

FICTION

MARK BLAGRAVE

Polyphemus

*Oh deere Goddess Venus, what
A poure haste thou? Behold how even this owgly Giant that
No sparke of meekenesse in him bath; whoo is a terrour too
The verrye woodes, whom never guest nor stranger came untoo
Without displeasure, whoo the heavens and all the Goddes despyseth,
Dooth feele what thing is love.*

FOR TWO. I'M MEETING SOMEONE." He is meeting someone. As though it were the most natural thing in the world, a matter of no consequence, happens every day. And the someone. Her, the queen of my heart, mistress of my desires, the goddess whom I adore, he calls her plain someone. Simpering at the waitress as she seats him, asking for decaff in that sanctimonious way, as if real coffee might—what?—put hair on his chest, make his beard grow in coarse and dark, like a man's, like mine. He gets a table without an umbrella, flirts with the waitress, chooses the seat with the sun behind him, so the down on his cheeks seems to sparkle, so there's a kind of halo all around his pretty little head. It offends my eye to look at him. What does she see?

I am looking down when she comes onto the patio, but I know she is there the very instant she arrives. Her scent gives her away: the flowers in her shampoo, a faint trace of musk, a distant undertone of garlic—her scent that swirls around you, teasing, promising, while you sit in the examining chair. "Which is better—one or two?" "Two." "Now which is better, two or three?" "You. You are better, best, everything to me." But you do not say that. You say "three," or "can I see them again?"

"Outside?" she asks him. "Isn't it a little cold?"

"You want to go in?" Is that a sulk?

"No. No. This'll be fine. Have you ordered?"

"Just decaff."

She does not explain why she is late. She *must* be late—it's twelve-fifteen; who makes dates for the quarter hour?—but she does not bother to explain. A recognition of his unworthiness; I know it is. She is chilly. I can tell. I sneak a peek beneath their table. Her toes are all scrunched up in her sandals. I imagine taking them in my mouth, one by one, sucking the blood back into them, my tongue sliding across the hard lacquered surface of the nails. The flesh on her calves is raised up in little bumps I can feel against my lips, the tiny dots of stubble like the prickles in a music box, plucking notes only we can hear. "Isn't it a little cold?" "You want to go in?" "No. No. This'll be fine." Why doesn't she tell him the *truth*?

"Busy morning?" So, he wants an explanation after all: is she late because of pressures at the office?

"Not very." (Ha!) "The summer, you know, people's minds are on other things. They don't think that much about their eyes." She is lying, of course, must be lying; who doesn't think about their eyes? Always? "You?"

"Actually, I just got up. Well, half an hour ago." God, he's a teenager! A baby! I can't sleep past six-thirty any more; we could make love before you leave for the office mornings. She laughs and rests her hand for an instant on his. The fingers are long, elegant, nails clear-polished and short. His hands are calloused, dirty—oil paint, ink, who knows what else. I have to work hard to shut the image of them on her naked body, stroking her, cupping her, out of my mind.

His decaff arrives and the waitress stands over them expectantly. They giggle, both together—it is a most unmusical sound—say they haven't had a chance to look at the menus yet, they've been so busy talking. (What have they *said*?) She says she'll give them a few more minutes then, and crosses to my table with the water pitcher. I want to set her straight, to say to her: "They're not lovers. That's just the way it looks. Meeting like this. Talking like that. Seeming not to care what they are going to eat. It may look like love, but it's not. It's not." But I do not believe it myself, so I only thank her for the water and order dessert. "No hurry," I say.

“I’ve got all the time in the—.” She’s already gone. Put off by my appearance, confused where to look.

This is their sixteenth lunch together here in eight weeks. I eat here every day now, just in case they show up. The first was a Thursday, then Friday, then Thursday and Friday and Thursday and Friday and Thursday and Friday and Thursday and Friday and Thursday and Friday and Thursday and Friday and yesterday and today. Too early to declare absolutely that it is a pattern, but it looks promising. I suppose they could be eating somewhere else on the other days. I wouldn’t know. I’m always here. Waiting. In case.

She wears her beige pant-suit Thursdays—some kind of expensive polyester that doesn’t look like it; always crisp, professional. A white blouse under, open two buttons at the neck, collar out over the jacket. Slingback shoes that hide her toes but show the cream and pink of her heels. On Fridays, it’s a more relaxed look: batik skirt, short-sleeved jersey under an unconstructed jacket, the sandals. (Those freezing toes; can’t he tell she’s cold, she’d rather eat inside?)

My first appointment was a Thursday: the polyester suit that doesn’t look like polyester; the white blouse; the slingbacks; the mingled scent of Clairol, Calvin Klein, and, far away, just barely there, Pizza Hut. We started on the machine outside the exam room, me staring into one end of a pair of binoculars while she gazed into the other. I couldn’t see her there, of course, even though her face was less than a foot from mine. Her knee, under the table, must have been even nearer. I tried to move my leg, casually, to brush hers as if by accident, but I couldn’t find it. “Just look straight ahead please, Peter.” My name on her lips. My first name on her lips. Her eyes looking right into my eye, literally, penetrating the cornea, through the pupil, down to the retina. I could feel her in there, scanning for lesions, on the alert for the least irregularity in the blood vessels. “Everything looks fine there. Good.” The confidence, the certainty. Would she have detected the crab in the other eye, twenty years ago, would she have been able to save...? Twenty years ago, I had to remind myself, she was not yet in kindergarten, the machine not invented, and lasers were for spacemen.

“Let’s go in here now.” It was only the exam room, I knew that; and the invitation was no more than she made to every patient, I knew that too; but as I followed, hypnotized by the pendulum motion of her bottom beneath the polyester suit, I detected

something more. It was there, I knew it was: a subtle message. For me. When she shut the door I wanted to wrap her in my arms, to take the tiny earlobes in my mouth, feel the plain gold hoops against my teeth, to set the silken hair free from the clip that held it, to rain down kisses on the long elegant neck. Instead, I climbed into the chair as instructed, and settled for her cool hands on my chin as they guided me not to her waiting lips but into the embrace of yet another machine. “A professor,” she said, looking at my chart, “you must do a lot of reading.”

“Not usually more than ten or twelve hours a day.” I wanted it to sound casual, as though there was nothing to it, as though anybody might as comfortably inhabit, for whole days at a time, that inner world where reading takes you. More than whole days.

“Wow. That’s quite a lot. I love reading. I adore curling up with a big fat best-seller. So. Any problems?”

“My arms don’t seem to be long enough any more.”

“Let’s check it out. Now, I’m going to just cover one—oh.” Caught out in her standard spiel, ambushed by the unseeing fact of my left eye, she started again. “Let’s check it out. Now, which is better—one or two?” The comparisons began.

*More whyght thou art then Primrose leaf my Lady Galatee
More fresh than meade, more tall and streyght than lofty Aldertree,
More bright than glasse, more wanton than the tender kid forsooth,
Than Cocklesbells continually with water worne, more smoothe.*

Six was better than seven I finally had to admit, although I knew it meant bringing the end nearer.

“It’s called presbyopia,” she announced, hoping, I suppose, to cushion with its technical name the actual diagnosis: a decreased ability to thicken the lens to see close objects, creeping age, senile inflexibility. I confessed to having bought a pair of reading glasses in the drugstore, bracing myself for a lecture against self-diagnosis—like self-abuse, it’ll make you go blind. “Those are probably fine for now. Have you thought about bifocals?”

“Not really. Sometimes. Do I need bifocals?”

“There’s a slight astigmatism. I could write you a prescription if you like. It’s only very slight. The eye is remarkably healthy”

She trailed off, and I finished it for her: “considering.”

“How long ago was it?”

“Twenty years.” I could see her then trying to peel away those years, straining to see me as I was at twenty-three. And suddenly I felt actually old and—yes—naked there in the chair. Naked and shrivelled. Not what I’d imagined at all. “Choroid melanoma.”

“They almost always did the complete enucleation then. I’ve read a little about it. Any history of glaucoma?” She retreated to the safety of her standard patter. “I’m just going to put these drops in. They anaesthetize the eyeball so I can measure the pressure. Lean your head back please.” With one hand she steadied my cheek, pulling the eyelid taut to hinder blinking, while with the other she squeezed the anaesthetic onto the cornea. Like Puck administering the love-juice to those two Athenian fools—only there needed no potion to make me worship her.

“Anything else? Any questions?” she asked, drawing the exam professionally to a close. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her to have lunch, to move in, to spend the rest of her life with me, but she added quickly: “You can always call the office if you think of anything.” At the door, she held out a long hand. I wanted to kiss but only shook it. I could have sworn it was warmer than before.

In the waiting room, reading a two-year-old copy of *People*, was a young man: faded blue jeans, Doc Martens, a T-shirt several sizes too large, dirty hands, clean hair, a pair of large blue eyes that looked as though they never blinked. I recognized him, of course, as a student in one of my courses—an infrequent attender whose name I had consequently never bothered to learn. “Alex,” she said, “you’re right on time. Let’s start out here.” Alex. I would have to go back and check my class lists.

As I paid the receptionist and collected the insurance forms, the thought of Alex’s cherubic face just inches from hers, the idea of her entering him through his pupil, the absolute probability that their knees would brush, made me want to fling a rock at his perfect little head. Only the thought that the projectile might glance off and hit her prevented me—that and the fact that I couldn’t at that moment lay my hands on a rock.

The ice-cream on my cherry cobbler has melted. I swirl my spoon through it, imagining I am spreading his blood on the snow. Oblivious, he has ordered a Croque Monsieur and is halfway through it while she is nibbling on a Greek salad. There is a pit in one of the olives; I see the surprised look on her face though he does not. As she holds those long fingers up to her mouth I imagine the pit rolled over on her tongue, pushed through the parted teeth, finally

to penetrate the lips, from which I see it gently plucked and deposited on her plate.

My waitress asks me for the fifth time if I'd like anything else. How could she ever begin to understand?

2

But if

*Thou knew me well, it would thee irke to flye and bee a greef
Too tarrye from me. Yea thou wouldst endeavour all thy powre
Too keepe mee wholly too thy self.*

We did end up having lunch together. I phoned the office on the Monday following my appointment, saying I wanted to find out more about the bifocals. The receptionist was uncomfortable discussing it, as I had hoped she would be. When I asked her why bifocals for a one-eyed man shouldn't cost just the same as single lenses for a two-eyed, she suddenly "remembered" that Dr. Tupper had wanted to speak to me.

"Peter?"

Gail, call me Gail. "Um. Gail?"

"What was your question?"

"Could I come and see you?"

"Are you having problems? Marie books the appointments. I'll put you back on with—"

"No. No problems. It's what you said about bifocals."

"Yes?"

"Could I come in to talk to you about that? Just a few minutes. Would you have just a few minutes? Not an appointment really, just a chat."

"Sure Peter. Could you come in later this afternoon, say five? I'll be finished with the exams for the day by then. Will that be okay?" Why couldn't I answer? "Well then, I'll look forward to seeing you then, shall I?"

It wasn't until after I hung up that I actually heard the note in her voice, that note I had first heard coming out of the anaesthetic twenty years ago, that note that says that Mother Teresa isn't the only one who could love the untouchable. "It's a beginning, anyway," I told myself, and headed downtown to buy a new shirt.

The receptionist, Marie, had left for the day when I arrived, and I had to bang on the frosted glass door several times before

Gail heard me and came to let me into the office. She was wearing the suit, but had kicked off the slingbacks. “My feet get tired by the end of the day,” she said, catching my glance at her bare toes; “will you forgive me in bare feet?”

I’ll fall down and cool those feet with my breath, bathe them with my tears, dry them with my hair; but all I said was “Of course.” She padded in front of me—again the pendulum beneath the wrinkle-free fabric—to a room I had not seen before: a small office, barely large enough for the desk and two chairs it held.

“So, it was about the bifocal idea,” she began, sitting herself behind the desk.

“I didn’t realize you’d have an office, an office like this I mean.”

“Where did you think I’d—?”

“I mean, I always picture you in the examining room.” Oh God, had I said “always”? “What I mean is, I had thought of the exam room, you know, where you saw me on Thursday, as really your office.”

“It is, really. I use this mostly for paperwork. And the odd consultation.”

“So.”

“So.”

“So now I can picture you here.”

“I guess.”

But I wouldn’t; I knew I wouldn’t. Couldn’t. For four days I had been picturing her only in the examining room—with that child, that downy-faced boy, that Alex. For four nights I had lain awake, tossing, sweating, unable to close my eye on the relentless image of them there together. The memory of her there, behind her desk, even with her feet bare, would never be able to eclipse the other picture I had formed.

*Anon the feend espyed mee and Acis where wee lay,
Before we wist or feared it.*

It begins quite routinely, as I imagine it, their tryst in the examination room. She asks him to sit in the chair, guides his face into the machine, flips down the flap to cover one eye. “There,” I think, “let him feel what *that* is like for awhile, to see the world like that.” He reads the very bottom line with ease—but the letters are not what they should be, surely. “L-e-t s f u ” “No!” I scream

inside, “that can’t be what it says,” and then: “nobody can read that small.” “Very good,” she says, and the intonation is so flat I cannot tell whether it is a diagnosis or assent. It is dark in the room, but I am sure I catch the white flash of her bra as she unbuttons the suit jacket. (Are you troubled by unexplained flashes of light?) I feel a tightening around my temples as he disengages from the apparatus and buries his face between her breasts. (Do you suffer from frequent headaches?) How they can risk it with the chair and the machines and only the thin-skinned lauan door between them and the waiting room I do not know, but I’m sure I can hear the moment he enters her. (Have you ever had difficulty judging distances? Do you see things that aren’t there?) And then, like a movie, the screen goes blank—a slow iris out from shades of grey to velvety black.

“Bifocals are quite an adaptation,” she was saying. “You have to learn to use your whole head to aim your gaze. And if you do any amount of work on a computer you have to work with your head tilted back.”

“As though you have a perpetual nosebleed,” I jumped in, anxious to show that I was listening actively.

“I guess. Yes.”

“Well, you’ve given me lots to think about.”

“It’s really up to you. The astigmatism is only very slight.”

“I’ve avoided glasses up till now. Except the reading ones of course. After the operation, they wanted me to have a pair—one of those pairs with the one black lens, you know the kind that’s supposed to spare other people embarrassment but really just ends up making them stare even more.

“It must have been very hard for you.”

“You can’t imagine how hard it is,” I said, instantly regretting my talent for unintended wordplay. She did not seem to notice. “I’m sorry, I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“Not at all,” she said, getting up, though, and moving toward the door. “Any time.”

I tripped over her slingbacks (had they been right there in the middle of the floor the whole time?) and nearly fell. She caught me. Herbal Essence, Obsession, Chicken Caesar. “Would you like to have lunch with me? I mean, if you’re not busy sometime would you like to have lunch one day?”

She nearly managed not to miss a beat. “Sure. That would be nice, Peter. When?”

"Tomorrow?" (Did I really say tomorrow? How desperate would she think me?)

"I'm kind of ... how about Thursday?"

Thursday it was. It rained, but that didn't really matter because the patio wasn't open for the season yet. She arrived with an umbrella, but her hair was a little wet anyway. My Nereid.

I had ordered a bottle of wine. At first she said she shouldn't really, that she worried about what her afternoon patients would think, smelling it on her breath. For a moment I was gripped with an envy of those patients so intense that it threatened to burst my stomach wide open: they would smell her breath long after she had gone from me. She must have misinterpreted my look of anguish. "Of course, we can't have you drinking the whole bottle all by yourself, can we? Now that it's open I mean." I poured glasses for us both. A tiny fragment of cork floated in hers and I watched it bob against her lips as we drank a little toast. "Here's looking at you," I had said, realizing as I did that she must have heard every optometrist joke in the book.

We talked about the university art gallery. She had become a supporting member in the fall, but hadn't yet managed a visit. She always meant to go to things when she got the notices in the mail, but either something else came up at the last moment or she just felt awkward going alone. I said I'd be happy to go along with her any time, she could just call; and then I told her that occasionally I even gave little talks in the gallery, when the work coincided with my own research. She appeared not to hear the invitation, but she clearly took in the boast.

"I thought you taught English," she said.

"I do."

"Then why do they get you lecturing in the art gallery? What would you have to say about art?" The wine had begun to affect her, freeing her to speak her thoughts this way.

"Knowledge overlaps. Don't you believe that?"

"Sure. I guess."

"Even before English professors became scavengers in every other discipline imaginable, it was important for them to understand something about visual art, and music too. And history. And philosophy."

"That explains it."

"What?"

"I know this guy, a young guy. Alex his name is. He's a Fine Arts student but he said you were his teacher. He recognized you in the office last week, said he has a course with you. I thought he must have been mistaken. So art students can take English too—just like you can lecture in art galleries?"

"The boundaries are pretty fluid. It's a little like optometry and ophthalmology." As soon as I had said it I was sorry. It was as though I had kicked her in the stomach. "Oh yes, Alex; I thought I saw him at your office. A bright boy," I lied, hitting the "boy" as hard as I could. "I hope there's nothing seriously wrong with his—"

"No, oh no," she said, breaking who knows how many professional codes of confidentiality. "He sees perfectly. He's working on a project, something for his art he says, something about eyes, and he wanted to get some ideas. I've offered to be a kind of resource-person, help make sure he gets everything he wants."

It was at that moment that I knew I would have to destroy the little creep.

3

*The roundeyd devill made pursewt: and rending up a fleece
Of Aetna Rocke, threw after him: of which a little peece
Did Acis overtake, and yit as little as it was,
It overwhelmed Acis whole.*

'Accidents' are not so difficult to arrange. If you are observant, and even only a little imaginative, you can usually set something fairly convincing up with relative ease. I began to watch Alex, to learn his patterns. Since I do all my teaching in the mornings it wasn't difficult. He seldom got out of bed before one, which even gave me time for a quick lunch. In the early afternoon, he would go to the doughnut shop for what I suppose he thought of as brunch—a cup of decaff with skim milk and an oatcake (an oatcake, in a doughnut shop!). Then he'd go to work in one of the little cubby-holes the department gives to its most promising students as studio space. If it was a Tuesday or a Thursday, and then only if he felt like it, he'd go to a class from three to five. I suppose he must have been enrolled in other courses, but perhaps they were all held in the morning, like the one of mine he habitually slept beyond. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he would

visit Gail at her office after five. I would watch from the pharmacy across the courtyard as he knocked on the frosted door until she came. Then, my heart too full to bear, I would go home for a quick bite to eat. Alex's trail was always easy to pick up afterwards. He'd go back to his studio for a few hours, stopping for a hamburger or a submarine sandwich on the way, and then make his way back downtown to one of the two bars frequented by students, where he would pass what was left of the evening braying with his friends and drinking beer after beer. Quite often, no doubt believing himself full of inspiration when it was only the beer, he would return to the studio where he would promptly fall asleep having accomplished at most a few pathetic squiggles on a canvas or a scratch or two from a wax model. It was these latter occasions that interested me most, for I saw, very early on, their enormous potential.

The studio area was left unlocked at all hours, any efforts by the administration to limit access to certain times of day having been met repeatedly with accusations of censorship and fascism. Freedom of expression's triumph was also mine as I was able to slip in unnoticed any day during the supper hour. There was an upper storage loft, cluttered with torn canvases and broken bits of easel, scraps of oxidized steel and shards of plaster of Paris, all furred with a couple of years' accumulation of dust. I made myself a little nest between an unfinished and long-abandoned Teiresias (the combination of parts too obvious to allow misinterpretation) and a tangle of metal that no doubt had once striven to embody a particularly tortured undergraduate state of mind. For the first few times the dust made me gag, and I lived in terror that I would sneeze and reveal myself, but gradually I became accustomed to, even comfortable in, my covert.

Early evenings were the most entertaining, the studio buzzing with excited chatter as the students encouraged one another, debated the validity of negative capability, or just plain flirted. Sometimes, one would have a live model—a cheerful student whom I recognized from my first-year class even without her customary jeans and floppy sweatshirt. On these occasions I tried to hide my eye, less for the sake of her modesty (which was little in evidence) than for mine. That, and a fear of being blinded; I know my Ovid. After nine or so, the studio would be peaceful again—the odd teetotaller, perhaps, left behind with his bowl of rotting fruit after the rush to the bars—until the late-night return of Alex. He was, I

assured myself, the only one to return after the bars closed, and that not every night.

The lump of bronze literally just came to hand one evening. My student was modelling in a cubicle below, and I had turned my face away and shut my eye. As I lay there trying not to imagine her breasts, I suppose that my hand must have been moving among the bits of rubbish around me in the loft. Suddenly there was something smooth and hard and rounded in my palm, too cold for the living flesh I was trying not to picture. I did not try then to lift it—the surface and the volume told me by themselves that it was very heavy. They also told me that my finding it was meant to be. I could see it all so clearly: the bronze, his head, the pool of blood on the plywood floor.

It was not difficult to envision the end result. But simply crushing a skull is a work for any moron; doing it with style and still making it look like an accident—that is art. Devising the perfect means was the challenge then. At first, I conceived of a simple drop. My target was, obligingly, a creature of strong habit. In his late-night visits to the studio he would quickly run out of whatever steam he thought he had. Then he would stretch out on the paint-spattered plywood floor, resting his head always in the exact same position on his rolled-up sweater, close his eyes, and go to sleep. Earlybirds among his classmates would often find him that way and help him home to his bed. (I would, by then, of course, be long gone, eating my breakfast and preparing my classes.) With a grease pencil I dotted out a target area on the floor; the markings remained invisible to all but my eye amidst the paint spatters. When the studio was empty at various times I tried several objects—a ball of yarn, a lump of plasticine; once, an egg (which I had to clean up quickly before anyone came in). Each day I rearranged the storage loft a tiny bit, giving it an increasingly chaotic and dangerous aspect. It was important that everyone be familiar with the way things looked up there so that when the ‘accident’ happened they could all look back and say they saw it coming. I know my Aristotle.

Careful preparation takes time, and all the while Alex continued to meet with Gail three times a week to do his ‘research.’ Some work was actually beginning to materialize out of it all—at least that is what I overheard him telling his classmates. All I ever saw (and it was more than enough) was a full-length and life-sized nude, viewed from the rear, looking in a long oval mirror. The mirror threw back no reflection of the woman except for a pair of

horn-rimmed glasses, the kind librarians wear in movies, suspended eerily in space. He had painted every stroke in the studio, without a model; his memory must be very good (it could not have been imagination; they had been seeing one another too long for that). His subject could, I was certain, be no one other than Gail. The eyeglasses were his saucy genuflection in the direction of the official objectives of his project; the buttocks, which could be none other than those that swayed beneath the beige polyester pantsuit, told the real story. Before he could paint her front into the mirror I determined to make my move.

The evening unfolded like a videotape of almost every evening leading up to it. There was the usual early bustle, followed by the customary exodus to the bars. At one, Alex returned. He must, I thought to myself as I crouched in the loft, be more than usually drunk because he forgot to turn on the lights when he came in, and he was muttering rather a lot to himself. In the faint glow from the fire exit light I could make out that he seemed to have draped himself in a large blanket (had it been raining outside?). Before long, I heard small moaning noises, as though perhaps he were going to be ill; then he began to subside in a heap of blanket to the floor. I turned to edge the lump of bronze forward, balancing it for a moment on the edge to be sure of my target. I strained in vain to see his cherubic face one last time; then, concluding that he must have covered it with the blanket, I let the bronze drop, and made instantly for the ladder.

I suppose I expected some sound—the crushing of a skull cannot be a silent matter—but I had not expected to hear his voice; death should have been too swift for that. So when I heard his piercing “Ow! Fuck!” I flattened myself to the wall instead of beelting for the door as I had planned. “My foot,” he cried, “something’s fallen on my foot. I think it’s broken.” That was when the girl who had apparently been with him under the blanket lit a candle. As she leaned over to look at his foot her glaring white breasts were like two eyes staring into the darkness accusing me. I did not need to see her face to know it was the girl from my first-year class.

*A fowle ilfavored syght it is to see a leavelesse tree,
 A lothely thing it is, a horse without a mane to keepe.
 As fethers doo b'ecome the birdes, and wooll becommeth sheepe,
 Even so a beard and bristled skin becommeth also men.
 I have but one eye, which dooth stand amid my frunt: what then?*

“Let me see if I understand this. You’ll have to forgive me; I’m old and stupid, and was poorly taught.” It was a ploy, of course, a way of setting up my younger colleagues for the kill. The Head usually scowls at me when I use it, but he has never tried to intervene. I think he loathes the new departmental symposia almost as much as I do. On this particular occasion he appeared to be asleep. “So the male agrees to worship the female—oops, sorry, ‘The Other’—in return for not being castrated. And she agrees. It’s a kind of a contract, right?”

“Right.” Dr. Maureen Withers PhD sounded tentative, almost as though she suspected treachery. Good for you, I thought; perhaps there is hope for the younger generation of academics after all.

“And part of the agreement is that he constitute her as beautiful. I think that’s what you said, wasn’t it, when you were using those examples of filmmakers using vaseline on their lenses to eliminate blemishes, and the bit about the silent film actress who would only be shot from one side?”

“Yes, but you have to—”

“So the male is doing all of this out of fear, isn’t he, fear of castration? The ‘male gaze’—isn’t that what you called it?—is actually the act of a craven minion; remember the Wyf of Bathe?”

“That’s not exactly—”

“But it is, don’t you see it? And what I don’t understand, frankly, is how you can define scopophilia as an act of coercion. It strikes me as an act of simple survival.” To make my point I crossed my legs defensively at the knee at precisely this moment, protecting my crotch with folded forearms. A few years ago, such a gesture would have had the department in stitches; this time, nobody even cracked a smile. I think that that must have been what provoked me. In trying to reconstruct my motives for what I did next I have concluded that it was the absolute lack of laughter that provoked me.

I never take my glass eye out in public. This is something I decided on twenty years ago, and it is a decision I have stood by almost without exception. I also do not think of my female colleagues (any of my colleagues) as sexual beings. This, by contrast, was never a conscious decision; it has simply never occurred to me to think of my co-workers in that way. I have never been able to detect the slightest hint. That I should, then, on this occasion—while one of my younger and more earnest colleagues was posing a further question to Dr. Maureen Withers PhD—raise my hand casually to my face, pop my eye out, wipe it on my sleeve, and finally lean across the coffee table to deposit it down the blouse of the ample-bosomed Ms. Mary Anne Smith MA can only be explained by the department's total lack of a sense of humour.

“What the hell were you thinking?” The Head had, of course, to follow up on the incident. Even he had not been able to sleep through the screams of Ms. Smith as my eye rolled over her breasts, lodged for a moment in her navel (it must have done; how else to account for the delay?) before falling out the bottom of her untucked blouse and coming to rest in her lap.

“I was trying to show them something about scopophilia, I think. It's not my proudest moment. I thought people might find it funny.”

“Have you been sleeping properly lately, Peter? You look like hell you know.”

5

*Of Fawne and nymph Simethis borne was Acis, whoo became
A joy to bothe his parents, but too mee the greater joy.
For being but a sixteene yeeres of age, this fayre sweete boy
Did take mee too his love, what tyme about his chylidish chin
The tender beare like mossy downe too sprout did first begin.
I loved him beyond all Goddes forbod, and likewyse mee
The Giant Cyclops, neyther (if demaunded it should bee)
I well were able for too tell you whether that the love
Of Acis, or the Cyclops hate did more my stomacke move.*

Alex's broken foot made him even easier to keep an eye on. He stayed shut up in his little apartment, wallowing in the pose of the dying artist. The girl he had been with that night never once, to my knowledge, showed her face, but there was a pretty steady

stream of commiserators and well-wishers from the moment his misfortune became generally known. Among them, of course, was Gail. Her visiting him alone in his apartment was a bitter reminder of both my dismal failure to kill him and his glowing success at crippling himself. If their relationship had been chiefly professional up to then (and I insist that it was not), it surely became something much more after the accident. She took him soup and bagels and books, which I feel sure she must have read aloud to him. I could see, through the window, even without the telephoto lens that served me so well in those terrible days, how she plumped his pillows for him, and helped him hobble to the bathroom. It was torture.

Watching her ministrations, however, gave me an idea. I decided to feign concern as the poor boy's teacher. His unfortunate affliction—this was my cover story—was preventing his attendance at class, and I hoped I could help by coming by regularly with readings and lecture notes that would keep him abreast. He and I both knew that he was missing no more class time with his injured foot than he would have anyway through his knack for sleeping in, but when I arrived the first time Gail was obviously persuaded, and that was good enough for me. It became better than good enough. By the fourth visit (I always timed them to coincide with hers, although she inevitably outstayed me), she gave me a little hug as I was leaving. "Thank you, Peter; this is so sweet of you," she whispered. Then she turned back to her patient.

The following day when I arrived with an armload of Capellanus and Ariosto (in translation), Gail met me at the door, distraught. "The most terrible thing has happened." Not terrible enough, I was willing to bet. "Alex has a severe nut allergy. Peanuts actually. A whiff of peanut could kill him, and somebody brought peanut butter cookies yesterday. He was asleep and I ate one. I had no idea. Anyway, when he woke up he smelled it on my breath I guess. His throat started to close. I didn't know what was happening. Luckily, he has this kind of pen-needle-thing that he jabs himself with and that holds him till he can get to the hospital. We spent an awful night. At the hospital. We were at the hospital all night. He could have died." It was the most I had ever heard her say all at once. I tried to block out the sense of her words, concentrating on how her lips moved, the way her throat rose and fell, but it was no good. Perhaps it was just as well. The tragic tale

actually gave me an idea: I would start augmenting my literary care packages with tasty little comestibles.

I couldn't, of course, put anything as gross and obvious as a peanut butter sandwich past Gail, who was now monitoring what came into the apartment with a vigilance that would have done Cerberus proud. But it didn't occur to her that an innocent-looking vegetable stir-fry might be laced with peanut oil, or that a box of cherry chocolates might have enjoyed passing intercourse somewhere on the floor of Laura Secord's factory with a roving band of peanut particles. Each day when I arrived I expected news of his demise. I had the scene planned to the slightest gesture: how she would greet me at the door, tearful, and a little dishevelled; how I would take her in my arms, smoothing her hair, drying her tears, flattening her breasts tight against my chest; how I would rub her back comfortingly and say soft things, things so soft that she would scarcely notice how my hand was working farther and farther down, how my knee was sneaking between her thighs. Each day she greeted me with a smile, and thanks for the previous day's snack—Alex had eaten it all up; could I believe what an appetite he had? I could, I said to myself, as I followed her into the sick room.

In a last desperate attempt to finish him I bought forty-six one-cent stamps. Then I ate half a jar of peanuts and licked the stamps one by one, sticking them to a large envelope which I then mailed to him. A few days later, she produced the envelope from under a pile of magazines. "This came for Alex today," she said. "Look at all those stamps. Can you imagine anybody licking all those stamps?" For a moment I allowed myself to imagine her doing just that. "The strangest thing is, there was nothing inside. The envelope was empty. Alex figures whoever sent it must be a little—you know—crazy. There's no return address, but he says that whoever sent it must live near a beach or something because it's like there are all these little bits of grit stuck under the stamps. See the bumps? Don't you think that's a clever theory?"

I stopped visiting after that.

6

*And if I catch him he shall feel that in my body is
The force that should bee. I shall paunch him quicke. Those limbs of his
I will in peeces teare, and strew them in the feeldes*

"Afternoon Peter."

"Afternoon, Madam Dean." She scowled at me. "Monica."

"How's the book?" It was her standard question.

"The edition. It's only an edition."

"Remind me."

"Golding's Ovid. It's the translation Shakespeare might have used."

"Little Latin and less Greek."

"It's coming fine," I lied.

"You look tired, Peter."

"So I keep hearing."

"When was your last leave?"

"I've never had—I don't believe in—You see, I've just never felt the need."

"Perhaps it's time you thought about it. Roger was telling me—"

"How I gave Ms. Smith the old evil eye?"

"Right down her blouse as I understand it. Jesus, Peter, what were you thinking?"

"You think she noticed?"

"You know damn well she screamed the place down. Who can blame her? And now she's filed a complaint."

"Who can blame her?"

"This could be very serious Peter."

"Everything's serious these days. I don't suppose I could claim it was an accident? That it popped out spontaneously and I was only trying to catch it and fumbled and that's how it wound up down her front?"

"The whole department saw what happened."

"Oh, I doubt that. Perhaps if I wrote her a note of apology. Don't-know-what-came-over-me sort of thing."

"We no longer live in an age of little notes, I'm afraid, Peter. There will have to be a hearing"

"After all, this is still a civilized community, isn't it?"

“We’ve set it for next Tuesday. Ten-thirty. Classes will be over, so that time should work for everybody. The Vice-President will chair. Now, I’m afraid I have a meeting to go to. I’m already late. Thanks for coming by, Peter. And good luck with the book.”

I don’t think she even noticed that I was still sitting there a minute later when she bustled out of the office.

7

*His scarlet blood did issue from the lump, and more and more
 Within a while the rednesse gan to vannissh: and the bew
 Resembled at the first a brooke with rayne distroubled new,
 Which wexeth cleere by length of tyme. Anon the lump did clyve,
 And from the hollow cliffe thereof hygh reedes sprang up alyve.
 And at the hollow issue of the stone the bubbling water
 Came trickling out.*

There are some threatening clouds. She is openly shivering now. I have had to order a third dessert so as not to appear conspicuous staying on and on at my table. I cannot leave until they do. I will not. It is a gamble, this waiting. Sometimes it pays off and sometimes not; sometimes the results elate, sometimes deflate. For instance, had I not stayed on two weeks ago I would not have had to suffer through a prolonged and tearful hand-holding session that engrossed them for half an hour after their bill had come. On the other hand, had I not stayed on last week I would have missed seeing her obvious and considerable disappointment when he presented her with a small canvas, the results, I heard him tell her, of “The Project.” It was not the painting with the mirror that I had seen in his studio. (I don’t know what ever happened to that; after the episode with the bronze I have avoided that place.) What he gave her might most charitably be construed as a kind of ill-conceived homage to Picasso. There was a human face, of sorts; that is relatively clear. But it was graced with only a single eye, right in the middle of its forehead. She thanked him for it, of course, even gave him a little kiss, but I could see she was horrified, repulsed by what he had made.

Today, I am going to follow them when they leave.

I dropped by her office on Wednesday, ostensibly to pick up my records. “I’m going on a year’s leave. Quite sudden,” I told

Maria, “and I thought I should, well, have them with me, just in case. You know.” She failed to ask me where I was going, so I had to keep the conversation going all by myself until Gail finally came out of the examining room, shaking hands with her latest patient.

“Let me know if you want to consider the bifocals,” I heard her say to him. Then: “Peter. Hi.”

“New outfit?” (God, did I really say it out loud?)

“Yes, in fact. Good for you.”

“I like it.” (Would she be able to hear in my voice that I was pretending she had bought it to please me?)

“Thanks.” She turned to collect her next patient. I put out my hand, I suppose to grab her elbow, to turn her back to me so I could ask her to have lunch.

That was when he came in. He is working for Crystal Springs for the summer and he had one of those huge water jugs over each shoulder.

“Hey Al,” she said, and Maria echoed “Hey Al.”

“Hey.” That was it. “Hey.” The way he held the jugs, his T-shirt was pulled up, revealing a taut hairless belly, the navel slightly convex, like a third eye looking right through us all.

“Lunch tomorrow?”

“Lunch tomorrow.” He said it as though it was the most common event, routine—which he must have known by then that I knew it was (could they have missed my presence at each and every one?). Then he bent over to put the water beside the cooler in a way that made it clear that he knew that every set of eyes in the room was on his teenaged bottom in its faded bluejeans.

So here we are. Lunch. And their bill has finally arrived and she’s reaching into her purse. He doesn’t make a move for his wallet; the role of starving student sits so comfortably on him. Has he told her, I wonder, that he has been put on academic suspension? It seems there was a failing grade in English 3111, Poetry and Art of the English Renaissance—not in itself catastrophic, but sufficient to drag the average down below the acceptable line. He must sit out two semesters, and I wonder whether he has told her, told his lady love, yet.

I have to gesture wildly to get my cheque. Having been put off so many times in her attempts to deliver it, my waitress seems bent on taking her own time now. When she finally shuffles over I simply thrust a wad of bills at her. “That’ll be fine just like that,” I say, calculating that she will probably realize a twenty-five per cent

tip. As I head into the dining-room and make for the front door, I can see her quickly leafing through the wad making sure that there is enough (and more) there. Just before I vanish I catch her eye and wink; it is a gesture I save only for the very squeamish, and her shudder lets me know it is not wasted.

Outside, it is suddenly raining. They are running for cover, Alex limping slightly but outrun anyway by her gazelle legs. There is a deep arched doorway five or six buildings down, and that is where they stop. With the rain running in sheets off the brickwork, they appear to have disappeared behind a curtain of water. I try to walk casually by, focussing all my concentration on ignoring the rivers of rain that are running down my back.

“Peter,” she calls as I pass, “Peter, you’ll get soaked. Wait in here. Wait it out with us.” I step up through the curtain. There is barely enough room for the three of us and I have to stand very near her, the scent from her wet hair intoxicating, the thought of her poor wet toes devastating. He grunts a hello—unable to forgive me, I suppose, for failing him—and then squints out into the rainy street. “I thought I saw you in the cafe. You eat there quite a lot I think. Alex and I have a kind of regular date, Thursdays and Fridays.” Does she think I am blind? Has she forgotten measuring the capacities of my eye and finding it basically sound? There is a drip on the end of her nose and I am dying to take out my handkerchief and wipe it off, but I don’t. “Was it supposed to rain?” she goes on, “did either of you hear a forecast? It’s bound to let up in minute isn’t it?” I am about to take the hint and leave them alone in their cramped dry cave when she suddenly cries out: “Here she comes, Alex. Jane! Jane! In here.” Alex has joined in the chorus of Janes, and a couple of seconds later the space that was too small for three is being made to admit a fourth. Gail tries to hug this person, with the result that her bottom squeezes me against a brick wall. My hand grazes the batik skirt before I lift it quickly out of the way to join its mate on the top of my head. Then Alex and Jane are embracing and Gail loses her balance against me. My hands drop to steady her and find themselves clasped firmly on her breasts.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s okay, Peter. An accident. Thanks for catching me.” She stays pressed up against me, I suppose to make enough room for Alex and Jane who are by now engaged in what looks like a rather serious kiss. I feel I should turn my eye away, but I do not. Gail starts to giggle. “C’mon you two, that’s enough. Jeez, get a room.

Jane, Jane, I want you to meet Peter. Peter, Jane.” She is a less refined version of Gail, but the resemblance is enough that I am only mildly surprised when she continues, “Jane is my little sister.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jane,” I manage, unwilling to extend a hand for fear of committing a second assault on Gail.

“Jane and Alex are engaged. Isn’t that sweet? They’re going to be married in August. She’s been away all year, teaching, in big bad Toronto. I don’t know what anyone sees in Toronto.”

Jane ignores this because Alex is at the same time asking her if she has eaten. She hasn’t, and he suggests the cafe. “It’s only half a block,” he says, pulling his T-shirt up like a hood over his head. I would swear the navel is winking. Jane holds her purse up over her head, and they set off with only the faintest of goodbyes.

For a moment Gail remains pressed up against me. Then she takes a step and makes a half-turn so she is facing me, looking me right in the eye. “I’ve got to get back to the office, Peter. Call me?” And she is gone, swallowed up by the storm. I hear her sandals flapping through the puddles. My Nereid. I stand for several minutes in the doorway, remembering how she smelled, the feel of her against me. A glassy bead of rain trickles down my left cheek. If you didn’t know me, you might almost think it was a tear.