

# Medusa's Ankles

*By A.S.Byatt*

SHE HAD walked in one day because she had seen the Rosy Nude through the plate glass. That was odd, she thought, to have that lavish and complex creature stretched voluptuously above the coat rack, where one might have expected the stare, silver and supercilious or jetty and frenzied, of the model girl. They were all girls now, not women. The rosy nude was pure flat colour, but suggested mass. She had huge haunches and a monumental knee, lazily propped high. She had round breasts, contemplations of the circle, reflections on flesh and its fall.

She had asked cautiously for a cut and blow-dry. He had done her himself; the owner, Lucian of 'Lucian's', slender and soft-moving, resembling a balletic Hamlet with full white sleeves and tight black trousers. The first few times she came it was the trousers she remembered, better than his face, which she saw only in the mirror behind her own, and which she felt a middle-aged disinclination to study. A woman's relation with her hairdresser is anatomically odd. Her face meets his belt, his haunches skim her breathing, his face is far away, high and behind. His face had a closed and monkish look, rather fine, she thought, under soft, straight, dark hair, bright with health, not with added fats, or so it seemed.

'I like your Matisse,' she said, the first time.

He looked blank.

'The pink nude. I love her.'

'Oh, that. I saw it in a shop. I thought it went exactly with the colour-scheme I was planning.'

Their eyes met in the mirror.

'I thought she was wonderful,' he said. 'So calm, so damn sure of herself, such a lovely colour, I do think, don't you? I fell for her, absolutely. I saw her in this shop in the Charing Cross Road and I went home, and said to my wife, I might think of placing her in the salon, and she thought nothing to it, but the next day I went back and just got her. She gives the salon a bit of class. I like things to have class.'

In those days the salon was like the interior of a rosy cloud, all pinks and creams, with creamy muslin curtains here and there, and ivory brushes and combs, and here

and there - the mirror-frames, the little trolleys - a kind of sky blue, a dark sky blue, the colour of the couch or bed on which the rosy nude spread herself. Music played - Susannah hated piped music - but this music was tinkling and tripping and dropping, quiet seraglio music, like sherbet. He gave her coffee in pink cups, with a pink and white wafer biscuit in the saucer. He soothed her middle-aged hair into a cunningly blown and natural windswept sweep, with escaping strands and tendrils, softening brow and chin. She remembered the hairdressing shop of her wartime childhood, with its boarded wooden cubicles, its advertisements for Amami shampoo, depicting ladies with blonde pageboys and red lips, in the Forties bow which was wider than the Thirties rosebud. Amami, she had always supposed, rhymed with smarmy and was somehow related to it. When she became a linguist, and could decline the verb to love in several languages, she saw suddenly one day that Amami was an erotic invitation, or command. Amami, love me, the blondes said, under their impeccably massed rolls of hair. Her mother had gone draggled under the chipped dome of the hairdryer, bristling with metal rollers, bobby-pins and pipe-cleaners. And had come out under a rigidly bouncy 'set', like a mountain of wax fruit, that made her seem artificial and embarrassing, drawing attention somehow to the unnatural whiteness of her false teeth.

They had seemed like some kind of electrically shocking initiation into womanhood, those clamped domes descending and engulfing. She remembered her own first 'set', the heat and buzzing, and afterwards a slight torn tenderness of the scalp, a slight tindery dryness to the hair. In the Sixties and Seventies she had kept a natural look, had grown her hair long and straight and heavy, a chestnut-glossy curtain, had avoided places like this. And in the years of her avoidance, the cubicles had gone, everything was open and shared and above board, blow-dryers had replaced the hoods, plastic spikes the bristles.

She had had to come back because her hair began to grow old. The ends split, the weight of it broke, a kind of frizzed fur replaced the gloss. Lucian said that curls and waves - following the lines of the new unevenness - would dissimulate, would render natural-looking, that was, young, what was indeed natural, the death of the cells. Short and bouncy was best, Lucian said, and proved it, tactfully. He stood above her with his fine hands cupped lightly round her new bubbles and wisps, like the hands of a priest round a Grail. She looked, quickly, quickly, it was better than before, thanked him and averted her eyes.

She came to trust him with her disintegration.

HE WAS always late to their appointment, to all appointments. The salon was full of whisking young things, male and female, and he stopped to speak to all of them, to all the patient sitters, with their questing, mirror-bound stares. The telephone rang

perpetually. She sat on a rosy foamy pouffe and read in a glossy magazine, *Her Hair*, an article at once solemnly portentous and remorselessly jokey (such tones are common) about the hairdresser as the new healer, with his cure of souls. Once, the magazine informed her, the barber had been the local surgeon, had drawn teeth, set bones and dealt with female problems. Now in the rush of modern alienated life, the hairdresser performed the all-important function of listening. He elicited the tale of your troubles and calmed you.

Lucian did not. He had another way. He created his own psychiatrist and guru from his captive hearer. Or at least, so Susannah found, who may have been specially selected because she was plump, which could be read as motherly, and because, as a university teacher she was, as he detected, herself a professional listener. He asked her advice.

'I don't see myself shut in here for the next twenty years. I want more out of life. Life has to have a meaning. I tried Tantric Art and the School of Meditation. Do you know about that sort of thing, about the inner life?'

His fingers flicked and flicked in her hair, he compressed a ridge and scythed it.

'Not really. I'm an agnostic.'

'I'd like to know about art. You know about art. You know about that pink nude, don't you? How do I find out?'

She told him to read Lawrence Gowing, and he clamped the tress he was attending to, put down his scissors, and wrote it all down in a little dove-grey leather book. She told him where to find good extra-mural classes and who was good among the gallery lecturers.

Next time it was not art, it was archaeology. There was no evidence that he had gone to the galleries or read the books.

'The past pulls you,' he said. 'Bones in the ground and gold coins in a hoard, all that. I went down to the City and saw them digging up the Mithraic temples. There's a religion, all that bull's blood, dark and light, fascinating.'

She wished he would tidy her head and be quiet. She could recognise the flitting mind, she considered. It frightened her. What she knew, what she cared about, what was coherent, was separate shards for him to flit over, remaining separate. You wrote books and gave lectures, and these little ribbons of fact shone briefly and vanished.

'I don't want to put the best years of my life into making suburban old dears presentable,' he said. 'I want something more.'

'What?' she said, meeting his brooding stare above the wet mat of her mop. He puffed foam into it and said, 'Beauty, I want beauty. I must have beauty. I want to sail on a yacht among the Greek isles, with beautiful people.' He caught her eye. 'And see those temples and those sculptures.' He pressed close, he pushed at the nape of her neck, her nose was near his discreet zip.

'You've been washing it without conditioner,' he said. 'You aren't doing yourself any good. I can tell.'

She bent her head submissively, and he scraped the base of her skull.

'You could have highlights,' he said in a tone of no enthusiasm. 'Bronze or mixed autumnal.'

'No thanks. I prefer it natural.'

He sighed.

HE BEGAN to tell her about his love life. She would have inclined, on the evidence before her eyes, to the view that he was homosexual. The salon was full of beautiful young men, who came, wielded the scissors briefly, giggled together in corners, and departed. Chinese, Indonesian, Glaswegian, South African. He shouted at them and giggled with them, they exchanged little gifts and paid off obscure little debts to each other. Once she came in late and found them sitting in a circle, playing poker. The girls were subordinate and brightly hopeless. None of them lasted long. They wore - in those days - pink overalls with cream silk bindings. She could tell he had a love life because of the amount of time he spent alternately pleasing and blustering on the telephone, his voice a blotting-paper hiss, his words inaudible, though she could hear the peppery rattle of the other voice, or voices, in the ear-piece. Her sessions began to take a long time, what with these phone calls and with his lengthy explanations,

which he would accompany with gestures, making her look at his mirrored excitement, like a boy riding a bicycle with hands off.

'Forgive me if I'm a bit distracted,' he said. 'My life is in crisis. Something I never believed could happen has happened. All my life I've been looking for something and now I've found it.'

He wiped suds casually from her wet brow and scraped her eye-corner. She blinked.

'Love,' he said. 'Total affinity. Absolute compatibility. A miracle. My other half. A perfectly beautiful girl.'

She could think of no sentence to answer this. She said, schoolmistressy, what other tone was there? 'And this has caused the crisis?'

'She loves me, I couldn't believe it but it is true. She loves me. She wants me to live with her.'

'And your wife?'

There was a wife, who had thought nothing to the purchase of the Rosy Nude.

'She told me to get out of the house. So I got out. I went to her flat - my girlfriend's. She came and fetched me back - my wife. She said I must choose, but she thinks I'll choose her. I said it would be better for the moment just to let it evolve. I told her how do I know what I want, in this state of ecstasy, how do I know it'll last, how do I know she'll go on loving me?'

He frowned impatiently and waved the scissors dangerously near her temples.

'All she cares about is respectability. She says she loves me but all she cares about is what the neighbours say. I like my house, though. She keeps it nice, I have to say. It's not stylish, but it is in good taste.'

Over the next few months, maybe a year, the story evolved, in bumps and jerks, not, it must be said, with any satisfactory narrative shape. He was a very bad storyteller, Susannah realised slowly. None of the characters acquired any roundness. She formed no image of the nature of the beauty of the girlfriend, or of the way she spent her time when not demonstrating her total affinity for Lucian. She did not know whether the wife was a shrew or a sufferer, nervous or patient or even ironically detached. All these wraith-personae were inventions of Susannah's own. About six months through the narrative Lucian said that his daughter was very upset about it all, the way he was forced to come and go, sometimes living at home, sometimes shut out.

'You have a daughter?'

'Fifteen. No, seventeen, I always get ages wrong']'

She watched him touch his own gleaming hair in the mirror, and smile apprehensively at himself.

'We were married very young,' he said. 'Very young, before we knew what was what.'

'It's hard on young girls, when there are disputes at home.'

'It is. It's hard on everyone. She says if I sell the house she'll have nowhere to live while she takes her exams. I have to sell the house if I'm to afford to keep up my half of my girlfriend's flat. I can't keep up the mortgages on both. My wife doesn't want to move. It's understandable, I suppose, but she has to see we can't go on like this. I can't be torn apart like this, I've got to decide.'

'You seem to have decided for your girlfriend.'

He took a deep breath and put down everything, comb, scissors, hairdryer.

'Ah, but I'm scared. I'm scared stiff if I take the plunge, I'll be left with nothing. If she's got me all the time, my girlfriend, perhaps she won't go on loving me like this. And I like my house, you know, it feels sort of comfortable, I'm used to it, all the old chairs. I don't quite like to think of it all sold and gone.'

'Love isn't easy.'

'You can say that again.'

'Do you think I'm getting thinner on top?'

'What? Oh no, not really, I wouldn't worry. We'll just train this little bit to fall across there like that. Do you think she has a right to more than half the value of the house?'

'I'm not a lawyer. I'm a classicist.'

'We're going on that Greek holiday. Me and my girlfriend. Sailing through the Greek Isles. I've bought scuba gear. The salon will be closed for a month.'

'I'm glad you told me.'

WHILE he was away the salon was redecorated. He had not told her about this, also, as indeed, why should he have done? It was done very fashionably in the latest colours, battleship-grey and maroon. Dried blood and instruments of slaughter, Susannah thought on her return. The colour scheme was one she particularly disliked. Everything was changed. The blue trolleys had been replaced with hi-tech steely ones, the ceiling lowered, the faintly aquarial plate glass was replaced with storm-grey-one-way-see-through-no-glare which made even bright days dull ones. The music was now muted heavy metal. The young men and young women wore dark grey Japanese wrappers and what she thought of as the patients, which included herself, wore identical maroon ones. Her face in the mirror was grey, had lost the deceptive rosy haze of the earlier lighting.

The Rosy Nude was taken down. In her place were photographs of girls with grey faces, coal-black eyes and spiky lashes, under bonfires of incandescent puce hair which matched their lips, rounded to suck, at microphones perhaps, or other things. The new teacups were black and hexagonal. The pink flowery biscuits were replaced by sugar-coated minty elliptical sweets, black and white like Go counters. She thought after the first shock of this, that she would go elsewhere. But she was afraid of being made, accidentally, by anyone else, to look a fool. He understood her hair, Lucian, she told herself. It needed understanding, these days, it was not much any more, its life was fading from it.

'Did you have a good holiday?'

'Oh idyllic. Oh yes, a dream. I wish I hadn't come back. She's been to a solicitor. Claiming the matrimonial home for all the work she's done on it, and because of my daughter. I say, what about when she grows up, she'll get a job, won't she? You can't assume she'll hang around mummy forever, they don't'

'I need to look particularly good this time. I've won a prize. A Translator's Medal. I have to make a speech. On television.'

'We'll have to make you look lovely, won't we? For the honour of the salon. How do you like our new look?'

'It's very smart.'

'It is. It is. I'm not quite satisfied with the photos, though. I thought we could get something more intriguing. It has to be photos to go with the grey.'

He worked above her head. He lifted her wet hair with his fingers and let the air run through it, as though there was twice as much as there was. He pulled a twist this way, and clamped it to her head, and screwed another that way, and put his head on one side and another, contemplating her uninspiring bust. When her head involuntarily followed his he said quite nastily, 'Keep still, can you, I can't work if you keep bending from side to side like a swan.'

'I'm sorry.'

'No harm done, just keep still.'

She kept still as a mouse, her head bowed under his repressing palm. She turned up her eyes and saw him look at his watch, then, with a kind of balletic movement of wrists, scissors and finger-points above her brow, drive the sharp steel into the ball of his thumb, so that blood spurted, so that some of his blood even fell on to her scalp.

'Oh dear. Will you excuse me? I've cut myself. Look.'



He waved the bloody member before her nose.

'I saw,' she said. 'I saw you cut yourself.'

He smiled at her in the mirror, a glittery smile, not meeting her eyes.

'It's a little trick we hairdressers have. When we've been driving ourselves and haven't had time for a bite or a breather, we get cut, and off we go, to the toilet, to take a bit of Mars Bar or a cheese roll if the receptionist's been considerate. Will you excuse me? I am faint for lack of food.'

'Of course,' she said.

He flashed his glass smile at her and slid away.

She waited. A little water dripped into her collar. A little more ran into her eyebrows. She looked at her poor face, under its dank cap and its two random corkscrews, aluminium clamped. She felt a gentle protective rage towards this stolid face. She remembered, not as a girl, as a young woman under all that chestnut fall, looking at her skin, and wondering how it could grow into the crepe, the sag, the opulent soft bags. This was her face, she had thought then. And this, too, now, she wanted to accept for her face, trained in a respect for precision, and could not. What had left this greying skin, these flakes, these fragile stretches with no elasticity, was her, was her life, was herself. She had never been a beautiful woman, but she had been attractive, with the attraction of liveliness and warm energy, of the flow of quick blood and brightness of eye. No classic bones, which might endure, no fragile bird-like sharpness that might whitely go forward. Only the life of flesh, which began to die.

She was in a panic of fear about the television, which had come too late, when she had lost the desire to be seen or looked at. The cameras search jowl and eye-pocket, expose brush-stroke and cracks in shadow and gloss. So interesting are their revelations that words, mere words, go for nothing, fly by whilst the memory of a chipped tooth, a strayed red dot, an inappropriate hair, persists and persists.

IF HE had not left her so long to contemplate her wet face, it might not have happened.

On either side of her mysteries were being enacted. On the left, a head was crammed into a pink nylon bag, something between a bank-robber's stocking and a monstrous Dutch cap. A young Chinese man was peacefully teasing threads of hair through the meshes of this with a tug and a flick, a tug and a flick. The effect was one of startling hideous pink baldness, tufted here and there. On her right, an anxious plump girl was rolling another girl's thick locks into snaky sausages of aluminium foil. There was a thrum of distant drums through the loudspeakers, a clash and crash of what sounded like shaken chains. It is all nonsense, she thought, I should go home, I can't, I am wet. They stared transfixed at their respective ugliness.

He came back, and took up the scissors, listlessly enough.

'How much did you want off?' he said casually. 'You've got a lot of broken ends. It's deteriorating, you haven't fed it while I've been away.'

'Not too much off, I want to look natural, I . . .'

'I've been talking to my girlfriend. I've decided. I shan't go back any more to my wife. I can't bear it.'

'She's too angry?'

'She's let herself go. It's her own fault. She's let herself go altogether. She's let her ankles get fat, they swell over her shoes, it disgusts me, it's impossible for me.'

'That happens to people. Fluid absorption . . .'

She did not look down at her own ankles. He had her by the short hairs at the nape of her neck.

'Lucian,' said the plump girl, plaintively, 'can you just take a look here at this perm, I can't seem to get the hang of this.'

'You'd better be careful,' said Lucian, 'or Madam'll go green and fry and you'll be in deep trouble. Why don't you just come and finish off Madam here - you don't mind, do you dear? Deirdre is very good with your sort of hair, very tactful, I'm training

her myself - I'd better take a look at this perm. It's a new method we're just trying out, we've had a few problems, you see how it is . . .'

Deirdre was an elicitor, but Susannah would not speak. Vaguely, far away, she heard the anxious little voice. 'Do you have children, dear, have you far to go home, how formal do you like it, do you want back-combing? . . . ' Susannah stared stony, thinking about Lucian's wife's ankles. Because her own ankles rubbed her shoes, her sympathies had to be with this unknown and ill-presented woman. She remembered with sudden total clarity a day when, Suzie then, not Susannah, she had made love all day to an Italian student on a course in Perugia. She remembered her own little round rosy breasts, her own long legs stretched over the side of the single bed, the hot, the wet, his shoulders, the clash of skulls as they tried to mix themselves completely. They had reached a point when neither of them could move, they had loved each other so much, they had tried to get up to get water, for they were dying of thirst, they were soaked with sweat and dry-mouthed, and they collapsed back upon the bed, naked skin on naked skin, unable to rise. What was this to anyone now? Rage rose in her, for the fat-ankled woman, like a red flood, up from her thighs across her chest, up her neck, it must flare like a flag in her face, but how to tell in this daft cruel grey light? Deirdre was rolling up curls, piling them up, who would have thought the old woman had so much hair on her head? Sausages and snail-shells, grape- clusters and twining coils. She could only see dimly, for the red flood was like a curtain at the back of her eyes, but she knew what she saw. The Japanese say demons of another world approach us through mirrors as fish rise through water, and, bubble-eyed and trailing fins, a fat demon swam towards her, turret-crowned, snake-crowned, her mother fresh from the dryer in all her embarrassing irreality.

'There,' said Deirdre. 'That's nice. I'll just get a mirror.'

'It isn't nice,' said Susannah. 'It's hideous.'

There was a hush in the salon. Deirdre turned a terrified gaze on Lucian.

'She did it better than I do, dear,' he said. 'She gave it a bit of lift. That's what they all want, these days. I think you look really nice.'

'It's horrible,' said Susannah. 'I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do.'

She could see them all looking at each other, sharing the knowledge that this was exactly what she was.

'Not natural,' she said.

'I'll get Deirdre to tone it down,' said Lucian.

Susannah picked up a bottle, full of gel. She brought it down, heavily, on the grey glass shelf, which cracked.

'I don't want it toned down, I want,' she began, and stared mesmerised at the crack, which was smeared with gel.

'I want my real hair back,' Susannah cried, and thumped harder, shattering both shelf and bottle.

'Now dear, I'm sorry,' said Lucian in a tone of sweet reason. She could see several of him, advancing on her; he was standing in a corner and was reflected from wall to wall, a cohort of slender, trousered swordsmen, waving the bright scissors like weapons.

'Keep away,' she said. 'Get off. Keep back.'

'Calm yourself,' said Lucian.

Susannah seized a small cylindrical pot and threw it at one of his emanations. It burst with a satisfying crash and one whole mirror became a spider-web of cracks, from which fell, tinkling, a little heap of crystal nuggets. In front of Susannah was a whole row of such bombs or grenades. She lobbed them all around her. Some of the cracks made a kind of strained singing noise, some were explosive. She whirled a container of hairpins about her head and scattered it like a nailbomb. She tore dryers from their sockets and sprayed the puce punk with sweet-smelling foam. She broke basins with brushes and tripped the young Chinese male, who was the only one not apparently petrified, with a hissing trolley, swaying dangerously and scattering puffs of cotton-wool and rattling trails of clips and tags. She silenced the blatter of the music with a well-aimed imitation alabaster pot of Juvenescence Emulsion, which dripped into the

cassette which whirred more and more slowly in a thickening morass of blush-coloured cream.

When she had finished - and she went on, she kept going, until there was nothing else to hurl, for she was already afraid of what must happen when she had finished - there was complete human silence in the salon. There were strange, harshly musical sounds all round. A bowl rocking on a glass shelf. A pair of scissors, dancing on a hook, their frenzy diminishing. Uneven spasmodic falls of glass, like musical hailstones on shelves and floors. A susurrant of hairpins on paper. A slow creaking of damaged panes. Her own hands were bleeding. Lucian advanced crunching over the shining silt, and dabbed at them with a towel. He too was bloodied - specks on his shirt, a fine dash on his brow, nothing substantial. It was a strange empty battlefield, full of glittering fragments and sweet-smelling rivulets and puddles of venous blue and fuchsia-red unguents, patches of crimson-streaked foam and odd intense spills of orange henna or cobalt and copper.

'I'd better go,' she said, turning blindly with her bleeding hands, still in her uncouth maroon drapery.

'Deirdre'll make you a cup of coffee,' said Lucian. 'You'd better sit down and take a breather.'

He took a neck brush and swept a chair for her. She stared, irresolute.

'Go on. We all feel like that, sometimes. Most of us don't dare. Sit down.'

They all gathered round, the young, making soothing, chirruping noises, putting out hands with vague patting, calming gestures.

'I'll send you a cheque.'

'The insurance'll pay. Don't worry. It's insured. You've done me a good turn in a way. It wasn't quite right, the colours. I might do something different. Or collect the insurance and give up. Me and my girlfriend are thinking of setting up a stall in the Antique Hypermarket. Costume jewellery. Thirties and Forties kitsch. She has sources. I can collect the insurance and have a go. I've had enough of this. I'll tell you something, I've often felt like smashing it all up myself, just to get out of it - like a great glass cage it is - and go out into the real world. So you mustn't worry, dear.'

SHE SAT at home and shook, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with tears. When she had pulled herself together, she would go and have a shower and soak out the fatal coils, reduce them to streaming rat-tails. Her husband came in, unexpected - she had long given up expecting or not expecting him, his movements were unpredictable and unexplained. He came in tentatively, a large, alert, ostentatiously work-wearied man. She looked up at him speechless. He saw her. (Usually he did not.)

'You look different. You've had your hair done. I like it. You look lovely. It takes twenty years off you. You should have it done more often.'

And he came over and kissed her on the shorn nape of her neck, quite as he used to do.