miniMAG

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Eros at a Crossroads

Salvatore Difalco

Clouds in the powder blue sky disguise shadows and mystery, as well as two faeries: one azure blue with arms outstretched, the other dove-white and blowing a silver trumpet. They slowly float out from the clouds into the bristling sunlight, where characters earthly and divine commingle in a scene—ostensibly more committed to the rainbow of chaos than orderly ritual and ceremony—of pseudo-transfiguration.

In the central gesture, a bouquet of red roses passes from the hands of a young lover in a crimson tunic to the ashen hands of his pallid and motionless betrothed, wearing an immaculate white dress and veil. Is this a wedding? It is not. Is the scene another species of ceremony? That is a question yet unanswered. What ceremony it could possibly be remains unclear. Is she enchanted or under the influence of a paralyzing agent? Difficult to surmise offered the scant evidence at hand.

Flanked by two nodding donkeys in straw sun hats, the ox playing the violin—presumably as a fitting accompaniment to whatever unnatural is transpiring—wears a beretta and a bovine look of amusement. His donkey companions continue nodding as if in affirmation. And what could be going on at this moment that escapes foul scrutiny? Faeries indeed might interfere with the natural order and atmosphere of the moment, though perhaps they contribute to what might be construed as an intriguing mystery. One accepts the premise that compounded things can at any moment lead to confusion and disorder.

Therefore, it is not up to the reporter to interpret what is witnessed, only to record it accurately, not overlooking or subordinating a single detail.

The male lover's face looks green in the shifting light. Perhaps this means something, though likely nothing. One can only bend so far backwards before the spine gives way and the wig falls off. More than



anything, this is an issue of boundaries. Not only the unbridgeable boundary of flesh and self that lies like a chasm between the lovers; but one must also not ignore the fact that the young man comes from the notorious *black village* where the women all wear mourning black and no flowers grow, and rumour has it only a single candle is allowed to burn at night. Whereas his beloved comes from a village near the abandoned green castle, where colours and flowers bloom and thrive, and no prohibition exists against light. How the two came together

provokes great debate in both their villages and the villages and counties beyond theirs.

"She summoned the blue faery," rumored someone from her village.

"He summoned the blue one. She summoned the white one, the one blowing the trumpet," argued someone from his village.

"What will come of this union?" asks a bystander.

"Likely nothing good," replies another.

In any event, a metaphoric candle flickers now between the lovers, though perhaps at the moment the gaping betrothed remains less cognizant of its flame than her lover, raising his hands as if to shield his green face from the hot lick of the blaze. Assuming another perspective, she may indeed be dreaming of an altogether different scenario, one where she could not be more wide awake and it is her lover who dozes with his eyes open as if drugged or hypnotized—when perhaps he himself is dreaming of yet another scenario, and so on. Perhaps it is intolerable that we question and make light of their states of consciousness.

The red roses tremble like flames in the betrothed's pale hands, and this is something memorable, as memorable as the azure blue faerie ducking under a small white cloud and performing a subtle acrobatic maneuver that leaves it crosslegged and floating up high as on a plush white cushion. And what might be the provenance of such a creature? Or what is its purpose? Who is asking? All of it is a performance. Let us accept this and suspend judgement.

If the faeries—surrogates for a higher, or rather supernatural agency—are unjust or uncouth, then they should be ignored. That goes without saying, even in the context of a jumbled phantasmagoria. If they are just and unobtrusively effective then they should be encouraged to practice their relative magic or influence—if we disagree that in the strictest sense they are magical. In the end it does not matter.

The violinist ox nods to the blue faerie and lengthens his notes as though by a preexisting arrangement. One takes it the faerie enjoys the change of tempo. Its manner of languid repose suggests a level of relaxation approaching terminal lassitude. No contingency exists should it suddenly fall from the sky. What impact would it have with the earth? Would it perish? Would it leave a smallish crater, perhaps ringed with azure?

On the other hand, the white faerie blowing the trumpet dribbles tepid sauce over the banquet, the trumpeting no more than the tooting of a plangent bantam not ripe enough to rouse the statuesque betrothed from her ongoing coma. Invention consists of more than spinning yarn from the void. We need all the puppets and toys permitted to us, all the tropes, however married and mangled. What land is this with faeries

and musical oxen? Ask yourself that question, then move beyond it for the good of everyone involved.

The ox nods and strokes his violin. He is accompanied by a simian creature in black on a snare drum whom we just noticed sliding out from a blue bush. Perhaps he represents darker and necessary forces, there to add rhythm if not mayhem to the compostion. Rhythm too often goes underreported or undervalued. Warm air billows over the players— divine, human, and bestial. The lover in his crimson tunic slowly rises above his beloved then revolves so that his red slippered feet point to the complex sky. Where have we seen this before? Perhaps we have not. His bottoming face darkens to aubergine as he nears it to his beloved's lolling head. After a few misses, he manages to kiss her lips. Everyone and everything falls quiet. Even the warm air currents stop flowing and softly hush.

That the young woman does not respond to the kiss, that she does not awaken from her dream state or walking coma, concerns the faeries who begin fussing and fluttering in the sky. This is all plausible, given the stated or implied parameters. Infinite precision out of reach, let us edge away from attempting to construct a model perfectly calibrated enough to be predictive. What is predictable is the lover descending back to ground and lying there weeping into his hands. She, meanwhile, remains motionless, stoic or oblivious, difficult to say.

The ox stops playing his violin. The donkeys stop nodding. And the faeries abruptly depart. The ending should be active. It should leave an impression. Perhaps the young man goes on to slay his beloved. Perhaps she slays him or has him slain. Perhaps they snap out of their magical states and parachute back to earth to accept the general banality of their lives. One always own the option of offering zero conclusions, zero predictions, and a dissatisfying closure. Then again, this is life not art.





This Church Isn’t Empty

Kimberly Brooking

A pile of bricks
tumbling down,
a red church abandoned
in the center of town.

The building has been
cleaned out, boarded up,
and left to rot.
A lock holds the door.

But desperate prayers
still live there.
Permanent squatters,
impossible to evict.

The walls still remember
the broken, the lost,
and the whispers of those
who just wandered in.

The art tried to comfort
the healing, the hurting,
and the heartbroken.
It still remembers their names.

The pews have held
the forgotten and hopeless,
year after year.
Do you think they could forget?

The floor has held up
dark pasts, sometimes the
only one supporting them.
It still does.

This rubble—
these weary stones
and worn wooden planks
and ornate door was home.

The only place they belonged,
The only place they felt safe.
Now where will they go?
Now where will they go?



In The Afternoon

Syd Brewster

New York was pretty when it wanted to be and as I sped down the mountain in search of Ben, I was reminded of why I always choose to stay. I used to come up here every summer with friends. We would drive 6 hours to hear nothing but the songs of birds, the talking of cicadas, and whatever was left when everyone stopped laughing. We used to hike up mountains in complete silence with only the crunch of leaves beneath our feet and the fear of ticks to egg us on.

The sky is brighter in the summers, but this afternoon, there were bushy brush strokes of dark gray storm clouds waiting to erupt. Towering eastern white pine trees swallowed me whole as I drove and felt like the only person in the world. Upstate had a smell to it in the fall that crept into the cracks and breaches of my car. It was the smell of wet leaves and smoky air from distant chimneys I could not see that softened me, cradled me, and kept me safe against racing thoughts.

The backseats remained empty and no friends accompanied me this time, no bursts of fast talking or silly gameplay. The only warmth I felt came from the heater drying out my skin. I scratched at my wrists until they turned red, developing raised scratch marks so stark anyone would've believed I had just been bound.

For no more than a second I looked down to trace the marks I had created and I nearly hit him. A figure walked across the empty road and I knew it was him. He wore one of his old wife beaters tucked into a pair of slacks. Despite the low visibility and my poor vision, I knew it was him. I knew it was him just by the way his stature and presence took up all the space around him.

I gripped the steering wheel tight, slamming on the break. The wheels slid against the wet pavement and stopped just before my hunk of metal crashed into him. My back wheels ended up on the other side of the road's double line. We stared at one another in between the flicker of my car wipers. Each time they flipped, I saw a new version of him, but the only thing that changed was the amount of rain water my wipers managed to sweep out of view.

I slipped my hand to the gear and the car jerked forward as I pushed it into park. I could hear all my stuff fall into their temporary resting places.

As I reached for the door handle, he continued walking on as though I didn’t nearly kill him, as though he hadn’t truly seen me at all. Ben was focused on something beyond the road and finished crossing the street.

I called out to him, but he didn’t stop. He just kept walking away from me. I got out of the car then, not thinking to shut the door behind me. The sight of him placed me into a trance and all I wanted was to see his face again. He hadn’t visited me in some time. I left the keys in the ignition, following him into the woods, through the thick brush that edged the long road. The trees devoured him just as I aimed to join him in the forest. The pine trees poked at my arms as I ran by. I was losing him. I didn't want to lose him. I could hear rustling from just in front of me, so I continued on and the trees began to eat me alive, too. Soon the sound of my running car was just a faint echo hanging by the thoroughfare.

I kept running, struggling to find a path to him. The trees too tall and compact for me to see in front or above.

I called out to him again.

“Ben!”

I kept calling, three or four times, screaming his name, yells sending birds flocking all around me from the trees. The tall pines shook as they took flight.

When the quiet came again, I could just faintly hear the rustling. It was to my left now and I ran to it, reaching a lake not too far from where I last stood.

I couldn't see him any longer, but instead, I saw a young boy. *Not my Ben*.

The boy thrashed in the water, swirling and screaming. He called out for help and I stood frozen. My boots sank deep into the mud at the lake's edge. He was not my Ben. Where is Ben?



My hands hovered above my boots before I began grabbing at them, picking at the laces and trying to unravel the knots as I watched the boy flapping his young arms against the water. He grasped at nothing, yet he did not enter the depths of the lake yet.

The boy still struggled in the water, crying out for help. He was drowning and I was worried about my laces. I jumped into the frigid water after I managed to toss my boots further from the edge. The cold shocked me despite already being soaked, but I began swimming towards the middle of the lake. My toes touched against the moss, feeling as little tiny fish brushed my leg just before all sense of grounding disappeared. I was in the open water now.

I reached the boy just as his movements began to quiet. I scooped him up, a pale thing no older than eight years old. The boy, he was tired, panting, grabbing against me. He crawled onto me, his arms a tightening collar around my neck.

I brought him to shore, his skin soft against mine. We held hands for a moment, staring at one another, breathless. He had freckles dotted across his nose and under fearful eyes. He was familiar and I was confused. The boy's shoulders caved into his chest as he shivered in his tank top and woolen shorts.

“Your shorts are wool?” I asked.

Stupid. It was all I could think to say. I didn’t think he wanted to talk about just nearly drowning.

He just stared at me, still holding my hand, still shivering in the mud. Our butts sat, seeping in heaps of brownish goo and it made me think of chocolate pudding. I hated chocolate pudding.

“Are you alright?” I asked, instead.

He nodded and looked away. His cheeks suddenly became bright red against his practically translucent skin.

“Where are your parents? What’s your name?”

“They were just there on the other edge of the lake,” he pointed with small fingers. “And name’s Ben.”

I stared at him, then beyond the lake to the other side, noting the marsh and thick brush that outlined it. I saw no one.

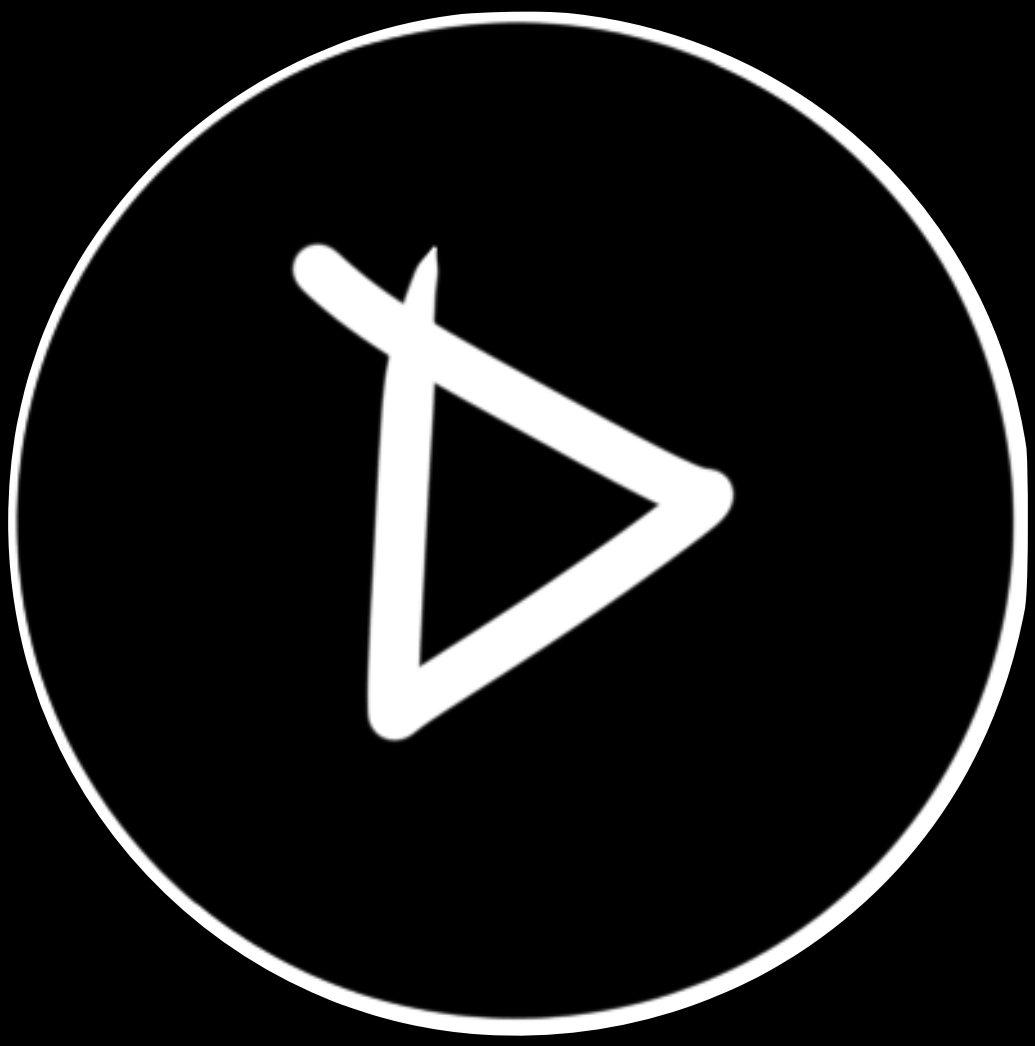
I stood up for a better look. Inching closer to the lake’s edge, the boy's hand slipped from mine, but my efforts to locate his family were futile. I didn’t see anyone.

Looking back down at the boy beside me for an explanation, I realized there would be none because he was no longer sitting in the muck of the mud.

The boy was no longer there.

Alone, I stood, dripping wet, my braids weighing me down.





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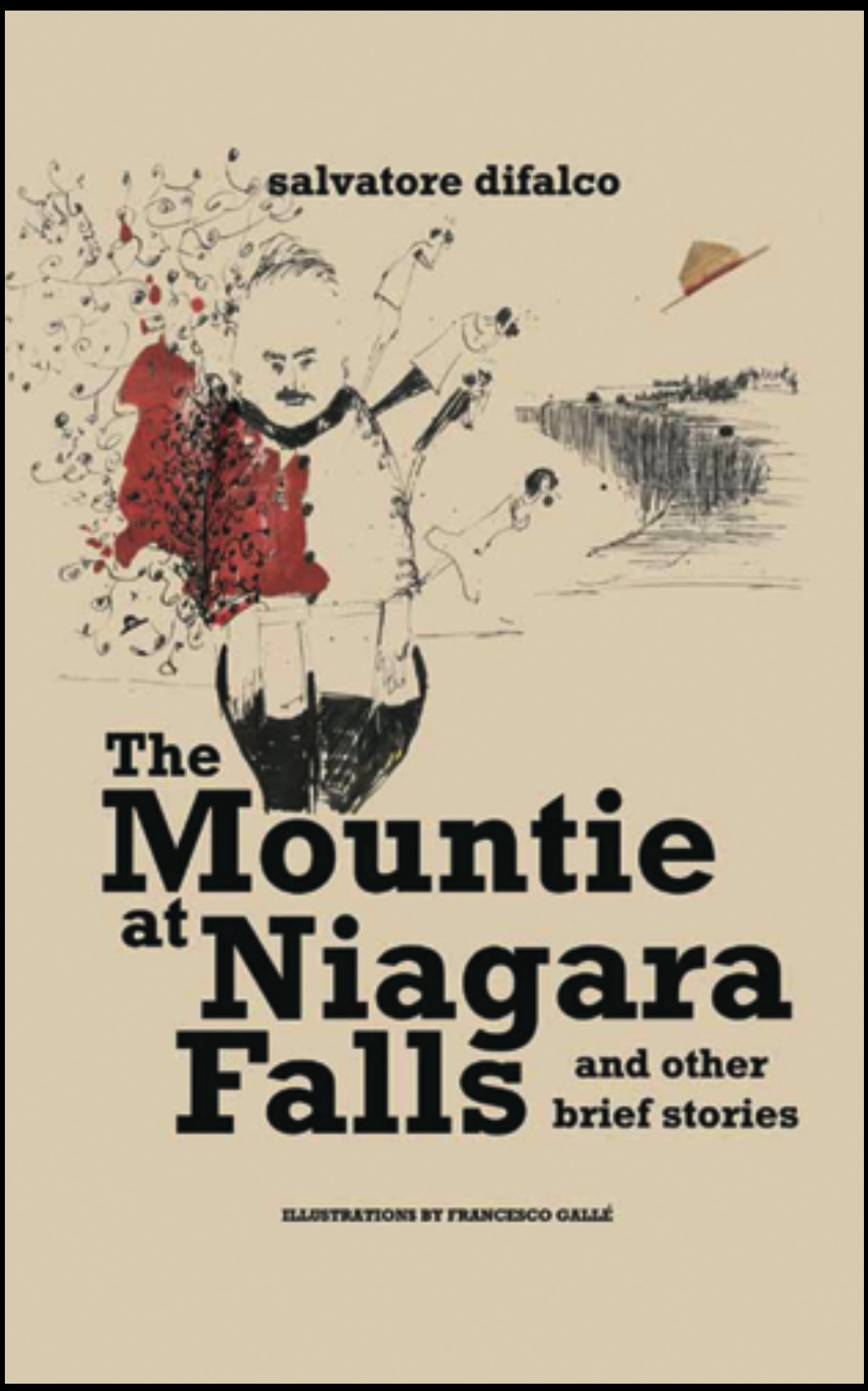
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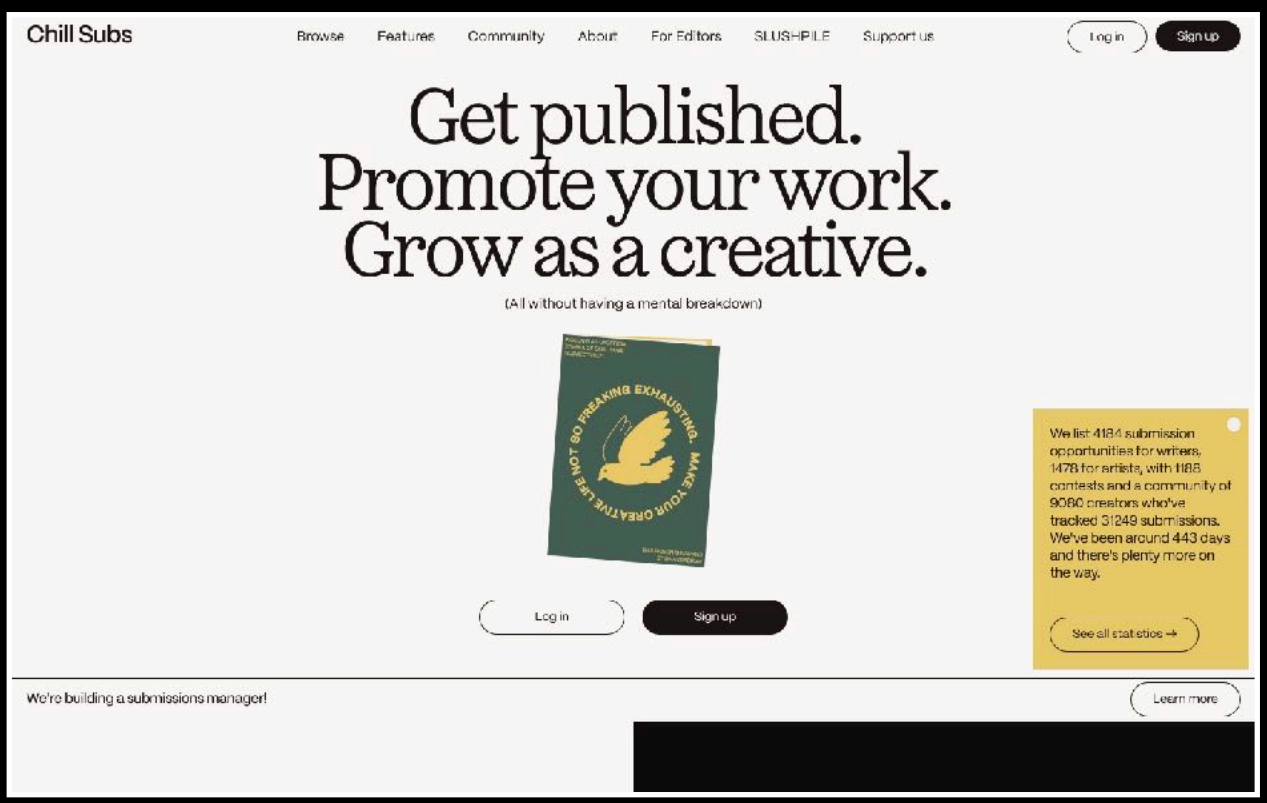
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