

Hank Kirton

The Story of Cilantro-Rose

This is what a woman did.

Once upon a time there lived a gentle, beautiful woman named Cilantro-Rose who lived in a small, wattle-and-daub hut deep in a forest of willow trees. Fields of jewelweed surrounded the house - juice-filled, translucent stalks of jade reaching up from the moist, mossy ground. The soil under Cilantro-Rose was black, rich.

Cilantro-Rose slept in a soft bed wrapped in slow waves of warm fabric. When she opened her eyes in the morning she counted the galaxies of dust drifting through the angles of sunlight projected from her half-dreaming mind. She wanted to label every dancing particle with names like gothic cathedrals.

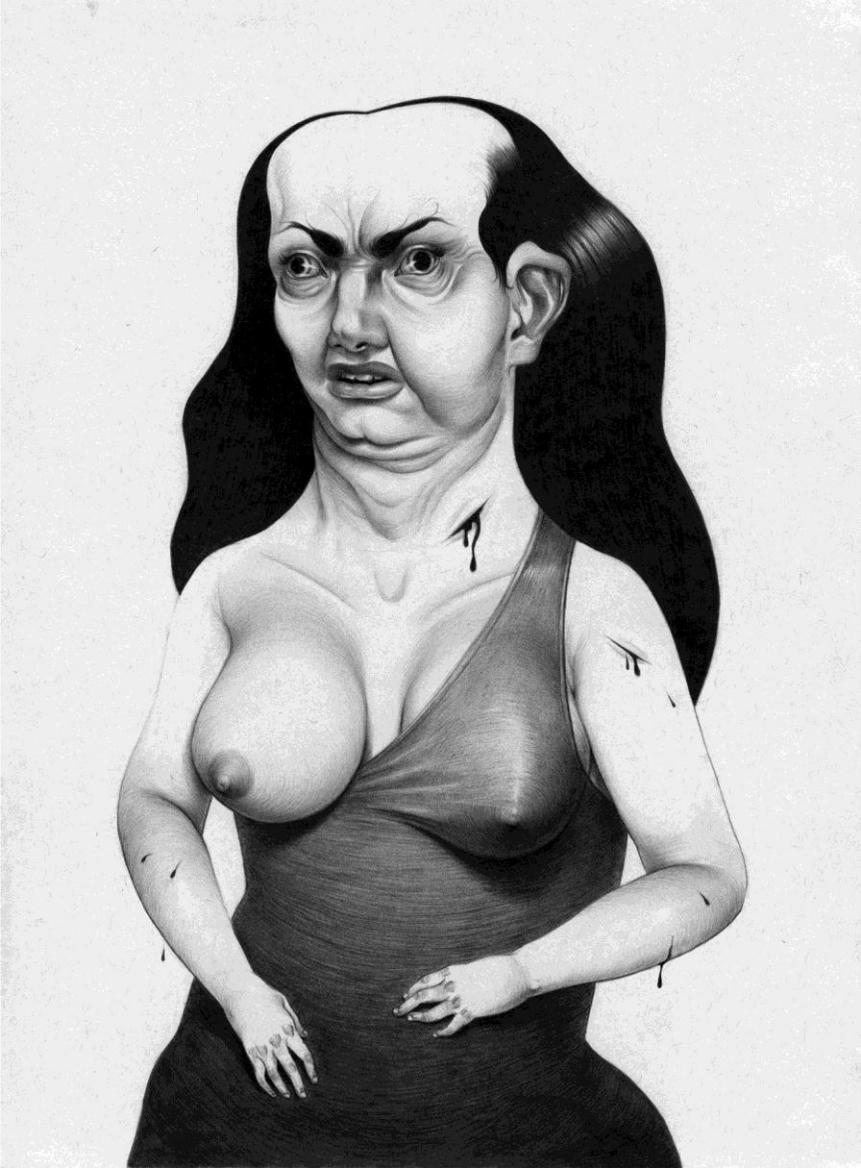
Cilantro-Rose worked as a midwife and dowser. She delivered your baby. She told you where to dig your well.

She spent her small sums of money on things like butter, flour, and Charlie Chaplin movies.

A stream behind her house kept her company. The stream spoke to her in tangles of black sound, about echoes without sources and invisible lines that turned impossible curves. It spoke of the illusion of time. Cilantro-Rose found the stream more truthful than stars.

A mile south, where things turned dry, fallen columns could be studied and appreciated, but Cilantro-Rose, keeping her interests modest, never wondered about them.

Cilantro-Rose kept a garden. She had a cat. She hunted quail with a sling-shot in autumn and gathered wild grapes and blackberries in summer. In the smoldering dawn, she fished for rainbow trout in the stream. She dropped



her line under a small waterfall, so the trout were obscured by bubbles and foam. She didn't want to see the fish before she caught them. Farther upstream there was a flat-topped rock where she could sit and watch the trout dart and splash. She did not fish there, but sometimes she sat there all day, even when it rained.

One day, old Moke Hocus ran to her house, and with nervous words and surging sweat told her that A Certain Woman had undertaken a difficult, strenuous labor and needed attention.

Cilantro-Rose gathered her instruments, fed her cat and followed old Moke Hocus through the forest. They walked three miles and did not speak. She walked behind him.

When they arrived at The Certain Woman's home, Cilantro-Rose felt something writhe inside her stomach and bowels, like a toxic blossom of grease unfolding and expanding inside her.

Before she even entered the house, she knew something was wrong.

The Certain Woman's house was large and opulent and a silver-buckled servant led them inside.

From the bottom of the stairs they heard screams.

They ascended the steps to The Certain Woman's bedchamber. Cilantro-Rose could see green in the air, sickness like mist.

The Certain Woman lay trembling in her bed, bedecked with heavy jewelry, her face twisted into a mask of catastrophe.

Cilantro-Rose approached the bed. The Certain Woman's color was very bad, like a drowned earthworm. Her respiration was erratic and carried the pungent hum of dead animal smell.

"We have to get her out of the bed," Cilantro-Rose said.

Old Moke Hocus nodded and they set to work.

Cilantro-Rose ordered old Moke Hocus and the silver-buckled servant to hold The Certain Woman upright, supporting her with hooked arms, while Cilantro-Rose knelt on the floor and parted The Certain Woman's wet, trembling legs.

The Certain Woman screamed and said, "What are you doing to me?! Where's Doctor Puncture?" and then screamed again.

"Your husband's gone to get Doc Puncture," old Moke Hocus told her. "But it's gonna take them a while to get back. I brought Miss Rose to help out in the meantime."

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The Certain Woman screamed again, her body buckling with violent contractions.

“Hold her tight!” Cilantro-Rose told the men.

The contractions abruptly ceased and colorless mucus seeped from between The Certain Woman’s legs, gathering on the floor in a lucent pool of reflected light.

Cilantro-Rose had never seen (or smelled) anything like it.

She reached for her bag but by the time she opened it and brushed her fingers over her instruments, it was over.

The thing that spilled from The Certain Woman’s body was dead.

Cilantro-Rose looked at it - an angry, berserk knot of hair and bone and mucus and one pulposus, milky eye bulging out blindly from the gummy tangle. A withered, wrinkled arm with fingers as thin as thread reached from the mass. A foot, small and crumpled, with four webbed toes, poked out like an amphibian limb.

Cilantro-Rose removed a pair of snips from her bag and severed the brown umbilical cord. The smell of feces wafted like death from the clipped cord. The thing had been defecating into the cord, poisoning The Certain Woman’s bloodstream.

Cilantro-Rose finally realized that The Certain Woman had fainted.

“You can let her go now,” she told the men. “Could you get some warm water and soap?” she said.

Cilantro-Rose washed the blood and strange substances from The Certain Woman, and then old Moke Hocus and the silver-buckled servant carried her back to the bed. She stirred slightly and groaned, but did not wake up.

Cilantro-Rose bundled the miscarriage, umbilicus, and black placenta in rags, then said, “I’ll dispose of this.”

“Thank you,” said old Moke Hocus. “What do we owe you?”

“Nothing,” Cilantro-Rose said. “I don’t charge for stillbirths.”

“She’ll be all right, then?”

“I think so. Tell Doctor Puncture what happened. I’ll be at home if he needs to speak with me,” Cilantro-Rose said.

During the long walk back, her hands tingled and itched and as soon as she got home, she washed them several times.

She buried the stillbirth and detritus – still wrapped in stained, sodden rags - deep in the garden, and then washed her hands again.

As dusk gathered, a full moon began to scale the sky. Cilantro-Rose stood in the garden contemplating the grave. She thought about saying something, composing an impromptu prayer or poem, but knew that the sound of her voice, and whatever meager words occurred to her would fall so short of her ambition that she'd just end up feeling self-conscious and small. Ashamed, almost.

She went to bed instead.

As she slept, she dreamed, but the colors decorating the dreams were wrong, as if painted with a madman's palette. The images quickly flickered like lightning before she could focus on them. There was no sound.

Cilantro-Rose awoke feeling fatigued, as if she hadn't slept at all.

The day was dim with sleet-colored fog, the windows bestowing only bleak, gray light and Cilantro-Rose lit a lamp and then started a fire in her small, cast-iron stove. Finding her kettle empty, she carried it outside to the pump.

She noticed what was wrong immediately, even through the dense fog.

Her garden, which had been thriving the day before, had perished during the night. Every plant, every leaf was dark and drooping, as if strangled by sorrow. The cucumbers and tomatoes, the squash and green pods lay dry and shriveled in the dirt, shrunk to empty husks.

The only thing alive was a lean, silvery reed, about six inches long, rising from the fresh grave of The Certain Woman's stillbirth.

Cilantro-Rose pumped water into the kettle with numb, trembling hands and then ran panicked into the house. She bolted the door for the first time in over two years.

She made a cup of tea with clumsy hands - a relaxing blend of herbs she had grown and mixed herself. The tea calmed her panic but not the confused, nervous edge that the sight of her garden had instilled in her.

She tried to distract herself by keeping busy; she knitted, composed a letter to her mother, baked a pheasant pie, mended an old dress and washed the floors. Each time she had to return to the pump for more water, she kept her frightened gaze away from the dead garden and the strange, silvery reed.

By the time dusk settled, she had worked herself to the point of exhaustion and she slipped to sleep easily and quickly.

Her dreams were abstract – amorphous, colorless, without meaning or sense.