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The Origin of Species

An Excerpt

Nino Ricci



*E*sther was on the top floor, in chronic

care. Up here the *ancien régime* still reigned, as if nothing had changed since the fifties, the same floors in checkerboard cream and brown asbestos tiles, the same pastel green walls, the trolleys stacked with chrome bedpans and with packets of gauze and surgical gloves. There were the bleached linen closets, the funny hospital hush, the ever-present medicinal smell—what was it? antibiotics? some kind of cleanser?—that lay over everything and that immediately conjured up every hospital visit he'd ever made as a kid to their endless web of wounded or dying relations. It ought to have been off-putting, all of this, but it wasn't. Instead it had the feel of an old-style institutionalism, familiar and instinctively comforting, almost Soviet in its air of worn-but-serviceable paternalism. What Alex's visits most reminded him of were the hours of reverie he used to spend in church as a kid—things didn't necessarily get better in these sorts of places, but at least they seemed put off for a while.

Esther was alone. Her father had paid to have her moved to a private room, which was probably costing him a small fortune, though she didn't seem in much of a position to enjoy the luxury of it, asleep most of the day or lost in a kind of lethargy that might have been the effect of whatever drugs they were giving her or just her body's slow shutting down. It had been several weeks now since she'd been able to manage anything like a conversation. Initially this had been because of some medical complication that had reduced her to just a hoarse sort of aspirating, but now she didn't even make the effort much. Writing was out of the question—a lot of her muscles had seized, and her hands had frozen into a claw shape that made holding things nearly impossible. About the only way in or out now was through her eyes, though these so often had a trapped look that Alex didn't like to dwell on them.

Her bed was surrounded by appliances of various sorts. The main one, oddly, which her father had had to buy, since the hospital didn't stock it, was a device whose stubborn, phlegmatic purpose was to keep her body temperature constant. Its technology was of the most basic sort: there was a big monitor at the foot of the bed, and then a water-filled pad that stretched out over her mattress and heated or cooled as her temperature fluctuated. Esther had complained of it: it was like lying in her pee, she'd said once, then her laugh.

Esther was asleep. The curtains over her window were drawn, and the room was dim with the crepuscular graininess of filtered daylight. For a long time Alex just sat there

Nino Ricci is Bridgewater State College's First Killam Professor of Canadian Studies. Nino is the author of five novels, including the critically acclaimed The Lives of the Saints. This excerpt, from Ricci's The Origin of Species, is forthcoming with Other Press in April 2010. Set in Montreal in the 1980s, The Origin of Species tells the story of thirty-something Alex Fratarcangeli and his relationship with Esther, a young woman dying of multiple sclerosis.

watching her, the heave of her chest as she breathed, the digital flicker of her monitor as her temperature rose a tenth, then fell again. Just a single sheet covered her, the hieroglyph of her body clearly outlined beneath it, legs splayed but relatively straightened, thanks to the cuts they'd made behind her knees after her muscles had started to lock. She was wasted almost to nothing now. Her cheeks had sunken, all the blush on them gone; her hair had thinned to the wispy sparse-ness of an old woman's. How many times he had thought of this body since that night she'd come on to him, how many shades of feeling it had brought up in him. So much strangeness seemed invested in it even now, that it should



house this person and be her and also turn on her like something alien. In Alex's mind Esther had become utterly inseparable from this body, so much did it define her and his relationship with her, and yet always he felt this as a betrayal, a failure to truly see past her surface and know her in some more essential, uncorrupted fullness.

No one had ever quite put it in these terms, but they were on a death watch now. The smallest infection, a virus, a cold, and she could turn. Each time he stepped into her room he felt a chill, not knowing what killer might cling to him.

"It's great that you come," Lenny said, his constant refrain. "Her mind's still working, I know that. I know the real Esther is still in there."

It had all happened so quickly. Alex knew that people lived with MS for years, into old age even, half of them probably total defeatists, with none of Esther's determination and spunk. And yet the illness had ridden roughshod over her as if her will had counted for nothing.

When she'd gone back into hospital after her terrible week home she had told him she wanted to die.

"It's like the old Esther's gone," she said, holding back tears, and he could almost see it before his eyes, the Esther who was bent on fighting, who would walk again, who would never give in, taking flight. "Is that awful, to want to die? Am I awful?"

"It's not awful." She had reached the moment he'd dreaded, when there was nothing before her but the truth. "It's hard right now, that's all. In a week you'll feel differently."

She didn't let on that she didn't believe him. It occurred to him that she might actually be asking something of him, to help her along when the moment came, to pull the plug, but he wouldn't get into that.

"Would you hold my hand?" she'd said. "Would that be all right?"

And he had sat there holding it in both of his until she passed into sleep. It had still been supple then, warm and soft and alive; he could feel it even now, sitting next to her while she slept again. Her life in his hands. It had felt like that.

They had reached the moment, surely, when plugs should be pulled, if one had a mind to. He watched the monitor flicker, down a tenth, up again, but couldn't believe that turning it off would make much of a difference, except in some long, drawn-out way. It remained to the Great Bastard in the sky to shut the machines down, if he had the heart to.

Back when she was still talking, she'd told him a dream she'd had.

"I dreamed I went to heaven," she'd said, "and everybody liked me."

Alex's copy of *Les Misérables* was still sitting on Esther's bedside table. He had taken to reading to her from it during his visits, choosing it because it was long and because he remembered the readings his Grade 8 teacher had done from it, Mrs. Jackson, making them lay their heads on their desks like Grade 1s and teasing out the last languid hour of the afternoon with it. "This is so great of you," Esther kept saying, in her hoarse whisper, "it's so great," though the opening chapters were so leisurely and long-winded Alex was afraid this would just turn into another of his failed enthusiasms. But then they came at last to Jean Valjean, and there was no turning back.

The story seemed to bring out the same wonder in Esther at the world's outrageousness as it had in Alex back in Grade 8.

"Was it really like that back then? Just for stealing a loaf of bread? We're so lucky to live when we do."

For a few weeks the readings became the highlight of Alex's day. He would sit there at Esther's bedside with the guilty afternoon light slanting in through the window, the light of sick days and special reprieves, and be back again with his head on his desk in Mrs. Jackson's classroom. The story drew him on like a drug. It was the worst sort of philistinism in his circles to care about something as barbarous as plot, yet for the first time in months or even years Alex felt himself taken over again by a book. The story was as pumped up as an opera—the penitent prostitute, the innocent child, the good-hearted criminal who couldn't escape his past—and yet it had such a scope to it, was so full of twists and new beginnings, that it seemed to carry a kind of Scheherezadian hopefulness.

He looked over once, and Esther was crying.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” Her voice was the barest rustling by then. “It’s just the story. It’s so beautiful. It’s sad, but it’s beautiful.”

Occasionally Esther’s sister would come, or her mother or Molly, and they would sit and listen with her until the window had grown dark and there was only the glow of the bedside lamp. Alex would have the feeling he had in airplanes sometimes, of not wanting to land. What was it, this power stories had, that moved Esther to tears, that he had forgotten? They might have been cave dwellers then, gathering around the fire. Come, I will tell you things, I will hold back the dark.

Then suddenly it was over. Esther got a cold, from him, maybe, and was put on a new round of drugs that drained the life from her. She never really recovered after that. He kept doing his readings for a while, but she’d fall asleep in a matter of minutes or would seem to grow irritable in a way that was completely unlike her, wincing at the light or shrugging away from him suddenly as if something unpleasant had touched her. For a couple of weeks now, he hadn’t read to her at all—they’d managed to get to the midpoint, as far as Little Gavroche, thanks to a few judicious excisions including the Battle of Waterloo, but Alex hadn’t the heart to go on again. Maybe it was the same with her as with people in comas, that you ought to keep speaking to them in some normal way, but all he could think of was this new wincing impatience in her, this twisting from him as if to say, Can’t you see that I’m dying? So he sat silent, mostly. If she was awake he would take her claw hand and mumble awkward niceties, trying to hold her eyes, to make a connection there, which happened sometimes, for seconds or minutes, longer than he could bear, really, and sometimes not. That was worse: she would look at him, and see him, and turn away. Not as if she hadn’t recognized him, but as if she couldn’t be bothered. Let me be. Let me sleep. It surprised him how much this cut him—he was her hero, her champion, her star. He could do no wrong. She was utterly mistaken in him, of course; God knew, he had tried to make her see that. Yet it seemed that if he lost her good opinion of him, if it was not something unshakeable and eternal in her, he would somehow lose the possibility of ever becoming that better person.

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