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Audience in the Mirror

John H. Liddle
St. John Fisher College

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Audience in the Mirror

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The apartment was on the other side of Maple Street and by now Jim would be sitting at the window. That neighborhood was a barren place, a flophouse for second-hand cars. A block away stood their brick apartment building; the only other buildings on the street were a high school of grey brick, a Colonel Sanders, a National Ambulance, and a green metal shed with blind windows. The rest of the block had been razed and sown with asphalt. As Violet walked past the high school, she quickened her pace because the yard full of shouting black faces and ball-slapping black hands made her feel looked at and vulnerable; she felt more than saw them watching her. If only there were something green and growing, a patch of grass, a shrub, a tree, but all there was was concrete."

Cover Page Footnote

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John Liddle

The apartment was on the other side of Maple Street and by now Jim would be sitting at the window. That neighborhood was a barren place, a flophouse for second-hand cars. A block away stood their brick apartment building; the only other buildings on the street were a high school of grey brick, a Colonel Sanders, a National Ambulance, and a green metal shed with blind windows. The rest of the block had been razed and sown with asphalt. As Violet walked past the high school, she quickened her pace because the yard full of shouting black faces and ball-slapping black hands made her feel looked at and vulnerable; she felt more than saw them watching her. If only there were something green and growing, a patch of grass, a shrub, a tree, but all there was was concrete.

Waiting for the traffic to break, she looked up at the shirt-sleeved white blur in the window. Watching the world go by. Jim, she was sure, though at that distance she couldn't see him clearly. Why didn't I meet someone else? Two years and her life was no better than when she'd met him. She was

still working at Neisner's, buying her clothes at Field's, and afraid of never finding anything more, anything better. And Jim. A fourth-hand man. The born loser. Maybe Ellis was right. "I'm only your uncle and you don't have to listen to no one like me," he'd warned her. "I never went more'n the eighth grade, but Vi, the man's a born loser."

Why had she fought Ellis about that? What had she believed in then? Now she wondered if it was because she thought she was right, or because Jim was her choice. Or had she been his? It seemed so long ago she wasn't sure she'd ever know which anymore. If only he would do something, anything, and then she let the words trail off in her mind.

The apartment was a single large white room, stove, refrigerator, sink on one wall, bed, dresser on the other, and just beyond that the john. There was nothing else but the formica-topped table, a broken TV and, of course, Jim, beer can in his hand, arms folded on the window sill looking out.

"How'd it go today?" he asked.

"All right," she replied.

"Tired?" he said without turning.

She took the vodka bottle down from the cupboard, poured some into a glass and drank it neat, before he saw, before she even washed up.

"What'd they have you doing?"

"Checkout counter."

"All day?"

She slopped some orange juice into the glass, used the last two ice cubes and put the empty tray back into the refrigerator. Then she poured vodka into the glass, before he turned and asked, "All day?" It was the first time he had looked at her. Out of the corner of his eyes, the way they did down in the street. It made her feel like a stranger had walked in when she was naked. She got up, drink in hand, and walked towards the bathroom.

Jim lit a cigarette. "Want to do something tonight?" he said.

"With what?"

"Do us good to get out of here."

"We'll just about make the rent this month." Why did she have to be the one saying no all the time? Why couldn't he be re-

An Alaskan by preference and a student by necessity, John Liddle looks forward to owning a book shop and writing stories and poems.

sponsible for. . . for . . . for what their marriage wasn't.

The door to the john opened half-way, then stuck.

"When are you going to fix that door!"

"I forgot. I'm sorry."

Sorry. He was always sorry.

In the tub, naked and soaking, she looked at herself. Her stomach was rounder than her boobs and made her wish she were growing not bloating. She closed her eyes. The water matted her hair and stopped her ears. She felt good, clean, like a firm-fleshed girl floating in a green river watching the sky until she remembered Jim over her, half-crouched, on thin hairless legs, making her feel exposed and fat even under the blankets.

When he heard the water pouring into the tub, Jim got another beer. Maybe things would straighten out tomorrow. He went back to the window where the setting sun was reflected in a hundred school windows. He drank the beer, too quickly to taste. He wanted her so bad that his clenched fist around the beer can squeezed it out of shape. Even then he couldn't meet her need, slid into damp emptiness, a void he could never fill, off into her darkness and her crying from frustration. "Die, son of a bitch, die!" he said and was stunned to hear himself speak aloud.

Soon, she would be coming out of the bathroom and would look at him, questioning, demanding. When are we getting out of here? When are you going to get a job that pays. Why are you such a god damn born loser? She would drink, they would go to bed, and it wouldn't be any good.

When Violet came out, the room was empty. She wrapped her hair in a towel, fixed herself another drink and sat at the table. The sun had set and the windows of the school were dark. Where was he, she wondered. She knew he would have run somewhere, any-

where, so that they wouldn't have to touch or look at each other. She wanted to tell him that it was all right, that it would be all right, but she couldn't. How could you talk to a man who apologized for everything, even for living?

She tried the TV before remembering that it was broken. "A busted TV and a thin-legged husband aren't enough. He should be here to hold me." The vodka warmed her and made her laugh.

At the *Clarion Bar and Grill*, black men climbed the seven cement steps to the plate-glass door, or stood in knots in front of the plate-glass window, waiting. They didn't mind just standing there, being, laughing, running a number, or shooting a little craps. Did their women hassle them, or just leave them be? They looked as if they belonged.

Jim walked past an empty lot. Half-way down the block stood a phone booth. The door was smashed and the charred remains of a phone book hung at the end of its chain. When the phone rang, he was surprised that it still worked and pushed on the metal frame of the door to tell whoever was calling that he had the wrong number. Nobody lived there. He stepped gingerly into the booth nervous of what might be in the newspapers that littered the floor, the odor of ammonia rank in his nostrils. A man's voice, soft and thick, came out of the gathering dark. "Hiya, howya doin'?"

Jim stood without moving, the receiver turned slimy in his hand.

"I wanna talk to you. I really like tall boys with brown curly hair like yours. Whyn't you and me get together?"

"How do you know what I look like?" Jim managed to say.

"Man, I can see you in that phone booth and you look fine to me. Whyn't we go for a ride? I can show you a real good time."

"Where are you?" Jim

stammered, fighting panic.

"The laundromat."

At the end of the street was the laundromat and in the window a black-haired face, pallid and lumpy, leered at him and simultaneously made a kissing noise into the phone. Jim dropped the receiver, yanked open the door frame and fled. He ran for a long time before, panting, he had to slow to a walk. Then he took the roundabout way back to the apartment and stopped before the white door where the paint was beginning to flake and show the underlying coat. On the other side of the door, Violet and his marriage would be waiting.

Violet slept, her head on her arms, her hair spilled out black over the table. An empty glass with flecks of orange pulp was at her elbow. Jim tried not to wake her. Over the window, he put up the old sheet to shut out the night, got a beer from the refrigerator and saw the half-empty vodka bottle. Violet moved her head, coughed, and he knew he had to wake her or there was no hope. He touched her shoulder, felt the warmth under her blue cotton shirt, but when she raised her head, her arms left a red blotch on her forehead, her eyes were puffy, lips swollen, and she smelled of sour orange juice. She shoved back her chair and lurched to the sink. Her shirttail was out and fat swelled over the top of her jeans as she drank a glass of water.

"You all right?" he asked.

She fixed another drink and turned to look at him before she took a swallow. "Nothing makes me feel so all right as coming here and being alone. You're really sweet to leave me. I really appreciate it. I hope I didn't put you out too much."

"I'm sorry, I really am."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. You walked out. You left. And now you're back. So what's to be sorry for?" With a long gulp, she finished her drink and began to fix another.

"It won't happen again."

"You mean you won't come back again? I'm not as dumb as you think. Maybe I'm not so good looking, but you're no prize either. Where the hell do you get off leaving me alone, then whining about how sorry you are! Remember me? Violet! The wife! The woman you can't support!" She was yelling.

Jim tried to put an arm round her shoulders, but she twisted free. "Why don't you do something besides feel guilty for everything?" He stood by the refrigerator and remembered an old drawing he had once pinned up on the wall of his bedroom in his father's house, a picture of what lay beyond the edge of the world. The drawing showed a sailing ship teetering at the edge. Foam and steam billowed up and out of the foam rose a monstrous serpent, long-scaled and writhing in anticipation, it stretched its mouth wide to take the ship. Jim leaned his forehead against the refrigerator door and closed his eyes. All he wanted now was a bed with cool white sheets; he'd stretch out, pull the sheet over

his face, and let the whole damned world fade out.

"You're no good to talk to," Violet whispered, staring at the floor, "and you're no good in bed. What the hell are you good for?" Slowly, with drunken dignity, she took her glass into the bathroom and pulled the door shut.

As he opened the refrigerator door, the ice-cube tray fell at his feet. "Goddam stupid-assed broad can't even fill up the fucking tray!" He picked it up, slung it against the wall and heard it clatter to the floor. The closed bathroom door was more than he could bear. He wrenched it open and saw Violet sitting on the side of the tub, drink in hand, her face upturned, the pupils of her eyes wide and dark, spots white over the cheekbones. Words distant and distorted. A hand rose, large, white, red-cracked knuckles, and he knew he was going to hit her. For an instant, he thought he could stop it, but the flat of his palm met the side of her face, her head snapped to one side, the glass fell, and she dropped over the edge of the tub, down into it.

He watched her struggle out of the tub and felt nothing. He should

have felt something. He had humiliated his wife; worse, he had given her the upper hand. She touched her cheek gently, glaring at herself in the mirror. He shifted his weight, trying to think of something to say or do.

"You hit me and nothing will change that."

"It was an accident," he said. "I didn't mean it."

"That's the only way you can touch me!" She was playing to the audience in the mirror now, gaining confidence as she went along, but he didn't care at all. The only thing he could come up with was, "I was drunk and didn't know what I was doing."

"My God," she said, spitting a dollup of blood into the sink. "You've made me bleed! You've hit me and made me bleed!"

As she wiped the strings of blood from her mouth with toilet paper, he heard an ambulance siren in the distance, but did not go to the window. He stood there just waiting, and when she had turned and thrown herself face down on the bed, he knelt to gather up the bloodsoaked papers and carry them away.

