

ONE HUNDRED
STROKES OF
THE BRUSH
BEFORE BED

Melissa P.



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6 July 2000

3:25 pm

Diary,

I'm writing in my shadowy room plastered with Gustav Klimt prints and posters of Marlene Dietrich. As she levels her languid, haughty gaze at me, I scribble across a white page that reflects the sunlight seeping through the chinks in the blinds.

It's hot, a dry, torrid heat. I hear the sound of the TV in the next room, and my sister's tiny voice reaches me as she harmonizes with the theme song of some cartoon. Outside a cricket screeches like there's no tomorrow, but inside a soft peacefulness has descended on the house. Everything seems safely enclosed in a bell jar of the most delicate glass, and the heat weighs down every movement. But inside *me* there's no peace. It's as if a mouse were gnawing away at my soul, so gently that it even seems sweet. I'm not ill, but I'm not quite well; what's worrying is that "I'm not". Still, I know how to find myself: all I need do is lift my eyes and fix them on the reflection in the mirror, and a soft, peaceful happiness will possess me.

I admire myself before the mirror, and I'm transported by the figure gradually emerging there, by the muscles that have assumed a firmer, more defined shape, by the breasts that are now noticeable beneath pullovers and bob gently at every step.

Ever since I was little, my mother has innocently wandered around the house nude, so I've grown accustomed to observing the female body, and a woman's figure is no mystery to me. Still, an impenetrable forest of hair hides the Secret and conceals it from sight. Often, with my image reflected in the mirror, I slip my finger inside, and as I look into my eyes, I'm filled with a feeling of love and admiration for myself. The pleasure of observing me is so intense and powerful that it immediately turns physical, starting with a twitch and ending with an unusual warmth and a shudder, which lasts a few moments. Then the embarrassment comes. Unlike Alessandra, I never fantasize when I touch myself. A while ago she confided to me that she too touches herself, and she said when she does it she likes to imagine she's being possessed by a man, hard, violently, as if she were going to be hurt. Gosh, I thought, and here I get excited simply by looking in the mirror. She asked me if I also touched myself, and my answer was no. I absolutely don't want to destroy this pillowed world I've constructed, a world of my own, whose only inhabitants are my body and the mirror. Answering yes would have been a betrayal.

The only thing that really makes me feel good is the image I behold and love; everything else is make-believe. My friendships are fake, born by chance and raised in mediocrity, utterly superficial. The kisses I timidly bestow on boys at my school are fake: as soon as I press my lips on theirs, I feel a kind of repulsion – and I bolt whenever I feel their clumsy tongues slipping into my mouth. This house is fake, so far removed from my current state of mind. I want every picture to be suddenly torn from the walls, a freezing, glacial cold to penetrate the windows, the howling of dogs to replace the crickets' song.

I want love, Diary. I want to feel my heart melt, want to see my icy stalactites shatter and plunge into a river of passion and beauty.

8 July 2000

8:30 pm

A commotion on the street. Laughter fills the stifling summer air. I imagine the eyes of my peers before they leave their homes: bright, animated, yearning for a fun night out. They'll spend it on the beach singing songs accompanied by a guitar. Some will wander off to spots cloaked in darkness to whisper infinite words into each other's ears. Others will swim tomorrow in a sea warmed by the dim morning sun, guardian of a maritime life that is yet unknown. They will live and learn how to lead their lives. OK, I'm breathing too, biologically I'm on track. But I'm afraid. I'm afraid of leaving the house and facing strange looks. I know, I live in perennial conflict with myself: there are days when hanging out with the others helps me, and I feel an urgent need for them. But there are also days when the only thing that satisfies me is to be alone, completely alone. Then I listlessly drive my cat from the bed, stretch out on my back, and think. I might even play some CDs, almost always classical music. I perk up with the music's help and don't need anything else.

But that racket outside is tearing me to pieces: I know that tonight they'll live more deeply than me. I shall remain inside this room, listening to the sounds of life, listening till sleep welcomes me into his embrace.

10 July 2000

10:30 am

You know what I think? I think starting a diary was the worst possible idea. I know what I'm about, I understand myself. In a few days I'll forget the key somewhere, or maybe I'll just decide

to stop writing, jealous of my thoughts. Or maybe (this isn't so implausible) my snoopy mother will pore over the pages, and then I'll feel stupid and break off my tale.

I really don't know if it's such a good thing to unburden myself. At least I'm distracted.

13 July morning

Diary,

I'm happy! Yesterday I went to a party with Alessandra, who looked very tall and thin on her spike heels, beautiful as ever, and as ever slightly rude in the way she talked and acted. But she was affectionate and sweet too. At first I didn't want to go, partly because parties bore me and partly because yesterday the heat was so stifling it stopped me from doing anything. But then she begged me to go with her, so I went along. We travelled by scooter and sang till we reached the suburb in the hills, now transformed by the scorching summer from green and lush to parched and shrivelled. The town of Nicolosi had gathered in the piazza for a huge festival, and the asphalt, cooled by the evening, was covered with booths selling candy and dried fruit. The little villa stood at the end of a narrow, unlit road. When we arrived at the gate, Alessandra started waving her hands and shouting, "Daniele, Daniele!"

He walked up very slowly and greeted her. He seemed rather handsome, though I couldn't make out much in the darkness. Alessandra introduced us, and he gave me a limp handshake. He murmured his name very softly, and I smiled, thinking he might be shy. At one point I distinctly saw a gleam in the darkness: his teeth were so white, so amazingly bright. I squeezed his hand harder and said "Melissa" a little too loudly. Maybe he didn't notice my teeth weren't as white as his, but

maybe he saw my eyes brighten and shine. Once we had gone inside, I noticed that in the light he seemed even more handsome. I walked behind him and saw the muscles ripple on his back with each step. At five foot two I felt very short beside him; I also felt ugly.

When we finally sat down on the armchairs in the living room, he was facing me, slowly sipping his beer and staring straight into my eyes. I was embarrassed by the spots on my forehead and by my complexion, which seemed much too fair compared to his.

His straight, well-shaped nose looked just like the ones on Greek statues, and the veins that stood out on his hands endowed them with an awesome strength. His huge dark blue eyes cast a proud, haughty gaze at me. He asked me a stream of questions while displaying utter indifference. Instead of discouraging me, it made me bolder.

He doesn't like to dance, nor do I. So we stayed by ourselves while the others got loose, drank, and joked.

A hush suddenly fell upon us, and I wanted to fix it.

"Beautiful house, isn't it?" I said, feigning self-confidence.

He just shrugged his shoulders. I didn't want to be pushy, so I remained silent.

The moment for intimate questions had arrived. When everybody was busy dancing, he moved even closer to my chair and started looking at me with a smile. I was surprised and charmed, expecting him to make some sort of move; we were alone, in the dark, and now quite favourably close to each other. It was then that he asked me, "Are you a virgin?"

I turned crimson and felt a lump in my throat as a thousand pins pricked my brain.

I answered a timid yes, which immediately made me turn away my eyes in order to quell my immense embarrassment. He bit his lip to repress a laugh and confined himself to a cough without uttering a single syllable. Inside me the reproaches were loud and harsh. "He'll never pay attention to

you again! Idiot!” But in the end what could I say? The truth is that I’m a virgin. I’ve never been touched by anyone but myself, and I’m proud of it. Still, the curiosity is there and it’s very strong, particularly a curiosity about the nude male body. I’ve always been prevented from getting to know it: when a nude scene comes on the TV, my father grabs the remote control and changes the channel. And when, just this summer, I stayed out all night with a boy from Firenze who was on holiday here, I didn’t dare put my hand on the same place where he had already put his.

Then there’s the desire to experience a pleasure produced by someone other than me, to feel his skin against mine. Finally there’s the privilege of being the first among girls my age to have a sexual relationship. Why did he ask me that question? I haven’t even thought about what my first time will be like, and I’ll probably never think about it. I want only to live it and, if I can, cherish a memory that forever remains beautiful, a memory that will keep me company at the saddest moments in my life. I’m thinking Daniele could be it – or so various things have led me to feel.

Last night we exchanged phone numbers and during the night, while I was sleeping, he sent me a text message. I read it this morning: “It was great to be with you, you’re very pretty, and I want to see you again. Come to my house tomorrow and we’ll go for a swim.”

7:10 pm

I’m perplexed and upset. The outcome I’d been unable to anticipate till a few hours ago was rather harsh, even if not entirely disgusting.

His vacation home is very beautiful, surrounded by a verdant garden and myriads of the freshest, most colourful flowers. The

sun's reflection shone in the blue swimming pool, and the water was so inviting you could just dive in. But today, of all days, I couldn't: my period stopped me. Under the weeping willow I watched the others diving and playing while I sat at a little bamboo table holding a glass of iced tea. Every so often he would glance in my direction and smile, and I would cheer up again. Then I saw him climb up the ladder and come toward me, the water slowly trickling down his glistening torso. He swept back his soaking hair and sprayed droplets all around.

"I'm sorry you can't have any fun," he said with a slightly ironic tone.

"No problem," I answered. "I'll just get some sun."

Without a word he took me by the hand as he grabbed the cold glass and set it down on the table.

"Where are we going?" I asked, laughing but a little worried.

He didn't answer. Instead he led me to a door at the top of a stair, lifted the mat, picked up a set of keys, and inserted one into the lock, watching me with a keen, crafty look as he did it.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked again with the same concealed worry as before.

Once more no answer, just a faint laugh. He opened the door, pulled me inside, and closed it behind me. The room was extremely hot and dimly lit by the glimmers that filtered through the shutters. He leaned me against the door and kissed me passionately, making me savour his lips, which tasted like strawberries and were nearly the same in colour. His hands were planted on the door, and the muscles on his back were taut. I could feel them hard beneath my hands while I caressed his back, running my fingers up and down just as the demons were running up and down my body. Then he took my face in his hands, broke away from my mouth, and asked me softly, "Would you like to do it?"

I bit my lip and answered no, because a thousand fears suddenly invaded me, faceless, abstract fears. The hands he had placed on my cheeks exerted more pressure, and with a force

he may have wanted – in vain – to translate into gentleness, he pushed me farther down, abruptly showing me the Unknown. I now had it before my eyes, it smelled male, and every vein that crossed it expressed such power that I felt duty-bound to reckon with it. It entered my lips presumptuously, washing away the strawberry taste that still impregnated them.

Then all of a sudden there was another surprise: my mouth filled with a hot, sour liquid, thick and plentiful. My sudden start at this new discovery gave him a slight twinge; he grabbed my head and pushed it toward him even more forcefully. I heard him panting, and there was a moment when I thought the warmth of his breath reached all the way down to me. I drank the liquid because I didn't know what else to do with it; my throat emitted a soft gurgle that embarrassed me. While I was still on my knees, I saw his hands drop. Thinking he wanted me to raise my face, I smiled. But he just pulled up his bathing suit, and I heard the noise of the elastic against his sweat-soaked skin. I then stood up on my own and looked him in the eyes, searching for some reassuring sign that might brighten me up.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked.

Still tasting the sour liquid, I answered yes, a glass of water. He left and returned a few seconds later with a glass in his hand. I was still leaning against the door, looking curiously around the room after he had switched on the light. I observed the silk curtains and the sculptures, as well as the various books and magazines scattered across the elegant sofas. An enormous aquarium projected its sparkling light on the walls. I heard noises coming from the kitchen. I felt neither worry nor shame, just a strange contentment. Only later did shame assail me, as he handed me the glass indifferently and I asked, “Is this really the way it's done?”

“Of course,” he answered with a derisive smile that displayed his beautiful teeth. Then I smiled and hugged him. While I was smelling the nape of his neck, I felt his hands behind me grasping the handle and opening the door.

“Let’s meet tomorrow,” he said, and after a kiss that was sweet for me, I went down to the others.

Alessandra looked at me and laughed. I flashed a smile that immediately disappeared as I lowered my head: my eyes filled with tears.

29 July 2000

Diary,

I’ve been going with Daniele for more than two weeks, and already I feel very close to him. It’s true that his behaviour towards me is somewhat rude, and never does a compliment or a kind word issue from his mouth: only indifference, insults, irritating laughter. And yet the way he acts makes me even more tenacious. I’m certain the passion I feel can make him all mine, and he’ll soon recognize it. During the hot, monotonous afternoons, I often find myself thinking of his taste, the freshness of his strawberry mouth, his muscles firm and rippling like massive fish. And almost always I touch myself, experiencing awesome orgasms, intense and brimming with fantasies. My passion is overwhelming, I feel it beating against my skin, wanting to get out, to unleash all its potency. I have a crazed desire to make love, I’d do it right now, I’d keep at it for days on end, till my passion is completely out, finally free. I know intuitively I shall never be sated anyway; after a short while I shall reabsorb what I have dissipated only to surrender it anew, in a never-ending cycle, always the same, always exciting.

1 August 2000

He told me I'm not capable of doing it, I'm not passionate enough. He said it with his usual mocking smile, and I left in tears, humiliated by his response. We were lying on the hammock in the garden, his head resting on my legs as I gently caressed his hair and gazed at his eyelashes, quite thick for an eighteen-year-old's. I ran a finger across his lips, wetting the tip a little. He awoke and shot me an inquiring look.

"I want to make love, Daniele," I blurted out. My cheeks were flaming.

He laughed so loudly he lost his breath.

"Give me a break, babe – what is it you want to do? You're not even capable of sucking me off!"

I looked at him, perplexed, humiliated, I wanted to sink into his well-manicured garden and rot beneath it while his feet trod on me for eternity. I fled, screaming "Asshole" and violently slamming the gate. I started the scooter and took off, my soul in ruins, my pride crushed.

Is it so hard, Diary, to let yourself be loved? I didn't think it was necessary to drink his potion in order to secure his affection; I thought I had to yield myself completely to him, but now that I'm about to do it, now that I desire it, he mocks me and drives me away. What can I do? Might as well forget about revealing my love to him. I can still prove I'm capable of doing what he doesn't expect. I'm very stubborn; I'll get my way.

3 December 2000

10:50 pm

Today's my birthday, my fifteenth. Outside it's cold, and this

Lenora Todaro reviews book *100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* by Melissa P (Melissa Panarello), translated by Lawrence Venuti (M). And that's just a partial list of the varieties of sexual experience that unfold over the course of two years in one teenager's life. "100 Strokes of the Brush Before Bed," written by the author when she was 16, is an autobiographical novel of sexual initiation in a small Sicilian city. It is composed in diary form -- a teen scream disguised as an erotic fairy tale. The book has sold some 850,000 copies in Italy and is being published in 24 languages. (The P is for Panarello; she revealed her last name when she turned 18, after working out a compromise with her mortified pa

One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed is a coming of age memoir about Melissa, a young sexually ravenous girl growing up in Italy. At the age of 14, she decides that she no longer wants to be a virgin and that she will share her body freely to anyone who asks. This takes her through a wildly experimental phase that involves a great deal of sex. When she was ready to publish it, her mother threw it into the trash. It was hyped as a very powerful piece of transgressive fiction and somewhat "Then I brushed my hair a hundred times, as princesses do, my mother always says." The next entry begins with broad irony: her mother asks, "Did you have fun last night?" She suspects her daughter of smoking pot, but Melissa just feels "empty." The question of self-love is raised again, and she distinguishes between the girl who did not love herself last night and the girl who does this morning. The next several entries switch between three different narrative threads, sexual relationships that begin on the internet. Melissa meets a lesbian called Letizia, who intrigues her.