting.

When she got home, she sat down immediately on the soft leather couch in the study and began to read. By three o'clock, she had already begun her third novel and had gotten up only once to let the dog out and to grab a cucumber sandwich for herself. When Mr. Cutting arrived home at six-thirty, he found the house in darkness except for the light in the study. There he also found Mrs. Cutting sprawled seductively on the couch with her feet up and her hair down around her shoulders. She looked for all he could tell as if she had been cast in a spell.

"Darling!" she murmured, without trying to get up to greet him. "Are you home already? I've been so busy, so really engrossed, I simply lost track of time. So sorry."

"Marjorie, why are you talking like that?" Mr. Cutting demanded. "Like what, darling?"

"Like...like...DARLING....You never call me darling. And why are you sprawled out like that on the sofa? You look like a... a... strumpet!" Mrs. Cutting's laugh was low and husky. She looked up at him provocatively.

"A strumpet? What a quaint word," she said. Then slowly she rose and gave Mr. Cutting a long, passionate kiss.

He pulled back in momentary shock, aghast at his wife's unseemly and most peculiar behaviour. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he was being compromised in some way, and he looked at her closely, then glanced past her at the disarray of books on the coffee table, dimly trying to make a connection between her sudden sultriness and the reading material that had obviously been engrossing her. He could make out the illustrations on some of the book covers although he could not read the titles. Images of voluptuous blonde women in ragged bodices pinned tightly in the arms of fiery young men with rippling muscles and roguish expressions assaulted him.

For a moment, he wondered if he had caught his wife indulging herself in some secret sin that had been carefully camouflaged for all the years of their marriage, but then her announcement at dinner came back to him, and he understood, or thought he understood, what was going on.

"Been reading, I see," he said.

She nodded once.

"What have you been doing all day?" he asked.

"Research," she replied. She seemed now to have come out of her daze a bit and began to arrange the books in two neat stacks on the table next to the leather couch. "I guess I told you that I am going to write romance novels."

"Practicing, then, are you?"

"Perhaps," she said without looking at him directly. Slowly she gathered up some note pages and went to cook dinner.

For the next two weeks, Mr. Cutting never knew what would greet him when he got home. Mrs. Cutting seemed to have two modes in which she operated. She became more aggressively sexual, meeting him one time at the door wearing only the short silk kimono that he had brought her from a business trip to Japan. At the same time, she became secretive. She moved a typewriter out to the den and set it up on the mahogany table in front of the window. From her station, as she called it, she looked out on the wisteria vines that were just beginning to burst forth their lavender blossoms. Beyond the wisteria, a bed of white lilies, yellow stamens protruding from their bell-shaped blooms, stood tall and proud on rigid stalks. Each morning she worked at the table, and each evening before Mr. Cutting arrived home, she placed her original manuscript into a manila folder and secured it carefully with a rubber band. In an identical folder, she placed its carbon copy. Then she locked both copies away in the drawer.

Mr. Cutting was mystified. The more questions he asked about her work, the fewer answers he received. She began meeting at night with twelve ladies from the writing group, not just once a week, but sometimes two or three times. It was necessary, she said, to share her work, to get feedback. Harriet had been right about the psychic energy of the twelve women, she said. It was really something of a miracle, and Harriet, the dear, sweet thing, had so much to offer all of them.

"What the hell does her husband think about your being there all the time?"

Mr. Cutting grumbled. "Maybe I should call and ask him if he wants to go to the club."

"There is no Mr. Levy," Mrs. Cutting replied. "They're divorced. She's had a frightful time of it, actually. And she's so talented. You must meet her sometime, really. You'd love her."

Mr. Cutting was not convinced that he would like her, much less love her, and the concept of psychic energy was damned silly. For two days he sulked, but Mrs. Cutting appeared not to notice.

One night with Mrs. Cutting off again with Harriet and the girls, Mr. Cutting idly picked up one of the romance novels that his wife had left in piles on the coffee table. He noticed three things immediately: the print was large, the pages were short, and the story was written almost entirely in dialogue. He yawned and skimmed the pages rapidly. The story had to do with a working girl who was in love with her boss at the same time she seemed to hate him. The words on the page were simple enough and the plot seemed rather contrived, but even as he rejected the book as silly woman's stuff, Mr. Cutting found himself being drawn into a certain underlying current of sexual tension. Silly stuff, he thought. Just like a woman to like this kind of thing. Still, he kept reading and suddenly things began to change. On page fifty, Mr. Cutting was shocked to discover that he was in the middle of a torrid scene in which the boss made love to his secretary on the leather couch in his office to the accompaniment of chattering typewriters in the room beyond.

Mr. Cutting dropped the book. He felt flushed and anxious. He stood up and wandered to the window where, had it not been dark, he could have seen the heavily laden wisteria vines and the tall, rigid lily stalks with their bell-shaped blossoms, ripe and sweetly redolent. The idea that his wife had read what he read—it was almost pornographic, he thought—much less trying to write it, made Mr. Cutting feel definitely at risk. What if...what if Marjorie were writing scenes like the one that he had just read, which, when he went back over it one more time, was filled not just with innuendo, but also with the most graphic details.

It was the details that bothered him. He seemed to recall reading somewhere that a writer can write only what he knows. What if-and this was the real fear that lurked there in the study-what if she were using their lovemaking for her model? She was, after all, a virgin when he married her and had been, he was absolutely certain, faithful to him for ten years.

For a moment, Mr. Cutting gasped to catch his breath. He knew for certain what Marjorie did not. He knew his shortcomings as a lover! Putting dimension and speed aside, he was aware of more exotic techniques he might have tried in their love making-Lord, the men at the club were forever discussing the topic. But the truth was that he didn't really care that much about sex. He did what he did, and since Marjorie never complained, he had simply never taken the time. Oh, it was horrifying...humiliating. Perhaps she didn't know that what they had done for ten years in their bedroom was not all that they might have done. What if she wrote directly from her own experience the obligatory scene, so to speak-the scene that led to the climax in the Aristotelian sense-and then she showed it, or read it, or did whatever you did when you belonged to a writing group, to those twelve women whose psychic energy was so perfect?

As he paced back and forth across the study, the imagined scene of his humiliation in print became real for him, and he not only saw the expressions on the faces of the lady listeners but heard their giggles and chortles as well. Mr. Cutting groaned in despair and threw himself down on the soft leather sofa where he remained, face down, for a short while. Then, slowly, because he was a reasonable man, a man of business who knew that there was nothing more dangerous than to be caught and held on the defensive, he straightened up. One needed to deal with facts, not conjecture, he reasoned. One needed to face the enemy head-on. One needed first of all to find Marjorie's manuscript. Only then would he be certain whether she had unwittingly deceived him.

Although he paid little conscious attention to his wife's daily routine, he knew after ten years that she was compulsive about neatness. She would never, he knew, have left her writing out on the table because it would have made the room look unbalanced. The antique writing table on which she had placed the typewriter had a single drawer. How simple, he thought. Of course, that was where she would put the manuscript. Perfectly simple, he thought, and he approached the table. Perfectly simple. He tried the drawer-twice. It was locked. Locked! Why should it be locked unless-unless she didn't want him to see how she had exposed him on paper. Ignominy! It was the only word that came to his mind, and he wanted for a moment to throw himself on the couch again. But, no, that would be too unmanly, too weak and cowardly. He needed to see for himself what Mrs. Cutting had written, even if it meant certain humiliation for him. He searched the library for the key to the drawer, but could find none. Finally, in a glorious moment, he remembered the skeleton keys in the front hall desk. The writing table was an antique. Surely one of the keys would fit. He fairly flew from the room, and returning with a large ring of keys, began the tedious process of elimination until he discovered one that fit.

What had moments before seemed horrible to him had now become an adventure in which he played the cunning detective, the wise priest, and the invincible hero. With trembling fingers, he opened the drawer and extracted the folder containing Mrs. Cutting's neatly typed carbons. Carefully, he removed the rubber band and, clutching the manuscript to his chest, strode decisively to the chair.

The first ten pages dragged on and on. The heroine was a childless married woman whose oafish husband didn't pay enough attention to her. They were in the process of separating, and the woman had contacted a lawyer.

Mr. Cutting found his wife's manuscript a bit unsettling. It wasn't so much that her writing was embarrassingly simple and a bit boring. She would never have to know he'd read it. He was troubled, however, by the parallels that he found between Mrs. Cutting and the heroine whose life seemed frustrated and miserable. He thought again about the statement that writers write only about what they know. If that were true, then Mrs. Cutting might be expressing her true feelings about their marriage. Could she really be this unhappy?

He tried to put the thought out of his mind and, in fact, was ready to put the whole project aside so as not to deal with his feelings of unrest, when he suddenly realized that the heroine and the lawyer were kissing. He glanced nervously at his watch, adjusted the light behind him and continued reading. When he finished, the manuscript slipped from his hands and he groaned. So there it was. Harriet had done it. The description of the liaison between the man and woman had excited him, he found, and in his excitement, he realized that he had forgotten that the author was his wife.

In fact, he had momentarily forgotten all of the fears that had driven him to purloin the manuscript in the first place. With a sense of relief that bordered on joy, he recognized that the details of the romantic coupling in the story bore no resemblance to any acts that he and Mrs. Cutting had ever committed in their lovemaking. He had been given a total reprieve. Never again need he fear being unmasked in front of the ladies with the perfect psychic energy. Marjorie had saved him; in fact, she had elevated him to a position of esteem, assuming that the writing ladies subscribed to the theory about writers and their experiences. For a moment he did, of course, wonder how Marjorie, whose writing for the most part had been rather dull and pedestrian, had managed to write sensuous scenes that were so vivid and real. But Mr. Cutting was a business man, and a business man is accustomed to being pragmatic. The ends do often justify the means, after all. In short, he didn't care about the means.

When Mrs. Cutting returned that night, flushed and excited from her meeting with "Les Girls," Mr. Cutting saw a stranger and a liar, and a tremour passed through him. He rose to face his wife, and like the hero in Mrs. Cutting's novel, he moved slowly and deliberately toward her through the dim shadows of the den. She stood there dazed and silent as he approached, and when they were inches away from each other, he took her firmly in his arms and kissed her with a passion that he had never felt for her before. With a gasp, she demurred momentarily, but then returned his kiss with equal fervour.

In moments, their clothes lay in jumbled heaps, and they were making love on the oriental rug. In moments they reached what in the terminology of the romance genre might have been described as "greater pinnacles of ecstasy" and lay there, limbs entangled and ghostly white against the rich and intricate design of the rug. They sighed in unison, it seemed, and drew closer to each other for warmth. Outside in the garden, the frogs chirruped steadily in the darkness, and a light nourishing rain had begun to fall softly on the lilies that lay beyond the wisteria in Mrs. Cutting's garden.