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Seeing is Believing

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Abstract

'Why don't you just do it,' he said, 'and be done with it. Beginning, middle, end — the way stories have always been made. Go ahead, write.' 'It's so boring,' she muttered. 'It certainly isn't as boring as writing about writing.' 'I never said I wanted to write about writing.' 'Look,' he said, trying to be helpful, 'it's the way people live, in sequence, they meet and something doesn't happen and then they look at each other again or meet again and something does happen — somewhere in time, though maybe not connected, and that's a beginning and out of that happens a middle and maybe even an —' 'Dear god,' she groaned, 'it's so dull!' 'Damn it, why write at all then?' 'What else is there that's better?' she said.

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/a/

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'Look,' he said, trying to be helpful, 'it’s the way people live, in sequence, they meet and something doesn’t happen and then they look at each other again or meet again and something does happen — somewhere in time, though maybe not connected, and that’s a beginning and out of that happens a middle and maybe even an —'

'Dear god,' she groaned, 'it’s so dull!'

'Damn it, why write at all then?'

'What else is there that’s better?' she said.

/b/

Once upon a time in a land not too far away there lived a young maiden. She was intelligent and beautiful as maidens invariably are, and of course she was very unhappy. You see, her father who adored her had died while she was but a child and her stunningly beautiful though not particularly bright mother, not able to cope with the large estate her husband left her, quickly re-married. Her new husband, so considerate and courteous in courtship, turned out to be a clever brute on the make who blatantly favoured his twin sons from a previous marriage. Very soon the mother, worn out by cares in the usual patient suffering fashion, and with only slightly worse timing than intelligence, died.

It seems hardly necessary to elaborate on the fate of our heroine. Her twin step-brothers noticed her only to tease and, as they grew older, to chase her screaming around the great house. Her step-father was too
occupied enlarging his enormous estate to notice anything; he simply kicked her aside when she got in his way. By the time she turned ten she was strong enough to be useful, and so she was sent to work in the barns. She carried hay and oats and water all day long to the one hundred horses stabled there, and after feeding she had to clean the aisles and gutters because of course the more those strong, beautiful animals ate, the more manure there was to shovel. Often she was so exhausted that she fell asleep on the straw in an empty stall, and one day her step-father noticed and said she might as well live there; it would save her time and probably be better for the horses. So she took her blanket and the picture of her father, which was all she owned, and cleared a small space for herself in the loft behind the hay bales. Soon she smelled so much like the stables that her step-brothers called her Barney.

As she grew older, she learned how to groom the horses as well, but of course she was never allowed to ride one. That was reserved for her step-father and step-brothers only. Every day at ten fifteen the brothers would walk into the stables in their beautiful riding costumes, smelling like Brut or Igor, and parade down the aisle poor Barney had laboured to clean, deciding which horses they would ride. Every day.

Until one spring morning. As Barney led out their mounts, the soft sunlight flickered a particular aura about her there between the shining horses against the dark opening of the barn. The twins broke off their usual banter, and stared. Silently Barney held out the reins to them, but they did not move. It seemed they were both seeing her for the very first time.

//c//

‘De-constructionists are not smart-ass, you ninny,’ she said. ‘They are parodic, they are trying to break down our conventional understanding of language and rebuild—’

‘All language is convention, what the hell else can it be? Look, it’s the one, greatest cooperative venture known to humanity, without it —’

‘Aren’t there a few other «cooperative ventures»!’

‘Silly, I mean on such a massive scale, see, we both agree this thing is called «bed», everybody who speaks English, maybe a billion people or so agree, this is «bed», otherwise —’

‘They won’t ever call it «bad», not «bed», «bad»?’

‘Oh, some of them will have a poor accent, sure, a small handicap but we all know what they really mean, they’re just not quite able to —’
‘What if I know better, I can hear exactly what I’m saying and I say it that way because I mean it, this is not «bed», it’s «bad».’

‘That’s de-constructionist all right,’ he said, ‘it probably started because they’re all foreigners and can’t talk properly anyway and that gave them the idea, probably Frenchmen or Marxists.’

/d/

In the high glass and concrete departure area of an airport echoing with arrivals and leavings, with persons repeatedly paged but apparently never appearing to lift receivers and to be heard by an ear waiting for a voice, somewhere, there was a small circle of people. If they had faced outward they would have resembled muskoxen of the Arctic islands backed around young to confront enemies, but these faced in upon themselves: they were bending gradually closer and closer together, intent only upon the slowly tightening sphere they made. It could have been a family, a mother, a son, several daughters, a father. Between the slabs of echoing glass a film of quiet gathered about them, it might have been that the father or a daughter was leaving. Certainly none of them had the worn, devastated skin of someone recently hurled for hours near the edges of space. Perhaps the son was leaving, or a daughter and they were vainly trying one last time to look into each other’s eyes, to see as they never had all of themselves at the same instant while their hands and arms groped around and beyond the person pressed against them for the next, trying to feel every bone in every individual body they suddenly knew they loved with an overwhelming conviction into the very cell circle and absolute affirmation of their own fingers meeting to clutch themselves. It seemed they should really be hollow globes, inside and outside every one of each other, to be touching each other completely at every surface in the desperate singing of all the pullulating nerves they had discovered within themselves, everywhere. Perhaps the mother was leaving.

/e/

‘Will you write me a letter every day?’

‘Then I’d have time for nothing but to write you letters.’

‘Really?’

‘A good letter, yes.’
'That would be lovely. You’re a superb writer, but you’ve never written me an all-day letter.'
'I will write you an all-day letter, the most perfect letter possible. Immediately, I will send it to you special delivery, Express as they say, and every day you’ll read it all day and it will tell you everything you want to know of me and of you and about us, it will be a letter you can read forever and never grow tired of, absolutely satisfying whenever you so much as glance at it, you could wear out the paper reading it so you better put it under glass and never touch it again until your looking wears it out, wears the letters right off the paper through glass, I will type it perfectly on an electric typewriter on hard, white paper and you can read it forever and it will —'
'What will it say, tell me, this perfect letter?'
'Have you put it under glass?'
'Yes, of course, my eyes are wearing it out. What?'
'It will say, a b c d f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z. And I’ll sign it, perfectly.'
'Every day I should read that?'
'Yes, perfectly complete, just arrange it, whatever you want to say.'
'I guess that’s all carpenters do too, arrange lumber, or potters mud or painters paint —'
'Every day I want to say exactly what you want me to say — isn’t that good? The perfect letter.'
'I couldn’t even make the word «love» in your letter.'
'Why couldn’t you?'
'You left out the «e».'
'What?'
'You didn’t say «e».'
She hesitated a moment, then she said, ‘You noticed that?’
'Yes.'
'Actually,’ she said, ‘I did say it, I was talking fast and I said «a b c dee f», I just ran it together a little, that’s all.’
'There isn’t much of a letter you can make out of the lumber of the English alphabet if you don’t have an «e».’
'You’re not listening to me.'
'I am, and you didn’t say it; if you had written out what you said, you’d have no argument. No «please», no «remember», or «beauty», «sweetheart» ... «we» ... «love» ...'
'There’s a lot of useable four letter words,’ she said, ‘without «e»s.’
'There is only one four letter word.’
'Yes,’ she said, ‘«mama».'
‘No. There is only one four letter word and I’ve never liked the smell of it. It stinks.’

‘Gold’? she asked.

He would not answer. After a moment she spoke again, ‘Could you write me a love letter without an «e»?’

He spoke then, very carefully, ‘I-would-not-want-to-try.’

It was so dark they could not see each other’s faces when the hunters finally heard the beaver coming. The sound of the creek running over stones played back to them from the cliffs in an endless lullaby and they stood still as trees against the willows, their shapes gone now from dark into darkness. They had been waiting so long for that quiet splash, that imperceptible breaking of surface in the pond before them that at first they could not recognize the sound for anything it might be: it seemed merely noise coming over the narrow water before them from the sand bar overgrown with willows, a small racket as if something was being dragged through willows and alder brush, an ever louder bumping between bushes. And nattering, like old workers trudging to the job and already anticipating a weekend. And then there fell into the indecipherable black sheet of water before them such a clumsy plop! one seeming bellyflop and then another, that the hunters nudged each other in astonishment, the very turns of their heads in the darkness betraying their utter incomprehension: these were the secret beaver they had never seen, whose dams measured and tiered the creek in steps between every bend and rapid where each fall weekend revealed more poplars devastated like wheatstraw, mown down and hurled against those still, temporarily standing? The hunters strained to see, still touching each other for fear one or the other would make a sound, they tilted forward into the darkness, and then they saw upon the invisible, suddenly silent water a string of starlight slowly being drawn.

‘Okay, there,’ one of them breathed.

A click, the black-green water surfaced in one spot of brilliant light. A beaver head there, a small blotch quickly turning and gone, the larger hump of back and tail flipping, Smack!, into a roil of water and gone, the hunters cursing each other almost aloud but unable to finish an oath before the head again surfaced, the light centred on it, and there was a tremendous CRASH. The cliffs hammered it back against their heads like clubs and the water exploded, seemed to smash in pieces out of the
yellow light. And then again, an instant too late, another crash, smashing the pieces further into pieces.

'Shit!'
'Did you get the bugger?'
'Sure as hell you didn’t!'
'Well I —'
'Sh-h-h...' the boy with the light hissed.

A head again; nose circling high out of the broken water. Was it the other one stupidly searching in the relentless light to smell its way into discovery, breath invisibility there?

The tremendous crashes this time were simultaneous and so overwhelming that only a clanging hammered in the hunters’ heads, on and on, while the light wavered, searching over the pond. Gradually the sound of the rapids returned through iron to its gentle insistence. But there was nothing on the surface of the water. Only a dark green glister, and then white bits moving, it could have been autumn leaves; or bone.

/ g /

'What were you doing the day I turned sixteen?'
'I wasn’t born yet.'
'So what were you doing, November sixteen?'
'I was with my mother. Looking at a van Gogh exhibition.'
'In Canada? Where — Montreal?'
'No, Esterhazy, Saskatchewan — or maybe it was Cereal, Alberta.'
'A van Gogh exhibition in Esterhazy or Cereal?'
'Why not? They’d never had one there before.'
'I suppose not.'
'It was the first and only van Gogh exhibition to ever travel to North America and the paintings were hung at three-foot intervals all around the school gym, just at eye level, all those thick blazing golden Arles vineyards and bridges and canals and purple wheeling nights and thick corn fields, they made the gymnasium stinking of basketball and wrestling mats burn with rainbows, I was swimming in rainbow fire, turning somersaults like a porpoise in the Gulf Stream.'
'Your mother really liked it.'
'Not really. It just gave her a gut ache.'
Barney, still holding the horses' bridles, looked from one brother to the other in similar amazement. Slowly she understood that, in their own peculiar way, the twins were as beautiful as any horses she had ever seen. Their very twinishness was like a mirror, doubling the seeing of them with tiny, charming particularities.

'Hey,' one of them laughed at last, it was Astor who had a small dusting of beard, 'why don't you ... come ride with us?'

'Yes,' Charles laughed also, 'please do.'

'I've never ridden,' Barney said, even more amazed. 'I wouldn't know how.'

'We'll teach you,' the twins said together, but they really did not have to. The bodies of horses were so familiar to Barney that when she at last mounted one, she felt with her legs what she had already always known with the rest of her body. So they rode all day, and if the estate had not been so enormous they certainly would have discovered every corner of it. They rode about in silent happiness: only occasionally would their glances meet and one or the other would suddenly laugh and break into a gallop or jump across a creek or a fence, and the other two would instantly follow. The sun was almost down before they noticed that their horses were exhausted and that they themselves were hungry.

'Come to the house for tea,' Charles said.

'Yes,' Astor laughed, 'please do.'

So after they had rubbed down the horses together, they went up into the house. In the rose arbour opening off the library, they were served tea. Through the glass doors Barney could see the room she remembered better than any other of the house she had once lived in: the foldy leather chairs, the globes and maps, books scattered and stacked, the dark bookshelves to the ceiling; it was almost as if she could smell her father's pipe, the faint sweetness of it. Then she realized that the twins had bent towards her; that each was holding one of her hands!

'Let's get married,' they both exclaimed together, laughing.

Barney was puzzled. 'Which one?' she said.

'It doesn't matter,' Astor said, and Charles finished his thought, 'Not even father can tell us apart — one day Astor has the beard and the next day I do.'

'We're both exactly the same,' Astor said, 'you want to see?'
And indeed, Charles and Astor were as alike as two roses. Then they all three put their arms around each other in the rose arbour and laughed and laughed.

'It would be perfect,' Charles said.
'Come, marry us,' Astor echoed.

/Would you love me even if we weren't married?'
'You believe I love you now?'
'You just said so.'
'That was at least fifteen minutes ago.'
'But your actions haven't changed in fifteen minutes, they —'
'Actions are reflex, habitual, one's body is too lazy to discover new ones.'
'I believe you love me.'
'Good.'
'Would you love me still even if —'
'I don't know.'
'I know.'
'What do you know?'
'That I want to love you, married or not.'
'Good. I want to too.'
'So show me you love me. I want to see it, right now.'
'We've done everything seeable, a thousand times over, on three continents, or four.'
'Come on, lover, you're the one with the famous imagination, now come on!'
'How about ... this?'
'Nice, but no good. You did that on June 23rd, 1981.'
'I did? This too?'
'Hmm ... I don't think so ... not then, that was on October 2nd, 1976.'
'You're sure, never since then?'
'Never.'
'Aw sweetheart, there is nothing on earth so re-assuring as loving a computer.'
Under the quick knife, the body of the beaver slowly revealed itself. It was a knife-point unzipping, the gradual removal of a fur coat to expose a yellowish fat nakedness.

‘You ever see a seal lying on a rock?’ the skinner asked. ‘Maybe in a zoo somewhere?’

The woman was looking at his knife with a certain abhorrent intensity; she said nothing, and since the man did not look up, he did not see the slight shake of her head, which might in any case have been no more than a suppressed shudder.

‘They’re a lot longer, but they have the same kind of bloated, boneless body,’ the skinner continued. ‘Maybe all water animals do, probably whales too, though I’ve never seen one. Skinned. Their skeletons are so deep inside layers of meat and fat, they don’t seem to have any bones at all to look at. Look here, two and a half inches of fat, turning my big trees into fat, the bugger.’

The woman said nothing. His left hand was clenched in the roll of greasy fur and was tearing it back under the quick, short slashes of the knife; both his hands were thick with fat and blood, she could not imagine them touching her, anywhere.

‘You cut a hole in it,’ she said, pointing, ‘there.’

‘Shit!’ his hands stopped and he looked up at her, grinning.

‘You’re watching me too close.’

‘Don’t you like me watching you?’

‘You’re the one doesn’t like it,’ and he bent to his work again.

‘That’s just a tiny cut, not like the bullet holes. I’ll stretch it out carefully and you can sew it shut with two stitches. When it’s dry, no one will ever notice.’

‘What makes you think I’d touch that?’

‘That’s woman’s work, sewing ... and when it’s stretched and dry you have to chew it soft too, carefully day after day just chew it, till it’s all soft and we can wrap it around our feet, keep warm at night.’

‘All my six years of braces to chew a dry beaverskin?’

He laughed, ‘What are beautiful teeth good for?’ and did not look up to see her baring them at him. ‘You’ll make this softer than layered silk, you’ll see, the inner fur so soft you’ll ... did you ever make love on beaver fur?’
She bent her slender legs up against her breast, wrapped her arms around them. Her chin found its notch between her knees.

'I don't know,' she said slowly, 'if I could make love to a beaver.'

'That's not what I meant,' he said. 'That is not what I meant, at all.'

What was left of the beaver lay on its back; when she looked at it with half-shut eyes it seemed to be a pale, bloated torpedo tipped with two enormous yellow teeth and black flares of nostrils. Its tiny front legs, its powerful hind legs with their webbed claws dangled down like helpless afterthoughts. When she opened her eyes wide, it looked like nothing but a plastic bag of bruised fat.

/k/

'No language is translatable.'

'You're exactly wrong, the genius of language is that it is eminently translatable.'

'No, it isn’t. Every language has its own systems of meaning, of reflecting what you see. If you have no past tense in a language, you cannot think about pasts.'

'That’s exactly where de-constructionists so-called become so ridiculous. They take words with fine, perfectly ordinary meanings and break them up so you can’t recognize the most usual — «desiring» becomes «desiring», a beautiful word like «ineffable» becomes an obscenity contorted into a title like «Effing the Ineffable». It’s dreadful.'

'That has nothing to do with what I was saying; and aren’t your examples rather tendentious?'

'So what’s tendentious? These so-called writers use the accidents of phonemology to get their tendentious meanings, usually obscene, into

'All words are play.'

'Don’t jack around too. I’m talking about phonemes, sounds, not phenomes, facts.'

'I know,' she said. 'All words are play.'

'You’re being ridiculous too! Words are the way human beings handle reality. You can make a game out of eating, but if you don’t eat at all, you’re dead.'

'I agree. Words are the deadliest game of all.'

'See, you’re at it again, jacking around with words, once you start there’s no stopping. It’s like when you start to look for risque shapes,
soon everything longer than it is wide is phallic, everything rounded is a breast —'

'Everything with a round opening, vaginal.'

'Exactly, so take it one step further, to translations.'

'I thought we agreed, languages are not translatable.'

'We didn’t agree! If that thing can be «the slipper», it can certainly be «die Pantoffel» as well.'

'It’s «der».'

'What?'

'It’s «der Pantoffel».'

'Okay okay, German expert, now, you’re taking a boat cruise down the Rhine and you buy a card showing the Lorelei and you write me in Canada, «Hey lover, here I am sailing down the River Clean and we’ve just passed the Laurel’s Egg» ... isn’t that ridiculous?'

'Hey, that’s pretty good.'

'It’s a joke, a silly meaningless joke based on phoneme accidents!'

'Actually, I find it ironically meaningful, really, the River Clean, I’ll never —'

'Oh for pete’s sake!'

'I’ll never see that abused river the same way again, my sweet, and who is pete, eh?’

'The old pete, I’m sure, black with a glowing red pitchfork.'

'Oh ... I thought you had a pete — r.’

'Probably, and you no doubt have a hairy!’

'Isn’t she nice?’

'Oh for —'

/n/

At first they could not believe it, but the fact was that the streets of the town were so narrow between overwhelming walls of whitewashed stone that they could not walk two abreast. Then they simply laughed; if anyone met them they would have to turn past each other sideways.

But fortunately they met no one as the cobblestones, rough as if gathered from a field, led them downwards towards the centre in the gradual evening and they were so excited by this ancientness, this definite Before Christ antiquity still being lived in in a clustered town they had glimpsed like a white-tiled splotch against a cove of the blue Mediterranean; so ecstatic at their own nerve of turning away from their planned
route and leaving their car locked in the shadow of a wall and just walking (they had seen immediately there was no question of driving down this topless tunnel), leaving the technological safety of their car and just walking with nothing but their handbags (*Never* leave your money or passport anywhere) firmly tucked under their arms; neither was even wearing stockings, just a loose cotton dress for the heat, and sandals.

They met no one. Perhaps it was time for the evening meal; they could hear voices and kettles, pots through open windows too high to look into but letting in, at last, the evening coolness though they were still perspiring from the tremendous sun all day, and then turning a corner they saw people passing far below them where it seemed another street perhaps as narrow as their own crossed; but when they got there, laughing to themselves a little in anticipation, they were still alone.

'Make your photos?'

It was a moment before either realized they had been spoken to; in English. In any case, the intersection would have forced them to decide in which of five directions to face here where the cobblestones emerged out of their straight narrowness and circled about themselves. Even the untrained soles of their feet could feel that; if they had been blind, if the whole town were blind, the circled stones would tell them exactly where they were; and then the tops of their feet felt suddenly cold as if along one of the streets a breath had come up from the sea. A man was standing in the fold of one wall. And then they realized that it was he who had spoken to them. A square camera, was it actually of wood?, stared at them, its black cloth draped over his arm.

'Oh!' the shorter woman said, frightened. 'Oh ... I ...'

'It's much too dark,' the other woman said with complete technological assurance.

'No,' the man said without moving and without inflection. And indeed the lens at the centre of the wooden face seemed to flicker, it clicked precisely even as they stood turned slightly away from it, their lower bodies poised as it seemed for flight and their faces caught exposed, perhaps quite open. His left hand moved, presenting a piece of paper.

'Oh no you don't,' the other woman said. 'We're driving on immediately, we're not staying anywhere to pick up a picture tomorrow, we're not going to be pressured by some unscrupulous —'

But the paper already in her hand was the picture. She recognized herself in bright sunlight: her back, she was getting out of a taxi in front of her own suburban house and there were her three tall children running, it seemed they were running down the curved walk to greet her!
She could not believe what she saw in her hand, her three children, their faces...

'Where's mine?' the shorter woman demanded beside her.

The man had glanced once at the picture he had taken and now he quickly shook his head. 'No,' he said, crouching back as if he would have been happy to disappear into the wall, 'it is not good, no.'

'Where's John?' the other woman said, still staring at the picture.

'You're a fake!' the shorter woman spit out, 'You're all alike, fakes trying to get money out of us, well, what do I look like in front of my house, eh, show me! Come on!'

But the picture she received did not show her. There was no person on it at all. Only the straight walk between the two birches leading to the front door of her house. There was no one there at all.

'There's just the three kids,' the other woman said, still staring.

'I did not want to take it,' the man said to the shorter woman, his face hunched painfully together; his voice so deeply gentle, almost as if he were praying the miserare.

'Where's my John!' the other woman screamed.

They stood side by side feeling the circular stones under their unwilling feet. They had not even planned to visit this town, their car was waiting for them, with one slight twist of a key it would carry them instantly, permanently away. But here they felt the stones, revelations laid before their defenseless eyes.

/0/

'Please, don't do that.'

'Sweetheart, I want to talk to you about it.'

'Why?'

'Because I like it, I want to experience more of —'

'Then why not just read it again?'

'I will, I will.'

'Readers nowadays are such meaning hounds, sniffing, sniffing after nothing but meaning, yes, I get a whiff here, there's a spoor of meaning, sniff, sniff ... if that was all there was to meaning a writer could just make one big stink and be done with it: the husband is a son of a bitch! Period!'

'It means a lot more then — okay, I'm not looking for meanings, it just is, okay? But ... why did you arrange the parts in the order you did?'

'I don't know.'
‘Look, I don’t believe that, when you write you’re so careful you —’
‘That’s why they’re labelled «a», «b», «c» etc. — you can read them in any order you please.’
‘But «b» comes after «a», and «h» always before «j», so —’
‘Not when you write words they don’t.’
‘What? Are you trying to make a word out of —’
‘Read them in any order you please, only please!’
‘A story has to have a pattern!’
‘Not necessarily. It could be — a necklace, with various beads in a relationship to each other, that’s all.’
‘Then ... I don’t see the string.’
‘Why do you have to see it? You sense perhaps it’s there, somewhere at the centre of things, but in good necklaces you never see the string, only individual beads juxtaposed. Don’t be so damned logical!’
‘Okay, the true beauty of a necklace is brought out when it is hung around a neck, right? So whe—’
‘Right! You’re the neck.’
‘Me?’
‘Yes you. You’ve read my story, you’re wearing the necklace.’
‘Oh. Has it ...’ he hesitated, then plunged on, ‘Was it, has it made me beautiful?’
‘You always are,’ she said, suddenly moved by a profound love. ‘I don’t really know, about the necklace. Maybe you don’t need it.’
‘But I want it.’
‘I know. But maybe the story isn’t really a necklace. Maybe it’s just a ... a random scatter of beads, as spilled on a bed.’
‘Not a «bad»?’
‘No, bed, b-e-d, bed.’
‘Of course,’ he laughed. ‘If you want to, right away.’