

Atalanta's Gran

for H.

They never get the story right, do they? They say that my Atalanta has what they used to call "S.A.". What they used to call "It." Sex appeal. A come-hither look. Well that's rubbish. She's just alive, she's just young.

What my Atalanta has is legs. Legs and lungs and the will to move. Lungs for life, lungs for great leaping jumps. Legs that used to drive her mother nuts. She would galumph into the house after school, twelve, thirteen years old and all the grace of a moose. "Hi Mom. Hi Gran." Slam went the bookbag. Swoosh went the fridge door. Glug glug went the milk, right out of the bottle, right down her throat. Shona, that's my daughter, would just about lose her mind with it. But where to start? The lack of a glass, the great thirsting greed, the galumphing? "Oh, really, Atalanta!" was all she could manage. Meanwhile I got to enjoy her, I had grandma privileges so I could just coo over her height and her speed and get a kiss on the top of my head. "Ooh, I just had it set!" I would say but obviously I didn't care.

Fourteen, fifteen. Ever taller, ever longer. Now she's a real athlete. Basketball, soccer, you name it. But above all, running. Those legs, those lungs, carrying her through the days, and into the kitchen: shorts, sneakers, stopping long enough to grab an apple. "Hi Mom! Hi Gran!"

Och. The apples. Always eating apples.

Sixteen, seventeen. Still running, faster all the time, no one can catch her. Running right out the door, out to college, out to another town, another future, another story.

Eighteen. Away in college. Some boy, some pretender, thinks she owes him something. Thinks he gets to walk her home from a party. Thinks they're leaving together. My Atalanta, she has said no, she has said NO. She has said NO. But Mr. Bees in his Ears can't hear a perfectly normal

sentence, so he follows her. Down the dark stairs of the white-columned house. Down the shady two a.m. street. To the corner where Atalanta will turn for home.

Atalanta stops, looks over her shoulder at this bozo. With her right big toe she pulls her sandal off her left foot, with her left big toe she pushes the sandal off her right foot. And Atalanta runs.

At first, she is running away, but within a block the speed of it fills her and the joy of it spreads through her body and she is just running. She is being as Atalanta as she can, as strong and as long, and as happy as she's ever been. She throws her head back, her long red hair trailing out behind her. And she laughs, she laughs like it's a song.

She looks again over her shoulder to laugh at the schmuck, thinking he'll be way behind --- and here's the party where my blood runs cold. He's not. He's gaining on her. He's running with a look on his face – I can't even think about it. It makes me sick. And now Atalanta's heart does start to pound, and her brain fizzles out a little – and suddenly it's hard to catch her breath.

She had grabbed her purse so that it wouldn't bang into her as she ran, and now, unseeing, she digs around to see what is in there that she can defend herself with. Mace? No luck, but maybe a clutch of keys? And that's when her hand closes around the apple. Or what she guessed was an apple, by the shape of it and by the fact that she had put an apple in her purse on her way out the door. But there was something funny about it: a smoothness, a coldness. She glanced down and saw: an apple it was, but it had turned – god knows how – to gold.

Atalanta stared at the apple for a moment and then knew what to do. "Look!" she cried over her shoulder, and she rolled the apple, low to the ground, like a bowling ball, towards the guy. It almost tripped him, and then, he saw the gold and turned to follow it, and went on following it into the gutter it had fallen into.

Atalanta kept running, but soon she heard footsteps behind her again, and she turned and saw the guy. And then, in her hand – another apple. So again she cries “Hey!” and this time she throws it, overhand, a nice long throw, and it wings past the guy, almost hits him in the ear, and lands in the bushes. Off goes the guy to dig it out, and Atalanta runs.

Then – one more time, running running then the footsteps behind her. This time she’s on a bridge when the golden apple reappears in her hand, and so she times it carefully. “Here!” she yells, and throws it fast, just a little higher than the guy but so shiny and golden, and he reaches for it, and he overreaches --- and it’s the perfect moment, and over the jackass goes, following that golden apple, right over the railing of the bridge and onto – well who know what was below, but Atalanta never saw him again.

Then Atalanta slowed to a jog and cooled herself down as she lapped around a few more blocks and then back to her house. She locked the door after herself, drank about a gallon of milk straight out of the jug in the fridge, had a shower, and went to bed. She slept like a baby, and she woke up happy.

A grand-daughter like that, it makes you think the world might just get better someday, doesn’t it?

But of course I’m biased.