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Lucija Radin-Mačukat

**Feminism and Intertextuality in Carmen Maria
Machado's "The Husband Stitch"**

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Zadar, 2024.



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Zadar, 14. srpnja 2024.

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1 Introduction

Throughout history, society has proved to be extremely innovative when it comes to punishing women – in medieval times, a woman who committed adultery would have her breasts ripped off; prostitutes or brothel-keepers would be branded with an iron and/or banished from the town; women accused of witchcraft or heresy would either be burned at the stake or drowned; “overbearing” wives would be paraded through the streets and subjected to a walk of shame. Today, women experience prejudice and sexual abuse in a different but nevertheless harmful manner – by being diminished and objectified either for the way they dress, the makeup they wear, how open they are with their sexuality, or simply for being women. Therefore, it comes to no surprise that female-oriented works and feminist themes found their way into literature as well. While some books focus more on the theory and philosophy behind gender and identity (such as *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir), feminist fiction portrays (female) characters that often challenge the misogynist and patriarchal nature of the society.

One example of the latter can be found in “The Husband Stitch,” a short story from the collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, written by American author Carmen Maria Machado. With the use of intertextual elements such as stage directions and subverted urban myths, Machado highlights the real-life horror stories that underpin social existence for women. The plot centres around the story of “The Girl with The Green Ribbon,” a cautionary tale with a tragic ending for the female protagonist. However, the ending of the story is not the main point. What matters is how that infamous ending is achieved. It matters that the relationship between the protagonist and her husband in many ways devolves. It matters that the story is told from a woman’s perspective yet has an unmistakable male gaze quality to it. It matters that the urban myths the narrator retells also mention women meeting tragic fates. All of these aspects work

together to make more of a simple urban legend told around the campfire, by revealing its complexities through the lens of gender.

The objective of this thesis is to analyse how folklore and stage directions connect the readers to the protagonist and subsequently to all women who have suffered the same fate, thus serving the feminist point-of-view of “The Husband Stitch.” Next, expanding on the topics and themes found in Machado’s short story, the thesis will provide a detailed study of the understanding of women, their sexuality, their bodies, and the role that patriarchy has in their perception. Furthermore, taking into consideration the portrayal of the main character, the thesis will tackle the lack of trust women face when their story, their wishes, and their emotions are put to question. The protagonist of “The Husband Stitch” has notable relationships with certain men in her life, so focus will be put on how different generations of men continue their cycle of abuse and violence towards women. Finally, this thesis will provide a translation of the said short story, together with a character study and a short analysis of the writing style.

2 Intertextuality – into the many layers of a story

One of the most notable structural elements with which Machado intrinsically connects her stories and engages the readers in “The Husband Stitch” is intertextuality – rather an intertextual subcategory which aims to revise the original text(s) (Smith 34). In this context, intertextuality works both as a necessary interruption to the main story as well as a means of exploring and subverting male expectations within a romantic framework (Walsh). More precisely, on the example of this short story intertextuality is presented through inserting and retelling urban myths, a literary device also called “embedded narrative” or “nested stories” (Ryan 320). The main plot is also interspersed by stage directions in which the narrator invites the reader to act out the story with her, to connect with her character and feel what she feels at that moment. Abundant are biblical elements too, with some passages being rewritten to suit the atmosphere or the story or to remark on the Church’s view of sex and female pleasure.

Machado skillfully weaves a web of stories inserting urban legends into the main plot, which focuses on one woman’s life: from her first love to marriage and the birth of her son. Nevertheless, the narrator's life is consumed with the constant fear of her husband untangling the green ribbon from around her neck, being the only thing she keeps secret from him. This way, all the stories (which somehow always result in women suffering some type of a cruel fate) include women who keep secrets in order to protect themselves, in direct contradiction to the wishes and desires of their romantic interests or the males in their lives, turning intertextuality into a type of safeguard which does not always manage to keep the danger at bay (Walsh).

In “The Husband Stitch,” Machado establishes a kind of intertextual “spool,” which nicely unravels throughout the text. The narrator herself mentions: “I have always been a teller of stories” (Machado, *Her Body* 8), as she takes the readers on a firsthand experience of her life

concentrating on sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, while simultaneously inserting third-person urban myths, which later on become the prevalent narrative as the mental ordeal the lead goes through forces her to pull back and become the very character from the stories she used to tell (Hood 997). Right from the beginning, the intertextuality seeps from this text as the story is set with stage directions aimed at the readers: “If you read this story, please use the following voices [...]” (Machado, *Her Body* 3). The readers are prepared for an intriguing start, while another intertextual element is added when the narrator meets her future husband: “In the beginning, I know I want him before he does” (Machado, *Her Body* 3). In this second instance of intertextuality, Machado takes from the first three words of the Bible. Together with the first-person account of the narrator’s life, biblical insertions, and stage directions, perhaps the most prominent element in the story is the constant air of mystery and horror surrounding the life of women, cleverly conveyed through retelling of muliebral myths.

2.1 Scary stories to tell in the dark

“The Husband Stitch” is a treasure trove when it comes to folklore and cautionary tales, as the horror stories Machado inserts every now and then range from Bloody Mary (5), and the legend of the Hook(man) (28), to the story of Johnny's stolen liver (23-24), and the Little Mermaid (26). Despite the fact that these myths proved to be a rewarding source of material for the story, Machado would seldom opt for their original and/or final form, but instead would turn the otherwise male or juvenile protagonist into a tortured woman and focus on the development of *her* story. The narrator herself admits this after the retelling of one of the cautionary tales in which she describes a woman cutting her own liver to satisfy her husband: “That may not be the version of the story you’re familiar with. But I assure you, it’s the one

you need to know” (Machado, *Her Body* 24). She does this to emphasize the great lengths women would go to in order to keep their partner content.

Besides, not only are the myths centred on the reality of living as a woman, but they are also stripped of their hopefulness or any possible happiness, frequently resulting in desperation and death. These stories range from the one in which the narrator is convinced by her father that what she saw at the grocery store were potatoes, not real human toes (Machado, *Her Body* 8), to the tale of a woman who searched a whole city to find a medicine for her sick mother, only to be driven to madness after being gaslighted by everyone that her mother does not exist (Machado, *Her Body* 18-19). Each of the campfire horror stories serve as a test for the readers, making them choose who to believe, the woman or the *other(s)*, questioning reality and the plausibility of the narrator’s voice. The ending of the story usually proves fatal for the female, whether as a result of her own choice, as is the case with the story of the graveyard girl (Machado, *Her Body* 9), due to being pressured and ultimately putting her faith in the man, as in the hookman myth (Machado, *Her Body* 28), or by sacrificing a part of herself (literally) to satisfy her partner, as in the stolen liver story (Machado, *Her Body* 23-24). This uneasy air that surrounds the amalgam of the tales provides a glimpse into the possible ending of the narrator’s story, focusing on her husband’s and son’s obsession (and its eventual consequences) with the ribbon on her neck (Bi).

2.1.1 The ribbon that ties it all together

The collection’s opening story is a famous urban legend, traditionally known as “The (Girl with the) Green Ribbon,” with many different iterations produced over the last 200 years, perhaps the most notable being from Alvin Schwartz’s collection *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories*. In Machado’s version, the narrator takes the place of the main character

and brings new meaning to that and other well-known stories the author uses in “The Husband Stitch,” choosing to uncover frequently silenced experiences and thus emphasize the importance of storytelling (Wieckowska 81). More precisely, the readers are encouraged to recognize the interconnectivity of the stories while being aware of their constant presence in women’s lives, and this is done on the nose as very often the moral of the horror stories perfectly encompasses the situation the narrator finds herself in in that moment (Jordan).

The way the story is constructed, one might think that the narrator surrounds herself with all the scary stories because she herself has lived through one and now is an established character in urban myths: some may recognise her as an ordinary girl with a ribbon around her neck, to others she may be a witch (though she does not like Halloween: “I have little use for this holiday” (Machado, *Her Body* 25)), a siren or a succubus due to her relishing in her own sexuality, while also being able to easily awaken desire in men. But what if the truth is more straightforward? What if Machado wants the readers to see her narrator simply as a woman who wants to keep one thing, one tiny little thing to herself so as not to lose all her essence subjecting herself to her partner, to her son, and ultimately to the society?

One thing is clear, the narrator’s intention is to be remembered in history, to share her experience and provide her advice on how to be and live as a woman: “I have heard all of the stories about girls like me, and I am unafraid to make more of them” (Machado, *Her Body* 7). But despite her efforts and bravery, her story becomes just one of many lessons in ever-present betrayal and hardship. It is a tale of boundaries, as well, wherein the husband threatens her boundaries and readers overstep theirs getting a glimpse into the lives of others. That glimpse is just a small part of her the readers can understand, and the narrator does not allow them to come any closer, distracting them with urban myths and campfire horrors. At times when the readers do feel closer to her, when they believe they understand her intimately, they are again reminded that they do not know the secret of the ribbon either (Corrigan). Although she stayed

true to herself keeping the secret and living her life knowing what she wanted and owning her sexuality, the narrator's resistance was ultimately broken by her husband. She untied the ribbon around her neck and went past retelling cautionary tales about women to becoming one, and surely inspiring many others (Walsh).

2.1.2 Short story as the perfect medium for (Female) Gothic

Gothic literature is commonly associated with dark and eerie spaces, haunted castles or houses and vast corridors that are very often explored by female protagonists who sense and are influenced by some kind of terror and imminent danger surrounding them, but are never believed by others, not even the male hero. This is the atmosphere Machado draws upon and situates in a modern setting, influenced by contemporary dread. Because, despite the social changes since the eighteenth century, women are still threatened and challenged, their progress and liberation impeded. The Female Gothic is then especially important because it denounces patriarchal ideas and emphasizes gender dichotomy and oppression, while simultaneously serving as an expression of female independence. The works falling under the Female Gothic literature usually feature a heroine who is pursued by a villainous patriarchal figure in unfamiliar and frightening settings. As the focus is on the chill and terror, the gothic genre tends to avoid overtly violent or sexual scenes, though this is one of the many aspects in which Machado's modern Feminist Gothic differs from the early Female Gothic tales (McCombs).

As Wallace writes, while in Male Gothic the focus is more on the mother, Female Gothic is preoccupied with the male as a source of female fear due to his power and economical status (*Uncanny* 60). Moreover, Machado offers a step forward in challenging and subverting some of the most important gothic literary themes, as is the gothic trope of the secretive man and the curious woman. "The Husband Stitch" includes no searching for a dead wife, no deliberate

murderous intent or hostile sexism. The curious one in this case is the man, constantly prying into the secret of his wife's ribbon while quietly endorsing male secrets, showing a progression in Gothic literature from the overtly hostile to subtle benevolent sexism. Another gothic tradition of the young wife, whose age compels her to seek help from an older, more experienced person, is missing as well. Although the gothic trope of the protagonist marrying at a young age is still present in "The Husband Stitch," her age has a completely different function – instead of facilitating her escape from a dangerous situation, it accelerates her demise, becoming a critique of the preoccupation with youth when it relates to women. While youth, female cooperation and curiosity combined would usually work to save the heroine of a gothic work, here death comes to the protagonist much later in life, what with the lack of female companions and the curious trait handed to the male character inevitably leads to the familiar gothic ending. By flipping many of the traditional gothic themes and shifting from explicit to subtle sexism, but still preserving the typical mortal gothic ending, Machado warns of the perilous nature of "the nice patriarchy" (Wilcox).

Furthermore, when it comes to gothic tropes, so obviously prevalent is the one of the haunted house (mansion or castle), a source of terror for the female and the place of her pursuit. In her memoir *In the Dream House*, Machado herself states that the main tropes of American Gothic are "woman plus habitation" and "marrying a stranger," but in the case of "The Husband Stitch," the male was a stranger because he concealed something of crucial importance, revealed later on as his abusive tendencies and desire to own his wife completely (87). That way, residency stops being a source of fear due to dark hallways or eerie voices heard in the night but becomes a misleadingly idealized heteronormative home in which a confined female experiences a violent and abusive relationship. Machado's domestic horror shows the danger is in the intimate, the familial, ending the metaphor of the haunted house and showing it for what

it really is – the female body, and the attack and the intrusion on the house as the attack on female (bodily) autonomy (Jesussek 330).

Along with drawing inspiration from “The Green Ribbon,” Machado merges the story with another gothic classic, the tale of Bluebeard, who gives his wife one rule whose breaking will bring her untimely death, as did to his many wives before her (Jesussek 334). In “The Husband Stitch,” it is the female protagonist who sets rules to her boyfriend: “he cannot finish inside of me, and he cannot touch my green ribbon” (7). After their marriage and the revoking of the first rule, he keeps insisting on knowing all her secrets and untying the ribbon around her neck, and the wife ultimately gives in, despite knowing her head will fall off. In this inversion of the Bluebeard’s tale, the heroine sets a rule that ensures her wellbeing, and it is crucial to her survival that the rule is not broken. She is the one who suffers the rule breaking, as Bluebeard’s wives usually do, making it seem like no matter what she does, in the end she will have to die as “brides never fare well in stories” (Machado, *Her Body* 11). Machado’s use and rearrangement of established gothic tropes and fairy tales full of dark romanticism, about abused, witch-like, seductive women, and secretive men of destructive passion and pride shows the need to re-examine and critically analyse these tales considering the ongoing violence against women in real life (Jesussek 328).

Finally, it is obvious now that, albeit a short form, the ghost story offers a lot of room to tackle not only the uncanny and the supernatural, but also to explore female fear, powerlessness, isolation, and sexuality within the modern patriarchy (Wallace 57). Again, there are many differences between the Female and the Male Gothic – while the Female Gothic strives towards explaining the supernatural, the Male Gothic establishes the supernatural as a reality; while the Male Gothic has a tragic plot, the Female Gothic tends to have a happy ending, usually resulting in marriage; thirdly, in the Female Gothic, the narrative focus is on the heroine’s point of view. Nevertheless, due to its concise nature, the short story as a form allows

women to avoid explaining the supernatural, as well as escape the marriage ending. Apart from its brevity, another advantage of the short story within the gothic genre is its association with the strange and the familiar, and consequently with dream. Since dreams show our most repressed and unconscious desires, the short story is “the narrative form most closely implicated with desire,” which is, by the same token, the instigation of the plot in “The Husband Stitch” (Hanson 26).

2.2 All the world's a stage

In the same way that urban myths are inserted in the short story to articulate women's discontent with the ongoing patriarchal prevalence and their entrapment within such society, stage directions further emphasize the obvious gender dichotomy and impossibility to escape the domestic and social female body (Wallace and Smith 2). These fourth-wall breaks invite the readers to perform and collaborate with the story, as the performative aspect forces them to stay with the narrator from the very start. Apart from mimicking the verbal storytelling culture of children's tales from the past, Machado also talks about stage directions as wanting to reflect the themes of the book and topics that frustrated her, especially the portrayal of women in media (focusing on science fiction and horror films) where female characters are unmemorable and whose traits are interchangeable, while men all have distinct voices (*Talks at Google* 00:30:28-00:33:12). Thus, the first stage direction, in which the narrator suggests differing and characteristic voicing of male characters, while her character can be read as forgettable and interchangeable with other women (Machado, *Her Body* 3), sets the tone for the entire story, as a clear case of the objectification of women.

For this reason, stage directions in the story can be seen as an example of feminist metafiction, a form of writing that questions the social relationship between fiction and reality,

focusing on female writing while simultaneously offering critique of cultural expectations and representation of women (Waugh 2). This questioning of fictionality in the story is most evident in the stage directions that are inserted after the retelling of cautionary tales, but also in situations when the narrator recalls scenes from her own life and deems the instructions necessary for the readers to experience them as well. In this case, the blurring of fiction and reality is reinforced further when the story follows the protagonist after an episiotomy: “If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them” (Machado, *Her Body* 16). On the level of the text, the metafictional breaks position storytelling as a means of reclaiming the body from said discourses, an apparent act of defiance through voice and writing. The text itself thus becomes an antidote, writing back or perhaps even speaking back against the anxieties presented within the thematic of the Female Gothic (*Cardiff BookTalk* 01:00:17-01:02:36).

The postmodern metanarrative aspect of the amalgam of voices in the story breaks the fourth wall and compromises the narrator’s reliability, devaluating it further with her constant evasiveness (causing the readers to suspect she has something to hide) and biased representation of characters. The mystery behind the narrator is further amplified in the way she skirts over the disturbing scenes that threaten to ruin the good things in her life, such as her husband and her obstetrician plotting to mutilate her with the eponymous husband stitch. Although she is careful not to reveal too much about herself, the complete story offers the readers an insight into a character whose life is addled by trauma and a woman who is robbed of the governance of her body, her sexuality, her mind, and consequently her life (Fisher 39).

By including stage directions with the aim of sharing life experience with the readers, the narrator becomes not just the author of the story, but also the director of a (horror) film that unravels in the readers’ minds while combing through the pages and becoming characters

themselves. Besides, the mystery surrounding the narrator and her stories propels the readers into bestowing meaning on them and embodying the roles, thus reconstructing and retracing the events that were otherwise left as gaps in the narrative (Wieckowska 87). The last stage direction in which the narrator allows her husband to untie her ribbon, resulting in her head falling off, marks the end of the short story, and is a clear example of the presence of feminist metafiction:

If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry. (Machado, *Her Body* 31)

While all other directions are written in parentheses, the last one deliberately lacks the latter, the reason being that this time the readers are not expected to act out the scene, but to undergo the process together with the protagonist. Furthermore, since stage directions are such a fundamental part of theatre, the readers may have expected the story will get a happy ending in the typical manner of a play – the curtains will come down, along will come the actors and cheerfully take a bow, proving to the onlookers/readers that they were deceived, and all is right in life again. Nevertheless, Machado shatters this illusion of a happy female life and makes the story real, reminding the readers that true horror still exists within the confines of everyday life: “[...] women’s lives have always been shitty. It just happens to be that we’re in a really bad moment right now, so I think people are looking for work that’s speaking to that” (Petrilla).

3 Feminist reading of (erotic) fiction

Among (many) other shelves of literary genre on Goodreads, *Her Body and Other Parties* has also found itself under the category of *women's fiction*, commonly viewed as a place where books exploring relationships, family and inner workings of women are often demoted to. There are books written by women and there are those written by men, but only the former receive the designation of pertaining to women's fiction, especially those that dare to tackle the topics of female experience. As such, these books are then dismissed for not analysing the big issues found in men's fiction, a misconception still present in today's literary society (Gay 147).

The division of writers by gender or perceived female themes keeps books by female writers from escaping the discarded pile on the lower shelf and joining admired and celebrated male-written books on the upper ones. In addition to this, it hinders the opportunity for female writers to find a more inclusive coed reading audience, as well as puts them out of contention for literary influence. In an essay for *The New York Times*, Meg Wolitzer mentions book length as another clue to a book's supposed literary importance, noting that certain male writers acquired high literary profiles by publishing extremely long books, while the same cannot be said for female novelists. It is her belief that a short-story collection draws less attention than a novel and may be judged as the work of someone who lacks the courage of a novelist. In another article for *The New Republic*, Ruth Franklin emphasizes: "The underlying problem is that while women read books by male writers about male characters, men tend not to do the reverse. Men's novels about suburbia (Franzen) are about society; women's novels about suburbia (Wolitzer) are about women." Precisely this unapologetic and authoritative writing about women has brought critical acclaim to some of the most notable female writers, which is a call for the literary community to accept this authority, recognise and celebrate it, all the while encouraging its preservation.

The feminist critical movement at its core attempts to analyse previously overlooked traditions of female writing. Here it is very important the notion of *gynocriticism*, which Elaine Showalter describes as “the feminist study of women’s writing, including readings of women’s texts and analyses of the intertextual relations both between women writers (a female literary tradition), and between women and men” (189). To determine whether a novel written by a woman is a feminist novel, one must employ a systematic approach to literature, that is, one has to be aware of not only the institutions that make available such a text and the audience that is created for its reading but also the way a piece of writing is read and the writing conventions which facilitate its categorisation within the literary genre. Therefore, a feminist reading fiction can be perceived as a political activity, as the work consists of constantly establishing *what* kind of reality is created and *how* images (of sexuality, maleness, and femaleness) support that creation. Next is the deeper examination into the type of feminist novel, as a text cannot be regarded as such solely on the basis of its women-centric experience. More precisely, a feminist novel shows allegiance to the women’s liberation movement, either explicitly, by raising consciousness through theoretical and political writing and having feminist aspirations as the focal element, or in an implicit manner, as is the exploration of female oppression (Coward 231).

Moreover, feminist novels can be distinguished from the typical romance genre by two more characteristics: the quasi-autobiographical structure, and the “voice” of the protagonist. This voice does not have to directly convey the author’s, but it oftentimes acts as a representative of women in general, with sexual experience (and sometimes its oppressive nature) at the core of all women’s experience. Erotic fiction can therefore be seen as part of the feminist project in which independent sexual subjectivity is explored, most notably through three aims. First is female authorship, where women can write about sex in an authentic and original approach, evident in the way some books are advertised as written for women *by*

women. The second aim is centred around the reader's entitlement when it comes to relationships, sexuality, and personal fulfilment through sexual pleasure, that is, the demand for equal sexual gratification. Lastly, there is the view of healthy female sexuality, where the goal is to enable an experience that was previously denied to women (Sonnet 176).

Erotic female-written fiction can be regarded as feminist if the female protagonist challenges patriarchal traditions and phallogentric passivity, meaning she is curious, initiating, and open with her sexuality. It is not uncommon for women's erotica to be provocative as well, exploring female sexuality in a serious manner, helping readers understand the pleasures, fears, and anxieties in sex and power. As such, erotica is not at odds with modern feminism as its role is not merely to offer cheap thrills, but to act as an instrument through which women can explore an otherwise prohibited eroticism, leading towards sexual and social empowerment (Phelan). "The Husband Stitch" is one of such stories which serves as an investigation into female experience of today, highlighting the dangers of benevolent sexism, misogyny, and many other problems that persist in the central institutions of marriage, motherhood, and society itself.

3.1 Women who love sex and other taboos

The plot of "The Husband Stitch" begins with the following paragraph: "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn't how things are done, but this is how I'm going to do them" (Machado, *Her Body* 3). Keeping in mind this is the protagonist retelling the moment when she first laid eyes on the boy that would become her husband, it is clear from the start that she has agency over her choices. The narrator is aware of her curiosity, her sexual "deviation," knowing perfectly well that making sexual advances towards a man defies custom (Teutsch). Nevertheless, she wants to explore and own her sexuality, and that night they begin their relationship. During the course of the relationship, the protagonist is the one telling her

partner and teaching him how she likes to be pleased, making this a clear subversion of who has agency in a sexual relationship. She has little to no hesitation in expressing her desires, but there is a sense of collaboration within the sexual aspect of the relationship when he welcomes her openness and when, after one coupling, the narrator observes: “We are learning, he and I” (Machado, *Her Body* 7).

The night after she gives her virginity, the narrator is washing herself, smelling the rust-like blood, but feels as if she has grown and become a new person. She is aware that women are usually condemned for their desire but feels no regret: “I have heard all of the stories about girls like me, and I am unafraid to make more of them” (Machado, *Her Body* 7). By having a female protagonist with clear sexual agency, Machado openly breaks the taboo of a woman who loves sex. In the same world that prioritises male sexuality and satisfaction in sexual discourse, desire holds danger for women. Through one of the cautionary tales, the narrator recalls a woman who was institutionalised for expressing her sexual desires to her partner, and she asks herself: “What magical thing could you want so badly that they take you away from the known world for wanting it?” (Machado, *Her Body* 4) This passage implies that desire is deemed wrong and impure only when felt by women – women are the ones shamed and punished for their sexuality, which leads to their feeling of guilt and subservience, and to a culture where girls grow up to be women who must keep quiet about their desire, while their partners are excused simply because “men want what they want” (Gay 160).

The questions that need to be raised here, not just in the context of the short story, but of the society too, are: What is the purpose of sex for her, and what is it to him? Who loves sex, and who uses the act to get access to power and domination? Because the shame that women feel when it comes to their sexuality is in fact a reflection of toxic masculinity, since men draw power by claiming sexual ownership over women (Krings). This is precisely what happens with the protagonist in “The Husband Stitch” – in the beginning, she is acting for herself but as the

story progresses, she loses that agency, acting in accordance with (and ultimately dying because of) the desires of her husband.

3.1.1 The psychology of womanness

Spanning from the protagonist's first love, marriage, and the birth of her son, "The Husband Stitch" is a bildungsroman. Interspersed throughout the text are some excerpts from her early life, which she talks about so rarely, making one realise the narrator had a tough childhood. She recollects a story from her youth when she threw a tantrum in a grocery store, believing she saw toes in the produce aisle, mixed in with potatoes. Her father sits her down and interrogates her, clearly showing his disbelief. As the protagonist is a child and can offer no explanation as to why someone would sell human toes, she consents to her father's account of the story. Even so, now a grown woman looking back, she knows different, determined she would fight for her beliefs: "I would have said to my father that there are true things in this world observed only by a single set of eyes" (Machado, *Her Body* 9).

Nowadays considered a part of the normal human experience, pareidolia, the phenomenon of seeing faces or other patterns in ambiguous images, was once considered belonging to the realm of psychosis, with main causes being anxiety and trauma (Ghose). Leaning into this theory, the connection can be made after reading about the narrator being sexually assaulted as a child by her paedophiliac teacher, what she deems her worst secret and shares it wilfully with her partner but still regrets it, as "the memory strikes such a chord of anger and shame that after I share this I have nightmares for a month" (Machado, *Her Body* 9). Statistically, childhood sexual abuse survivors show a higher rate of sexual difficulties than their peers, many later suffering from cases of early-onset and heightened sexual interest, but also people-pleasing with the aim of diffusing conflict and earning approval from others

(Godbout). Such is the case with the protagonist from this short story – although in the beginning one can sense her urgency, her fervent desire for first love, longing to be in the adult world, sexually autonomous, and have ownership over her body and her mind, as the story reaches its end, she resigns to the sacrifice of her identity and personal boundaries in favour of sustaining her relationship with her husband and avoiding his rejection (*Desire* 00:02:46-00:03:47).

Nevertheless, before her grown-up life unravels and she inevitably reaches her untimely death, the narrator is eighteen and is marrying her first love. Her parents approve of the match, and she is happy, spending the upcoming days dress shopping. She is again reminded of an urban myth, this time one where a bride dies in her wedding dress. That sense of dread that surrounds what should be the happiest day of a woman's life is intensified on her wedding day, when her soon-to-be husband pins her against the wall and tries to untie her ribbon once again (Machado, *Her Body* 11). She manages to fight him off; they marry and have their honeymoon travelling across Europe, trying new food, and having lots of sex. The protagonist realises she is growing again and entering a new stage of life: "I recognize that this is not the entire world, but it is the first part of it that I am seeing. I feel electrified by possibility" (Machado, *Her Body* 12). Although blinded by newlywed happiness, knowing now how the story ends, it could be concluded that the root of her hurt (and ultimately her death) is connected to her husband, more specifically her pressure to exude wifely obedience and subjugation to the will of her partner. The marriage act then poses a threat to the narrator's individuality and freedom of thought, acting as a metaphorical cage that prevents her being truly herself. Similarly, during the 18th century women were deprived of legal right within marriage: "The husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband" (Long Hoeveler 6). That way, one could say that her life was predestined from the moment the protagonist

decided to marry – signing her marriage license meant sealing her death certificate and eventually becoming one of those cautionary tales she tried to avoid.

Quickly following the honeymoon, the narrator falls pregnant and shares the happy news with her husband. What should have been a joyous moment turns to horror when he obsessively tries to untie the ribbon again. These violent attempts at her body seem to trigger the protagonist into preoccupying herself with something other than her trauma, and this is when she usually resorts to telling scary stories. This time, the story follows a feral woman who grows up in the woods and is seen nursing wolf cubs (Machado, *Her Body* 13). An obvious nod to her fear of giving birth and lactation, the horrendous experience of birthing is made even scarier when the narrator is given a husband stitch, and later when it is discovered that her problematic pregnancy and labour mean she can have no more children in the future (Machado, *Her Body* 18).

Throughout her accumulated life experience and through the moral lens of the urban myths, the protagonist is slowly realising what an ordeal it is to be a woman. When her son gets a bit older and starts going to school, she decides to take up art classes for women to occupy her time. There she is drawn by a beautiful model who poses for nudes and asks her out for coffee. During their conversation, the woman reveals she has an eleven-year-old daughter, and that makes the narrator think: “We do not discuss the specific fears of raising a girl-child. Truthfully, I am afraid even to ask” (Machado, *Her Body* 22). Although she seems to be aware of the aura of horror that surrounds growing up, raising, and being a woman, she is intent on masking her fear and denying its plausibility by exaggerating her happiness, a coping mechanism with which she tries to convince herself nothing is wrong. This is visible through numerous sentences in which she claims her joy is incomparable to that of other people, such as when her son is accepted to university and announces he proposed to his girlfriend: “Even the luckiest woman alive has not seen joy like this” (Machado, *Her Body* 28). However, all of her pent-up emotions and the real truth come out when she finally succumbs to her husband’s

relentless attempts at the ribbon. Right when the ribbon is untied and she resignedly meets her end, the narrator confesses: “I feel as lonely as I have ever been” (Machado, *Her Body* 31), ultimately confirming how alone she is in the experience of being a woman (Jesussek 334). Nevertheless, perhaps something changes in the next generation of women – the only representative of it being her son’s fiancé, whom she met, but never mentioned her ribbon. Is it because she (and consequently other girls and women from the new generation) does not have one? If she does have a ribbon, is it not important enough to mention? On the other hand, if she does not have a ribbon, does it mean that modern women are different, that they freed themselves from the feminine burden, or did they just “evolve” in a way that makes their secrets even more suppressed?

3.1.2 The case of Church vs. Women

Continuing with the theme of female subjugation, Machado claims she drew inspiration from her experience of the body, of being a queer woman, and a woman in general, mentioning religion as one of the early influences when it came to navigating sex and sexuality (Halston). The writer saw it necessary to call for caution regarding oppressive patterns in Christianity towards women and to remind people what can happen when young women accept the false narratives spread about their bodies, sex, and sexuality, and how damaging it can be to their viewing of the world. Machado understands she cannot solve that problem by herself but hopes that she can provide an alternate narrative for those in need (Nilsen). While Christian purity culture is not explicitly mentioned in “The Husband Stitch,” one can feel its invisible strings dictating the protagonist’s life and permeating almost every scene in which a woman tries to free herself from the shackles of the patriarchy.

Perhaps the most obvious nudge to the Bible can be found in the very first sentence of the plot: “In the beginning, I know I want him before he does” (Machado, *Her Body* 3), which can be read as a double entendre. First, it alludes to the beginning of the Bible: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*King James Bible*, John 1.1). Secondly, as the story continues, the narrator, a young girl, reveals her intentions with the boy she is interested in, and they have frequent sex, before marriage. In Christianity, women are said to be recognised not only as being created second but were also punished for originating human’s fall into sin: “For Adam was formed first and then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor” (1 Tim. 2.13-14). By the same token, the protagonist of “The Husband Stitch,” who opens the theme of sex and initiates their (pre-marital) sexual relationship can be seen as Eve, and her future husband as Adam, who she forced into sin. Why? According to the Bible, sex is seen as a part of the marital union, a means of conception, and is judged completely if practised outside of marriage (Ez. 23.5-10). In Ezekiel 23, a woman who enjoys sex outside of marriage and for purposes outside conception (such as bodily pleasure) is sentenced to death, while her children are taken away from her (Cink 13). Therefore, the purpose of the woman’s body in Christianity is to bear children, whereas her sexual interests do not mirror the image of God but reduce the body to carnal desire and propensity for sin (Radford Ruether 85).

Furthermore, apart from the Christian woman’s role of wife and child bearer, there is also that of husband’s servant, quietly and submissively accepting his authority, thus trying to win her husband’s affection and love (Radford Ruether 87). This is the proof of the woman’s double subjectivity, first to Christ and then to the husband, as Christ is the head of the church, so is the husband the head of his wife (Eph. 5.24). A study of Christian women who have experienced domestic violence showed that pain and suffering those women endured is in direct relation to religion, meaning they spiritualised their trauma and with it shared in Christ’s

suffering (Phiri 93). Also, the women seemed to possess some kind of distorted sense of forgiveness. Just like the protagonist of “The Husband Stitch”, Christian women forgave their husband each time he hurt them, but their forbearance failed in changing the behaviour of the abuser. On the contrary, the cycle of violence continued because the assailant was not held accountable for his actions (Rakoczy 33). In this sense of continually forgiving her husband and ultimately letting him become her killer, the narrator in “The Husband Stitch” draws many similarities with the lives of said Christian women.

Another biblical scene that draws parallels with the short story is the act of cleansing, most notable being Pontius Pilate washing his hands after the verdict was reached about Jesus’ future (Matthew 27.24-26). In “The Husband Stitch,” after the first sexual encounter with her future husband, the protagonist comes home and describes the process of washing herself, how despite the blood and the smell of rust she felt renewed (Machado, *Her Body* 6). Whether physical or spiritual, most of the excerpts from the Bible mention cleansing as a form of purging oneself from evil, erasing the sins and starting anew (Ps. 51.2, Ps. 51.7, Is. 1.16, Ez. 36.25). Similarly, given that sex before marriage and women enjoying sex for purposes other than procreation is seen as a sin in the eyes of the Catholic Church, one might say that by washing herself the narrator admits her wrongdoing. But she does not vow to put an end to her supposed sinning. On the contrary, what makes her feel alive and new is not the act of cleansing itself, but the fact that she has experienced pleasure and unlocked a new part of her life, the one that makes her feel curious and happy.

It is visible that the protagonist in “The Husband Stitch” has established herself as a progressive woman in terms of embracing her sexual curiosity and rejecting Catholic teachings. Perhaps the strongest scene in which she reaffirms her way of life as a “harlot” comes out of rebelling in the very building that presents the institution of Catholic religion – the church. Right before their marriage ceremony, the narrator and her partner have sex, rescinding her rule

of not letting him finish inside of her. Machado describes this sexual act in a very passionate and violent manner, injecting a feeling of disgust with the next sentence in which the protagonist wonders “if [she is] the first woman to walk up the aisle of St. George’s with semen leaking down her leg” (Machado, *Her Body* 11). As a patron saint of plague, syphilis, and leprosy sufferers, the mention of St. George further emphasizes the connection between the grotesque and female sexuality. Apart from aligning herself with diseases that killed millions of people across the world, more important here is the symbolism of women’s sexuality which the narrator brings into the church, thus defiantly desecrating the holy temple, the image of purity and patriarchy (Fisher).

Later in the story, the protagonist struggles with her pregnancy, suffering daily from heavy stomachache. On one such occasion, the pain is so harsh she collapses on the way through the park, when a female passerby helps her sit up and offers her some water to drink (Machado, *Her Body* 14). This scene is reminiscent of the tale about Veronica and Jesus, which is not found in scripture but remains an important part of Catholic tradition. In the story, Jesus is carrying the cross on his way to Calvary, when Veronica rushes through the crowd to wipe away the sweat from his face (Frisch 339). The narrator in “The Husband Stitch” can be associated with Christ once more in another biblical story, in which a soldier offers a sponge soaked in vinegar to Jesus at the Crucifixion (John 19.29). Was it the writer’s aim to connect her main character with the figure of Jesus Christ? If so, why? Did the protagonist see herself as the Messiah, at least in the sense of female emancipation, embracing of sexual freedom and liberation from the shackles of the patriarchy and the societal norms surrounding women? By accepting this theory, one could say that “The Husband Stitch” is essentially a Bible for modern women – instead of the Ten Commandments, it contains warnings in the form of urban myths, and in the place of Christ who died for the people’s sins, there is a sexually curious housewife, a woman with a mind of her own who ultimately dies as well, but perhaps with the intention of teaching women

exactly what (not) to do if they want to avoid meeting the same end as millions of women before.

3.2 The “nice” patriarchy

In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey studies the concept of scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking, within cinematic framework. Underlining social and political power as controlling forces, she posits the male gaze as a critique in the representation of men and women in film (Mulvey 11). Deriving from patriarchal ideologies, the male gaze depicts women as objects purely for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer, diminishing the female worth to that of an erotic interest. Machado refutes this idea of systemic patriarchy describing the protagonist of her short story the same way, reducing her character to her looks: “I am beautiful. I have a pretty mouth. I have breasts that heave out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse at the same time” (Machado, *Her Body* 3). Moreover, with the opposition of “innocent” and “perverse,” she alludes to the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, patriarchal notion by which women can be either good (chaste) or bad (promiscuous) (Fisher).

Taking into consideration the male gaze as a role that women are meant to play under specific gazes, the narrator of “The Husband Stitch” is first introduced as a “good girl,” under the watchful eye of her father. As soon as she is out of her father’s sight, she gathers courage to court a boy and even to lead him outside to kiss him (Machado, *Her Body* 3). One would say that the protagonist reached her sexual autonomy freeing herself from her father’s control, but in reality, she was just handed from one male gaze to another, that of her husband. For example, in a scene where the narrator is being vulnerable in admitting to her now husband that she may be attracted to another woman, his immediate answer is the idea of a threesome – again, she is shamed for his pleasure (Machado, *Her Body* 23). Furthermore, as the story progresses and the

protagonist's husband gets more insistent on untying her ribbon, the idea of male entitlement reveals his subtly sexist nature in such an understated way that the narrator is left firmly believing that her husband "is not a bad man at all" (Machado, *Her Body* 30). Precisely this subtle endorsement courtesy of the husband is one of the clearest examples of Machado's revision of gothic tradition through a progression from hostile and explicit sexism to benevolent and subtle sexism (Wilcox).

This short story also not so subtly touches on the patriarchal notion that women serve only as bodies for enjoyment and reproduction, with no other interests of their own. This is evident in the main character's way of life – the inability to have more children combined with the fact that being a good housewife and raising a child is the protagonist's only occupation, it leaves her life without purpose when her son gets old enough to leave home and go to college. She has managed to protect her ribbon while her son needed her, but when there is no need to provide for him anymore, the narrator lets her husband untie the ribbon, which kills her. The timing of the protagonist's death acts as a critique of the sexist idea that only motherhood makes female lives meaningful, and of the resulting conclusion that a woman's life has no value if and or once she has no ability to give birth (Wilcox).

When writing *Her Body and Other Parties*, Machado says she thought about the idea of "good-man entitlement," the sense of entitlement that men have that is more covert and not as obvious as the more boorish type of sexism (*PBS Books* 00:02:36-00:03:32). The fact that the true character of the protagonist's partner in "The Husband Stitch" stays hidden from the outside audience and raises no red flags is even more obvious in the scene where the narrator's parents have no objections to her choice of spouse: they believe her future husband is "a nice boy" and will be "a good man" (Machado, *Her Body* 3). This acceptance of a male partner solely due to his behaviour in the home of his future in-laws perfectly encompasses how the "nice" patriarchy operates – the absence of any apparent dangerous or sexist behaviour leads to

acceptance of this subtle form of misogyny. Taking into consideration that male curiosity and entitlement eventually kill the protagonist, it is clear that benevolent sexism can be as dangerous as its hostile version, the only difference being that hostile sexism gives a clear warning that allows for self-defence, while benevolent sexism gives out no such warnings. As a result, the narrator's mother has no reason to believe her daughter may be making the wrong choice, thus showing how veiled sexism leads to a false sense of security and naivety. The protagonist's eventual demise, caused by her "nice" husband, acts as a warning against complacency towards patriarchy simply because its enactor is seemingly harmless (Wilcox).

3.3 Bodies, bodies, bodies

One of the recurring themes in the short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* is the horror surrounding the control over female bodies and bodily autonomy. Machado claims that people, especially women, have complicated relationships with their bodies, and even goes to say that the female body is a "nightmare" in the sense of how it is being used and leveraged against women (*Strand Book Store* 00:23:17-00:24:48). This obsession with the body is exactly what weaves through every story in the collection – the body is the site of women's vulnerability, but also the primary source of their joy (Caplan-Bricker). By putting women's bodies at the forefront of the stories, the writing becomes bodily fiction within a (feminist) culture concerned with rediscovering the body (Robins). Even the covers of the book (see fig. 1) allude to the trope of headless women of Hollywood and the trend where women are represented in media as mere body parts, faceless and objectified bodies.



Fig. 1. Book covers of “Her Body and Other Parties.”

What is more, changing the conventional short-story collection subheading from “and Other Stories” to “and Other Parties” further comments on the claim that men, particularly husbands, feel they lay on female bodies. On the one hand, a woman’s body can be regarded as a literal party, a site of pleasure and enjoyment – the notion of the husband stitch clearly shows that a wife’s body can be altered to her husband’s wishes. Besides, the title of the collection hints at women as party favours, up for consumption and given around for fun, or, better yet, as party houses/locations where men come to let loose, let out steam, enjoy themselves for a few hours, and then go back home, slowly forgetting about the night before. A party is a brief, momentary thing and this reflects how women’s bodies are seen and valued accordingly (Jesussek 333).

On the other hand, “Parties” from the subheading can be read as a legal term, where it is accentuated that female bodies are never really theirs because there are all these other parties involved. Machado herself says that the problem is that women’s bodies never exist in isolation. There is her body, and then there are all the other parties that feel they are entitled to it (Grady).

For example, in the scene where the protagonist of “The Husband Stitch” reveals to her husband she is pregnant, he forcefully restrains and taunts her by stroking her ribbon (Machado, *Her Body* 12). This act represents the sense of entitlement men feel they have over women’s bodies, and how control can be taken from women, whether in a big or a small manner. Even the narrator confesses how easily her partner could undo her ribbon in that moment if he wanted to (Machado, *Her Body* 13). It is a proof of how the relationship is not an equal exchange but instead a power dynamic, a situation in which the man has the upper hand and holds the woman’s life (quite literally) in his hands (Crane 8).

3.4 A matter of consent or How to tear her to ribbons

The green ribbon, such a minute detail, a simple adornment worn as a necklace, has brought such a violent and murderous plot in “The Husband Stitch.” Why, and what does it mean? Although it is not explicitly explained, one can assume that all women and only women wear ribbons in the short story. When the protagonist delivers her son and holds him for the first time, she utters: “No ribbon. A boy,” and later calls him the “unmarked baby” (Machado, *Her Body* 16). However, the woman from her painting class has a red ribbon around her ankle (Machado, *Her Body* 22), and she mentions another woman with a yellow ribbon around her finger that constantly tangles in her thread while she is sewing, making the whole process stressful and arduous (Machado, *Her Body* 27). The narrator’s own ribbon represents a number of things: firstly, given its placement on her throat it symbolizes her voice and the lack thereof; then, a secret piece of herself, cherished more than her body, which she gives to her husband of her own volition; and lastly, introducing all the other women with ribbons, it becomes more than a physical object – it represents an essential part of female identity that is sacred to femininity, guarded and never shared, not even with the husbands and the sons (Bi).

Every person, including women, is entitled to their own secrets and personal obscurities, but by neverendingly pressuring to touch and untie her ribbon, the protagonist's husband constantly forces her to surrender all her private thoughts, regardless of the cost. The ribbon as such marks the objectification of women, where though the colour and the position of the ribbon make it a slightly different experience for each woman, the undercurrent is the same – women live as prey, with risks and vulnerability just for being female (again a connection can be made to how the narrator was scared to ask about “the specific fears of raising a girl-child” (Machado, *Her Body* 22)) (*Literary Roadhouse* 00:29:48-00:31:17).

The fact that only women wear ribbons, and they keep their meaning secret, positions women and female sexuality as enigmatic in masculine discourse. Something that is so mysterious and against nature elicits hostility and violence from the protagonist's husband. This thin line he is forbidden from crossing provokes anger and prodding questions such as “Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?” (Machado, *Her Body* 20). Here the irony is present in the very colour of the ribbon, which is associated with vitality, whereas it is the bearer of death for the narrator. Symbolically and literally, it is merely a sign of what lies beneath the silky green fabric – a border that divides the protagonist's mind and body, and the only way she can hold herself complete is by keeping this last line of defence. Up until the moment she unties her ribbon, the narrator's husband has achieved his dominion over her sexually, but by the act of “beheading” she loses the last frontier of her mind, with her spirit and consciousness destroyed (Fisher).

Even though the protagonist allowed the removing of the ribbon, this decision cannot be imputed solely to her – despite her obvious pleas to leave it alone, for decades she was bullied by her husband to reveal the secrets of the ribbon, to let him touch it, thus wearing her down, so the consent for untying the ribbon in fact results from coercion. For this reason, the removing of the ribbon can be viewed as symbolic rape, representing the final dominion of her

husband over her. To further horrify the moment when the narrator's head falls off, Machado uses grotesque language, inserting stage directions and making the readers imagine that part of the skin "wet with blood and openings" as a gangrenous wound, or "smooth and neutered" as a pretty blow-up doll her husband reduced her to (Machado, *Her Body* 31). The husband is not the only threatening male in this short story: rape culture here passes from one generation to another as nothing is changed, so when the protagonist's son realizes his father's fascination with the ribbon, he then proceeds to forcibly remove it himself, forever losing his mother's trust (Machado, *Her Body* 21). As he grows up, the son meets a girl and announces to his parents his wish to marry (Machado, *Her Body* 28). One can only wonder whether his fiancé would meet the same fate as her mother-in-law.

Another approach to the symbolism of the ribbon would be to see it as the woman's personal identity and autonomy, a metaphor for her desire to maintain control over her life and her decisions. At the same time, the ribbon reflects gender roles and societal expectations surrounding women – despite her husband's insistence on untying the ribbon, the narrator refuses to do so, commenting on how women are expected to conform to specific norms and roles the society imposed on them without considering their wishes. Apart from gaining the pleasure of a secret revealed, in several instances it is hinted that the husband also receives sexual pleasure at the notion of untying the ribbon: "I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and end of his desires all etched there" (Machado, *Her Body* 30). The ribbon becomes the husband's fixation and the epitome of his lust, again reducing his wife to a mere sexual object (Jesussek 333).

In an exchange between the couple, after he had failed to remove the ribbon, the husband asks the protagonist why she is hiding it from him. She replies with a simple, yet a powerful statement: "I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours" – as part of her, she should decide what she wants to do with the ribbon, and despite the close marital relationship they share, her husband

has no place in this decision (Machado, *Her Body* 21). In Machado's reimagining of Alvin Schwartz's horror classic, the ribbon is not a simple scary trick but a condition of womanhood – "It's such a bother, isn't it?" another woman says of her ribbon, swearing and crying (Machado, *Her Body* 27). The narrator is a sexually compliant and domestically dutiful housewife, a parody of heteronormative perfection. The ribbon is her only secret, and she is killed because her husband does not let her have it. Essentially, "The Husband Stitch" is a horror story in which the real monster is the patriarchy and the idea of "the good life" in which for any kind of relationship (romantic, familial, business...) to be stable and long-lasting, the woman must conform to and obey the wishes of her partner, husband, father, or son (Robins). In one instance, the protagonist wonders whether "perhaps men have ribbons that do not look like ribbons", thereby questioning if men have secrets, hidden wishes, or mysterious pasts of their own (Machado, *Her Body* 21). With the ending of this short story, Machado has proven that men do not need ribbons for two reasons: first, they are not part of the shared female experience of life in horror, and second, sooner or later every man reveals his hidden side, the same way the narrator's husband, disguised as "a good man," uncovered his violent and ultimately murderous nature.

3.5 The afterbirth

In the beginning of the tale, Machado's protagonist claims "Everyone knows these stories – that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them – but no one ever believes them" (Machado, *Her Body* 6). The same could be said for the husband stitch, a medical procedure whose existence is rarely acknowledged by professionals due to the lack of official records and studies. It is an unsanctioned medical practice whereby an extra stitch is given to the patient after a vaginal birth in order to increase the sexual pleasure of a male partner, often

accompanied by pain upon intercourse. Suturing the perineum after a natural tear or episiotomy tightens the vaginal entrance, and it is often done without consulting the patient, what makes it one type of female genital mutilation. The mystery surrounding the procedure and the absence of evidence thereof, together with the narrator's insistence on fictional tales and urban legends, prompts the readers to question the validity of her words, thereby indoctrinating the audience into the very mentality Machado is critiquing (Corrigan). This type of body horror not only takes into account the fears of the body as a threat to itself, but also the fears of larger medical institutions laying claim over the very people and their bodies they swore to cure and protect, disregarding women's explicit decisions regarding their bodies and medicalising dissent (López 40).

While the protagonist is on the delivery table, under a haze of a powerful sedative, her husband asks the doctor: "How much to get that extra stitch? [...] You offer that right?" (Machado, *Her Body* 17). Despite the obvious lack of her consent, she is given the husband stitch rumoured to mimic the virginal tightness of a woman's body. When she wakes up, the doctor says: "You're all sewn up [...] Nice and tight, everyone's happy" (Machado, *Her Body* 17). The narrator has just given birth to another human, something neither man is capable of doing, yet she lies powerless at the hands of the two men (Krings). Apart from the blatant disregard for her wishes and giving precedence to her partner's sexual experience, the act of the husband stitch also symbolises castration of the wife by the hands of her husband through elimination of her agency and bodily autonomy (Fisher). Going back to the way the protagonist describes the place where her ribbon stood as "neutered," which is a synonym for castration, this becomes an indication of her husband stealing the ownership over her body, decapitating, as well as castrating her, as the final proof of her subjugation (Machado, *Her Body* 31).

3.6 Hush hush

In “The Husband Stitch,” the protagonist and all the other characters (even those from the urban legends) are nameless. What is more, the story starts with the narrator advising the readers on the use of different voices for the characters, the first-person narration making the voice more personal, as if a close friend was telling the story. The narrator’s own view of herself and her voice is “as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same,” and throughout the story she is careful so as not to reveal too much about herself (Machado, *Her Body* 3). However, the narrative unpacks a character riddled with trauma and stripped of everything: her mind, her sexuality, her body, and finally, her life. Conversely, “the boy who will grow into a man and be [the protagonist’s] spouse” is described as “robust with serendipity,” clearly distinct from the narrator’s “forgettable” description (Machado, *Her Body* 3). Here Machado points to the painfully obvious difference between the growth of a strong and healthy boy into a man, while the protagonist stays the same “high-pitched” person, reminiscent of a child and carrying a negative connotation. To this end, the narrator’s static presence is in direct opposition to the evolution of men, the only sign of movement reflected in her sexuality (Fisher).

The enforced silence of women’s voices and the idea of the story’s women as fixtures rather than growing beings is compounded further by the casting of the voices of “all other women” as “interchangeable with [the narrator’s] own” (Machado, *Her Body* 3). “The Husband Stitch” is narrated by an anonymous female (any, all women) who describes her interactions with males through many years of her life. She is nameless because her story may as well be the story of any other woman, it is interchangeable, and it shows how female experience is shared. The protagonist never reveals her true wishes: she is a housewife, with no other occupation. The readers only feel they know her in the moment of her lust (though in all her sexual encounters with her husband, not once it is acknowledged that she had an orgasm –

which again hints at how men's satisfaction is put first, disregarding women), as well as her fear to guard her ribbon and its secret. The narrator discloses only bits and pieces about herself, making it feel like she was a supporting character in her own life. The insertion of horror stories helps her avoid talking about herself, but it is perhaps the only way she believes she can bring the readers closer to herself and her own beliefs, the only way someone could get to know and understand her.

3.7 Storytelling and the credibility gap

Cautionary tales make up a large part of "The Husband Stitch," and with her revisionist myth making Machado puts the subject of storytelling as central to feminist discourse. By retelling legends that highlight the dangers of society and the misogyny that persists in the central institutions of marriage and motherhood, she demonstrates the epistemological value of storytelling in female experience and day-to-day survival (Hood 989). These tales are placed purposely as they bookend the narrator's trauma – when something harrowing happens to her, she offers the readers a story that reminded her of that part of her life (*Literary Roadhouse* 00:05:20-00:07:09). For instance, after retelling the childhood story of her father's distrust in seeing human toes in a market aisle, she describes a story about a girl who was pressured by her peers to venture into the cemetery at night (Machado, *Her Body* 9). What should have been a silly game resulted in her death, and her friends denied any wrongdoing by convincing themselves and everyone else she had wanted to die. In the end, the girl's peers reversed her story the same way the protagonist's father gaslighted her into disbelieving her own about (pota)toes. In this and many other examples, the narrator uses her own experience to bolster and inform her choice of urban legends, just as intertextuality informs the readers (Rousseau 87).

Most of the embedded stories are concerned with the female body, and, while sometimes not the primary focus, the body serves as a commentary on how the society perceives it, alluding to control, misogyny and gaslighting that construct the image of a female body. Furthermore, the tales that serve to pass down knowledge from one woman to another instil submission and chastity in women in a subversive way – just as people dismiss local legends and scary stories for any epistemological value they may contain, women are also ignored when they speak their truth. The tendency to doubt women and question their authority is prevalent, while the society relies only on that which can be proven by fact (Hood 990). The urban myths in the story examine sexuality, desire, knowledge, and motherhood, and their coinciding with the parts of the narrator's life she deems significant point to their didactic and instructive quality. By involving politics and subverting well-known fairy tales, Machado uses storytelling as a feminist re-evaluation of the knowledge transmitted, at the same time highlighting the epistemic value of oral tradition among women (Rousseau 84).

Machado explains her view of the urban legends: “There's like a knob being turned between what is there and what is not, and women [...] existing somewhere on this spectrum” (*Wheeler Centre* 00:24:18-00:27:36). By inserting tales of old and scary stories told around the campfire, while simultaneously making them about women and their unhappy endings, Machado further emphasizes the uncertainty and horror surrounding female lives, resulting in readers questioning the reality and truthfulness of even the main arc of the story – the narrator's. Numerous dark and bad omens surround the protagonist in “The Husband Stitch,” such as the fact that her husband sees her in her wedding dress before the wedding ceremony (Machado, *Her Body* 11), or her sewing skill (Machado, *Her Body* 27) that may allude to the Greek Fates, who control the destiny of all people by weaving a never-ending thread (Caruso). The protagonist's own destiny was eclipsed in the sentence her husband uttered after she refused to let him untie her ribbon: “A wife should have no secrets from her husband” (Machado, *Her*

Body 20), turning her into just one of countless cautionary tales about women. Following with the previous idea of reading “The Husband Stitch” as a modern Bible for women, the urban legends featured in it in a way create a darker, misogynistic, and satiric set of commandments, ultimately criticizing a society that readily absorbs and revels in creating fantasies of killing women who violate the rules (Fisher).

Moreover, Machado wants to draw attention to the problem with stories (about women), and women in general, and the credibility that fails to be assigned to them. Among the horror stories embedded in “The Husband Stitch,” there is one about a girl who visits Paris with her mother, who suddenly falls ill. When the daughter runs to get the cure and returns to the hotel they were staying in, she finds her mother is missing and no one remembers who she is. The situation throws her in a spiral and eventually the woman goes crazy due to gaslighting she experienced, wondering if she ever even had a mother (Machado, *Her Body* 19). Another story, which the narrator calls “a real classic,” recounts how a couple were kissing in a car parked next to a lake, when it was announced on the radio that a killer was on the loose from the local mental asylum. The news agitated the girl, who asked to leave the place, having an eerie feeling someone was watching them. The boyfriend disregarded her worrying, confident that there was nothing to be afraid of. Sure enough, right then they saw the killer through the car window (Machado, *Her Body* 29). It was already mentioned how even the narrator experienced male disbelief, when her father, the first man she knew, did not believe her story of seeing human toes in a market aisle. The urban myths in this short story are full of subverted truths and logic about women who speak out and are not believed and people making them feel crazy about it. In spite of their saturation in the society, the protagonist offers the readers *her* side of the female story, to explain how it has influenced her, and how it can affect other women too: “That may not be the version of the story you’re familiar with. But I assure you, it’s the one you need to know” (Machado, *Her Body* 24) (Caplan-Bricker).

3.8 The husband did it

Even though the narrator of “The Husband Stitch” somewhat embraces her sexuality throughout the story, her openness to sexual exploration does not go unpunished. It is true, she does get her wish and marries the man from the party, but she keeps one part of her body a secret from her husband: the green ribbon around her neck. The mysterious purpose of the ribbon is unknown to both the readers and her husband until the tragic ending of the short story. In this case, the female protagonist’s acceptance of her desire is punished twice: first by the extra stitch after childbirth which she is given to increase the male partner’s pleasure, and secondly by her death at the hands of her distrustful husband whose actions bring deadly consequences (López 42). Being the one part of her he cannot have access to, the protagonist’s husband questions the nature of the ribbon incessantly, unwavering in his determination to untie it (Krings). The narrator spends essentially her whole life trying to influence the blatant character of her husband, hoping he will relent and start respecting her boundaries, but she never manages to change him, with his tough disposition ultimately leading to her inevitable doom, much as is the case with the gothic tradition. More precisely, the past (here meaning his past attempts at her ribbon) always comes back to haunt the narrator, which is a typical psychoanalytical view of time in the Gothic – the past is always mobile, prone to return and disrupt present events; the gothic past never stays dead and is therefore never fully knowable (Wallace and Smith 18).

Despite the fact that the protagonist of “The Husband Stitch” dedicates her life to pleasing her husband, both emotionally and sexually, he still feels he deserves access to the ribbon, has the right to know. This masculine persistence in time becomes unbearable, so it comes to no surprise that the narrator eventually gives in to her husband’s ceaseless obsession.

Even after falling in love, getting married, raising a son, and sending him off into the world, milestone after milestone, the husband still insists on touching the ribbon. The narrator finally realizes nothing has changed and asks his confirmation: “Do you want to untie the ribbon? [...] After these many years, is that what you want of me?” When she despondently allows him to unravel the ribbon around her neck, he does so in a greedily joyful manner, reminiscent of that of a child who is given a treat: “[...] he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. “Yes,” he says. “Yes” (Machado, *Her Body* 30). His ultimate betrayal is infuriating and disappointingly poignant, telling the story of male privilege that destroys the only boundary the woman kept, the one thing she considered sacred, that which did not belong to him. Her simple question and his dogged persistence here only serve to magnify the male sense of entitlement: he believes he is entitled to her secret, he wants access to it; in other words, he wants to claim ownership of it, and by extension, of her (Bi).

The foreboding ending of this short story, in which the protagonist’s head falls off when her husband finally unties the ribbon, is at its root murder by microaggression, or more precisely for this case – femicide. The ribbon was holding the narrator’s head to her body, and when she allowed her husband access to that one private part of her, it resulted in her death. In this instance, Machado does not place emphasis on the husband’s reaction to his wife’s demise, simply because he is not the victim here. In essence, the author is saying that men are conditioned to believe they are entitled to whatever they want, no matter the cost. Women, on the other hand, are conditioned to believe they must surrender themselves to the desires of others, especially men. “The Husband Stitch” then shows how toxic masculinity and gender roles influence and destroy women, using the ending of the story as an example in which the perfect patriarchal woman dies as soon as she is created. With this short story, Machado admits to hoping that perhaps one day serious issues such as women being tightly stitched without

permission for their male partner's pleasure will be more commonly addressed, and that gender will not be a determinant of inequality (Krings).

3.9 A “new” generation of men

As previously explained, the first passage of “The Husband Stitch” in which the narrator suggests different voices to be used for male and female characters sets the tone for the entire story. Essentially, she communicates directly with the women who have been made smaller by the male figures in their lives. She describes herself as dainty and “forgettable,” to be “interchangeable” with all other women, while using powerful diction to embody the nature of male characters because it is implied by their gender alone (Machado, *Her Body* 3). Throughout the story, the protagonist chronicles her interactions with authoritative male figures as a way of uncovering their various methods of controlling her mind and body according to their patriarchal beliefs. As such, this work comments on how societal gender roles overemphasize female self-sacrifice and male aggression, which diminishes female independence and establishes inherently unbalanced marriage partnerships (Hadi).

3.9.1 The gaslighting father

Taking childhood as the starting point, the first male figure with whom the protagonist interacts is her own father, though she rarely mentions their relationship. Perhaps the most “extensive” study of his character is shown in the paragraph about toes in the market aisle, in which the father minimises her story's validity. Even though the narrator is certain she saw and felt human toes, her father undermines her experience and credibility, discrediting her role as a witness. At the same time, he establishes his credibility by virtue of his role as a patriarch,

despite being an outsider to the event. The protagonist concludes the retelling by reflecting on the nature of knowledge and its connection to age and maturity (Machado, *Her Body* 9), recognising that those in position of authority tend to minimize the credibility and discredit the personal experience of others deemed lesser by the patriarchy, especially children and women (Rousseau 69).

3.9.2 Husband the conqueror

Passing from one male gaze (father) to another (husband), the narrator also examines the nature of knowledge through the portrayal of her husband's obsession with touching, untying, and obtaining information about the ribbon on her neck. Those instances of his attacks become increasingly violent as their relationship progresses. Moreover, the protagonist juxtaposes her husband's questioning to the critical moments in their lives, most of which coincide with events of a sexual nature. By continuously connecting his repeated attempts at her with sexuality, the narrator aligns her husband's behaviour to that of sexual violence and the desire to conquer and control the female body. Since the ribbon is inherently female, any attack upon it may be recognised as misogynistic and dominating (Rousseau 69). Right from the partner's first interaction with the ribbon, one can sense the problem of neglecting consent in his treatment of it ("he reaches out his hand" to touch the ribbon, without asking her permission) (Machado, *Her Body* 4). His conquering attitude forces the protagonist to physically stop him from invading her body: "I seize it and press it away" (Machado, *Her Body* 4). In another instance, the narrator's then boyfriend asks about the ribbon again: "May I touch it? [...] I want to touch it" (Machado, *Her Body* 6). The shift from "may I" to "I want" demonstrates his indifference to her consent and affirmation of his own selfish desires. Since he has already obtained some information about her body through intercourse, he feels he is

entitled to knowing everything about that body and the ribbon, which proves an especially infuriating secret (Rousseau 71).

The man's desire to untie the narrator's ribbon becomes increasingly brutal in the following milestones of their life together – right after she agrees to marry him, he confesses: “I feel like I know so many parts of you [. . .] and now, I will know all of them” (Machado, *Her Body* 9). Although there is no specific mention of the ribbon, its presence is implied in the “many parts” the soon-to-be husband wants to uncover. Seeing that he blurs the boundaries of sex and control, the ribbon is the last part of his lover he has not yet exposed. By marrying her, he expects this mystery to be revealed to him, gaining him full access to and control over her body. After their wedding, the husband becomes progressively angrier when met with resistance to his desire (Hood 1000). Right after the narrator reveals she is pregnant; he gives in to his need to touch the ribbon. Startled, the protagonist begs him to stop, and her husband releases her and “rolls on his back as if nothing has happened” (Machado, *Her Body* 13). In a dismissive move reminiscing of her father when he brushed off the story about (pota)toes in the market aisle, the husband invalidates her experience, silencing her and allowing for future violations of her body (Rousseau 74).

Much later, when their son is grown up and out of the house, the pair indulge in their awakened sexual desire, which again results in the husband touching the ribbon. The protagonist finally succumbs to his desire, followed by the realisation that her husband is not “a bad man at all [. . .] and yet—” (Machado, *Her Body* 30). Her husband is the perfect example of all the other males she heard about and interacted with in her life: she counts herself lucky for having him, he is good with their son, wants to provide for the family, he treats her as the most beautiful woman in the world – all this making her believe this is as good as it can get. She concludes that her husband is not a singularly evil man, nor a tyrant, and even when he unties the ribbon, it hurts her the most that he is one of the good ones. That is why his behaviour

is even scarier: she is not imprisoned physically but is trapped within his perception of her and his epistemological drive to find out the truth about her ribbon. Ending her realisation with an ambiguous “and yet” indicates that there is still something about him that does not make him completely good. This revelation points to the narrator’s re-examination of her husband’s actions, as he behaves the same way she has learned all men do when confronted with female assertiveness. From her father’s gaslighting and her teacher’s abuse, to the doctor’s deliberate ignorance of her needs as she gives birth, all the men she has known have wanted and managed to exert some control over her body.

As she watches him untie the ribbon, she disturbingly mentions that she does not “have to touch him to know that he grows at the thought” and that he “groans” as he unties the silky length (Machado, *Her Body* 30). Associating the untying of the ribbon with sexual arousal, he does not recognise his final invasion on her body as sexual violence but is instead driven by blind selfishness to possess her completely. The story’s ending follows all the other versions of the urban myths, and the protagonist’s husband finally gets what he wants: her body, without a head, and the ability to say no (Wilson 241). By allowing her husband to untie the ribbon, she does not simply acquiesce to his relentless demands but rather chooses to deny him access to her mind and body, thus forever preventing his dominion over her. Despite knowing she will perish when the ribbon is untied, she chooses death over living her whole life in fear of sexual violence. This way, her death should not be seen as capitulation but rebellion against the patriarchal society which wants to hold her captive in its oppressive norms (Rousseau 77).

3.9.3 The doctor’s traitorous complicity

The narrator’s relationship with her husband is one of the examples of the culture’s acceptance of sexual violence within the household. However, the interactions she has with the

doctor while giving birth and his complicity with the protagonist's husband show that even institutions such as hospitals, which exist to cure and protect people's bodies, can play an active role in upholding patriarchal control of women and their bodies (Rousseau 77). The scene in which the narrator gives birth is imbued with her overt awareness of corporeality, as well as her complete lack of control over the handling of her body. When the labour passes its twentieth hour, the protagonist starts to worry, asking: "What's happening?" but the doctor seems to ignore her; when her husband asks the same question, the doctor answers that he doubts she will deliver the baby naturally (Machado, *Her Body* 15). The gaslighting continues even after she gives birth, when the doctor disregards her implorations to the contrary and imposes a husband stitch upon her. In this scene, she is drugged but remains somewhat conscious during the dreaded procedure, hearing her husband and the doctor talking and joking. Significantly, "[n]either man turns his head toward [her]" while she mumbles her pleading for them to stop (Machado, *Her Body* 17). Although she wilfully demonstrates her wishes, it is to no avail (Hood 1001).

The birthing scene in this short story serves as an example of the extent of control that patriarchal male figures exert over the female body. The doctor's emphasis on what "may be best for everyone" (Machado, *Her Body* 15) upon deciding on the procedure is a blatant lie: the husband stitch performed on the narrator's body only sexually benefits her husband, who gets to relive the original moment of sexual conquest; for the narrator, the procedure necessitates a full year to recover completely and ruins her chance of having another baby. Because of her new status, that of a mother, the doctor, complicit with her husband, reverts the protagonist's body to what he deems to be its original purpose: that of a sexually usable, and thus controllable, object. The doctor's imposition of such a procedure is an act of violence that mirrors the husband's silencing of his wife's desires. By making her more sexually alluring, they justify their need to control female bodies (Rousseau 80).

3.9.4 What little hope the son brings

Ever since the birth of her son and their agreement for him to be born naturally and not be taken away from her body, the narrator sees her son as a part of her, her own person that cannot do anything wrong: “No one has ever done better,” she says about his performance in a school play (Machado, *Her Body* 27). Nevertheless, her notion of him changes as he gets older and becomes a man. This is obvious in the way he treats the ribbon around her neck: as a child, he is unconcerned by it, he understands it as an integral part of her and inspects it but “never in a way that makes [her] afraid” (Machado, *Her Body* 18). The son does not see the ribbon as a threat or a mystery to be revealed, but his behaviour changes after he witnesses a violent exchange between his parents. In one of the numerous hostile attempts at the protagonist, his father questions the secret of the ribbon, declaring that, as a wife, she should have none (Machado, *Her Body* 20). The day after the incident, the boy mirrors his father’s overstepping demeanour, a sign that the father has passed the sense of entitlement on to his son: “[O]ur son touches my throat and asks about my ribbon. He tries to pull at it” (Machado, *Her Body* 21). This autonomy, individuality is not a part of his mother anymore, it is an accessory, and he learns that from his father (*Morgo Mack* 00:17:14-00:22:36). His imitation of his father’s behaviour “pains” the narrator who must insist that the ribbon is “forbidden to him” (Machado, *Her Body* 21). As she shakes a can full of pennies to scare him away, she admits that “[s]omething is lost between [them]” and their relationship will never be the same (Machado, *Her Body* 21). The description of her son’s changing behaviour from unperturbant acceptance of the ribbon as a part of his mother to duplicating his father’s questioning about it acts as clear evidence that violence against women can be observed and assimilated (Jesussek 333).

As her son gets older, he starts losing his childish nature, and the narrator finds eerie ways to remind the readers of his upcoming “evolution” into a man. On one such occasion, the family is preparing to go trick-or-treating on Halloween, and the son is dressed as a tiny professor, clicking his pipe “in a way [she] find[s] unsettlingly adult” (Machado, *Her Body* 25). The protagonist’s realisation may point to her simply becoming aware that her son is growing too fast, like most parents feel, but it can also be seen as a glimpse of something bad to come, pointing to his impending manhood. The latter is confirmed in the next scene where the son realises his mother is not in costume, which makes him throw a tantrum (Machado, *Her Body* 25). This “bratty”, greedy and aggressive behaviour is present in both the son and the husband – they both presuppose that they are entitled to knowing everything about the narrator, and when this knowledge is refused and they do not get what they want, their true character comes to the surface; the son may still be forgiven as he is just a child, but there is no excuse for the hostile nature of the husband.

The protagonist has spent her whole life hearing various scary stories, fairy tales and urban myths, and now that she has a young boy, she can assume the position of the teller of stories. As stories can shape one’s identity, she hopes to raise her son into a better man by passing down folk tales (Machado, *Her Body* 26). Notably, these stories do not focus on girls and women, as do the urban legends strategically positioned in the narrative; rather, they feature broader themes and a wider ranging aim. She is aware that her husband “would forbid these stories” (Machado, *Her Body* 27), but she still continues telling them with the goal of educating her child into becoming a sensible, cautious human (Hadi). By deciding to avoid retelling the famous cautionary tales involving women, the narrator prevents her son from growing up believing his mother to be some kind of monster. This way, she does not only try to dismantle the patriarchal perception of women so ingrained in the society, but also further acknowledges

the importance of storytelling and creating discourse in order to shape young minds and new beliefs.

Nevertheless, despite all her efforts at raising him differently, her son inevitably grows up into a man like all the others she knows. This is obvious in the way the protagonist notices how “[h]e stops smelling like a child—milky-sweetness replaced with something sharp and burning, like a hair sizzling on the stove” (Machado, *Her Body* 27). The loss of his “milky-sweetness” may be connected to his separation from his mother, who provided him with milk, while the adjectives “sharp”, “sizzling”, and “burning” point to a potentially menacing future in which he adopts predatory masculinity. He develops a sense of independence as well, as “he stops asking for [his mother’s] stories” (Machado, *Her Body* 28). The son gets older, and the family is overjoyed when he shares the news of not only being accepted to college, but also of his plans to marry his girlfriend: “Such a good boy. Such a wonderful life to look forward to. Even the luckiest woman alive has not seen joy like this” (Machado, *Her Body* 28). Although the last scene in which the son is mentioned ends on a hopeful note, still present is the fear that the narrator’s initial statements come true, and her son adopts his father’s behaviour (Rousseau 83). Perhaps the hardest evidence for this theory lies in the first few paragraphs of the short story, in which she suggests reading the son’s voice the same “as [her] husband[’s]” (Machado, *Her Body* 3). Knowing the tragic ending of this short story, it is clear that Machado wonders whether men really change for the better, or whether the world is stuck in an endless loop in which boys grow up to be the exact replicas of their fathers. Since the story stops following the next part of the son’s life, the relationship with his fiancé, his marriage, and possible children, it is up to the readers to decide on their fate, depending on one’s own view of the society as a whole.

3.9.5 A good man is hard to find... and even harder to get rid of

As their son leaves for college, the parents indulge in their awakened sexual desire. Sprawled on the bed, the narrator wakes up to her husband probing the ribbon with his tongue (Machado, *Her Body* 30). She feels shocked and betrayed, and as he seems unresponsive to her calling him repeatedly by name, she resorts to a slight physical altercation, elbowing him in his side. She finally sees his face clearly in the dark of the room: “He looks confused and hurt, like my son the day I shook the can of pennies” (Machado, *Her Body* 30). Something clicks inside the protagonist, and she realises that he never really learned anything, he did not stop wanting to touch and untie the ribbon, and this obvious treason hurts her the most. What is more, she understands that the perpetrator of such relentless violence is not some unnamed monster, but also “not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would be a deep disservice to him” (Machado, *Her Body* 30). “He is not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt,” (Machado, *Her Body* 30) the narrator says in the moments before her death. This is exactly where the real terror of the story lies – not in the made-up monsters from the fairytales meant to scare children, but in the frivolity with which the protagonist’s agency over her own body is taken away by her lifetime partner and her doctor, otherwise caring, functional men. Casual misogyny and how it infiltrates every part of the society, even those believed to be protected by scientific objectivity, is the actual horror in this story (López 42).

The protagonist’s final realisation seems to leave more to be said about her husband: “He is not a bad man at all [...] And yet—” (Machado, *Her Body* 30). There is something missing in this sentence, something unsaid, a truth absent from the narrative. The readers are persuaded to look at the husband as a “good man,” and looking back at the beginning, one could easily be misled by seeing him as a symbol of her conquest, someone who she wanted to have, and so she got him. However, this is not the case. The truth lies in the stories she tells – the

stories about women in a patriarchal society who become either mere objects by losing agency over themselves and their bodies or monsters if they rebel against the system (Teutsch). With her sympathetic portrayal of men in this story – the father, teacher, doctor, husband, and son – Machado shows that even “good, loving men” are not exempt from violent and misogynistic transgressions, which is the root of fear in “The Husband Stitch.” Circling back on the importance of hearing, believing, and heeding to women’s words, she dramatizes the social horrors of the day and captures the intangible fear women have of not being believed and their experiences invalidated or called into question, not just from acquaintances or strangers, but from the people closest to them (Bi).

In the last scene of the story, the husband unties the ribbon and the narrator’s head falls off. Her life ends with a last thought, “I feel as lonely as I have ever been” (Machado, *Her Body* 31), a painful reminder that, although aware of the pain and violence that befalls numerous girls and women in the stories before her, she is unable to prevent her own death (Hood 1001). Continuing with the aforementioned analysis, acknowledging that stories and legends frame the narrator’s attempts at survival, her death can be read as a last resort in the face of a patriarchal culture. In other words, her death should not be understood merely as fatalistic and inevitable, but more as a manifestation of agency since she is revoking her husband’s control over her body. The protagonist’s death then suggests that “[t]he problem is bigger than men [...] and lies in society’s complicity in disregarding a woman’s needs and its promotion of the idea of a sacrificial wife and mother that can only end in her own destruction” (Hood 1001). This allusion to rape culture as a systemic propagator of gendered violence places the narrator in the midst of a trap. It is from the confines of this trap that the narrator decides to abandon her ribbon, and her life, in a final bid for freedom (Rousseau 77).

4 “The Husband Stitch” – literary style and translation

Originally published in *Granta*, “The Husband Stitch” is the introducing story from the collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. On the process behind its creation, Machado says she wanted to write about a sexually adventurous mid-century housewife, along with rewriting Alvin Schwartz’s story about the girl with the green ribbon (Carroll). Schwartz’s collection *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* served as an inspiration for the stage directions, as well. Those horror stories that were told on camping trips when Machado was a Girl Scout were the ones that stuck with her throughout her whole life (Carroll). When the first draft was done, Machado realised that her original idea, along with the green ribbon story and the title all had a common ground, as if they were speaking to each other. She then carefully selected urban myths that could be retold and serve the same narrative, since “urban legends (and folktales, and fairy tales) have this way of showing us what we already know to be true,” thus the retellings to reflect that idea (Nilsen). The result is a genre-bending story that does not conform to the traditional narrative structure, but reconstructs and re-establishes it, while at the same time serving as a social critique, inviting readers to actively engage with the story, piecing the puzzle together as they see fit (Weeks).

4.1 Womanhandling

The original tale of the girl with the green ribbon is only a few paragraphs long, but “The Husband Stitch” turns it into a chilling, sexual, feminist allegory, full of stage directions and various urban legends. When it comes to the writing, Machado at times dips into science fiction, psychological realism, fantasy, and fairy tales in such a way that makes it impossible to predict when and whether a certain romance scene will turn into a horror story or vice versa

(Petrilla). In one interview, the writer mentions how she views benevolent sexism as influential and detrimental, a note she wanted to strike in *Her Body and Other Parties*: the story structure allowed her to convey that idea in a manner that was faithful to her beliefs (Nilsen).

Another important theme for Machado was female desire – a topic she claims is so often explored by older, straight white men. She mentions noticing the lack of female writers explicitly writing about sex and their works not being marketed as strictly erotica or romance or women’s fiction. Her opinion is that the audience is culturally used to reading about female desire from the perspective of a male writer and that this exclusivity has led to a large number of unwritten or unsold or unpublished or mislabeled female-authored literary fiction about sex (Bergman). Hence the need to write a female character interested in sex, articulate in expressing her desire and feelings freely. Machado’s intention was to write sex as something that happens casually and is not commented upon – “it just is what it is” – explicit sex in literary fiction not as the main plot, but as a plot device whose purpose is deepening the characterization as any other stylistic choice would do. For this reason, she is adamant in dismissing the view of “The Husband Stitch” as erotica: “The story is not serving the sex, the sex is serving the story” (Kane).

Taking into account the importance of showing desire, bodies, and sex from a female perspective in the original short story of “The Husband Stitch,” it was necessary to approach translation in the same way. This feminist approach to translation, by which feminist translators are urged to flaunt their presence and agency in the text, participating actively in the creation of its meaning, was coined by Barbara Godard as *womanhandling*. The said process removes the age-old veil of women’s and translator’s public and literary invisibility, and in turn makes them and their work more apparent (Godard 95). Reading the short story as a feminist Bible of sorts and keeping in mind that the narrator addresses the audience directly, especially during the stage directions, it was the translator’s choice to translate the work as directed to female

reader(s). The decision is further reaffirmed by the fact that the story features particular moments of intuition and reserve where it does not quite disclose what the narrator is trying to say, invoking the sense of female community. Take, for instance, the last sentence from one of the urban myths in “The Husband Stitch”: “I don’t need to tell you the moral of this story. I think you already know what it is” (Machado, *Her Body* 19). Apart from the idea that not knowing means nothing is closed off to a single meaning, in other words – you will know without explicitly being told because you are female, you have been through this or similar situations and/or definitely know someone who has been through it.

What this means upon taking the task of translation, particularly with the abundance of sexual content in the story, is avoiding producing something that will fall into the category of erotica and consequently be deemed less worthy than a work of (men’s) fiction. Furthermore, as Croatian is not rich in sexual vocabulary, there is a fine line between a text seen as pure porn due to its use of explicit language, and one that is far too tame in its representation of sex, as are the grandma-directed smutty short stories found in lady magazines such as *Gloria*. This fine line, the golden mean that would indicate a valuable work of art that perfectly encompasses what it is to be a woman who openly talks about and practises sex, is what the translator tried to achieve. That included choosing the tone and the register of the explicit scenes so as not to catch the eye of a reader, following the writer’s aim of sex not standing out. On the other hand, speaking of the feminist aspect of the story, sometimes the translator’s involvement in the text meant opting for the more “marked” word(s), as was the case with some parts of the original text. For example, the noun “lake”, which is usually neuter in English, has feminine gender in the short story: “[...] I will tell you the stories about this lake and her creatures” (Machado, *Her Body* 6); the translator believes this was a purposeful decision of the writer. Similarly, after the scene in which the protagonist gives birth and is subjected to the process of the husband stitch, the doctor tells her: “You’re all sewn up, don’t you worry [...] Nice and tight, everyone’s

happy” (Machado, *Her Body* 17). Instead of the direct translation of “zašili smo vas/zašiveni ste”, the translator chose “zakrpani ste”, a verb of pejorative meaning, in line with the misogynistic belief that a woman’s body is irreparably damaged after giving birth.

4.2 Horror and sex – a character study

When asked about being recognised as a genre-bending author, Machado mentioned the disdain she felt for the boundaries of genre:

A lot of people think of genre as having power over them. It’s quite the opposite, actually. Subversion is the point: When a reader expects a thing to be one way, I can take that and run the other direction with it, and use that expectation to create a really dramatic effect. (Sojit Pejcha)

This resistance to the limits of genre is precisely the reason why sex and horror are so intimately entwined in Machado’s works, especially in “The Husband Stitch.” According to the writer, both are very telling character studies: “Through both pleasure and fear, you access hidden parts of the psyche. And horror is the same way [...]” (Sojit Pejcha). Therefore, translating scary stories and urban legends in the text not only meant maintaining the eerie feel persistent through the story, but also recreating the same mood during the more sensual scenes. This is to say, there is something wicked in the way the narrator talks about sex and desire in “The Husband Stitch,” as if it was dangerous and sick for a woman to want it that much. After retelling a story about a woman who was sent to a sanatorium after expressing her desire to her lover, the protagonist wonders: “[...] I don’t know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?” (Machado, *Her Body* 4). The adjective “deviant” was translated as “nastrane,” and the “vile” thing she asked for as “izopačeno,” maintaining the

same menacing tone as in the original. The sexual side of her partner is described as dark and violent, as well – right from the first time they kiss and touch, this is illustrated with intense imagery and verbs such as “seize,” “press,” and “pushing open” (Machado, *Her Body* 4). After knowing how tragically the story ends, one might say that the main plot of “The Husband Stitch” is an urban legend in itself, especially after noticing how the narrator prepares the readers for a horror ending right from the start. For instance, with a sentence such as “It is not normal that a girl teaches her boy [...]” when describing the start of her relationship with her future husband, in which the words “not normal” (translated as “nije normalno”) stand out as an ominous presence. Likewise, the protagonist hints at her own unhappy ending when explaining that “[b]rides never fare well in stories,” as she herself is a bride-to-be (Machado, *Her Body* 11).

4.3 A story with a kick

Speaking of syntax, Machado’s sentences tend to be longer and are usually written in present tense, both of which proves difficult in translation. The writer is also very well versed in creating suspense mid-sentence, namely by adding (many) prepositional phrases, as is the case with “I have imagined a lot of things in the dark, in my bed, beneath the weight of that old quilt, but never this, and I moan” (Machado, *Her Body* 4). The three prepositional phrases here create a delay that temporarily prevents the reader from reaching the independent clause and with it the resolution of the sentence. Breaking the sentence down, one finds that it is comprised of two simple sentences: “I have imagined a lot of things” and “I moan.” Neither are particularly surprising, but what makes the sentence art, what makes it “kick”, are exactly the prepositional phrases Machado uses as temporary stop between the first and the second independent clause. The writer did not have to stop at just three; adding more dependent clauses would mean raising

more suspense in an already anxiety-ridden story. Nevertheless, while long sentences read easily in English or Spanish, in Croatian they are not custom, which meant that the translator's intervention sometimes included rearranging or breaking up larger sentences and clauses. There is a sense of rhythm in the text, as well – at the beginning of the story, the sentences are long and the retellings abundant, whereas in the second part of the plot (especially as the narrator's son gets older), the sentences become shorter and scarier, making the reader feel as if the protagonist is running out of time to tell her story. Which, in fact, is true due to her untimely death.

All the characters in the story are unnamed, since Machado writes a lot of first-person texts and does not necessarily believe her characters' names need to be spoken (Davis). This fact proved to be another translating challenge, since unnamed characters sound odd in Croatian and the lack of a subject in the sentence confuses the reader as to who the performer of a certain action is, thus the resort to using personal pronouns where necessary to clarify any possible doubts. To conclude, "The Husband Stitch" is a short but complex work that deals with urban legends, stage directions, and female desire, all usually regarded as low-brow or middle-brow concepts. The aim of the translator was to keep all the story's elements and themes, whilst also transforming the work into something of literary value in Croatian.

4.4 Translation of the short story

ŠAV ZA MUŽA

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, molim te obrati pažnju na sljedeće glasove:

JA: kao dijete, piskutava, neprimjetna; kao žena, također.

DJEČAK KOJI ĆE IZRASTI U MUŠKARCA I POSTATI MI SUPRUGOM: muževan, pršti od sreće.

MOJ OTAC: drag, prodoran; poput tvog oca, ili pak poput čovjeka kojeg bi željela za oca.

MOJ SIN: kao malo dijete, nježan, blago frfljav; kao muškarac, isti kao moj suprug.

SVE DRUGE ŽENE: istog glasa kao i ja.)

U početku znam da ga želim prije no što to on zna. Ovako se to inače ne radi, ali tako ću ja to napraviti. Imam sedamnaest godina i s roditeljima sam kod susjede na zabavi. U kuhinji popijem pola čaše bijelog vina s njenom kćerkom mojih godina. Moj otac ne primijeti. Sve postane meko, poput svježeg ulja na platnu.

Taj mladić mi je okrenut leđima. Promatram mišiće na njegovu vratu i gornjem dijelu leđa, kako se rasteže u košulji zakopčanoj do grla, poput radnika odjevenog za ples, i to me uzbudi. Nije da nemam izbora. Predivna sam. Imam lijepe usne. Imam grudi koje se prelijevaju iz haljina na način koji je u isto vrijeme nevin i perverznan. Dobra sam djevojka, iz dobre obitelji. Ali on je malo grub, kako to muškarci znaju biti, a ja to želim. Izgleda kao da bi i on mogao željeti isto.

Jednom sam čula priču o djevojci koja je od svog dragog tražila nešto toliko izopačeno da ju je izdao njenoj obitelji pa su je poslali u sanatorij. Ne znam kakve je nastrane užitke tražila, premda me očajnički zanima. Koju to čarobnu stvar moraš tako jako željeti da te zbog toga pošalju izvan poznatog svijeta?

Mladić me primijeti. Čini se sladak, smeten. Pozdravi me. Upita me kako se zovem.

Uvijek sam željela odabrati svoj trenutak, i ovo je trenutak koji biram.

Poljubim ga vani na terasi. On mi uzvratu, isprva nježno, a onda jače, pomalo gurajući jezik u moja usta, što me iznenadi, a, čini mi se, možda i njega. Mnoge sam stvari zamišljala u mraku, u svom krevetu, pod teretom onog starog popluna, ali nikad ovo, i uzdahnem. Na to se povuče kao prepadnut. Oči mu na trenutak nervozno polete lijevo i desno prije nego što se smire na mom vratu.

„Što ti je to?“ upita me.

„Ovo?“ Dotaknem vrpca na potiljku. „Ma, samo vrpca.“ Prijeđem prstima cijelom dužinom preko njene sjajno zelene tkanine i zaustavim se na zategnutoj mašni s prednje strane. On posegne za njom, ali ja ga zaustavim i odgurnem.

„Ne, ne smiješ“, kažem. „Ne diraj to.“

Prije no što se vratimo u kuću, upita može li me ponovno vidjeti. Rado, odgovorim. Te noći prije nego zaspem, ponovno ga zamišljam, njegov mi jezik silom otvara usta, i moji mi prsti klize niz tijelo i zamišljam da je tu, samo mišić i žudnja da zadovolji, i znam da ćemo se vjenčati.

* * *

I jesmo. Mislim, doći ćemo do toga. Ali najprije me po mraku automobilom odveze do močvarnog jezera negdje daleko od svega. Ljubi me i grabi za dojku, dok mi se bradavica uvija pod njegovim prstima.

Nisam zapravo sigurna što će napraviti prije samog čina. Tvrd je i vruć i suh i miriše na kruh, a kad me slomi vrisnem i uhvatim se za njega kao da sam izgubljena na pučini. Tijelo mu se spoji s mojim i on gura, gura, a prije kraja izađe iz mene i završi sklizak od moje krvi. Opčinjava me i uzbuđuje taj ritam, opipljivost njegove potrebe, jasnoća njegova otpuštanja.

Poslije klone u sjedalo, dok ja osluškujem zvukove jezera: gnjurce i zrikavce i nešto što me podsjeti na prebiranje po žicama bendža. Preko vode diže se vjetar i hladi me.

Ne znam što dalje. Osjećam kako mi srce kuca među nogama. Sada boli, ali čini mi se da bi poslije moglo biti i dobro. Prstima ispitujem svoje tijelo i odnekud osjetim trnce požude. Njegovo se disanje utiša i shvatim da me gleda. Koža mi sjaji pod mjesečinom koja ulazi kroz prozor. Uхватim ga kako me promatra i znam da mogu ovladati tom požudom, kao da mi vršci prstiju golicaju sam kraj vrpce balona koji samo što nije odlebdio izvan dohvata. Hvatam i uzdišem i puštam da me val nosi polagano i glatko, čitavo vrijeme susprežući dah.

„Ja bih još“, kaže, ali ništa ne započne. Okrene se k prozoru, a ja slijedim njegov pogled. *Tko zna što je sve tamo vani, u tami*, pomislim. Muškarac s kukom umjesto ruke. Sablasni autostoper koji vječno ponavlja isto putovanje. Starica prenuta iz spokoja svog zrcala, prizvana dječjim glasovima. Svi znaju ove priče; odnosno, svi ih prepričavaju, premda ih ne znaju, ali nitko im nikad ne vjeruje.

Njegove oči odlutaju preko vode i vrte se na mene.

„Pričaj mi o svojoj vrpci“, kaže.

„Nema se tu što reći. To je samo vrpca.“

„Smijem li je dotaknuti?“

„Ne.“

„Želim je taknuti“, kaže. Prsti mu se trznu, a ja skupim noge i ispravim se na sjedalu.

„Ne.“

Površina jezera se namreška i nešto izmigolji na površinu, pa padne uz pljusak. On se okrene prema zvuku.

„Riba“, odvrati.

„Jednom ću ti“, kažem, „ispričati priče o ovom jezeru i njenim stvorenjima.“

Nasmiješi mi se i počese bradu. Malo moje krvi zamrlja mu lice, ali on to ne primijeti, pa ja ne kažem ništa.

„Volio bih to, zaista“, odgovori.

„Odvezi me kući“, kažem. Poslušao kao pravi džentlmen.

Te noći, dok se perem, svilenkasta sapunica između mojih nogu podsjeća i miriše na hrđu, ali ja sam novija no ikad.

Mojim roditeljima jako se sviđa. Drag je momak, kažu. Odrast će u dobrog muškarca. Pitaju ga za posao, hobije, obitelj. On čvrsto stisne ruku mog oca, a majku zaspe komplimentima zbog čega se ona hihoće i crveni poput djevojčice. Dolazi kod mene dvaput tjedno, ponekad tri. Moja ga majka pozove na večeru, a dok jedemo zabijem nokte u meso njegova bedra. Kad se sladoled u zdjelici pretvori u lokvu, kažem roditeljima da ću ga otpratiti niz cestu. Pobjegnemo u noć, slatko se držeći za ruke dok iz vida ne izgubimo kuću. Odvučem ga među drveće, a kad naiđemo na malu čistinu, svučem čarape i ponudim mu se na sve četiri.

Čula sam sve priče o djevojkama poput mene i ne bojim se stvoriti ih još. Čujem metalnu kopču njegova remena i šuškanje hlača dok padaju na tlo, i tada na sebi osjetim njegovu tvrdoću. Preklinjem ga, „Bez odugovlačenja“, i on me poslušao. Dahćem i nabijam se na njega, na toj čistini postajemo životinje dok se jecaji mog užitka i njegove iznenadne sreće udružuju i rasipaju u noći. Učimo, on i ja.

Dva su pravila: ne smije završiti u mene i ne smije dirati moju zelenu vrpču. Istroši se u zemlju, *pljus-pljus-pljuskajući* kao prve kapi kiše. Red je na meni, ali moji su prsti sada prljavi

od zabijanja u zemlju poda mnom. Navučem gaćice i čarape. On se tiho oglasi i uperi prstom, a ja shvatim da su mi ispod najlonki i koljena skorena od zemlje. Skinem čarape i otresem prljavštinu, pa ih opet obučem. Izgladim suknju i popravim frizuru. Jedan je pramen od napora pobjegao iz njegovih zaglađenih kovrča pa ga vratim na mjesto. Šetamo do potoka gdje dlanove prepustim struji dok opet ne postanu čisti.

Laganim hodom vraćamo se kući, nevino se držeći pod ruku. U kući, majka je pripremila kavu, pa svi sjednemo zajedno dok ga otac ispituje o poslu.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, zvukovi s čistine najbolje se mogu prikazati tako da duboko udahneš i zadržiš dah. Onda otpusti sav dah odjednom, dopuštajući svojim plućima da se uruše u sebe poput zgrade sruvane sa zemljom. Ponovi ovo više puta, skraćujući vrijeme između kojeg zadržavaš i puštaš dah.)

* * *

Oduvijek sam pričala priče. Kad sam bila mala, majka me iznijela iz trgovine jer sam vrištala zbog ruku na odjelu voća i povrća. Zabrinute žene okretale su se i gledale kako se ritam i udaram po majčinim vitkim leđima.

„Jabuke!“ ispravila me kad smo se vratile kući. „Ne *juke!*“ Rekla mi je da ostanem sjediti na svojoj stolici (dječjoj verziji, napravljenoj za mene) dok se otac ne vrati. Ali ne, ja sam vidjela ruke, blijede i krvave batrljke, pomiješane sa sortom *Idared*. Jedna od njih, ona koju sam dotaknula vrškom kažiprsta, bila je hladna kao led, i poput žulja popustila je pod mojim dodiranjem. Kad sam ovo prepričala majci, nešto se iza njenog pogleda naglo trznulo poput preplašene mačke.

„Ne mrdaj“, rekla mi je.

Otac se te večeri vratio s posla i poslušao moju priču, sve do zadnjeg detalja.

„Upoznala si g. Barnsa, zar ne?“ upitao me, misleći na starijeg gospodina, vlasnika trgovine.

Vidjela sam ga jednom i to sam mu i rekla. Imao je kosu bijelu kao nebo pred snijeg i suprugu koja je znala pisati akcijske cijene koje su lijepili na izlog trgovine.

„Zašto bi g. Barns prodavao ruke?“ otac me upitao. „Gdje bi ih nabavio?“

Bila sam mlada i, s obzirom na to da nisam razmišljala o grobljima i mrtvačnicama, nisam mu znala odgovoriti.

„Čak i da ih je uspio negdje naći“, otac je nastavio, „što bi postigao prodavajući ih pod jabuke?“

Bile su tamo. Vidjela sam ih vlastitim očima. Ali očeva kristalno jasna logika probudila je u meni crva sumnje.

„I, što je najvažnije“, zaključio je moj otac, pobjedonosno stigavši do svog konačnog dokaza, „zašto nitko osim tebe nije primijetio da su to ruke?“

Sad kad sam odrasla žena, ocu bih rekla kako na ovom svijetu postoje stvarne stvari koje može opaziti samo jedan par očiju. Ali kako sam bila samo djevojčica, pristala sam na njegovu verziju priče i nasmijala se kad me podigao sa stolice i poljubio na odlasku.

Nije normalno da djevojka uči svog dragog, ali samo mu pokazujem što želim, što mi se vrti u glavi kad zatvorim oči i tonem u san. Vrlo brzo nauči čitati moje izraze lica dok me prožima žudnja, a ja se pred njim ne suzdržavam. Kad mi kaže da želi moja usta, cijelu dužinu mog grla, naučim se ne gušiti i uzimam ga cijelog, uzdišući njegovu slanoću. Kad me pita koja je moja najgora tajna, ispričam mu za učitelja koji me sakrio u ormar dok se učionica nije ispraznila i natjerao me da mu ga držim, i kako sam poslije kući dlanove ribala spužvom od čelične vune

sve dok nisu prokrvarili. To me prisjećanje toliko razljuti i osramoti da nakon toga mjesecima imam noćne more. A kad me zaprosi nekoliko dana prije mog osamnaestog rođendana, kažem mu da, da, molim te, i sjednem mu u krilo na toj klupici u parku, raširivši suknju kako prolaznici ne bi shvatili što se ispod zaista događa.

„Poznajem toliko tvojih dijelova“, kaže mi s prstima u meni, susprežući dahtanje. „A sad ću ih znati sve.“

Ima jedna priča o djevojci koja je na nagovor prijatelja po mraku otišla na obližnje groblje. U ovom je pogriješila: rekli su joj da će ako usred noći stane na nečiji grob probuditi mrtvaca koji će je zgrabiti i povući za sobom, a ona se na to samo narugala. Ruganje je prva greška koju žena može napraviti.

„Život je prekratak da bi se bojali“, rekla je, „pokazat ću vam.“

Ponos je druga greška.

Može ona to, uvjerala je samu sebe, jer nema šanse da je zadesi takva sudbina. Dali su joj nož koji je trebala zabiti u hladnu zemlju kako bi dokazala svoju prisutnost i teoriju.

Otišla je do tog groblja. Neki tvrde da je grob izabrala nasumce. Ja vjerujem da je izabrala jedan vrlo stari zbog vlastite nesigurnosti i uvjerenja da će, u slučaju pogreške, netaknuti mišići i meso svježeg trupla biti opasniji nego oni stoljećima stariji.

Kleknula je na grob i nož zarila duboko u zemlju. Pripremila se na trk (jer nije bilo nikoga kome bi lagala da se ne boji), kad je shvatila da ne može pobjeći. Nešto ju je zgrabilo. Jauknula je i pala na zemlju.

Svanulo je i njeni su prijatelji stigli na groblje. Našli su je mrtvu na grobu, a njenu vunenu suknju oštricom čvrsto pribijenu u zemlji. Je li umrla od straha ili hladnoće, zar je to

roditeljima bitno? Nije bila u krivu, ali to više nije bilo važno. Poslije su svi mislili da je željela umrijeti iako je umrla dokazujući da želi živjeti.

Ispostavilo se da je biti u pravu treća i najveća greška.

Moje roditelje obraduje vijest o zarukama. Majka kaže da, iako se djevojke danas počinju sve kasnije udavati, ona se za mog oca udala s devetnaest, i drago joj je što je to učinila.

Kad odaberem vjenčanicu, sjetim se priče o mladoj ženi koja je sa svojim dragim htjela ići na ples, ali nije si mogla priuštiti ništa novo. Kupila je dražesnu bijelu haljinu u trgovini rabljenom odjećom, a poslije se razboljela i preminula. Liječnik koji ju je pregledao dok je bila na samrti otkrio je da je umrla zbog izloženosti tekućini za balzamiranje. Ispostavilo se da je jedan bezobziran pogrebnikov pomoćnik ukrao haljinu s trupla neke mladenke.

Po meni, poruka je ove priče da će te siromaštvo ubiti. Stoga na svoju haljinu potrošim više nego što sam namjeravala, ali prekrasna je, i radije bih je kupila nego umrla. Dok je slažem u kovčeg za miraz, razmišljam o mladenki koja se na dan svog vjenčanja igrala skrivača pa se sakrila na tavan, u stari sanduk koji se zaključao kad je ušla i više se nije mogao otvoriti. Ostala je ondje zarobljena dok nije umrla. Ljudi su mislili da je pobjegla sve dok godinama poslije sluškinja nije našla njen kostur u bijeloj haljini, skupljen u tom mračnom prostoru. U pričama mladenke nikad ne prođu dobro. Priče mogu namirisati sreću i ugušiti je kao svjetlost svijeće.

Vjenčamo se u travnju, na jedno neuobičajeno hladno popodne. On me vidi u haljini prije vjenčanja i ne može se oduprijeti strastvenim poljupcima i zavlačenju u moj korzet. Kad se ukruti, kažem mu da iskoristi moje tijelo kako želi. S obzirom na okolnosti ukinem prvo pravilo. Gurne me uza zid i raširi dlan preko pločice pored mog vrata, da se uravnoteži. Njegov palac okrzne moju vrpcu. Ne miče dlan i dok se probija u mene ponavlja: „Volim te, volim te,

volim te.“ Ne znam jesam li prva žena koja hoda do oltara crkve sv. Jurja dok joj se sjeme cijedi niz nogu, ali volim vjerovati da jesam.

Za medeni mjesec odemo na putovanje po Europi. Nismo bogati, ali snalazimo se. Europa je kontinent priča, a ja ih učim između konzumiranja braka. Putujemo iz živahnih drevnih metropola do uspavanih sela i alpskih koliba i natrag, pijemo žestoka pića i zubima pečeno meso trgamo s kostiju, hranimo se špeclima, maslinama, raviolima i kremastim žitaricama kojima ne znam ime, ali ih želim svako jutro. Ne možemo si priuštiti spavaći kupe u vlaku, pa moj suprug podmiti konduktera za jedan sat u praznoj sobi, i na taj se način združimo prelazeći Rajnu, dok me suprug drži prikovanu uz klimavi okvir i zavija kao nešto iskonskije od planina oko nas. Shvaćam da ovo nije cijeli svijet, ali počinjem ga otkrivati. Nove me mogućnosti uzbuđuju.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, zvuk kreveta pod pritiskom željezničkog prijevoza i vođenja ljubavi možeš stvoriti sklapajući i rasklapajući metalnu stolicu. Kad te to umori, onome tko ti je najbliži pjevaj napola zaboravljeni tekst starih pjesama i sjeti se dječjih uspavanki.)

Prestanem krvariti ubrzo nakon puta. Jednu večer to obznanim suprugu, dok ležimo znojni i ispruženi na krevetu. On zrači oduševljenjem.

„Dijete“, odgovori i stavi ruke pod glavu. „Dijete.“ Toliko je dugo tih da pomislim kako je zaspao, ali kad se okrenem, vidim da su mu oči otvorene i uperene u strop. Okrene se na bok i zagleda u mene.

„Hoće li i dijete imati vrpču?“

Osjetim kako mi se čeljust napinje i nehotice okrznem svoju mašnu. Premišljam se oko odgovora, pa se odlučim na onaj koji me najmanje ljuti.

„Ne može se sa sigurnošću reći“, napokon mu odgovorim.

Tada me uplaši uhvativši me za vrat. Dignem ruke da ga zaustavim, ali snažan je i jednom me rukom uhvati za zapešća, a drugom posegne za vrpcom. Palcem pritišće svilu. Nježno dotakne mašnu, kao da mi masira spolovilo.

„Molim te“, kažem mu. „Molim te, nemoj.“

Kao da me ne čuje. „Molim te“, ponovim glasnije, ali glas mi se slomi.

Mogao je to tada napraviti, odvezati vrpцу, da je htio. Ali pusti me i prevrne se na leđa kao da se ništa nije dogodilo. Zapešća me bole, pa ih trljam.

„Treba mi čaša vode“, kažem. Ustanem i odem do kupaonice. Odvrnem slavinu, pa mahnito provjeravam vrpцу, očiju punih suza. Mašna je još uvijek čvrsto svezana.

Ima jedna priča koju volim a koja govori o osamljenom bračnom paru kojeg su ubili vukovi. Susjedi su našli tijela rasporena i razasuta po njihovoj sićušnoj kolibi, ali nikad nisu pronašli njihovu novorođenu kćer, ni živu ni mrtvu. Neki su tvrdili da su je vidjeli kako trči s čoporom vukova i juri po terenu divlje i neukroćeno poput svojih suputnika.

Vijesti o njoj širile bi se po selima nakon svakog viđenja. Kažu da je jedne zime u šumi napala lovca; prava je istina da je lovca prestrašila sićušna gola djevojka koja je kesila zube i zavijala tako neprirodno da mu je utjerala strah u kosti. Pričalo se i o mladoj ženi u dobi za udaju koja je pokušala oboriti konja. Viđena je čak i kako čerupa i trga cijelu kokoš.

Mnogo godina poslije vidjeli su je kako odmara među trstikom pored riječnog korita i doji dva vučja mladunca. Želim vjerovati da su proizašli iz njenog tijela, jedan jedini slučaj u kojem je vučja vrsta okaljala ljudsku. Sigurno su joj zakrvavili grudi, ali nije joj smetalo jer su bili njeni i samo njeni. Zamišljam kako je u kontaktu s njihovim njuškama i zubima našla neku vrstu utočišta, mira koji nigdje drugdje ne bi mogla pronaći. Mora da joj je s njima bilo bolje nego što bi joj inače bilo. U to sam sigurna.

* * *

Mjeseci prolaze, a moj trbuh raste. U meni, naše dijete mahnito pliva, udara i gura i grebe. U javnosti, daščem i posrćem, držim se za trbuh i kroz zube ponavljam Malcu (to je moj nadimak za bebú) da prestane. Jednom se spotaknem u šetnji parkom, istim onim u kojem me suprug zaprosio godinu dana prije, pa padnem na koljena, zadihana i na rubu plača. Prolaznica mi pomogne da sjednem i da mi vode, tješéći me da je prva trudnoća uvijek najgora, ali s vremenom postane lakše.

Zaista je najgora, ali zbog mnogočega drugog osim mog izmijenjenog oblika. Pjevam svom djetetu, i razmišljam o bapskim pričama o visokom i niskom trudničkom trbuhu. Nosim li u sebi dječaka, sliku i priliku svog oca? Ili djevojčicu, kćerku koja bi smekšala sinove koji bi slijedili? Jedinica sam, ali znam da najstarije kćeri razmaze svoju braću, a oni ih zauzvrat štite od opasnosti koje vrebaju — taj mi prešutni dogovor grije srce.

Moje se tijelo mijenja na neočekivane načine: dojke su mi velike i vruće, trbuh je prošaran blijedim tragovima, obrnutim od tigrovih. Sebi sam čudovišna, ali u suprugu pak ponovno budim želju, kao da je moj novi oblik proširio naš popis perverzija. Tako moje tijelo odgovara: u redu na blagajni, dok primam pričest u crkvi, obuzima me nova i divlja žudnja koja me tjera da se smočim i nabrekнем na najslabiju provokaciju. Svaki dan nakon posla, moj suprug kući dolazi spreman s mentalnim popisom stvari koje bi želio od mene, a ja sam voljna

pružiti mu što traži, pa i više, jer sam na rubu orgazma još otkako sam to jutro otišla kupiti kruh i mrkvu.

„Ja sam najsretniji čovjek na svijetu“, kaže on dok me gladi po truhu.

Ujutro me ljubi, dira i ponekad me uzme prije kave i tosta. Na posao odlazi laka koraka. Kući stiže s jednim promaknućem, pa drugim. „Više novca za obitelj“, kaže. „Više novca za našu sreću.“

Usred noći probude me trudovi, a svaki se milimetar moje unutrašnjosti prije otpuštanja savija u nečuven čvor. Vrištim kao što nisam vrištala od one noći pored jezera, ovaj put iz suprotnih razloga. Sada mi zadovoljstvo time što znam da moje dijete dolazi remeti nepopustljiva patnja.

Porodaj traje dvadeset sati. Suprugu gotovo otrgnem ruku, urlajući prostote koje izgleda ne šokiraju medicinsku sestru. Liječnik je uznemirujuće strpljiv dok zuri među moje noge, a njegove bijele obrve šalju nečitljiv Morseov kod preko cijeloga čela.

„Što se događa?“ upitam.

„Dižite“, on zapovijedi.

Budem li morala čekati još sekundu, uvjeren sam da ću vlastite zube zdrobiti u prah. Pogledam u supruga koji me poljubi u čelo i upita doktora što se događa.

„Nisam siguran da će ovo biti prirodan porod“, kaže liječnik. „Dijete ćemo morati poroditi kirurški.“

„Ne, molim vas“, odgovorim. „Ne želim to, molim vas.“

„Ne bude li uskoro pomaka, morat ćemo“, kaže liječnik. „To bi bilo najbolje za sve.“ On digne pogled i gotovo sam sigurna da namigne mom suprugu, ali bol čini da um vidi stvari drugačijima no što jesu.

U glavi sklopim dogovor s Malcem. *Malac*, govorim u sebi, *ovo je posljednji put da smo samo ti i ja. Molim te, ne daj im da te izrežu iz mene.*

Malac se rodi dvadeset minuta poslije. Ipak moraju napraviti rez, ali ne preko mog trbuha kako sam se pribojavala. Umjesto toga, doktor uperi skalpel prema dolje, a ja osjetim nešto, kao da me se naglo povlači, iako je to možda od lijekova. Kad polože dijete u moje naručje, pregledam ga od glave do pete, njegovo naborano tijelo prošarano crvenom, boje neba u suton.

Nema vrpce. Dječak je. Zaplačem i sklupčam neobilježeno dijete u naručje. Sestra mi pokaže kako da ga podojim i tako sam sretna što mogu osjetiti kako pije, mogu dotaknuti njegove prste, male zareziće, svaki od njih.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, slušateljima daj nož za guljenje i zatraži od njih da si zarežu meki dio kože između kažiprsta i palca. Zatim im zahvali.)

Ima jedna priča o ženi koja se krene porađati, a dežurni je liječnik umoran. Ima jedna priča o ženi koja je i sama rođena prerano. Ima jedna priča o ženi čije je tijelo držalo dijete toliko čvrsto da su je morali rezati kako bi ga spasili. Ima jedna priča o ženi koja je u tajnosti rodila vučje mladunce. Kad malo bolje razmislim, priče se na neki način spajaju poput kapi kiše u jezeru. Svaka je nastala od drugog oblaka, ali jednom kad se sjedine ne postoji način da ih se razdvoji.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, razmakni zavjesu kako bi dokazala poantu svojim slušateljima. Padat će kiša, vjeruj mi.)

Bebu uzmu da me mogu zašiti gdje su rezali. Daju mi nešto što me uspava, preko maske koja je lagano priljubljena uz moja usta i nos. Suprug se šali s doktorom dok me drži za ruku.

„Koliko tražite za onaj dodatan šav?“ upita. „Radite to, zar ne?“

„Molim te“, kažem mu. Ali jezik mi se zapliće i uspijem samo slabo jauknuti. Nijedan se muškarac ne okrene prema meni.

Doktor se nasmije. „Niste prvi...“

Spuštam se niz jedan dug tunel, pa opet izronim na površinu, ali prekrivena nečim teškim i tamnim, poput petroleja. Mislim da ću povratiti.

„...kažu da je osjećaj kao...“

„...kao djev...“

A onda sam budna, sasvim svjesna, a mog supruga nema, a nema ni doktora. A beba, gdje je...

Medicinska sestra promoli glavu kroz vrata.

„Vaš suprug je otišao po kavu“, kaže, „a beba spava u krevetiću.“

Doktor uđe iza nje, brišući ruke o komad tkanine.

„Zakrpani ste, ne brinite“, kaže on. „Fino zategnuti, i svi zadovoljni. Sestra će popričati s vama o oporavku. Neko vrijeme ćete morati mirovati.“

Beba se probudi. Sestra ga podigne onako povijenog u pelene i ponovno ga stavi meni u naručje. Toliko je lijep da se moram podsjetiti na disanje.

Svakim se danom polako oporavljam. Krećem se sporo, sve me boli. Suprug me dotakne, a ja ga odgurnem. Želim se vratiti našem starom životu, ali tome zasad nema pomoći. Već dojm i ustajem se u rane sate kako bih se brinula o našem sinu uz svu svoju bol.

A onda ga jednog dana uzmem u ruke i taj ga čin toliko zadovolji, da shvatim kako mu mogu utažiti glad i ako ja ostanem željna. Oko sinovog prvog rođendana dovoljno sam zacijelila da supruga mogu ponovno primiti u krevet. Zaplačem od sreće pri njegovom dodiru, osjećaju ispunjenosti kojeg sam tako dugo priželjkivala.

Moj sin je dobra beba. Raste i raste. Pokušamo napraviti još jedno dijete, ali mislim da je Malac napravio toliko štete u meni da moje tijelo više ne bi moglo udomiti nekog novog.

„Bio si loš stanar, Malac“, kažem dok utrljavam šampon u njegovu glatku smeđu kosu, „i neću ti vratiti kaparu.“

On se brčka u umivaoniku, gugutajući od sreće.

Sin zna dodirnuti moju vrpču, ali nikad na način koji bi me preplašio. On je vidi kao dio mene, poput uha ili prsta. Veseli ga i ne treba mu ništa više, što me raduje.

Ne znam je li moj suprug nesretan zbog toga što više ne možemo imati djece. Ako jest, tugu drži za sebe, dok svoju želju otvoreno pokazuje. Dobar je otac i voli svog dječaka. Nakon posla, igraju se lovice i trče po dvorištu. Sin je još premalen da uhvati loptu, ali mu je moj suprug lagano pogura po travi, a sin je uzme i ispusti, na što suprug ukaže i poviče, „Vidi, vidi! Jesi li vidjela? Uskoro će je moći baciti.“

Od svih priča o majkama koje znam, ova je najtočnija. Mlada Amerikanka u posjetu je Parizu s majkom kad se majka razboli. Odluče prenoćiti u hotelu na nekoliko dana kako bi se ona odmorila, a kćer pozove doktora da je pregleda.

Nakon kratkog pregleda, doktor kaže kćeri da majci samo treba lijek. Stavi je u taksi, dade vozaču upute na francuskom i objasni djevojci kako će je odvesti do njegovog doma, gdje će joj njegova supruga dati odgovarajući lijek. Dugo su se vozili, a pri dolasku djevojku je uzrujala doktorova supruga, koja je temeljito i nepodnošljivo sporo spravljala tablete od praha. Ponovno u taksiju, vozač luta ulicama, ponekad prođe dvaput istom cestom. Uzrujana, djevojka napusti vozilo i odluči se pješke vratiti u hotel. Kad napokon stigne, portir izjavi da je nikad prije nije vidio. Ona otrči do majčine sobe, ali zidovi su sad drugačije boje, namještaj je drugačiji nego što se sjećala, a majke nigdje nema.

Postoji mnogo završetaka ove priče. U jednom, djevojka je nevjerojatno uporna i sigurna u sebe, pa iznajmi sobu u blizini i nadgleda hotel, da bi na koncu zavela mladića koji je radio u hotelskoj praonici i otkrila istinu: njena je majka preminula od veoma zarazne i smrtonosne bolesti, te je ovaj svijet napustila ubrzo nakon što je djevojka otišla iz hotela po uputama doktora. Kako bi izbjegli paniku širom grada, osoblje je uklonilo i pokopalo njeno tijelo, prebojilo prostoriju i donijelo novi namještaj, te potkupilo sve uključene na šutnju.

U drugoj verziji ove priče, djevojka godinama luta ulicama Pariza, uvjeren da je poludjela te da je njen bolestan um izmislio majku i život s njom. Djevojka pretura po raznim hotelima, zbunjeno i tugujući, iako ne bi znala reći za kim. Svaki put bi je izbacili iz nekog otmjenog predvorja, a ona bi plakala za nečim izgubljenim. Njena je majka mrtva, a ona to ne zna. Neće to znati dok i sama ne umre, pod pretpostavkom da vjeruješ u raj.

Ne moram ti reći koja je pouka ove priče. Mislim da je već znaš.

* * *

Naš sin ima pet godina i krene u školu, a ja shvatim da poznajem njegovu učiteljicu od onog dana u parku, kad se sagnula pomoći mi i predvidjela lakše buduće trudnoće. I ona se sjeća mene, pa kratko popričamo u hodniku. Otkrijem joj da nemamo djece osim našeg sina i da će sad kad je on krenuo u školu moji dani biti ispunjeni lijenošću i dosadom. Draga je. Kaže mi da, ako tražim način da zaokupim vrijeme, postoji jedan divan tečaj slikanja na lokalnom koledžu.

Te noći, dok je moj sin u krevetu, suprug ispruži ruku preko kauča i stavi je na moje koljeno.

„Dođi mi“, kaže, a mene probode užitak. Skliznem s kauča i nježno zagladim suknju dok klečim ispred njega. Poljubim mu nogu, prijeđem rukom do njegova remena i oslobodim ga prije nego ga cijelog progutam. On provuče ruke kroz moju kosu, gladi me po glavi, uzdiše i gura se u mene. Ni ne primjećujem da njegova ruka klizi prema mom zatiljku sve dok ne osjetim kako provlači prste kroz mašnu na vrpici. Ustuknem i brzo se odmaknem od njega, padajući unatrag i mahnito pregledavajući mašnu. On ostane sjediti, gladak od moje sline.

„Vrati se natrag“, kaže.

„Neću“, odgovorim. „Dirat ćeš mi vrpce.“

On ustane i zakopča hlače.

„Supruga“, kaže, „ne bi smjela imati tajne pred mužem.“

„Nemam tajne“, kažem mu.

„A vrpca?“

„Vrpca nije tajna; ona je dio mene.“

„Jesi li se rodila s njom? Zašto ti je oko vrata? Zašto je zelena?“

Ne odgovaram.

Neko vrijeme šuti. Zatim odbrusi,

„Žena ne bi smjela imati tajne.“

Nos me zapeče. Ne želim plakati.

„Dala sam ti sve što si ikad zatražio od mene“, kažem mu. „Zar ne mogu imati ovu jednu stvar?“

„Želim znati.“

„Misliš da želiš znati“, odgovorim mu, „ali zapravo ne želiš.“

„Zašto je želiš sakriti od mene?“

„Ne skrivam je. Jednostavno nije tvoja.“

On se spusti veoma blizu, a ja se povučem kad osjetim viski na njegovu dah. Nešto zaškripi, pa oboje podignemo pogled i vidimo kako stopala našeg sina nestaju uz stepenice.

Te noći moj suprug ode na spavanje s opasnom ljutnjom koja se raspline čim krene sanjati. Dugo sam vremena budna i slušam ga kako diše, pitajući se imaju li muškarci vrpce koje ne izgledaju kao vrpce. Možda smo svi označeni na neki način, iako ga je nemoguće vidjeti.

Sljedeći dan, naš sin takne moj vrat i pita me za vrpcu. Pokuša je povući. I iako me boli, moram to nekako zabraniti. Kad posegne za njom, ja protresem posudu punu kovanica. Stvori se kakofonija zvukova, a on se povuče i zaplače. Nešto se među nama izgubi; više to nikad neću naći.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, pripremi limenku punu kovanica. Kad stigneš do ovog trenutka, glasno je zatresi pred licima sebi najbližih ljudi. Promatraj izraze njihovih preplašenih, pa izdanih lica. Primijeti kako te više nikad ne gledaju na isti način.)

Upišem se na tečaj slikanja za žene. Dok je moj suprug na poslu, a sin u školi, ja se odvezem do prostranog zelenog kampusa i neugledne sive zgrade u kojoj se održavaju satovi slikanja.

Po svoj prilici, muški aktovi skriveni su od naših pogleda radi nekakvog očuvanja moralnosti, ali predavanje ima vlastitu energiju; toliko je toga za vidjeti na neobičnom nagom ženskom tijelu, toliko materijala za razmišljanje dok crtaš ugljenom ili miješaš boje. Primjećujem kako se više žena meškojlji na sjedalu kako bi preraspodijelile protok krvi.

Jedna je žena prisutna na svakom satu. Crvena joj je vrpca omotana oko tankog gležnja. Koža joj je maslinaste boje, a trag tamnih dlaka proteže se od njenog pupka do Venerinog brežuljka. Znam da je ne bih smjela željeti, ne zato što je žena i k tome neznanka, već zato što joj je posao svlačiti se, i sram me iskorištavati takvu situaciju. Nemala količina krivnje prati moj vrludajući pogled, ali isto kao što olovka slijedi njene obrise, moja je ruka prati u tamnim zakutcima moga uma. Nisam zapravo ni sigurna kako se takve stvari odvijaju, ali mogućnosti me tjeraju u ludilo.

Jednog popodneva nakon predavanja, prolazim kroz hodnik i iza ugla je ona, ta žena. Odjevena je, zamotana u kabanicu. Njen me pogled zaustavi u hodu, i iz blizine primijetim zlačani prsten oko obje njene zjenice, kao da su joj oči dvije pomrčine sunca. Ona me pozdravi, i ja nju.

Sjednemo u separe u obližnjem bistrrou, naša se koljena tu i tamo slučajno okrznu ispod laminiranog stola. Ona pije crnu kavu, što me plaši, iako ne znam zašto. Upitam je ima li djece. Ima, kaže, kćerku, predivnu malu jedanaestogodišnjakinju.

„Jedanaest je zastrašujuće doba“, ona kaže. „Ne sjećam se ničeg prije nego sam navršila jedanaest, ali nakon toga svijet je odjednom postao pun boja i strahota. Koja brojka“, kaže,

„kakav je to nered.“ Tada je na trenutak misli odvedu negdje drugdje, kao da je zaronila ispod površine jezera, a kad se vrati, nakratko mi ispriča o kćerinim postignućima u pjevanju i glazbi.

Ne raspravljamo o posebnim strahovima odgajanja ženskog djeteta. Iskreno, bojim se i pitati. Ne pitam ni je li udana, a ona odgovor ne nudi svojevolumno, iako ne nosi prsten. Pričamo o mom sinu, o tečaju slikanja. Očajno želim znati koja ju je to potreba nagnala da se svlači pred nama, ali možda je to ne pitam jer bi odgovor, poput adolescencije, bio previše zastrašujući da bih ga zaboravila.

Očarana sam njome, nema druge riječi za to. Ima nešto u njoj što je čini otvorenom, ne na način na koji sam ja bila, kakva još uvijek jesam. Ona je poput tijesta; način na koji se razvlači pod rukama skriva njenu snagu, njen potencijal. Kad skrenem pogled s nje i opet je pogledam, čini mi se dvostruko većom nego prije.

„Mogle bismo se naći još koji put“, kažem joj. „Ovo mi je bilo veoma ugodno popodne.“

Kimne mi glavom. Ja joj platim kavu.

Ne želim suprugu ispričati o njoj, ali on osjeća moju netaknutu želju. Jedne noći me pita što to kipi u meni i ja mu priznam. Opišem mu i detalje o njenoj vrpici, što me dodatno posrami.

On je toliko zaintrigiran da krene mumljati duge i detaljne fantazije dok skida hlače i ulazi u mene, a ja ne čujem ni pola, iako pretpostavljam da smo u njegovoj mašti ona i ja zajedno, ili smo možda obje s njim.

Osjećam se kao da sam je na neki način izdala, pa se više nikad ne vratim na predavanje. Nađem neku drugu zanimaciju da mi skрати dane.

(Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, natjeraj slušatelja/-icu da ti otkrije neku svoju veliku tajnu, pa otvori prozor najbliži ulici i otkrij je urlajući što glasnije možeš.)

Jedna od meni najdražih priča spominje staricu i njenog supruga, zlog poput demona, koji ju je plašio nasilnošću svoje naravi te promjenjivim karakterom svojih hirova. Mogla ga je zadovoljiti samo svojih kuhanjem, čemu je bio potpuni rob. Jednog joj je dana kupio oveći komad jetrice i ona ga je skuhalo za njega uz brojne začine i temeljac. Ali, omamio ju je miris njenog umijeća, pa su nekoliko zalagajčića postali nekoliko zalogaja, a jetrica je ubrzo nestala. Nije imala novca da kupi još jedan komad, a bila je prestravljena pri pomisli što bi suprug napravio kad bi saznao da je sve pojela. Stoga se odšuljala do susjedne crkve gdje su nedavno položili tijelo jedne žene. Približila se zamotanoj figuri, pa je zarezala u nju kuhinjskim škarama i ukrala jetru iz trupla.

Te je večeri njen suprug ubrusom obrisao usta i izjavio kako je to najbolji obrok koji je ikad jeo. Nedugo zatim, kad su otišli na spavanje, starica je začula otvaranje ulaznih vrata, a do soba je doprlo jedva čujno naricanje. *Tko je uzeo moju jetru? Tkooooo je uzeo moju jetru?*

Glas se primicao sve bliže spavaćoj sobi. Tišina je ispunila prostor kad su se vrata širom otvorila. Mrtva je žena ponovila svoje pitanje.

Starica je zbacila deku sa supruga.

„On ju je uzeo!“ pobjedonosno je izjavila.

Zatim je pogledala u lice mrtve žene i prepoznala svoja usta i oči. Spustila je pogled na svoj trbuh i sjetila se kako ga je izrezala. Obilno je krvarila tamo na krevetu, iznova šapćući nešto dok je umirala, nešto što ti i ja nikad nećemo saznati. Pored nje, dok je krv prodirala u samu srž madraca, njen suprug nastavio je spavati.

Ovo možda nije verzija priče koju ti znaš. Ali, uvjeravam te, ovo je ona koju trebaš znati.

* * *

Začudo, moj suprug je veoma uzbuđen zbog Noći vještica. Uzela sam jedno od njegovih odijela od tvida i prepravila ga u jedno manje za sina, da može biti mali profesor ili nekakav staromodni akademik. Dala sam mu i lulu za žvakanje. Naš sin je drži među zubima na način koji mi djeluje uznemirujuće odraslim.

„Mama“, moj sin upita, „a što si ti?“

Ne nosim kostim, pa mu kažem da sam ja njegova majka.

Lula ispadne iz njegovih malih usta i padne na pod, a on zavrišti tako glasno da se ne mogu pomaknuti. Moj suprug doleti i uzme ga u naručje, tiho mu priča, ponavljajući mu ime između jecaja.

Tek kad mu se ritam disanja vrati u normalu, shvatim svoju grešku. Nije dovoljno star da bi znao priču o nestašnim djevojčicama koje su za poklon htjele bubanj i bile su zločeste prema majci dok nije otišla, a zamijenila ju je nova majka, ona sa staklenim očima i bubnjajućim drvenim repom. Premlad je za priče i njihovu istinitost, ali ja sam mu nehotice ipak ispričala jednu, o malom dječaku koji je tek na Noć vještica otkrio da njegova majka nije njegova majka, osim na dan kad svi nose maske. Užarena knedla kajanja zapne mi u grlu. Pokušavam ga uzeti u naručje i pomaziti, ali on samo želi otići na ulicu, gdje je sunce nestalo ispod obzora, a magla i svježi zrak obavijaju sjene.

Nemam koristi od ovog praznika. Ne želim sa sinom odlaziti u kuće stranaca ili pripremati kokice i čekati maškare da na vratima zahtijevaju otkupninu. Ipak, u kući čekam s pladnjem punim ljepljivih slatkiša, otvarajući vrata sićušnim kraljicama i duhovima. Pomislim na sina. Kad svi odu, spustim pladanj i odmorim glavu.

Naš sin se vrati kući s osmijehom od uha do uha, žvačući komad bombona koji mu je usta obojao u nijansu šljive. Ljuta sam na supruga. Voljela bih da je pričekao da se vrati kući prije nego što je dopustio konzumaciju zaliha. Zar nikad nije čuo te priče? O iglama u

čokoladama i žiletima u jabukama? Priliči mu da ne razumije čega se sve treba bojati na ovom svijetu, ali još uvijek sam bijesna. Pregledam sinu usta, nema nikakvog oštrog metala u nepcu. On se smije i vrti po kući, omamljen i energičan od slatkiša i uzbuđenja. Omota ruke oko mojih nogu, našu prijašnju epizodu već je zaboravio. Oproštaj ima slađi okus od bilo koje slastice koja se može ponuditi s vrata. Kad mi se popne u krilo, pjevam mu dok ne zaspe.

Naš sin ne staje rasti. Ima osam, pa deset godina. U početku mu pričam bajke, one najstarije, ali bol i smrt i prisilne brakove sakrijem pod tepih kao trulo lišće. Sirene dobiju noge i to ih škaklja. Nestašne se svinje odgegaju s veličanstvene gozbe, nepojedene i u boljem stanju nego prije. Zle vještice napuštaju dvorac i sele se u male kolibe, dane provedu slikajući portrete šumskih stvorenja.

Ipak, što je stariji, sin postavlja više pitanja. Zašto ne bi pojeli svinje, pa bili su gladni i zli? Zašto su vješticu pustili na slobodu nakon svega lošeg što je napravila? A ideju da bi pretvaranje peraja u noge moglo donijeti zadovoljstvo odlučno odbacuje nakon što se poreže škarama.

„Pejaje bi bubale,“ kaže, jer se muči s izgovaranjem slova *r*.

Složim se s njim dok mu stavljam flaster. Boljelo bi. Pa mu pričam priče bliže istini: o djeci koja nestaju s jednog dijela željezničke pruge, namamljena u nepoznate krajeve zvukom fantomskog vlaka; o crnom psu koji se pojavi na vratima osobe tri dana prije njene smrti; o trima žabama koje te zaskoče u močvari i gataju ti za novac. Mislim da bi moj suprug zabranio takve priče, ali sin ih pomno sluša i čuva za sebe.

U školi se održava predstava *Mali pastir* u kojoj je dobio glavnu ulogu, pa se pridružim majkama koje rade kostime za djecu. Glavna sam kostimografkinja u prostoriji punoj žena koje šiju slične svilene latice za cvijeće i male bijele gaće za pirate. Jedna od majki na prstu ima

blijedožutu vrpcu koja joj se neprestano zapliće o konac. Psuje i jauče. Već sam joj jednom morala škarama otkinuti te dosadne niti. Pokušam to nježno obaviti. Ona odmahne glavom dok je oslobađam od božura.

„Koja gnjavaža, zar ne?“ pita. Ja kimnem glavom. Pogledam kroz prozor, djeca se igraju, otimaju se za igračke na igralištu, čupkaju glave maslačcima. Predstava prođe odlično. Na premijeri, naš sin lakoćom proleti kroz svoj monolog. Savršenim glasom i ritmom. Nitko nikad nije bio bolji.

Naš sin ima dvanaest godina. Otvoreno me upita za vrpcu. Kažem mu da smo svi različiti i ponekad ne bi trebao propitkivati. Uvjerim ga da će razumjeti kad odraste. Odvratim mu pažnju pričama koje ne sadrže vrpce: o anđelima koji žele biti ljudi i duhovima koji ne shvaćaju da su mrtvi i djeci koja se pretvore u prah. Prestane mirisati kao dijete; taj mliječno-slatkasti miris zamijenilo je nešto goruće i oštro, poput vlasi na štednjaku.

Naš sin ima trinaest, pa četrnaest godina. Kosa mu je mrvicu preduga, ali ne mogu se natjerati da ga ošišam. Moj suprug mu razbaruši kovrče na odlasku iz kuće, a mene poljubi u kut usana. Na putu do škole, naš sin čeka susjedovog dječaka koji hoda uz pomoć štaka. Jako je nježan u svom suosjećanju, moj sin. Nema kod njega nagona za okrutnošću, kao kod nekih. „Na svijetu ima dovoljno nasilnika“, ponavljala bih mu. Ove godine prestane me pitati za priče.

Naš sin ima petnaest, šesnaest, sedamnaest godina. Brilljantan je dječak. Druželjubiv je na oca, tajanstven na mene. Počne se udvarati predivnoj djevojci iz svoje srednje škole koja ima blistav osmijeh i zrači toplinom. Rado bih je upoznala, ali nikad ne inzistiram da ih pričekamo kako bi se vratili iz šetnje, prisjećajući se vlastite mladosti.

Kad mi kaže da je primljen na studij strojarstva, presretna sam. Skakućemo po kući, pjevamo i smijemo se. A kad suprug dođe s posla pridruži nam se u slavlju koje nastavimo u obližnjem ribljem restoranu. Otac mu između zalogaja romba kaže, „Veoma smo ponosni na

tebe“. Naš sin se nasmije i dodaje da želi zaprositi svoju djevojku. Čestitamo mu, sad smo još sretniji. Kako je to dobar dječak. Kako je divan ovaj život kojemu se mogu radovati.

Čak ni najsretnija žena na svijetu ne poznaje ovoliku sreću.

Ima jedan klasik, ali zaista klasik, koji ti još nisam ispričala.

Cura i dečko odvezli su se na parkiralište. Neki kažu kako to znači da su se ljubakali u autu, ali ja znam tu priču. Bila sam tamo. Parkirali su se uz rub jezera. Ispreplitali su se na stražnjem sjedalu kao da se svijetu spremao kraj. Možda i je. Ona mu se ponudila i on ju je uzeo, a kad je završilo upalili su radio.

Glas na radiju donio je vijest o poludjelom ubojici s kukom umjesto ruke koji je pobjegao iz obližnje psihijatrijske bolnice. Dečko se nasmijao u bradu i promijenio stanicu. Kad je pjesma završila, cura je začula slabo grebanje, poput spajalice na staklu. Pogledala je prema svom dečku, a onda navukla džemper preko golih ramena i obgrlila se rukama.

„Bolje da odemo“, izjavila je.

„Ma ne“, dečko je odgovorio. „Ajmo još jednom. Imam cijelu noć.“

„Što ako ubojica dođe?“ djevojka je upitala. „U blizini je ludnica.“

„Bit će sve u redu, draga“, dečko kaže. „Zar mi ne vjeruješ?“

Cura je nevoljko kimnula glavom.

„Pa, onda...“ kaže on, dok mu se glas gubio na način koji će dobro upoznati. Spustio joj je ruku s prsiju i položio je na sebe. Napokon je svrnula pogled s jezera. Vani se mjesečina presijavala na čeličnoj kuki. Ubojica joj je mahnuo cereći se.

Ispričavam se. Zaboravila sam kraj priče.

Kuća je tako tiha bez našeg sina. Prolazim kroz nju, dodirujem sve površine. Sretna sam, ali nešto se u meni seli na neko strano mjesto.

Te noći, suprug me upita bih li željela da krstimo novoispražnjene sobe. Nismo se tako divlje vezali još otkako se naš sin rodio. Dok ležim prebačena preko kuhinjskog stola, nešto se staro u meni probudi i sjetim se kako smo se željeli prije, kako smo ostavljali tragove ljubavi po svim mogućim površinama, kako je on uživao u mojim najmračnijim dijelovima. Silovito zavrištim, ne brine me čuju li to susjedi, ne brine me hoće li itko pogledati kroz prozor i vidjeti cijelu dužinu njegova uda u mojim ustima. Izašla bih vani na travnjak da od mene to zatraži, dala bih mu da me uzme straga da nas vidi cijelo susjedstvo. Mogla sam upoznati bilo koga na onoj zabavi kad sam imala sedamnaest: glupe ili čedne ili nasilne dječake. Religiozne dječake koji bi me natjerali da se preselim u neku daleku zemlju kako bih preobratala njihove stanovnike, ili neku sličnu glupost. Mogla sam doživjeti nebrojenu količinu tuge i razočaranja. Ali dok smo ovako na podu, a ja cvilim i nabijam se na njega, znam da sam donijela ispravnu odluku.

Zaspemo izmoreni, goli i rašireni preko kreveta. Kad se probudim, moj mi suprug ljubi potiljak, ispipavajući vrpću jezikom. Moje se tijelo naglo pobuni, pulsirajući od sjećanja na užitak, ali snažno se opirući izdaji. Pozovem ga po imenu, ali on ne odgovori. Ponovno mu se obratim, ali drži me snažno uza sebe i ne staje. Probodem ga laktom, a kad iznenađeno otpusti stisak, uspravim se i okrenem prema njemu. Zbunjen je i povrijeđen, kao i moj sin onog dana kad sam protresla teglu s kovanicama.

Odlučnost procuri iz mene. Dotaknem vrpću. Pogledam u supruga, početak i kraj svih njegovih želja ucrtane su mu u lice. Nije on loš čovjek i to je, iznenada shvatim, izvor moje

tuge. Nije on uopće loš čovjek. Nazvati ga zlim ili pokvarenim ili groznim bila bi uvreda. A opet...

„Želiš li da odvežem vrpce?“ upitam ga. „Nakon svih ovih godina, to je ono što želiš od mene?“

Licem mu zabljesne sreća, pa pohlepa, na što dlanom prođe preko moje gole dojke do vrpce. „Da“, odgovori. „Želim.“

Ne moram ga dotaknuti kako bih znala da mu se diže pri samoj pomisli na to.

Sklopim oči. Sjetim se dječaka na zabavi, onog koji me poljubio i prodro u mene uz obalu jezera, koji je radio sa mnom što je htio. Koji mi je podario sina i pomogao mu da i sam odraste u muškarca.

„Onda“, kažem, „radi što želiš.“

Drhtavim prstima uzme jedan od krajeva vrpce. Mašna se polako odveže, s krajevima uvijenim po navici. Moj suprug uzdahne, ali mislim da ni sam nije toga svjestan. Provuče prst kroz zadnji čvor i povuče. Vrpca nestane. Odlebdji i zakovrča se na krevetu, ili bar tako mislim, jer ne mogu spustiti pogled da slijedim njen pad.

Moj se suprug namršti, a onda mu se na licu probudi nešto drugo; tuga, ili možda prijevremeni gubitak. Ruka mi poleti prema vratu – nehotice, radi ravnoteže ili neke druge besmislice – i dalje od toga ga ne vidim.

„Volim te“, uvjeravam ga, „više nego što možeš zamisliti.“

„Ne“, kaže on, ali ne znam na što odgovara.

Ako čitaš ovu priču naglas, možda se pitaš je li ono mjesto koje je moja vrpca štitila bilo zakrvavljeno i rastvoreno, ili glatko i sterilizirano poput linije kojom su spojene noge neke

lutke. Bojim se da ti ne mogu reći, iz razloga što ni sama ne znam. Zbog ovih i drugih pitanja, kao i zbog nemogućnosti da na njih odgovorim, iskreno mi je žao.

Težina mi se preraspodijeli, i s njom osjetim snagu sile teže. Lice mog supruga nestane iz vida, a umjesto njega pojavi se strop, a zatim zid iza mene. Dok moja odrubljena glava klizi niz vrat i kotrlja se s kreveta, ja sam usamljenija no ikad.

5 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to identify and examine intertextual and feminist elements within the short story “The Husband Stitch,” as well as to provide a literary translation of the work, the one that would introduce Machado’s writing to Croatian audience. Intertextuality is visible in the short story through the insertion of cautionary tales and stage directions, while the procedure of the husband stitch shows how women’s desire and feelings are diminished, and male wishes glorified, a clear sign of a feminist outlook.

The short story features rewritten urban myths with female leads that always die a terrible death in order to satisfy the males in their lives. This subversion of famous fairy tales makes the readers further question reality and reliability of the narrator. The dubious nature of the story is further emphasised with the insertion of stage directions; by breaking the fourth wall, Machado amplifies the aura of mystery surrounding the narrator. Moreover, making the readers act out and relive the scenes together with the protagonist strengthens the intensity of her feelings and bonds her to the audience, as it is impossible to read the story and not sympathise with her. Furthermore, a characteristic typical of Female Gothic works, Machado’s aim was to denounce patriarchy and emphasize gender dichotomy, while at the same time supporting female independence by raising consciousness and showing allegiance to the feminist movement, exploring female oppression through the life of her protagonist, a female open with her sexuality. As a representative of female horror, “The Husband Stitch” centres around patriarchal institutions that exist to please men and control women, and while the addition of supernatural elements might add to the horror, they mostly serve to amplify the misogyny still present in the society. This way, the narrator’s struggles warn us about how society treats most women: since female voices are “interchangeable,” their pain, loss of autonomy, and objectification is universal as well.

Another common thread among women is the literal thread of ribbons that female characters wear on various parts of their body in this short story. Those silky bows vividly connect women in their shared experience, separating them from men in the perception of their bodies, sex, pregnancy, and labour. The writer herself mentions in one of her interviews how she is interested in specific experiences of the body and what it means to be a woman: “I think of the body as one of the very few shared languages we all have” (Hardy). The symbolism of the ribbon as the woman’s personal identity can also be seen as a metaphor for the desire to maintain control over her life and her decisions. One way or another, keeping the ribbon as a means of preserving autonomy has a grimly consequence for the protagonist – by unravelling the ribbon and letting her husband finally get his wish, she loses her life.

With the various generations of men that remain stuck in their ways, Machado also comments on the dangers of the “nice” patriarchy. Seemingly harmless, subtle sexism goes unnoticed and is therefore harder to detect and judge since it is not obviously hostile. Nevertheless, by forgiving the abuser and not holding him accountable for his misogynistic behaviour, the circle of violence continues: from the narrator’s father dismissing her truth, over her husband and his relentless desire to conquer her and her body, the doctor who does not take her wishes seriously, to her very son who mimics the alarming demeanour of his father. The real terror, as the protagonist realises in the end, is in the familiar, in the fact that her husband is “a good man” but still betrays her by wanting to untie the ribbon. Accepting to untie the bow, the woman’s death brings upon a Pyrrhic victory: losing her own life, but never giving up her mind and her freedom.

Upon tackling the task of translating “The Husband Stitch,” the translator had three goals in mind: make it sexy, make it spooky, make it art. To rephrase, the first aim concerned the sensual scenes in the story (which are abundant), where it was important to transfer the female desire, a major theme of the plot, but at the same time not be misled and get lost in the

explicit language by leaning into erotica and thus minimising the literary value of the work. Secondly, another significant element of the short story are the retellings of cautionary tales which, together with the horrors of living as a woman, bring upon a harrowing tone present throughout the entire plot. The feeling of dread that pursues the reader while reading literal scary stories followed by more metaphorical ones concerned with living under a patriarchal regime was necessary to translate into Croatian too. Finally, mere literal translation of the work would not do: Machado's use of present tense and long sentences with numerous prepositional phrases posed a challenging, but imperative part of the translation. After all, changing the style of the writer and/or reducing "The Husband Stitch" to pornography would be an insult to the work that is so important for the girls and women of today. While mass media are usually the ones that make a social statement through horror and science-fiction films, it is crucial to know that literature can also be used with the same goal, as an undercurrent to the world we are currently living in and inciting the readers to rebel against it.

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Summary

Feminism and Intertextuality in Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch"

"The Husband Stitch" is the title story from Carmen Maria Machado's debut collection *Her Body and Other Parties* published in 2017. An American author of Cuban descent, Machado's fiction is frequently called "strange and seductive" with elements of horror and mystery, a definition perfectly encompassing her most famous short story. This thesis provides a critical analysis of "The Husband Stitch" with emphasis on feminism and intertextuality as two of its most important characteristics. "The Husband Stitch" is a powerful story showing the mundane horrors of female existence made stronger by the instalment of scary stories which always include women. The legends and folklore highlight the dangers of society and the misogyny that persists in the central institutions of marriage and motherhood. For this reason, two types of intertextual elements are analysed in the thesis: cautionary tales and urban myths the narrator retells, and stage directions intended for the readers. Moreover, the analysis deals with the story's theme of feminine guilt, female subservience and the lack of female voice. The 'husband stitch' is an old practice whereby an obstetrician puts an 'extra' stitch in a woman's perineum after she gives birth and makes her tighter in order to please her partner. Therefore, it is obvious through the very title that the story features sexist connotations and, what is more, glorifies the male and his needs while condemning the woman for wanting to explore and own her sexuality. The final part serves as an overview of the critical analysis, along with the literary translation of the short story in question.

Key words: critical theory, feminism, intertextuality, literary translation, Carmen Maria, Machado, "The Husband Stitch"

Sažetak

Feminizam i intertekstualnost u „The Husband Stitch“ Carmen Marije Machado

„The Husband Stitch“ naslovna je priča iz *Her Body and Other Parties*, prve zbirke Carmen Marije Machado objavljene 2017. godine. Machado je američka spisateljica kubanskog podrijetla čija se fikcija često naziva „neobičnom i zavodljivom“ s elementima horora i tajanstvenosti, što je definicija koja savršeno zaokružuje njenu najpoznatiju kratku priču. Ovaj diplomski rad daje kritičku analizu djela „The Husband Stitch“ uz naglasak na feminizam i intertekstualnost kao dvije njegove najvažnije karakteristike. „The Husband Stitch“ snažna je priča o svakodnevnim užasima ženskog postojanja pojačana umetanjem strašnih priča koje uvijek uključuju žene. Legende i folklor naglašavaju opasnosti društva i mizoginije koja je prisutna u institucijama braka i majčinstva. Stoga se u ovom diplomskom radu provodi analiza dvije vrste intertekstualnih elemenata: poučnih priča i urbanih mitova koje pripovjedačica prepričava, kao i scenskih uputa namijenjenih čitateljima. Nadalje, analiza se bavi temom ženske krivnje, ženske pokornosti i nedostatka ženskog glasa. 'Mužev šav' opisuje praksu u porodu u kojoj se primjenjuje više šavova no što je potrebno da bi tkivo zacijelilo u svrhu povećanja seksualnog zadovoljstva partnera. Stoga je očito i kroz sam naslov da priča sadrži seksističke konotacije i usto veliča muškarca i njegove potrebe, a s druge strane osuđuje ženu zbog želje za istraživanjem i korištenjem vlastite seksualnosti. Posljednji dio rada služi kao pregled kritičke analize uz književni prijevod spomenute kratke priče.

Ključne riječi: kritička teorija, feminizam, intertekstualnost, književno prevođenje, Carmen Maria, Machado, “The Husband Stitch”