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"Rest Cure"

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"Rest Cure"

Kay Boyle

- 1 "Rest Cure"¹
- 2 He sat in the sun with a blanket about him, considering, with his hands lying out like emaciated strangers before him, that today the sun would endure a little longer. Certainly it would survive until the trees below the terrace effaced it, toward four o'clock, like opened parasols. A crime it had been, the invalid thought, turning his head this way and that, to have ever built up one house before another in such a way that one man's habitation cast a shadow upon another's. The whole sloping coast should have been left a wilderness with no order to it, stalked and leafed with the great strong trunks and foliage of these parts. Cactus plants with petals a yard wide and yucca tongues as thick as elephant trunks were sullenly and viciously flourishing all about the house. Upon the terrace had a further attempt at nicety and precision been made: there his wife had seen to it that geraniums were potted into the wooden boxes that stood along the wall.
- 3 From his lounging chair he could reach out and, with no effort beyond that of raising the skeleton of his hand, finger the parched stems of the geraniums. The south, and the Mediterranean wind, had blistered them past all belief. They bore their rosy topknots or their soiled white flowers balanced upon their thick Italian heads. There they were, within his reach, a row of weary washerwomen leaning back from the villainous descent of the coast. What parched scions had thrust forth from their stems now served to obliterate in part the vision of the sun. With arms akimbo they surrounded him: thin burned Italian women with their meager bundles of dirty linen on their heads. One after another, with a flicker of irritation for his wife lighting his eye, he fingered them at the waist for a moment, and then snapped off each stem. One after another he broke their stalks in two and dropped them away onto the pavings beneath his lounging chair. When he had finished off what plants grew within his reach, he lay back exhausted, sank, thin as an archer's bow, into the depths of his cushions. "They kept the sun off me," he was thinking in absolution. In spite of the garden and its vegetation, he would have the last drops of sun. He had closed his eyes, and there he lay looking straight ahead of him into the fathomless black pits of his lids. Even here, in the south,

in the sun even, the coal mines remained. His nostrils were sick with the smell of them and on his cheeks he felt lingering the slipping mantle of the English fog. He had not seen the mines since he was a young man, but nothing he had ever done between would alter them. There he sat in the sun with his eyes closed, looking into their depths.

- 4 Because his father had been a miner, he was thinking, the black of the pits had put some kind of blasphemy on his own blood. He sat with his eyes closed looking directly into the blank awful mines. Against their obscurity he set the icicles of one winter when the war was on, when he had spent his twilights seeking for pine cones under the tall trees in the woods behind the house. In Cornwall. What a vision! How beautiful that year, and many other years, might have been had not it been for the sour thought of the war. Every time his heart had lifted for a hillside or a wave, or for the wind blowing, the thought of the turmoil going on had beset and stricken him. It had lain like a burden on his conscience every morning when he was coming awake. The first light moments of day coming had warned him that despite the blood rising in his body, it was no time to rejoice. The war. Ah, yes, the war. After the mines, it had been the war. Whenever he had believed for half a minute in man, then he had remembered that the war was going on.
- 5 For a little while one February, it had seemed that the colors set out in Monte Carlo, facing the Casino, would obliterate forever the angry memories his heart had stored away. The great mauve, white, and deep royal bouquets had thrived a week or more, as if rooted in his eyes. Such banks and beds of richly petaled flowers, set thick as thieves or thicker on the cultivated lawns, conveyed the wish. Their artificial physiognomies masked the earth as well as he would have wished his own features to stand guard before his spirit. The invalid lifted his hand and touched his beard. His mouth and chin, he thought with cunning satisfaction, were marvelously concealed.
- 6 The sound of his wife's voice speaking in the room that opened behind him onto the terrace roused him a little as he sat pondering the sun. She seemed to be moving from one long window to another, arranging flowers in the vases, for her voice would come across the pavings, now strong and close, now distant as if turned away, and she was talking to their guest about some sort of shrub or fern. A special kind, the like of which she could find nowhere on the Riviera. It thrived in the cool brisk fogs of their own land, she was saying. Her voice had turned toward him again and was ringing clearly across the terrace.
- 7 "Those are beautiful ones you have there now," said the voice of the gentleman.
- 8 "Ah, take care!" cried out his wife's voice, somewhat dimmed as though she had again turned toward the room. "I was afraid you had pierced your hand," she said in a moment.
- 9 When the invalid opened his eyes, he saw that the sun was even now beginning to glimmer through the upper branches of the trees, was lolling along the prosperous dark upper boughs as if in preparation for descent. Not yet, he thought, not yet. He raised himself on his elbows and scanned the sky. Scarcely three-thirty, surely, he was thinking. The sun can't be going down at once.
- 10 "The sun can't be going down yet awhile, can it?" he called out to the house.
- 11 He heard the gravel of the pathway sparkling and spitting out from under the soles of their feet as they crossed it, and then his wife's heels and the boots of the guest struck and advanced across the paving stones.

- 12 "Oh, oh, the geraniums--" said his wife suddenly by his side.
- 13 The guest had raised his head and stood squinting up at the sun.
- 14 "I should say it were going down," he said after a moment.
- 15 He had deliberately stepped before the rays of it and stood leaning back against the terrace wall. His solid gray head had served to cork the sunlight. Like a wooden stopper, thought the invalid, painted to resemble a man. With the nose of a wooden stopper. And the sightless eyes. And the creases when he speaks or smiles.
- 16 "But think what it must be like in Paris now," said the gentleman. "I don't know how you feel, but I can't find words to say how grateful I am for being here." The guest, thought the invalid as he surveyed him, was very conscious of being a guest--of accepting meals, bed, tea, society--and his smile was permanently set beneath his nose.
- 17 "Of course you don't know how I feel," said the invalid. He was looking sourly up at his guest. "Would you mind moving out of the sun?" As the visiting gentleman skipped out of the way, the invalid cleared his throat, dissolved the little pellet of phlegm which had leaped to being on his tongue so as not to spit before them, and sank back in his chair.
- 18 "The advantage--or rather *one* of the advantages--of being a writer," said the visiting gentleman with a smile, "is that he can settle down wherever the fancy takes him. Now, a publisher--"
- 19 "Why be a publisher?" said the invalid in irritation. He was staring again into the black blank mines.
- 20 His wife was squatting and stooping about his chair, gathering up in her dress the butchered geraniums. She said not a word, but crouched there picking them carefully up, one by one. By her side had appeared a little covered basket, and within it rattled a pair of castanets.
- 21 "I am sure I can easily turn these into slips," she said gently, as if speaking to herself. "A little snip in the right place and they'll be as good as new."
- 22 "You can make soup out of them," said the invalid bitterly. "What's in the basket," he said, "making a noise?"
- 23 "Oh, a *langouste!*" cried out his wife. She had just remembered. "We bought you a *langouste*, alive, at the Beausoleil market. It's as lively as a rig!"
- 24 The visiting gentleman burst into laughter. The invalid could hear him gasping with enjoyment at his side.
- 25 "I can't bear them alive," said the invalid testily. He lay listening curiously to the animal rattling his jaws and clawing under the basket's lid.
- 26 "Oh, but with mayonnaise!" cried his wife. "Tomorrow!"
- 27 "Why doesn't Mr. What-do-you-call-him answer the question I put him?" asked the invalid sourly. His mind was possessed with the thought of the visiting man.
- 28 "I've asked him why he was a publisher," said the invalid. What a viper, what a felon, he was thinking, to come and live on me and not give me the satisfaction of a quarrel! He was a not a young man, thought the invalid, with his little remains of graying hair, but he had all the endurance and patience of a younger man in the presence of a master. All the smiling and bowing, thought the invalid with contempt, and all the obsequious ways. The man was standing so near to his chair that he could hear his breath whistling

through his nostrils. Maybe his eyes were on him, the invalid was thinking. It gave him a turn to think that he was lying there exposed in the sun where the visitor could examine him pore by pore. Hair by hair could the visitor take him in and record him.

29 "Oh, I beg your pardon," said the gentleman. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology. You see, I'm not accustomed to it."

30 "To what?" said the invalid sharply. He had flashed his eyes open and looked suspiciously into the publisher's face.

31 "To seeing you flat on your back," said the gentleman promptly.

32 "You covered that over very nicely," said the invalid. He clasped his hands across his sunken bosom. "You meant to say something else. You meant to say *death*," said the invalid calmly. "I heard the first letter on your tongue."

33 He lay back in his chair again with his lids fallen. He could distinctly smell the foul fumes of the pits.

34 "Elsa," he said, as he lay twitching in the light, "I would like some champagne. *Just because*," he said, sitting up abruptly, "I've written a few books doesn't mean that you have to keep the truth about me to yourself."

35 His wife went across the terrace, leaving the two men together.

36 "Don't make a mistake," said the invalid, smiling grimly. "Don't make any mistake. I'm not quite finished. Not *quite*. I still have a little more to write about," he said. "Don't you fool yourself, my dear."

37 "Oh, I flatter myself that I don't," said the gentleman agreeably. "I'm convinced there's an unlimited amount still to come. And I hope to have the honor of publishing some of it. I'm counting on that, you know." He ended on a playful note and looked coyly at the invalid. But every spark of life had suddenly expired in the ill man's face.

38 "I didn't know the sun would be off the terrace so soon," he said.

39 His wife had returned and was opening the bottle, carefully and without error, with the end of her pliant thumb. The invalid turned on his side and regarded her: a great strong woman whom he would never forget, never, nor the surprisingly slim crescent of her flexible thumb. All of her fingers, he lay thinking as he watched her, were soft as skeins of silk, and tied in the joints and knuckles by invisible satin bands of faintest rose. And there was the visiting gentleman hovering about her, with his oh-let-me-please-Mrs.-oh-do-let-me-now. But her grip on the neck of the bottle was as tenacious as a snake's. She lifted her head, smiled, and shook it at their guest.

40 "Oh, no," she said, "I'm doing beautifully."

41 Just as she spoke the cork flew out and hit the gentleman square in the forehead. After it streamed a geyser of purest gold.

42 "Oh, oh, oh," cried the invalid. He held out his hands to the golden spray. "Oh, pour it here!" he cried. "Oh, buckets of it going! Oh, pour it over me, Elsa!"

43 The color had flown into Elsa's face and she was laughing. Softly and breathlessly she ran from glass to glass. There in the stems played the clear living liquid, like a fountain springing upward. Ah, that, ah, that, in the innards of a man, thought the invalid joyfully! Ah, that, springing again and again in the belly and heart! There in the glass it ran, cascaded in needlepoints the length of his throat, went whistling to his pulses.

44 The invalid set down his empty glass.

- 45 "Elsa," he said gently, "could I have a little more champagne?"
- 46 His wife had risen with the bottle in her hand, but she looked doubtfully at him.
- 47 "Do you really think you should?" she asked.
- 48 "Yes," said the invalid. He watched the unbelievably pure stuff flowing all over his glass. "Yes," he said. "Of course. Of course, I should."
- 49 A sweet shy look of love had begun to arch in his eyes.
- 50 "I'd love to see the *langouste*," he said gently. "Do you think you could let him out and let me see him run around?"
- 51 Elsa set down her glass and stooped to lift the cover of the basket. There was the green armored beast lifting its eyes, as if on hinges, to examine the light. Such an expression he had seen before, thought the invalid immediately. There was a startling likeness in those small audacious eyes. Such a look had there been in his father's eyes: that look, and the long smooth mustaches drooping across the wee clefted chin, gave the *langouste* such a look of his father that he exclaimed aloud.
- 52 "Be careful!" said Elsa. "His claws are tied, but still--"
- 53 "I must have him out," said the invalid. He gripped the *langouste* firmly about the hips. He looks like my father, he was thinking, I must have him out where I can see.
- 54 In spite of its shackles, the animal contrived to wave his wide pinions in the air as the invalid lifted him up and set him on the rug across his knees. There was the same line of sparkling dew-like substance pearling the *langouste*'s lip, the same weak disappointed lip, like the eagle's lip, and the bold suspicious eye. Across the sloping shoulders of the beast lay a sprinkling of brilliant dust, as black as coal dust and quite as luminous. Just as his father had looked coming home at night, with the coal dust showered across his shoulders like a deadly mantle. Just such a deadly cloak of quartz and mica and the rooted roots of fern. Even the queer blue toothless look of his father about the jaws. The invalid took another deep swallow of champagne and let it seep quietly through his flesh and blood. Then he lifted his hand and stroked the *langouste* gently. You've never counted, he was thinking mildly. I've led my life very well without you in it. You better go back to the mines where you belong.
- 55 When he lifted up the *langouste* to peer into his face, the arms of the beast fell ludicrously open as if he were seeking to embrace the ailing man. He could see his father very well in him, coming home with the coal dirt all over him in the evening, standing by the door that opened in by halves, opening first the upper half and then the lower, swaying a little as he felt for the latch of the lower half of the door. With the beer he had been drinking, or the dew of the Welsh mist shining on his long mustaches. The invalid gave him a gentle shake and set him down again.
- 56 I got on very well without you, he was thinking. He sipped at his champagne and regarded the animal upon his knees. As far as I was concerned you need never have been my father at all. Slowly and warily the wondrous eyes and the feelers of the beast moved in distrust across the invalid's lap and bosom. A lot of good you ever did me, he was thinking, as he watched the *langouste* groping about as if in darkness; he began to think of the glowing miner's lamp his father had worn strapped upon his brow. Feeling about in the dark and choking to death underground, he was thinking impatiently. I might have been anybody's son. The strong shelly odor of the *langouste* was seasoning the air.

- 57 "I've got on very well without you," he was thinking bitterly. From his wife's face he gathered that he had spoken aloud. The visiting gentleman looked into the depths of his glass of champagne.
- 58 "Don't misunderstand me," said the guest with a forbearing smile. "I'm quite aware of the fact that, long before you met me, you had one of the greatest publics and following of any living writer--"
- 59 The invalid looked in bewilderment at his wife's face and at the face of the visiting man. If they scold me, he thought, I am going to cry. He felt his underlip quivering. Scold me! he thought suddenly in indignation. A man with a beard! His hand fled to his chin for confirmation. A man with a beard, he thought with a cunning evil gleam narrowing his eye.
- 60 "You haven't answered my question," he said aggressively to the visitor. "You haven't answered it yet, have you?"
- 61 His hand had fallen against the hard brittle armor of the *langouste's* hide. There were the eyes raised to his and the canny feelers lifted. His fingers closed for comfort about the *langouste's* unwieldy paw. Father, he said in his heart, Father, help me. Father, Father, he said, I don't want to die.
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NOTES

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