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Thomas M. March

Joy

All her hours were yellow sands,
Blown in foolish whorls and tassels;
Slipping warmly through her hands;
Patted into little castles.

Leave for her a red young rose,
Go your way, and save your pity;
She is happy, for she knows
That her dust is very pretty.

—Dorothy Parker, “Epitaph for a Darling Lady”

As Joy pulled her coat more tightly around her throat, she noticed again that it was the inside stitching that was less than quality. Inside the collar, just near the hem, the stitching had almost all unraveled. Only a few tight emergency stitches kept the hem line smooth, the edge seemingly crisp and unbroken, like the seashore seen from the pool behind the house.

She'd had to park on the roof of the parking garage because the only spaces left on the first two floors were reserved for compact cars or motorcycles or doctors. The snow was piled high in eight-foot mounds pushed together by the plows. Snow still fell on them, and some flew off in the wind. The wind blew the snow around her ears, and during the short walk to the elevator, larger bits, harder and frozen, flew into her face from the snow mounds.

They were like diamonds, she thought, those larger, harder bits. The snow mounds were large diamonds, unpolished and hard, gleaming dull in that awkward angle of sun. The wind wore them down, a hard, persistent wind that seemed to come from all directions at once.

The wind wore them down and blew perfect diamonds into one's face. She laughed at it. It was a silly, comforting thought, but she kept it, anyway.

As the elevator door closed, she could feel her face thawing, diamonds melting and rolling down her cheeks, and she licked at them when they reached the corners of her mouth, because there wasn't anyone watching. There was a poem about sand that she'd read on the beach, and it had come so unexpectedly as she turned the page that she had to laugh. How funny it had been to find a poem about

sand and sandcastles, just as one was lying there, watching small children at work in building them. She had laughed out loud, and the children had turned their faces, squinting at her, had shrugged their shoulders and turned around again after seeing her smiling, pointing to the page.

Patted into little castles. What had brought this to mind? Maybe it was the snow, plowed into giant castles. There was more of that poem. But what was the rest? Patted into little castles. It wouldn't come.

The warm air pushed through her coat at the throat, where there was an opening now that she'd relaxed her hands. She could feel half of her chest thawing. The other half wouldn't. It wasn't cold, though, not numb. What was it? Nothing. There wasn't a word for it. There was nothing to compare it to.

She had taken her coat off in the elevator, and by the time she approached the receptionist's desk, it was folded perfectly in half over her arm.

The nurse looked at her sweater and then her face and smiled a thin, wintry smile. Her lips were blue. Maybe she was just tired, or had just been outside herself.

The doctor was running late. She could have a seat.

The receptionist watched as she walked away. Joy knew it because she couldn't hear papers rustling until she turned around again to sit down.

She continued to thaw. The cushions were thin and didn't offer much support. They weren't designed to be sat in for very long. Her hands were still cold. She watched them in her lap, opening and closing. One opened wide, but the other wouldn't quite. It was white, and the other was pink.

But the fingernails were fine, more than fine. She had lacquered them half a dozen times with clear polish, and in this light you couldn't find a flaw.

The warm blood was pushing the last bit of cold from her cheeks. It was like vacation, like Florida and the beach in the late afternoon, cross-legged under a wide, wide hat and sometimes titling back to let the sun fall in past the brim. (The time-share had only cost one hundred dollars a week.) The ocean came right to the back door, and the sand was so fine that the smallest steps kicked up clouds. It was best not to go into the water, anyway, because you kicked up less sand onto your legs. But she had been, she remembered, such a strong swimmer once.

It only took a touch of water on the toes, as she strolled along the line where the incoming waves disappeared into the sand.

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The water was brown when you were in it, but such a bright, beautiful blue from the lounge chair, even on overcast days. It really was prettier, in every way, to keep one's distance.

She would scoop sand absentmindedly as she read, holding the book open with one hand, a dead weight against the page, and sifting sand with the other, digging holes and filling them, all in one motion.

Patted into little castles.

She touched her face. It still felt cold against one hand, but warm against the other. She drew that hand away and was about to let it drop into her lap. There was the ring she got from the company when she retired, fourteen carat gold, and diamond chips set in the company logo. She'd meant to have it appraised, but that wasn't the important thing, was it? Forty-five years at the same company and not one bad report, that was what the diamonds said, and, saying it, they shone larger than chips.

She'd lost it all at the beach. It had managed to slide free from her sweaty fingers and fall into the powdery sand. From that height, she thought, it must have fallen half a foot into the ground. So it was a good thing she hadn't gone into the water. As soon as she'd noticed, her husband came over with the metal detector, and after half an hour or so of short beeps and long pauses, there it was, hardly buried at all, diamond chips catching the sun and none of them missing.

Yellow sands. . .through her hands. Patted into little castles. What was the rest of it? It just wouldn't come. She stared at her ring instead, at the diamond chips returning the fluorescent light.

The doctor's teeth had been so white, as white as his eyes. He shone at her as he spoke, his assurances rolling over her and smoothing her out again, crisp and even.

After that vacation, she had kept the ring in a drawer in the condo, alongside the watch they had given her husband. There were diamond chips in it, too, at 12, 3, 6 and 9, but not enough to form the company logo.

The doctor's watch looked heavier. But she couldn't remember how big the diamonds were at the four important stops. The whiteness of the lab coat against the deep green silk of his tie had been distracting. There was sure to be a chance to steal a glance at it later.

He'd said he didn't feel like it, that there was nothing wrong. And then she had felt lucky, and the diamonds in his watch were large enough to wink congratulations at her.

Joy

The waiting room was full. Had all of these old women dared to drive through the snow?

She lifted her feet from the floor and looked at her boots. They were black, and shiny where they were still wet. But at the edges they were grayer, streaked with white, dried salt.

She watched her feet fall softly back to the carpet.

The boots next to hers were shiny and dry. She must have been dropped off at the front door. She'd kept her coat on, green and soft-looking, and the boots disappeared under it. But her gloves were off, and her face was pink. There were only smooth hands and eyes that matched the coat.

Her gloves were folded neatly in her lap, like two separate hands. Her actual hands rested calmly on the armrests without squeezing or tapping. The fingers fell gently over the sides of the armrest, leaving one finger on top, and it wore a beautifully big emerald ring, surrounded by twelve tiny diamonds.

When Joy looked up again, she saw that the woman had noticed her staring.

She looked calmly at Joy, never lowering her gaze past the nose.

"You have a beautiful tan," she said.

Joy felt the heat come into her face again. "Oh," she said, touching her face with her hands, and they were both warm now, so she couldn't feel the burning of her fingers. "My husband and I were just on vacation. We went down to our time-share with some other couples we retired with."

"Really? Where?"

"In Florida, on the Atlantic side. It's so beautiful. Right on the beach, but there's a pool. I never did understand that."

"Well, of course. Some days you just don't want sand in your hair or salt on your skin."

"I suppose," Joy said, smiling. As she spoke, she polished the face of her ring with her thumb. Patted into little castles. Patted into little castles.

"I didn't mean to intrude. The reason I asked was that we just bought into a time-share, too, somewhere else. I thought it would be a funny story, our meeting like this, if we were neighbors." She lifted her hand from the armrest and put it on Joy's arm and just as quickly pulled it back again. Joy looked down and thought that it seemed never to have moved at all. "In fact, we're leaving next week for a month, which is another reason why I hope everything goes well here. I'm hoping to come home with a tan as nice as the

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one you've got." She smiled and twisted the ring around her finger a few times.

Joy couldn't stop watching the ring, disappearing behind the hand and then reappearing for a few seconds as she worked it around again. She tried not to look. It was rude, and it must have been obvious. Each time the woman blinked or looked away, Joy had time to look down quickly to watch the ring, like holding her breath at the poolside and imagining diving fast to the bottom to retrieve something, only to look up again almost instantly, to avoid being caught.

"Are you and your husband recently retired?"

"Yes. Just recently. Has this man been your doctor long? I'm sorry to change the subject. My last doctor was a bit cavalier about these things, surprisingly enough, since it is their job to worry for you, or at least to seem to."

"That's all right. Yes. He's a wonderful doctor. I've been coming to him for over a year, since before the trouble really started. I was worried but wrong at first. But when something did go wrong, I was glad I already knew him. And he wears the most beautiful ties."

"Hmm. Some people have said so. About being a wonderful doctor, that is. I'll have to judge his ties for myself. The last doctor had horrible taste in neckwear, come to think of it. Soothing pastels. They were supposed to put you at ease, I suppose."

"This one likes bold colors, sometimes a simple pattern. They're calming, too, in their way." They were the first thing you saw, and they were solid, predictable. They made sense and you could touch them and they would close around your hand, like the waves dove under the sand as they died.

The nurse stepped out and called a name that Joy didn't hear, and the woman stopped twisting the ring around her finger and gathered up her things. The ring looked as though it had never moved at all.

Joy pulled her sweater down very carefully over her hips. It was bunching up around her stomach. She picked up a magazine and thumbed through it, not reading but looking at the pictures. Advertisements were always sunny, always tropical, especially in Winter.

It wouldn't be impossible to take another vacation so soon. What was there to prevent it? There were discount cruises sometimes, even during the regular season.

The nurse opened the door. "Joy, Doctor will see you now." She smiled her blue-lipped smile.

Joy

As she followed the nurse down the hall, she kept her coat folded over her arm, only the outside showing.

The nurse wore white. Everything was white. The floor tiles must have been mopped three times a day, because the smell was white. Her hands began to tingle with cold again.

She heard a voice from behind one of the closed doors as she passed.

"Your tie is lovely, by the way. But I don't care if you do think it's nothing. I want the tests anyway."

Joy imagined the emerald flashing in punctuation.

"Better the tests now than difficulties later, don't you think?"

She heard some quiet mumbling, followed by the tearing of a sheet of paper.

And then the nurse closed the door. Joy sat on the exam table, on white butcher paper that crinkled as she moved to get more comfortable. It was the sound of her feet on the crushed shell path to the beach. And, remembering where she was, the sound faded, and into its place easily, naturally, rolled a picture of the doctor in his white lab coat, a swirl of rich color beaming between his lapels.

So when the door opened, she was smiling.

"How are you?" he said, smiling at her, looking only at her eyes. "Things have turned out very well, haven't they? You're a very lucky lady. But, then, I told you in the beginning not to worry, didn't I?" His eyes were sparkling at her.

Before he sat down, he had to move her coat, which she'd folded over his chair in the neatest way, nothing of the lining showing. He lifted it with one hand, and all of the folds fell out, leaving the hastily stitched inner hem exposed when he dropped it in a ball onto another chair.

She needed to smother to wince that came to her face. It was time, anyway, to lift the sweater over her head. She was cold again, and she forgot, for a moment, which half of her she should expect not to feel.

It had come! Part of it, at least. All her hours were yellow sands, patted into little castles. Oh, but there was no one to tell it to!

As Joy emerged from under her sweater, the doctor looked puzzled at the length of her smile.