

REBECCA EVERLASTING

An essay by Rachel Pastan

The woman who had my job before me had moved months before, so I never met her. She existed only as a virtual folder on my computer screen—*Elyssa*—and as a shadow behind the disappointed looks of my new coworkers. It was my first office job, in the development department of a small contemporary art museum. I struggled with the copy machine. I wasn't sure which letters had to be reviewed by the boss. When I asked the grumpy, overworked business administrator for formatting help, she sighed: "Elyssa used these margin settings." Twice a week, ghostly messages materialized on my voicemail from a local optician, informing Elyssa that her contact lenses were ready to be picked up.

Elyssa. I could picture her: blond, competent, organized. She haunted me, this invisible figure who had sat where I sat now, and whom the people around me seemed unwilling to forget. And suddenly I thought: *It's like Rebecca, only in the workplace!*

And then I thought: *That's not a bad idea for a novel.*

Rebecca was published in 1938, when Daphne du Maurier was thirty-one. Lauded for its "atmosphere of terror," it was an immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic, selling 45,000 copies in the first

month alone. The film version, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

Du Maurier insisted *Rebecca* was not a ghost story, but it is certainly the story of a haunting: how the spirit of a departed person can torment the one who comes after. And although the novel has often been viewed (including by me) as a potent love story, du Maurier had something more complicated and modern in mind: a study of power relations between men and women, and a study in jealousy as well. To her mind, there was more of hate in it than love.

Perhaps du Maurier's contemporaries missed her point because she was ahead of her time. Carried away by the story's melodramatic undertow, it's easy to miss the writer's sharp realism, to romanticize Max de Winter rather than notice how du Maurier mistrusts his power. We like to think we're more sophisticated readers now, but passion remains a tricky business.

Rebecca, however, was always clear-eyed. She knew what she wanted and how to get it, right to the end. Her last, defiant smile would haunt her killer for the rest of his life. It is a tribute to du Maurier's genius that it still haunts us today.

ALENA

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