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The Currency of Love

by Barys Paulau

The question came at the end, when the lights were already too hot and the microphone had begun to feel like an instrument of confession rather than a broadcast.

What is it like to be a dependent woman?

Diana held the pause the way you hold a glass you're not sure you want to drink from. The interviewer—young, earnest, his ambition wearing the mask of curiosity—waited with the patience of a man who believes he has asked something profound.

She could have said many things. She could have invoked the centuries, the structural math of professions, the statistical certainty that a woman's labor is discounted before it even begins. She could have pointed out that his question revealed more about him than about her—the assumption that money is the only currency worth measuring, that dependence is a state of lack rather than a condition of life.

Instead, she said: "We are all dependent. On air, on grace, on the accident of being born into bodies that will fail us. The question is not whether. The question is on what."

Afterward, she wrote an essay for her own publication. The title was wrong—she knew it even as she typed it—but titles are like doors: you choose one and walk through, even if the frame is crooked.

If I am dependent, I exist.

She tried to say what she meant: that the cult of independence is a myth sold to women by women who have already won the lottery of circumstance. That a child is dependence made flesh. That love—real love—is the voluntary surrender of self-sufficiency.

The essay was too careful. It hedged. It apologized for its own existence. She wrote around the truth instead of into it.

The truth was this: she had loved a man who was married. She had loved him knowing the geometry of it—the angles that would have to break. She had loved him anyway, and when he chose her, she did not ask whether it was feminism or foolishness. She asked whether it was true.

Now he commutes between New York and Paris. He is a financier. He makes more money than she does. This is not a scandal. This is a fact, like gravity or the price of butter.

The scandal, apparently, is that she is not ashamed.

The scandal is that she wakes up in a city she loves, with a child she chose to have, in an apartment that is not hers alone, and feels—not gratitude, exactly—but something stranger: a sense that this is what it means to be alive. To hold someone's life in your hands and trust that they will hold yours in return.

Her daughter is three. She does not yet ask about money. She asks about light: why it comes and goes, why it changes color, why the sun seems to follow her even when she hides.

Diana watches her and thinks: This is dependence. This is the original contract. The one that cannot be negotiated, only honored.

The essay needed a sharper knife. It needed to say that dependence is not the opposite of freedom. The opposite of freedom is fear. And fear is what happens when you believe that everyone is a transaction waiting to happen.

She wanted to tell them—I was not safe before. I was never safe. The only thing that changed was that I stopped pretending otherwise.

But that was too honest for a public essay. Honesty like that belongs to lovers and children and the dark.

When she reads the comments—the inevitable swarm of women telling her she has betrayed the cause—she thinks of a line from a book she read in college, something about how the only real question is what you are willing to pay for, and that love, if it is love, is always paid for in a currency that has no exchange rate.

She pours herself a glass of wine. She looks out at the Paris sky. Somewhere over the Atlantic, her husband is on an airplane, coming home.

She does not wonder if she is dependent. She knows she is. On his love. On the child's breath. On the fragile machinery of a life that could end at any moment.

The question is not what it is like.

The question is what else would you choose?

She never publishes a retraction. But she remembers the pause before the answer—the way the silence held her as water holds a swimmer.

She was not afraid.

That was the answer she should have given.

Dependent. Yes. But free.

Free. Yes. But never alone.