

## THE RELIC

Betsy O. West

An infamous event was taking place. There being no reasonable way to discuss such a thing, it is enough to explain that she was aware of great changes in the atmosphere because of it.

First, the man simply appeared out of nowhere bringing with him a decided cold spell. It was one of those occurrences that could never happen to you. As such, it was not until he actually first laid hands on her that she was startled in the least.

But then so quickly it all became like one of those scenes one doesn't want to read about, never worthy of description. Later, years later, there were even those long periods of time she was indeed unable to recall any of it.

Yet, she often slipped back into that tangling of time, fighting right along with all her personal forces of good, to beat it back into its cave, as befitting the seething dragon it was; blind, sordid thing which constantly hounded the present tense.

But, while it was actually happening it was as if the air rained rancid rhymes upon the site. Her usual solar winds and heavenly ether found no place to land thereabout. Instead, these circled and whirled above while she shouted with such a great noise that not even a wisp of moonlight shined there. So her efforts were useless. And nobody came.

Something she called her "all that mattered" left the scene turning its holy back. It simply looked the other way and muttered that no one could possibly have given birth to such a vicious fool. It couldn't imagine, it shouted into the night, what kind of mind or heart would pound in the chest of the attacker.

But "all that caused eminence," being what it was, nevertheless had no capacity to be absent from her when there was the tiniest hope. And with her, at least, there was a natural abundance, seasoned by a heretofore unmarred life and times. But because she also had an oversupply of indignation and fury "all that was comforting" hovered waiting for the chance to do something.

This meant that this part of the event was lonely and frightful for her since she had no real way to escape. She could only wait for it to end, stinging with indignation in every pore and cell.

And then it ended. The creature, having completely given up its rights to any good kind of life, stepped back, one foot at a time, trailing a string of absurd verbal apologies, as empty and loathsome as everything else about it. He was gone, the black hole sucked him away to his never never land.

It wasn't until she was sure he was truly gone that the solar winds trickled back to surround her, whispering about her, concerned and relieved that she indeed hadn't gone with him into some lifeless place. The winds' presence was her sign that all wonder could come back. And it did, now dropping dewy tears from someplace reassuringly onto her cheeks and down her nose and chin. Later, it was hard for her to describe to Julien exactly what these returning rushes had been like because they were very intense.

But the winds kept up their blowing in hurricane force and with such a loud roaring that they filled spaces of her physical aches with a babbling and jamming which muted the questions of the first officers to arrive. These winds also distorted her perception as she watched the pencilling light-toned fingers, stern brown-eyed white coats and gloves, and flashing badges, which brought in the first policewoman, finally, which helped a lot.

"And why did you bathe?" the policewoman asked softly, because that is exactly the first thing she had done. "You shouldn't have bathed," she was told, "but, there are tests that will show what happened anyway. So maybe it doesn't matter. Do you have any bruises?"

And there were more questions and comments but she couldn't give the policewoman any description of the man at all. Unfortunate. There was evidence, yes, this evidence, yes, that. A contusion. Anything else? Anything at all?

"Oh," she finally recalled to the policewoman, "and there was this hair." She held up her hand. "I still have it." The woman cop stared at her partner who shrugged his shoulders and had no answers about this type of thing.

"Maybe," said the woman inspector, now examining the thickly matted hair ball, it might be at least noteworthy as a sign of a struggle. However, it could be anyone's hair. Keep it, however, she was told, just in case they caught him. As evidence.

Later, she was alone, unsteadied. But, as time passed in this extraordinarily long evening, as she sat up, silent, at least her apartment itself, which had waited for her to relax, found ways to say welcome back. Her kitchen was trying to suggest that she make some tea. The window in the living room had a comforting yawn on its face as it lay open and familiar, its grass-toned gossamer drapes bulged with the night air.

But, with her senses returning, she suddenly noticed the misremembered thing still clutched in her hand and, horrified, she dropped the webby knot.

At once the hair ball glared at her from the floor, quite alive. It had been bound too tightly in her grip and so it now rolled and sprung and seemed to prance up and down, upside down,

unspringing itself. It unfolded to its more natural bulk, as one might expect squashed hair to do, uncurling, breaking loose like an atomic structure gaining mass. Then it rested momentarily on one spot on the floor, and having stopped growing, it now tumbled purposely toward her feet on a breeze.

Charged with fear, she leaped as it passed her chair, and she rushed to the drapery sash and jerked closed the dampish curtains. She gasped wildly.

Distinctly, it was breathing. Of course, she thought she might be mad.

Of course, it began to laugh at her. It chuckled demonically with a throaty voice.

She circled, giving it wide berth. She reached her desk and rummaged through for something to contain it, a receptacle in which to trap it.

"What's your problem, dearie?" it asked cheerfully.

She whirled about, at first not daring to move. Then quickly and certainly, without answering it, she pounced and whisked the hair into a new white onion-skin envelope. Her faced drained of blood. She set the seal. Then, without any aim she heaved it, repulsed, into a far corner of her living room. It landed in her knitting bag which was filled with warm, lovely-colored mohair for Julien's sweater.

It was hissing in the knitting bag. She had to stop it.

"I don't know how you got in," she found herself answering it, "but someone will come for you yet! Put you away for good!" She pulled the envelope away from the wool that would have been a sweater and she reopened the envelope, wherein the twisted interloper, puffing itself in the worst manner, suggested she should pull up a chair.

Outraged, she tried to reseal the thing, licking it shut, stamping it firmly with her fist, pounding it furiously, her hand momentarily shaking out of control. She tossed it away.

"Let's get acquainted," it said as it sailed through the air into the farthest corner where it lay half submerged behind the telephone books.

I'm so very tired, she thought to herself, and she concentrated on getting into bed.

In the morning it was singing from the far corner of the room. It had a poor selection of tunes, things she'd heard herself, maybe once, on the radio and disliked. Tunes which hadn't lasted for good reason, she felt. Yet, it was singing loud enough to be heard even as she busied herself with her breakfast in the kitchen. Surprisingly, it was not hard to ignore as long as she was involved with the day's grocery list and baking plans. When these came to an end and she could enjoy her favorite toasted bread and coffee, it set up a roaring

that made her uncomfortably nervous and made her want to cry.

On returning to the living room she saw it had placed itself square in the center of the room, the faulty seal on the envelope having given way in the night. Perhaps it was because bright morning sunlight streamed through like a spotlight that day, that she became aware of how filthy this object was. She loathed saving it when she finally saw it like this, a thing she had seized by some bungling of fate. It probably was overrun with invisible vermin. The police themselves should have taken it away. They were supposed to do things like that, not leave a person to suffer with the likes of it.

"Here comes the ruined woman," it whispered. "Here comes someone to say hello. How are you doing, dearie?"

"You are filth," she said, almost retching, scooping it up with an edge of her morning paper.

Into the kitchen she went with it taunting, "Don't you think you deserved it, baby?"

Into the sink went the plug and hot water gushed up to fill it. She pulled on a thick pair of rubber gloves and then proceeded to add to the foaming, boiling wash basin every cleaner she had under the sink. Into this the raging hair was plunged. She drowned it as best she could, swirling it under the faucet, then turning the water off when the sink was full. She watched the soggy blob ride the miniature whirlpool.

And it was about to be sucked into the sewers, as its owner had been sucked away in the dark the night before.

But, before its last circling down the drain, it managed to squeak, "I'm your evidence."

In the nick of time she caught in with her gloved hand, dragging it dripping and shampooed from her sink. She laid it on a fresh paper towel and placed a glass over it.

The hair was still quiet under the glass the next morning, and the next and the next. When it came time for her to face breakfast on the fourth morning, it spied her and began to buzz like one of those winter flies caught between windows in the midst of the coldest weather; a fly whose unnatural days were numbered and who managed to have a murky resplendence which could come only from its state of capture when it could buzz and knock hideously against each window pane and eventually die, mateless, for lack of food.

She deliberately and slowly had her breakfast to the sound of its humming. There were plenty of things to be done with it. She chewed the last piece of toast, licked the last butter from her fingers and then rose and placed the hair, glass and all, on a tray which she then carried to her desk.

"If I can't get rid of you," she told it, "I will make you silly." She placed a message holder to one side, the kind which has a long, tight vertical slot to hold paper upright.

She took the hair from under the glass. It whistled self-confidently until she extracted one of its strands, when it fell silent with shock. This strand she strung through the message clip, all the way to the bottom, leaving a once inch end on one side, long enough to grasp.

She proceeded with the second strand, which shrieked. She smoothed it between her fingers. Then the next, and for countless others – and its cries weakened as the little stack of hairs grew in the message clip, which looked, now, very much like a wig maker's tool.

While she worked, she scolded, "What could you possibly have gained? Nothing." She wasn't sure it was listening but it didn't matter. "If my loss is your gain, you dig yourself a deep hole." She hummed tunes she liked, and most of the things she said to it seemed to be appropriate.

It finally stood stiff in the clip – every filament, all straightened out, as much as hair can uncurl. It was all quiet and even. She pinched together the short ends and bound them, creating a bobbed lock. She tied this end with the finest, strongest thread that she had on hand. She used foolproof fisherman's ties to secure it. Then, back into the clip it went, for a final combing. "You almost look pretty," she said to it.

"Silly, indeed, silly woman," it answered her at last, restored to its whole size, causing her to shrink back. "Come on down to my point of view."

"It's the devil himself," she exclaimed. "For sure."

"Oh, no, sweet thing. I'm just a wad of hair," it said as if it gave yet another hint in a game of twenty questions and it was bored with playing.

Then it kept talking. "I like living at your house," it said, as she searched for her letter and envelope supply. "Come on, you have to admit you're keeping me in rather good style."

"Keeping you!"

"Secret lover, aren't I? Did you ever tell Julien about me? Hmm? Me, close to you? Oh, I know about Julien, all right. He's nothing. There'll be some little nagging doubt he'll have about you if you do tell him. I know. He'll even think you deserved it, like I do. Didn't you?"

"Die!" she said suddenly, producing a flaming match. And again she commanded it to die as she began singeing it. But it only laughed in the acrid smell.

"I'm your evidence. You don't want to destroy me."

At once she pinched out the melting fibers.

"They'll never call," she wailed, "They'll never catch you." So many days and hours passed so slowly and no one called about it. "You are a rogue," she accused, "and why don't they find you and gas you or do what they must?"

Now missing several of its strands, the hair fell back into the new envelope she held out for it. She sealed it away to stink and smoulder by itself. It chuckled lowly, but she did hear it whine a little because of the burning, a fateful stewing sound.

For several days the envelope lay silent.

She began to question the identity of its voice. Who would dare to think it was a secret lover, to not even show a face before the dark of that night? It was no part of her, that one, in any way like lovers or husbands or wives are to each other, but yet, still, it was so close.

She often curled up wanting but not wanting companionship. But what would Julien think of her now? The telephone had rung many times since then, after that night. Julien with his brilliant eyes and sensible smile, with the left eyebrow that questioned everything. She should call him. Julien, as peaceful as a spanish guitar, in an Arthurian court. It was possible he rode a white horse to his Fifth Avenue job.

Panic struck her, however, when she thought about telling him. When this happened the hair ball laughed heartily; it seemed to know whenever it had succeeded with her.

"It's you and me, alone, baby. Really." it would say, "You don't really hurt now do you? Just think. If you decided not to have taken offense, you wouldn't be a victim. Why didn't you just lay back and enjoy it?"

"Vicious twister! Am I really so worthless?" She asked. "Have I been wrong about why I feel so used?" She walked away leaving it humming to itself. She went to her kitchen and rummaged for some crackers, not wanting them, wondering why she felt hurt. If she recovered altogether, would someone be able to say, no harm done?

"Come on," it would say to her, "You could take it."

It was time the relic was gagged, its type of insight obliterated; its sneer coiled tight closed.

She found the message holder clip once more and worked the bound end of the hair swatch into its groove so that the ends sprayed out from one side in all directions. In the desk was a bottle of white glue which flowed into her fingers. She used some undrunk tea to thin the paste. She slid each strand between her gluey fingers, pinching each end. Like a mustache wax, the concoction stiffened the lips of the thing – made each opinionated strand bend

bowshaped from the paper holder clip, thus restricting the whole in its tendency to haphazardly re-curl, snarl.

For the first time the mass of twining notions stood in orderly attention, all the hairs radiating straight and even in a damp fan. She pondered it a while. It began to dry and then she separated it into three parts and began neatly braiding, evenly and deliberately, the thinnest, tiniest braid one could imagine, as if she were wetting the hair of a miniature child being coiffed for her first party. Delighted with her unsexing handiwork, she left the completed plait to dry.

It was silent when she returned. "Would you like a story?" She asked it, knowing full well that because she had glued its mouth shut it couldn't respond. She carefully pulled out her copy of "The Rape of the Lock" and read portions of it aloud while she slowly chose among several bright colored ribbons. She read and looked among them, then read, and tied one of them neatly to the end of the plait, and then tied the entire thing in a hoop.

What worth, she wondered, holding up the tiny ring of hair to her light, is there to this evidence, except what I make of it.

She recalled having walked by an old shop so many times and once recently having stopped to see a tiny framed ornament. It was from some Victorian mantelpiece or doorway, a tiny lovers' lock of hair intertwined together and tied lovingly with a wee ribbon and embellished with hand printed eulogies of love's pathos, an elegy for the unrequited. It had made her weepy at the time and reminded her of the round frames high above the altar at St. Christopher's, the bones of martyrs interred in glass and bits of fabric, clips of hair, preserved for centuries; feted yearly, held somberly aloft in gold, side by side with the Host and blessed casks.

"Dark relic," she muttered under her breath as she laid out the wreath of hair on the desk top, placing her magnifier on top of it. "Unholy mentor."

There were many peaceful nights after that.

Some days later, some weeks uncounted, the haunting cries began again. They started late one night. She sat bolt upright in her white cotton bed. It was the glue; it had dried out, seriously flaked away from the braid, like old ceiling paint, defrocking the hair's silence.

From then on, once more, every day the envelope made a racket. She was irritated, but waited, believing in a day the house would become clean and peaceful once again. In the meantime it nonopolized her favorite corner, always disturbing her peace.

Until one day, she came into the apartment and on hearing it begin its baneful discord, she marched to the drawer and flung it open, seized the envelope and tore it open.

"Julien knows," she announced, "he knows everything that hap-

pened that night, and now, it is too bad for you; he's asked me. We're engaged. He is a good man. He says it doesn't matter." She proceeded to empty the newly informed tendrils into an envelope to seal once more but it howled with amusement.

"Won't Julien have trouble now!" the twisted lock sneered. "On that first night, when you lie there together. Won't that be comical as he knows about it all!" Snickering, it added, "If he's a man of lesser prowess than some... less determination than some..." and it had recently liked to leave sentences hanging.

"It takes two, you horrible thing! It takes two, for anything of importance. It takes two, you swatch of illness! I'll teach you, it takes more than one like you to achieve anything, anything at all. I'll show you once and for all."

She furiously picked up the fancy little braid, still wound into the shape of a wreath, its patches of glue flaked away. "You are," she reminded it, "and always were, all by yourself, alone. Into your white cage!" she commanded. "Like it? No? You are jealous of Julien. Would you like a partner? I'll show you how it takes two for you!"

She snatched her sewing shears from the knitting bag and sawed and sliced at the little braid, slowly and with great relish. The various hairs made a series of small noises like tiny voices accompanying the melodic slicing. Springing and flying apart from itself, and with rather high pitched screeches and a few low bellows, the plait was severed in two.

"There. Lie like the snake you are, cut in half. Do I have to tell you now what you can do with yourself?" She felt wonderfully evil. She deposited the two broken ends into a new white envelope and licked it shut to close out its painful accusations.

The injured relic left her alone in her solitude for quite a while. One day she was dusting about the apartment and she stopped when she came to the envelope. Curiosity caused her to open it.

"So," it immediately began, "what's it worth to you?"

She couldn't imagine what now.

"How much are you worth?" it continued.

"Worth to whom?"

It was impatient. To her, to it, to Julien. How sorry should it be? \$10, \$20, \$50?

"You think I'm for sale?"

"Be reasonable, bitch."

She shivered and shoved the envelope back in the drawer, sorry she'd pursued the thing. It shouted obscenities, asked her bride price.

"Bride!"

"We're practically married, you know. With you keeping me in

the desk, in your house, considering everything, and all. And right under Julien's nose. . . Does he know you keep me in your desk, Hmmm?"

"There is nothing in the world you could give me."

"How else am I to escape you?"

It hadn't occurred to her it wanted to leave.

She felt the power to ignore it for the first time. For the first time she thought she could see a faceless man. She tossed the decomposing fuzz into another white envelope.

Finally, submissive, it hadn't called out for several weeks. She went to the desk to take it out for one last question and a last look. "Who else have you hurt and taunted?" She asked it. "Who else do you bother?"

Obligingly, it opened one of its invisible eyes and answered, "Anyone else who allows it and for as long as I can."

She found a yellow manila envelope and marked it with the number of the police precinct and calmly put the relic away in the cupboard behind the desk. It was the last time. It was too draining to talk with it any more. It would live back in the closet, of course, since there was no way she could find to destroy it.

It was one of those long winter evenings one just knows leads to warmer weather. She and Julien had seen several winters and such evenings together, dozens in fact. She'd decided to take up knitting again. There had been her job, her career. Then there had been children. Countless reasons why she never knitted. Julien always teased her about it. He said it had been the one thing she'd promised to do before they were married he was still hoping for.

Because it was that special kind of night, she had decided now was the time. A new pattern book lay next to her, a collection of colorful sweater photos. One dashing grey haired man modeled the sweater she told Julien she would make. She'd found all her old knitting things; made quite a mess in the room digging it all out of a deep cupboard near her desk.

Julien offered to clean up the clutter. He rummaged about discovering several old things. Photos of the wedding, baby pictures, flash bulbs for a camera no longer on the market. He pulled out a deeply yellowed manila envelope and opened it.

"What in the world is this?" he asked. He extracted a mummified hair mass, now a blackened lump, a mere sad specter of its former self. He sniffed it. "Burnt? Moldy? What is this thing?"

It was one of those glorious winters when it took her a while to recall.

"Oh," she said, "I'd forgotten about that thing."  
Julien, unaware of its former potency, twirled the tortured item in the light of her knitting lamp. "Must have been in that cubby forever," he said.

"Now that I think about it," she replied, "it has. It has indeed."

She took it from the mystified Julien and she herself squinted at it. Her eyes weren't so sharp anymore; didn't recognize it at all. "I might as well get rid of it."

She tossed it into the gas log where an ancient and familiar sizzle screamed its last. As it went up in quick rancid smoke and as it melted from sight, a warm surge of triumph came over her.