

THE GOLDEN TOWER: A FAIRY TALE

by Lisa Alther

Adam sat beneath the wooden water tank on the roof of his building on West 57th Street, scanning the new tower block across the street with his binoculars. The walls were of tinted glass, with structural beams of an alloy that had a distinct golden cast. His neighbors had turned on their lights for the evening, so they were highlighted in their windows as though on a stage. On the tenth floor a woman he had named Mrs. Boring stirred a pot on her stove, while Mr. Boring texted in an armchair. Unlike many occupants, they left their curtains open to the night, so that any random voyeur could spy on them. But there was nothing to see. Even their sex life on their rumpled bed relied relentlessly on the missionary position.

Still, it was an improvement over the views into the ramshackle building this tower had replaced. The only thing to watch there had been elderly women opening cans of food for their cats. These widows, living in rent-controlled apartments on their social security checks, had been bussed to a welfare hotel in the Bronx to make room for this golden tower.

The full moon above Central Park cast shadows across the park drives, along which intrepid joggers still ran and bikers in tight shorts pedaled.

Adam shifted his field glasses to the top of the tower, at a level with his own tar-surfaced roof. A woman he had never seen before stood at the railing of her balcony, gazing out toward the park. Backlit by lamplight from her living room, she appeared to

have plaited her hair into braids that wreathed her head and snaked down her back. He twisted the lenses of his field glasses to increase their magnification and focused on her face. But the light coming from behind her head threw her face into shadows. Adam realized he was standing so still that he had stopped breathing. He drew a deep breath and lowered his glasses. He had always scoffed at the concept of love at first sight, but this woman had just turned him into a believer.

Every night, while the full moon over the park waned to a crescent, Adam studied his new love on her balcony. All day long he sat at his desk in his cubicle in the Met Life building, performing the paperwork required for his job as an auto insurance adjuster – and dreaming of the nighttime and the golden tower across his street, where the silent woman with the long braids waited. At precisely 9pm she would emerge on to the balcony, stand by the railing, and gaze off into the park. At precisely 9:30pm a creature resembling an orangutan would come out the door, encircle her wrist with fingers that appeared to end in claws, and drag her back inside. But the woman's mien of calm indifference never altered -- as though she were under the spell of an evil magician.

Such passivity only increased Adam's ardor. All his life he had suffered from the indignity of knowing that he had entered this world by way of a vagina. His attempts to reenter those clammy vises owned by forlorn women met on Match.com had been disheartening. The greedy sucking paroxysms that vaginas demanded from him as an adult reminded him too vividly of the one from which he had barely escaped as an infant. His favorite fetish was a passive female – and at last he had found one! Night after night

his new beloved just stood there, silent and motionless, while he adored her from across the street through the steamed-up lenses of his faithful binoculars.

Eventually Adam realized that he didn't even know what his inamorata looked like. He had only seen her backlit on her balcony at night. He began to crave a glimpse of her in all her splendor during daylight hours. So he cashed in his 401 K and quit his job. Each morning he would pack a ham sandwich and a bottle of water in his backpack, ascend to his roof, and sit in the shade of his water tower, waiting for his love to appear on her balcony across the street.

He waited a long time. The dog days of summer turned cool, and the leaves on the trees in the park began to flare red and orange and spiral to the ground. Soon Adam had to wear his down vest and Ugh boots during his forays to the roof. And still the woman had not appeared to him in the light of day. Though his nighttime vigils continued. He saw himself as her guardian, keeping watch over her terrace and windows even when he couldn't actually see her.

But one sunny afternoon shortly before Thanksgiving the balcony door opened and out the woman came. She was just as stunning as he had been imagining, with her fair hair braided, and the braids encircling her head and looping down her back. She resembled the Circassian concubines in the paintings of Turkish harems, which he had viewed at the Met a number of times while trying to convince dreary dates from Match.com that he wasn't interested in them just for sex.

She wore running shoes and yoga pants and a cropped Pussy Riot tee shirt. He noted with alarm that her cheekbones were so prominent that they cast shadows across

her cheeks, and her eyes were sunken into their sockets. Her hip bones protruded like ax heads below the waistband of her pants, and her breasts lay almost flat against her chest. Adam was accustomed to the fashionably gaunt women of New York City, but his beloved appeared to be overdoing it. He wanted to toss her his ham sandwich, but instead he remained hidden beneath his wooden water tank trying to figure out what to do next.

For the first time ever, the woman herself didn't remain motionless. Instead, she took her braids, one by one, and unplaited them. Her freed hair was so long that it pooled on the balcony floor. She knelt down and gathered it up in her arms like harvested wheat. Then she dropped it over the railing, where it gleamed like spun gold in the sunlight. A faint breeze off the park caused this curtain to stir like a luffing sail. Adam's mouth fell open. More than anything, he longed to crawl up under that golden duvet of hair and huddle there forever, protected from the bustle and cruelty of the outside world.

Adam soon became convinced that his beloved was being held captive by that unattractive simian beast who dragged her off the balcony into the apartment each night at 9:30pm. Somehow he had to rescue her. But how? She was on the fifteenth floor of a tower with no outside staircases. Had her braids been several yards longer, he could have seized one and swung across the abyss to her balcony like Tarzan on a grapevine. Had he been a Flying Wallenda, he could perhaps have stretched a tightrope between his building and hers and tiptoed across the canyon that separated them. But instead he was an overweight middle-aged man who had always been chosen last for sports teams in his youth. He was not hero material, yet love was suddenly requiring him to act like one.

The next morning Adam strolled across the street to the entrance of the golden tower to suss out the lay of the land. The doorway was flanked by two huge Corinthian columns that were entwined with plaster acanthus vines and leaves gilded with gold leaf. A doorman built like a barroom bouncer stood behind a desk along one wall. He wore a navy blue jacket with gold buttons and epaulettes. Adam couldn't tell from his haughty demeanor whether or not he might be bribable.

Just then an elevator door opened and out came the burly creature from the penthouse terrace. He was evidently human, but just barely. His face was framed by a flaming corona of hair the color of an apricot poodle. He wore a double-breasted overcoat of fox fur that matched his hair and sideburns. His eyes, beneath bushy apricot brows, were beady slits, and a large mouth with prominent lips dominated the bottom half of his face. His feet splayed outward at forty-five degree angles as he walked, so that he seemed to occupy the entire corridor as he lurched from side to side. On either hand and behind him trod three beetle-browed men in black trench coats, who eyed Adam as though he were an unexploded IED.

Outside, the doorman opened the rear door of a black Bentley Bentayga W12 First Edition. Adam blinked, knowing from his career as an auto adjuster that this SUV was the fastest on earth with 600 horsepower, and that it retailed for close to three hundred thousand dollars. The three bodyguards clambered into a second Bentley standing behind that of their boss, and the convoy sped off to evict more welfare widows.

Adam wandered back across the street to his own building, deeply discouraged. He saw no way to rescue the woman he loved before she starved to death in her golden

tower. He was unemployed and uncoordinated, whereas her captor was vast in girth and owned the fastest SUV ever made. That night, for the first time in several months, he didn't go up to his roof to squat beneath his water tower and keep watch over his beloved. Instead, he lay on his bed and tried to envision other less dangerous women on whom he might train his binoculars.

Nevertheless, at noon the next day Adam found himself in his local pizza parlor, attired in jeans, a sweatshirt and a Mets cap. He ordered a large meat lovers pizza. Carrying the flat gray take-out box, he walked into the entryway of the golden tower.

"Pizza for the penthouse," he announced to the doorman.

"I'll take it up," said the doorman, reaching for it.

"Please, man, give me a break. They'll tip me, and then I'll split it with you."

The doorman hesitated. "I'm not supposed to allow anyone up there."

"I won't tell if you won't," said Adam.

The doorman shrugged. "Deal. Last elevator on the left."

The elevator door was embossed with a gold-leafed scene from the Judgment of Paris, in which the shepherd prince was trying to decide whether to name Hera, Athena or Aphrodite the fairest of them all. Adam agreed with his choice of Aphrodite. It was now clear to him that love was the only game in town worth playing. He was prepared to court death at the hands of that apricot orangutan in order to serve this goddess whom he had never met -- but had loved for so long.

Inside the elevator, the only button was labeled fifteen. When the door swept open, he stood directly outside the penthouse entrance. He drew a deep breath to calm his

roiling stomach and then rang the bell. The door opened, and there was the woman of his dreams, wearing her yoga pants and Pussy Riot tee shirt.

“Pizza, m’am.”

She grabbed his arm and dragged him inside, seizing the box, hurling it on to the kitchen counter, wrenching it open, ripping off a slice, and stuffing it into her mouth point first. “Thank God you finally come,” she muttered, her mouth full.

She had some kind of Slavic accent to match her Circassian appearance. For the first time Adam was close enough to discover that she had eyes the blue green tint of algae in a clear mountain lake. And never in his life had he seen so much hair sprouting from the head of a single individual. Her braids ran every which way around her head and down her back, like a Cat’s Cradle run amuck.

She consumed half the pizza in a matter of minutes. Then she paused to belch and to catch her breath. “Every night I stand on balcony, prayink for pizza,” she explained.

“Are you being held here against your will?”

“At first I want to be here. Husband when we date promise if I kiss him in right places, he transform from hairy troll into handsome stud. I kiss and I kiss but nothink happens. He say he can only love me if I stay thin. So he install home gym, and I am supposed to spend all day workink out on machines. Not permitted to go down to street. Only food what he brings me. And all he ever bring is kale and Granny Smith apples and spring water.”

“What do you think your husband would do if you were no longer thin?” Over her shoulder Adam could see a treadmill, exercise bicycle, elliptical trainer, rowing machine,

stair stepper, weight bench, and a complete set of barbells and hand weights. The only equipment missing from this modern-day torture chamber were the rack and the breaking wheel.

She sighed. “He marry four wives before me. Each one when she gain weight he divorces.”

“I live just across the street,” said Adam, thinking fast. “I can bring you a pizza every day, if you like?”

“That would be so fantastic!” She clapped her hands with delight. “But now you must go. Doorman gettink suspicious. Husband, he pay him to make sure no one go in or out. Eva is my name.” She extended her hand.

“Adam.” Her hand was so soft and warm that Adam’s atria nearly fibrillated. He prayed to Aphrodite that this touch would be the first of many between them.

As he left, Adam tipped the doorman \$50 to ensure reentry the next day. For the next couple of weeks Adam brought his sweetheart pizza in all its varieties – napoletana and bianca, quattro formaggi and viennese, alla casalinga and romana, capricciosa and sfincione.

One day as she chewed a slice of quattro stagioni, Eva said, “All those times I see you sittink under water tank across street, Adam, I think you just want from me sex, like all the others.”

“You knew I was watching you?”

“Of course. Moonlight and sunlight, they reflect off your little telescope glasses like tiny cat eyes in dark. I not know why you sit there every night. But now I startink to think you care if I am happy or not.”

“I do care,” said Adam earnestly, carefully refraining from acknowledging that he wouldn’t have kicked her out of bed either. He had apparently achieved hero status in her eyes, despite his complete unsuitability for the role, and he would never disappoint her if he could help it.

A few days later, as they shared a pugliese pizza, Adam studied Eva’s cheekbones and realized with satisfaction that they were receding and becoming engulfed by encroaching flesh. Screwing up his courage, he finally dared to goad the elephant in the room: “I have a plan for us, Eva.”

She looked up at him with her smoky blue green eyes, as a strand of mozzarella that stretched from her slice to her luscious lips trembled.

“I’ll keep on bringing you pizzas until you grow fat. Your husband will throw you out, and then you can move across the street and live with me.”

She thought this over for such a long time that Adam was convinced his aggression had alienated her. He began to catalogue the various methods of suicide, weighing the pros and cons of each, in search of the least painful.

Finally she replied, “Yes, Adam. Let us do this think! But one request I have for you.”

“Anything!” said Adam, incredulous that this gorgeous woman had inexplicably agreed to move from this luxury penthouse in a golden tower into his tiny rent-controlled hidey-hole across with street.

“Please can you sometime bring me Whopper and French fries and milkshake of chocolate in place of pizza?”

“Yes,” he said fervently. “Yes, Whoppers it is -- my light, my love, my life!”

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