The Lying Glass

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The Lying Glass

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

"Sarah was not alone in the house but she was the only one awake at the time the doorbell rang. Her two children were sleeping in their rooms and she was working in her bedroom, according to her usual habit. Every night after she put them to bed, she would write and think and read, non-fiction, mostly, because she wrote poetry and the way she did it was to throw out from herself, like a spider, a sticky web of intelligence-gathering that caught in it everything that wandered by. She was not a reader of fiction because she had had enough of other people’s lies: she was constantly inventing her own. She also worked as a mathematician for a statistics-gathering company, and at night she would try to catch up on her paperwork and write reports on the daily discoveries, the raw data accumulated day by day. She glanced at the digital clock on the marble-inlaid table: 9:45. Often at this time at night, her father would drop in to visit her and to kiss his grandchildren. he had been doing this ever since her husband had died four years ago. She ran barefoot down the stairs, the shaggy white rug soft under her feet."

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Looking at her, flying down the stairs to greet her father, most people would think that Sarah was a brave and joyful person. Her gaze was level, unerring: there was nothing, it seemed, that she was afraid to look at or to confront in herself or others. She was one of those rare people who, by sheer presence and manner, forces others to reveal themselves, telling their most intimate secrets, things they wouldn't tell their analysts, their best friends, or even their lawyers. Yet, as is often the case, the gap between illusion and reality-between what you see and what you get—often proves unbridgeable, and the little known but factual truth was that Sarah had certain secret vulnerabilities. When she was sixteen or maybe seventeen, she had seen Ingmar Bergman's film The Virgin Spring, and even now, almost twenty years later, she could still recall the expression on the girl's face just before she died: eyes staring upward, beseeching the sky, commingling awe, terror, and a despairing passion; then the final obliteration. Unforgettable, like the expression that must have been on Lear's face as he held Cordelia, dead in his arms. She thought about that look often over the years, and the thought would make her lonely, a sudden terrible loneliness would come whispering and murmuring around her like wind in the trees. She would look at her two daughters shimmering with a mysterious readiness, as yet unnamed, and she would think how easily they could be hurt, how the thing that they were getting ready for—which had to do with being with a man, with love and lust, and the deep unspeakable pleasures of being a woman—could be distorted and transduced into something uglier, darker, and less innocent. The breakableness of children, it had always seemed to Sarah, was a terrible thing.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, turned into the long unlit hallway, and opened the door, without peeking through the shutters first, or turning on the outside light. The man standing at the door was a stranger. She felt a rush of air against her cheek as he hurried himself past her, a huge shadowed shape, into the hall. She did not ask why he was there because it occurred to her that he himself did not know the reasons: they were outside his memory, perhaps, even before his birth. Some trauma in the womb, it may have been, or something in the long slow agony of his seasoning had taught him that he was nothing, unwanted, and that therefore everything was nothing without meaning or connection. Could she have convinced him that she herself was inviolable? That everything that exists has connection with everything else? She could not. Therefore she remained silent.

Long wordless moments passed, frightened with danger, as she looked at the intruder looking at her. She forced
herself to remain calm. Sweat formed on her eyelids like tears, rose like steam from her forehead. The man was amazing to look at, a freak, monstrous in size and bulk, with small, close-together eyes set into a face that was perfectly smooth, hairless, and spongy-white as a chunk of fine cheese. There was a curious unseen feminine quality about him; a softness, a pliability, though cleverly disguised by his physical size. Grunting sounds and syllables without meaning issued from his cracked lips. She couldn’t make out what he was saying. Something about watching the widow’s house, the young widow with children, oh yes, watching. He had shouldered himself into the room and heaved his body down on the leather couch, blue, worn, crisp at the edges, a wedding gift from her parents. He wore a long, shapeless coat, sooty baggy trousers, and though it was summer, moth-eaten brown wool gloves with the finger-tips missing. From time to time, he pulled his faded shirt, like an Army surplus tent, out of his pants and wiped his nose with it, all the while glancing furiously at her with a look which she might have interpreted as asking for something, begging. His tiny eyes, red-rimmed with drink or sorrow, swam in her vision, distorted by tears of anger or fear, until she realized that it was not her tears but his drifting in the refracted air between them like graceful birds, held hovering in that space by an immanent will. Suddenly he lifted his head and paused, staring straight into her eyes.

“I am not a man who cries easily,” he said.

Sarah fought back an unreasonable surge of joy in her throat, hoping she caught it before it reached her eyes. Maybe he wasn’t . . .

“I believe you.” Quietly she said it, careful to keep all emotion, all judgment out of her voice, as if safety lay in neutral intonation. She hid her hands in her pockets, clenching her fists to disguise her moist trembling. He was freely sobbing now, his shapeless features contorted in a grimace of self-pity. Sensitiveness. A romantic he was! She could see it in his rapidly bobbing Adam’s apple and the way his voice curled and cracked around the edges.

“Women don’t easily forgive a man who cries all the time.” His breath came in thin gasps between long sighs, his voice a mere whisper. He dropped to the floor, covering his bloated head with one arm; his elbow moved an inch to the right, leaving exposed one blurry red eye peering slyly, expectantly at her.

Sarah’s eyes narrowed. “I forgive you,” she said and turned immediately away from the sight of such humiliation. The absurdity and danger of a woman’s plight struck her then like a club, or a revelation. She had never felt so powerful before, nor at the same time so lost, helpless, so completely without resources. Her one weapon—her vision, her faculty of eyesight, became at once her greatest asset and most glaring liability. A certain kind of man might react against it as against his worst enemy, hating women for their freedom from sexual strictures, from having to “perform,” proving over their arching flesh his maleness, his “adjustment” to a man’s role, punishing them, most of all, for the unforgivable crime of being there and seeing. Sarah knew that her witnessing his degradation, and her insight into its causes, sealed her fate from the moment that her forgiveness was called for and granted. She held both hands up in front of her body, palms outward, the ancient gesture of supplication. Or repudiation. Under her breath, she whispered, “No”.

But the time for thought was quickly over, or yet to come. He had her pinned to the floor before she had time to scream or run, twisting her arm behind her, lugging forward, providing her, and in a flash his great weight had dragged her downwards and her clothes were raised above her waist. The first, numbing blow came swiftly, and she saw him watching her closely through slitted eyes, almost tenderly, as if curious about the outcome, solicitous, though in fact he knew in advance. She saw his wide, panicking face, his small pig’s eyes, his knee rising before it fell like a white tree onto her stomach. She heard his laughter, a thin, joyful squeal. But after that, like a stone she felt nothing. Her body was like one of those shells found sometimes stranded on the beach, abandoned by some sea animal to the whims of tides and storms.

Time seemed to freeze and flow backwards, and memory rushed in as if to protect her. Images of great violence and purity came into her mind, blocking out present horror and giving rise to a strange, healing sense of reconciliation with the darker powers, a new intuition into their design. There was nothing, nothing to be afraid of any longer. The world grew dim, then bright.

She stood on a hill which fell away to a meadow on an afternoon in late fall. It was cloudy and windy; she could feel the wind tangled in her hair. The grass was dead and grey-green, and in the distance she could see a few trees widely spaced, stripped of their leaves by the wind. About halfway between where she was standing and the farthest edge of her vision, marked by the line of trees, something of great moment was taking place. A shaggy animal was standing with its back towards her, its head lifted high as if proudly or vigilantly, in a pose of perfect stillness and self-containment. All at once it began to tremble violently, lurching forward: the back legs seemed to stiffen, while the front legs collapsed and bent outwards. The head was almost on the ground. From her vantage point on the hill she stood for a long time and wept for the beauty of the colors and the fatigue of mothers.

Sarah opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling for what seemed like hours. Night sounds drifted in from behind the closed and lined window covering the window walk: a car starting, a hungry or suspicious dog barking, the heavy, insistent sound of crickets mating in the grass. She tried to move, testing her arms and legs, but they seemed to be nailed to the floor. When she was pregnant with her first child, the last one, she had felt towards the end of her term this same curious lassitude, as if muscles and sinews were emptied of vital fluid and what was left was dead heavy flesh, weighing her down; and not only when she was pregnant, but before and after. The symptoms, familiar as a friend, dreaded as death, overcame her all at once: clouds forming in the brain, crystals of ice floating inside the chest, and that inexpressible heaviness in the body which makes movement unthinkable. She tried to close off her mind but another fantasy or memory crowded in; this time even more painful: once, in reply to her anxious questions, the man she loved had
told her she was beautiful. His name was Richard and later he became her husband. They had been on their way somewhere, maybe the movies or back to the dorm, and were holding each other's hands as if kingdoms depended on it. Suddenly he had stopped and bent his head toward her, his eyebrows drawn inward, and had stared, smiling, for a long time into her face. For some reason the splintery gold lights in his normally dark eyes, the slanting smile, had frightened her. Panicked, she had finally asked, "What is it? What do you see?" He said, "I see how beautiful you are, the way your eyes reflect back at me whatever I want them to." Though he spoke tenderly, with no malice or injury intended, the words, she remembered clearly, had gone through her veins like quick poison. It was as if she had suddenly ceased to exist. And now it occurred to Sarah, while she was lying on the floor staring at the ceiling, that she had always functioned primarily as a mirror for other people's aspirations, a flat, smooth, prevaricating piece of glass which, containing nothing, reflects everything. Or so it seemed to her for the space of that moment, a mere heartbeat. She lurched to her feet, and staggered out the door into the night.

She began to run blindly, stumbling, passing darkened houses with wide shadowed lawns, spreading trees in front, and huge yawning spaces in between. People she saw every day, waved to, sometimes spoke to, in that brief, half-embarrassed way we greet
our neighbors, were now asleep in their beds. She passed a brief stretch of more houses and then a busier street, with cars, street lights, and gas stations, supermarkets, restaurants. She stayed away from main thoroughfares whenever possible, walking on grass (cool moisture between her toes, lushest of well-tended lawns) and, because what was here below frightened and excluded her, she looked up at the stars. The sky seemed swollen with them, their luminous presence abridging an otherwise blank endless space. Somewhere in that charged, unsnumbling vastness lay a clue, an emotion, or an image as yet uncrystallized but struggling for shape. She thought again of her father, who had taught her the names of flowers and stars and animals when she was still a child, looking through Audubon books and back copies of National Geographic, excitedly listing different species of birds and snakes and trees and insects and stones. There was a kind of holiness in naming things, a litany. She felt strangely comforted.

From far away, a siren sounded, breaking the silence. Almost at the same moment, a car turned the corner just ahead and sped towards her, headlights gleaming in the darkness like a dragon's eyes. The wind suddenly ceased and the stars disappeared, their airy light extinguished by other lights. She was approaching a shopping center surrounded by a vast field of concrete. Even at this hour some cars were parked there, and for a moment she allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to just crawl into one of them and sleep until her exhaustion was gone. One morning they would find her like that, curled into a ball, still sleeping, a lost woman. Later, maybe, when the night was truly over. But for now... she felt her whole life, past and future, flowing and merging together in one continuous present. She would act; that much, at least, was clear. For the rest... She shrugged.

A figure materialized out of the shadows as if from thin air, moving slowly towards her. It was her own reflection, glimpsed in a darkened store-window as she passed. In amazement and terror, she saw how she must appear to the outside world: a small ghost, white-robed, wild-haired, pale as winter, with two small white feet visible below the frayed and bloody hem of her gown, her black eyes glinting, unblinking like a bird. Any casual observer or innocent reveller who happened to be entering or leaving the bar or restaurant ahead, and who, surfeited with his nightly portion of food and wine, might be seen fastening his buttons, his frail rags against a sudden chill in the summer air, any casual observer who might happen to turn his head as if by accident to see Sarah close by, crouching in the shadows, would surely think her insane. That was possible, even likely, though of no importance, and at any rate, no one was there to observe it, no one to record the momentous fact. The impression of fatedness she had felt earlier, the sense of imminent discovery and the urgency to tie the knot (or unravel it, the mystery) was intensified now as she stepped boldly out of the shadows and pushed open the fretted doors of the restaurant.

A sycamore of thick hot smells and noises swirled around her like crazy birds: tinny jukebox music, laughter, and a smell like old lettuce. She stood staring for a long time, blinking, weeping with exhaustion. Her eyes closed, and she may have slept. When they opened again, minutes or hours later, every detail of the scene before her stood out more clearly than before, like words etched in braille: she could have read it with her fingertips or with the soles of her bare feet. A long, deep, windowless room, lined with tables and chairs on one side, a polished curving bar on the other; an illuminated ceiling splashing greasy yellow light like melted butter onto the faces of people who were strangers to each other, enemies to themselves; a smooth tile floor which seemed warmed as if with human breath. Alone at a table near the rear of the room sat the intruder, his legs splayed out at a crazy angle, his head dipping downwards, musing, like a stopped train, lost in thought. There was such an air of bewilderment, a kind of holiness in naming things, a litany. She felt strangely comforted.

The man suddenly jerked his chin up from where it had been sagging on his chest, the force of the motion halting him out of his chair. The rage returned and she remembered. Her scream was low, like a moan, then rising in a crescendo of hatred. She screamed and pointed her finger like a gun straight at the astonished forehead. Her voice did not sound like a human voice. She could not have said how her voice sounded to her, but others who heard it said it sounded like an animal dying, or like the ravings of a madwoman. Or so they told the doctors and nurses at the hospital where they took her after that.