

I Have Not Yet Seen The World

by

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I've been thinking quite a bit lately.

Oh god, cross that out.

A few days ago I went to the movies. You had been dead now for seven months. That is not the reason that I went to the movies, I didn't notice the date until I was sitting in the auditorium, ticket in hand, and by then it was too late to consider whether I should mark the anniversary of your death with a film or not, it was too late.

The film was about a woman. In the opening scene, she is raped in a subway underpass. The rest of the film is an unfolding of the events that lead up to the assault. In the final scene, the woman is a young girl, she is lying in the grass gazing up at the sun. Nothing that we know will happen has happened to her yet; it has only happened to us. When I went home, I thought about the first time you showed me a picture of yourself as a child. You sat on the rug fiddling with a piece of paper.

Our apartment belongs to me. I still live there. A few months ago I found a receipt in one of your jacket pockets. You had bought a ruler, a saw and a bucket of *retroblue* colored paint. You purchased those items only a few days before you died.

I looked up *retroblue* online. It's the kind of color that people used to paint their kitchens in the 1950s. I have no idea what you were planning to saw and paint *retroblue*. I spent about an hour rummaging through drawers and cupboards searching for those mysterious items until I decided that at least I had found the receipt and could not ask for more.

There we have it. I have the receipt of your purchases and cannot ask for more.

An accounting of some kind.

You once told me that your mom had planted a tree in the palace park on the day that she found out she was pregnant with you. She'd snuck out at night and dug a hole in the earth near a cluster of other trees so that it wouldn't stand out and there she had planted the tree, which was nothing more than a sapling at the time, and then she'd run off in the dark. When I asked you to point out the tree to me, you said you didn't know which one it was. You suspected it was a fabrication, you said. A story your mother made up to give you a bad conscience. When you were a teenager and you

would both argue, she would often say: You should be more grateful, after all I am the one who bore you, and you would answer: I never asked to be born, people have children for their own sakes. Then she, with wounded pride in her voice, said: I planted a tree for you in the park, do you think that was for my own sake too?

I don't know what to do with that word, sorrow. Just like with love, hate, freedom and other shiny, blunt terms, I glower at it from a distance with distrustful eyes. Still, I've ventured to the park this summer, often. I lie on the outskirts, examining clusters of trees and imagining which of them may be yours. I've chosen a cherry tree that might be about thirty three years old (I of course don't know anything about this), it is thin and gnarled. The whole thing is terribly sentimental. I have permitted myself things that I normally would not permit. It feels like I'm on vacation in a place where no one knows me, or on an acid trip that's almost over, and beyond that: nothing.

So, an accounting. You were not very satisfied with life. It would be silly to pretend otherwise. But you worked hard, really hard, at becoming a better and somewhat happier person.

In addition, there was something very sincere about you, an almost childish openness—your laughter was never contemptuous and one could read your every emotion on your face. Your apparent innocence often made me forget where you came from. Sometimes I would get caught up and start telling you a *piquant story*, for example about the time I did this and that with him or the other, and you would listen big-eared and smiling before responding enthusiastically, oh, that reminds me of that time I had a three-way with that stripper lady and the anorexic hairdresser lady, and the anorexic hairdresser insisted on doing a backbend while I took her. And then you laughed loudly. When you noticed my facial expression, you said, in order to smooth things over and excuse yourself: It wasn't anything serious, we had just taken a shit load of cocaine.

Your geography was really quite different than mine. Still, you liked me. You said I was sharp as a tack and incredibly sexy. The truth is that I was the first person you slept with after becoming sober and I've read that it's normal for addicts to experience a kind of sexual rebirth following rehab. I didn't say anything about it to you but you must have known that.

When we slept together, it often felt like a kind of miracle. Can I say that? I'll say it. People who are similar to one another might not need it in the same way, that sacrificial site between the bodies, entering the glade (before I met you, I pictured love as a kind of hand, or claw, that would grab hold inside of me, but not anymore, when I hear the word love, I picture the glade. Taking that step out into it. Yes, yes, I know). We did everything with each other. But there was an imbalance to it. Now and then, when you tied me up or when I would tighten my grip on your throat, I would glimpse in your eyes something that I kept forgetting: That you originated from the darkness, while I was merely a blind passenger there.

I don't think it was a charade on my side, it was more that I was participating in these small transgressions the way that a non-believer enters a sanctuary and allows herself to be opened by the room—before she shamefully notices a person prostrate in front of the altar in concentrated prayer. Or like a sobbing tourist at a concentration camp just before the sob gets stuck in their throat. You were the prayerful supplicant, you were the Jewish children staring out from a black-and-white photograph. Now and then when you looked at me, just before you would come, I could sense it.

The only family member that you introduced me to was Rikke. You had lost contact with both of your parents, first

your father and then your mother but you spoke warmly of Rikke. The house in Drøbak, you lived there for several years when you couldn't pay your rent and got kicked out, when you lost your job as a bartender, as a customer service representative, as a construction worker.

It was Rikke who had played Mahler and Schönberg for you when you were a child, it was Rikke who had Kafka, Woolf, Beckett and Dickinson on her bookshelf and Hitchcock, Bergman, Veier and Fellini in her video collection. She was everything that your parents were not, the only thing she had in common with them was that she drank.

In many ways, you have Rikke to thank for us getting together, you said that time as we drove out of the city on our way to visit her. It was winter and the roads were icy, you had rolled down the window on the passenger side and blew warm smoke and steam out into the cold. I swung onto the road, shifted gears.

Oh, really?

Yes.

You flicked the butt out through the window, rolled the window up and crouched down, shivered. You smiled fox-like. You would never have dreamt of touching me with a ten foot pole if I hadn't had some measure of *cultural sophistication*.

Before I knew about Rikke, I *was* confused, it's true. I knew where you'd come from, and I couldn't work it out. All of that bluntness and sadness and sullenness, that it could give birth to something so clear and sharp as you, that you had grown out of something like that.

Sometimes I would look at you as you read, for example when you sat at the end of the sofa—you sat on my sofa! You have been here! Something in me needs to shout it in the streets, because it's starting to resemble a dream, all of it, I'm one of those drunks in a theatrical play who has been sleeping on the street and wakes up to find themselves in the king's bed and then gets to live like a king for awhile before waking up on the street again, wondering whether it was all a dream, I walk through the apartment searching for traces, yes, your toothbrush is still in the glass, your jackets hang on the coatrack in the hall, someone comes over and asks me delicately whether it isn't time to get rid of your belongings, they probably imagine that I lie in bed at night in a heap of relics, screaming and begging and punching the air, but I don't do that, I just need to know that it was real, you in this apartment, and that it was also true—with bent neck and slippers on your feet, and there was something about the veins on your forehead, your tense jaw, the way you held a book, your hands a touch too big and the sides a touch too fragile, which made me think you must have created yourself. You resembled someone who, deep in concentration and with enormous effort, had molded themselves between their own hands. You know that documentary, *The King*, where Nils Aas locks himself in his studio and works on his sculpture of Haakon VII for several years. He was really beautiful when he was young, Nils Aas. He stands in his studio working on the sculpture, first as a miniature and then full-sized, and he has the same expression as you, or you had the same expression as he, I picture you there inside that studio, only it isn't the King you are working on, but yourself.

When we spoke together, you would always listen attentively. You seemed afraid of missing a single word, as though I might have something extremely significant to teach you. I could see how you sat pondering afterwards, with that insanely awake and concentrated gaze of yours, you took what I had said with you over to the slab where the sculpture that was you stood. You pressed blue stones into the moist clay.

And then I learned about Rikke and I knew that if it was true for me, the same must be true for her as well.

You asked me to turn into the parking lot in front of a semi-detached house.

We're there, you said with feigned lightness in your voice.

You were out of the car before I'd even turned off the engine. Through the window I watched you run a hand through your hair. You stepped restlessly through the yard, retracted your fingers in under the arms of your sweater, you had left your jacket and gloves in the car. You walked over to one of the windows of the daylight basement and peered in. I drew a breath and unfastened my safety belt.

Rikke stood back inside the hallway with her arms crossed. A child who'd been strictly lectured not to open the door to strangers, but who nonetheless fell for the temptation and now worried what might befall her. She wore heavy make-up, her shoulder-length hair was ragged from years of home dyeing, tiny wrinkles bordered her eyes and mouth. You walked over to her and opened your arms.

The apartment was small and quite dark, only narrow strips of daylight pinched through the windows, which were located at the top of the walls with a view out toward the parking lot. When I was younger, I liked to peek in through the windows of such underground apartments, imagining everything that might be living down there. Now and then we heard the sound of steps from the overhead apartment, a child yelling something, cupboard doors slamming, and then an almost imperceptible twitch crossed Rikke's face.

The living room was decorated as well as could be with various colorful trinkets, there were scarves draped over the back of the sofa, glass bowls filled with plastic pearls, dried flowers in kitchen glasses, a wrought iron candlestick, a few vibrant paintings that I suspected Rikke must have painted herself, they were painted with no talent, but with large, clumsy emotions in the strokes.

Rikke had set the table for coffee, a remarkably small tea set was laid out on the table. I sat at the rear of the sofa, you sank down beside me, footloose and fancy free, apparently unaffected by everything that could hardly stand upright, the objects, the furniture, Rikke, a home like something dreamed into being by a neglected child, in which all that's essential is absent.

You asked curious questions. Rikke replied briefly, almost dismissively, but she looked at you with eyes brimming with trust. I gradually drifted further and further away from you both. What had I expected? A place with more power? A large, dilapidated house, a woman who waltzed through the rooms talking too much and too loudly, the scent of much-too-strong perfume, a glass cabinet containing rounded bottles with amber-hued beverages, a garden of wilted flowers, something baroque: A place where insanity was draped like a heavy, painted shadow over everything. Only not this. Not this frail woman and her bric-a-brac, not this worn IKEA sofa, the bookshelf that was hardly a bookshelf, the DVD player in a corner on the floor. Not this little person with no words for anything.

You placed a hand gingerly on her shoulder. You spoke to her with a mild, safe voice, your reading-voice, slightly deeper than otherwise. Those evenings that I would return home late and we were both exhausted and slept together, slowly and concentrated, and after that you would read aloud for me, the tone of your voice frequently changing character. Then I would think, I would like to hear your voice reading to my child. I would like to stand outside of a bedroom and hear your voice reading to a child.

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I wonder at you. How you stood with open eyes and let the world fall into you. How you lifted something up, a bird, a bone, a person, with the same gentleness, Your respect for everything that exists. The will to let it be as it is. Only gently pick it up and look at it and stroke it with your fingertips.

I was quiet in the car ride home from Rikke's place. I couldn't hide—what was it? Disappointment? Pity? A feeling of having been swindled? You peered out the window, the reflections from the street lights were glowing wounds across your face that healed and healed in the darkness.

Were you unhappy?

I don't know.

The only thing I know is that I don't have your gaze, nor your hands.

My eyes are closed and my fists clenched.

I am still lying in the womb mumbling out my own language.

I have not yet seen the world, that's why it's so easy for me to judge it.

But I am trying to listen now that you are gone, I hope you know that. I am practicing to become like you.