

THE TURNED-INTO'S

Charles Haddox

A fter an hour's walk through the rustling gardens, and along roadsides that were slick as soap, Gerry made it out to Zoë's shop. It was located in a quiet residential neighborhood of a far-flung suburb situated on formerly rural countryside that was still crisscrossed by old irrigation canals, which kept things humid all the time, even at three in the morning. He arrived at such an unheard-of hour because Zoë's shop, named after the classic 1920s children's book which was actually based on a quite complex philosophical conceit, namely, that human metamorphoses oddly resemble those of creatures in the insect world, was only open between the hours of midnight and six a.m. That was her gimmick: being open at such strange hours—especially strange for a store that sold nothing but useless little gifts all handmade by Zoë herself. Actually, the store had nothing to do with the complicated philosophy that animated the famous children's book; the name, as used by the proprietress, "The Turned-Into's," was apt in a more literal way because Zoë liked to turn things into other things. There were hand-drawn flip books that told complex dramatic stories like *Lela in the Badlands* and *Magnus North of Stockholm* fashioned from fancy writing journals, bells made of marzipan dipped in chocolate, hand puppets created out of wool stocking caps, Volume Fifteen of the *Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia* transformed into a home safe, and every kind of junk imaginable converted to Christmas ornaments displayed on upright, branching, dried yucca stalks in the manner of fancy Southwestern specialty stores. Gerry found himself wandering through that unfamiliar suburb at

three o'clock in the morning under a blank, thoughtless moon not because he really needed to pay Zoë's unreasonable prices for his gift-giving needs, but because, being a young man, he had delightful feelings for Zoë.

He entered the tidy white bungalow with the living room that had been converted to a shop and found the two friends of Zoë who acted as cashiers asleep at their posts, with dry, sullen mouths and fanlike hair spreading over their desks. Zoë and the four apprentice midwives that she let sleep in the house which had only been partially converted to a retail shop were wide awake. Being midwives, the four were used to strange hours, and Zoë never slept during the time that her shop was open.

Zoë was tall and laughed loudly at everything, altogether a dominating and agreeable host. Gerry liked her wholesome features and pretty green eyes. The four midwives, Zodiac, Carla, Winter and Claire, were really quite dull in appearance compared to Zoë, as was Gerry himself, who looked like a *du jour* plumber or garbage man. At least the midwives were dressed in colorful calico skirts and tie-dyed painter's pants and hemp or linen shirts, and smelled of sandalwood and clary sage, and evening primrose oil, which was used medicinally in their sacred calling. Winter had wooly blond hair and Zodiac had dreads and Carla had no hair at all! Claire's delicate little head was covered in short, serviceable brown curls. She was sucking on a lemon lollipop that was as sour as a D# minor scale. Everybody went by first names, as if surnames were a thing of the past. Gerry only knew Winter's, which was musical, like an incantation: Glynfiddich. Winter was strange all over; food would taste green to her at Mercury's perihelion and red at its aphelion. At the moment there were a few drops of dried blood in her sunny naiad hair.

Carla was the outspoken one. She once told Gerry that she didn't think he was very smart. He greeted her where she sat, in a corner filled with baskets of rolled-up block prints on rag

paper depicting star charts, fish, and sentimental deer heads. There were two or three rubbings of Sheela na Gigs that Zoë had made on a trip to Ireland when she was twenty. Carla was knitting a scarf out of caramel alpaca. She had spun the wool herself between thumb and forefinger with a hand spindle and was using a difficult double seed stitch. Without getting up from her rocking chair, she looked at Gerry disdainfully.

“I hope you’re not here just to look.”

“What’s the matter with you? I’m not causing any trouble.”

“Not yet. But you’ll be talking Zoë’s ear off the minute I give you a chance.”

“Zoë can take care of herself.”

“I didn’t say she couldn’t. But the customer—supposing that you really are one—is always right. Damn, I missed a stitch!”

“Pull the back stitch, not the strand,” Zoë said, “and be nice.”

The only other customer in the store was a shopper who had come all the way from Fort Davis, the kind of hipster redneck found only in the Van Horn-Marfa-Balmorhea triangle. He posed no threat to Gerry in his pursuit of Zoë’s affections, having ruined his chances with her by using the “she’s all that and a bag of chips” line within earshot. No goddess wants to be compared with a bag of chips.

It was time for Gerry to do some shopping. He kept his eye on pretty Zoë, and she kept her eye on him as if he were a potential shoplifter. To please her he made complimentary comments about the bookmarks made out of old jeans that were embroidered with suns and galaxies, the candles with *OM* in Sanskrit-lettering crudely painted on them, and the variety and quantity of marzipan fruits, lizards and frogs all brilliantly tinted with vegetable dyes. He picked out two suncatchers made from old patent medicine and whale-oil bottles filled with colored water. And a string of chocolate-

covered marzipan bells. Zoë's patchwork quilts were the only real works of art in the place, but were prohibitively expensive. Instead, he chose three patchwork chicken potholders.

The humid air outside in the deepening night was filled with laughter and voices, even though everyone was asleep but the customers and hangers-on inside the little shop that smelled of herbal sachets and homemade smudge sticks. The laughter and voices must have been coming from sleepers, who, because of their hectic lives, were only able to enjoy themselves in the realm of Queen Mab. One of the clerks who had fallen asleep awoke for a moment, let out an audible sigh, and almost immediately succumbed to the effects of nepenthe and nightmare.

Gerry didn't like the general languid air of the shop, but was determined to impress Zoë with his purchases. She rang him up herself and bundled the suncatchers, the marzipan bells, and the chicken-shaped potholders in fine white rice paper that smelled of milk and cinnamon, like rich pudding without the raisins. Even though she had swindled him out of twenty dollars with her rubbish he continued to feel overwhelmingly tender toward her. He opened a bundle that he had brought in the pocket of his overcoat and produced a worn toy that had been saved from his childhood. It was a plush animal, a yellow and black tiger. Its face had been re-embroidered several times, and not always with skillful hands. The whiskers looked like a mustache.

"This is for you, my Gloriana of the discarded."

He handed the little tiger to Zoë, who took it eagerly. She knew—after all—that Gerry worshipped her.

"Woe to women who accept gifts from men," Zodiac said petulantly, in what may or may not have been an affected Dutch accent. She was wearing a flimsy pair of earrings crafted by Zoë that looked like cocktail olives and were made out of clear red and cadmium-green plastic sheeting.

"I didn't see you have any hesitation about taking that

quart of partridgeberry jam from the street minstrel we met in Seattle.”

“He was all the way from Cape Breton. Cute, too. Anyway, it was lingonberry.”

“Same thing.”

“Is not.”

“Next thing you’ll be telling me that *Rubus idaeus* and *Rubus leucodermis* are the same.”

“Don’t start with the Latin names. You know I don’t know the Latin names. I still have trouble with English. Not to mention my eyesight.”

“Eyesight, eyebright. It’s the late hours you keep.”

Zoë encouraged the midwives to go to bed and awakened one of the cashiers—by means of a cup of cambric made with almond milk and honey—so that she could take care of the customer from West Texas. Putting on her soft, red felted-wool coat, Zoë invited Gerry to sit on a bench just outside the door where they would have a little privacy. A cache of very stubborn falling stars greeted them as they ventured into the cold, sodden night air.

Zoë was still a little miffed.

“If you use a word like ‘sage’ without knowing the Latin name it could mean *Leucophyllum*, or *Salvia*, or *Artemisia*. As a medicine woman, Zodiac should know better. The Latin names are so easy, and they’re poetic, too. *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, *Hedera helix*, *Thuja occidentalis*.”

Taking his seat beside her, Gerry asked, “So how’s it going with you?”

“We, my guests and I, made jam from the grapes and strawberries that we grew last year, and Winter bakes honey bread, and we buy fresh fruit at the Farmer’s Market. Altogether, I’d say we survive. The girls get cell phones from their work ’cause they’re on call so much. They have to buy their own scrubs, but I make most of the rest of our clothes. This coat was a gift from my mommy.”

Zoë had lived with her “mommy” and two sisters until she was twenty-five. She had a sign on her bedroom at her mother’s house that said, “Zoë’s Room.” Facing an immense cottonwood that presented a true spectacle, even in the dark, and a little worried that her cashier may have fallen back to sleep, she seemed somewhat distracted, less impressed with Gerry’s loyalty to her—despite her considerable idiosyncrasies—than he might have expected.

“Quite pastoral,” he said, both impressed and slightly annoyed. He noticed that someone had painted a picture of an owl eating a human placenta on the sign for Zoë’s store, a crude set of lines with something of a totem or familiar in its look.

Spring had arrived rather abruptly after a hard winter and the almond trees were blooming in the front yard of the modest little house. A peach tree had also flowered, and ground cherry bushes were putting forth a few blossoms that were white-pink in the frothy moonlight. Gerry imagined that the grapevines in the back yard were producing freshly unfolded leaves, pixie handprints; wet and shiny like red and green skin. The Carolina jasmine covering the windows was bursting with yellow trumpet flowers.

Gerry took Zoë’s hand and held it to his heart. It was warm and limp.

“I hope you’re not going to tell me that you all go swimming in the canals during the summer...”

“I’ll swim wherever I want. And I’m not telling you any of this to impress you,” she said. “You asked how things were going with me. I’m making lots of money off my work, too, if you really must know.”

“You should get some chickens or ducks. You know, for the eggs. You could build them nests.”

“I’d rather die than eat an egg. It’s monstrous, really.”

“I suppose it is. Vitelline villainy.”

“No, really. Don’t joke about that sort of thing.”

Gerry remembered that the egg was a symbol for the universe in many religions. He actually suspected that Zoë ate nothing but dried roots from a plain earthenware bowl; roots that smelled of mice and looked like scorched sticks. She was barefoot when he met her, and her bare feet and the hem of her dress were stained with red mud as she wandered by a little spring that had risen out of the limestone and clay in an abandoned field near her store. It was evening, and supple gold tones shimmered along the flat horizon under an atmosphere of fire. The sweet, clear, grass-choked waters of the spring reflected the blood-and-gilded sky, as they spread out to a spot where someone had built a rough wall of pale pink untrimmed limestone without mortar or wash. It was child's play, really, just a pile of small, flat stones, but it held the waters at bay. A family of plump, brown quail and sinuous wild turkey waded and drank with their implausible beaks in the wind-whipped, shallow pools surrounded by cypresses, trees greedy for water, their foliage slowly changing to shadowy olive and liver and indigo in the sad, serene twilight.

Sad, serene, to the man who stood alone at the marsh's edge, unnoticed by birds and dragonflies, a man as still as the dying air, as the auric dust passing through a sieve. He remembered playing there as a child, before the suburbs encroached on it. The blue of ragged salt cedars against the pink stone wall touched him deeply. A cold wind was blowing, and the winter-fat bushes and clumps of tall dried grass moved gracefully, tolerantly, under its force. The landscape seemed alive, as did the sky, which was turning from sunset colors to dark gray.

Nearby, Zoë was walking with purpose, singing to herself and digging for roots in the wet soil with her hands. Her song was as beautiful as her laugh was unsettling. She wore a buttermilk ramie/blend scarf that fluttered in the wind like a pennant. Her scarf was the source of base jealousy on the part of her guests, especially when it made a satisfying scratchy

sound.

The year was ending, and it was too cold for anyone to be walking with bare, muddy feet at twilight. Gerry remembered the lines from Shelley about winter, “such as when the birds die.” He called to her, and she looked at him with startled green eyes. Setting down the willow basket full of roots that she carried on one arm, she placed her hands on her hips and asked him what he wanted.

“Where are your shoes?” he asked.

“Where are your feet?” she answered.

She continued to let him hold her hand as they sat together outside her shop.

“How are things going with us?” he asked.

“What can I say? I’m always happy to see you. Your hand feels like electrical current. My lips wouldn’t mind some current.”

They kissed passionately for a while under the stars that glistened like upside-down fish and a low moon wrapped in a luminous caul. The hipster redneck passed them on his way out of the store and hissed under his breath. Zoë ended the wet kissing by bursting into contented laughter. It seemed to Gerry that she had grown even taller than usual and that her hair was getting longer.

“I would love it if you would do a drawing of us kissing,” Gerry confessed to Zoë.

“Wouldn’t a self-portrait be enough?”

“Of course, but with a drawing of us kissing I could be sure that there would be no goings on behind my back.”

“What if there was? You don’t own me.”

“No. But I think I’m in love with you.”

“You’re a little young for me.”

“We’re practically the same age.”

“I’m just enough older that I wouldn’t let you doll me up and make me your little maid. Believe it.”

He put his hand on her leg, which was covered by a long

skirt and green silk tights underneath the skirt.

A white parasol trapped in the upper branches of the cottonwood tree began to stir like a sick jellyfish. Gerry unconsciously stroked his fine, black beard, using the hand not occupied with Zoë's leg, and thought about a chapter in *Water People*, a book of roughly the same vintage as *The Turned-Into's*, called "Davy Jones' Larder." He recalled a colored lithoprint that was divided into two parts: one that depicted a coquelicot medusa swimming in a cool, calm tide, and the other a carefully-molded coquelicot gelatin sitting on a high pantry shelf.

The bench was actually an old porch swing and Zoë began to rock it back and forth with singular gravity.

"It's late. Do you mind if I sleep in your shop tonight?"

"What would my customers think? I'm not running an inn."

"You let your help sleep in the store."

"I let them take little naps. They're not asking for a slumber party. Here, rest your head on my breast for a little while."

She held him in her arms and sang *Brahms' Lullaby*. Her rich contralto was not dreamy or maternal but sensual and *accarezzévole*. Gerry thought of the crickets in *The Turned-Into's* playing the violin and cello.

One of the midwives was called to a birth and walked past without speaking, in a hurry to get to her car. Gerry was on the verge of falling asleep when a field owl in flecked silver down flew out of a chaste-tree and began pecking maliciously at his face. He tried to fight the animal off and it began using its talons as well. Somewhere a brushfire continued to burn and the air smelled conspicuously of fire. Zoë stroked the yellow and black plush tiger, and laughed cheerfully, rocking back and forth, continuing to sing and gesture to him with her long, lovely artisan's hands until well into the dawn. ♦