

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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SMALL THINGS

The day was too hot for cooking so we decided to go out for a pizza. It would be a small treat, but small things, too often overlooked, were what had sustained our marriage over the years. I had suggested going to a real restaurant, but neither of us felt up to the occasion. An antipasto and pizza would do just fine.

"You haven't worn that for a while, John. It looks good on you. . . ." my wife, Joan, praised.

I had put on my linen sport jacket with a dark blue polo shirt. "I don't look too dressed up, do I?" I asked playfully.

"No," Joan reassured me. "You look fine."

I will later swear that I put my eyeglasses in a case and slid it into my jacket's inside pocket.

Pizza Milano was on the other side of town, between the terminal for the trucks that supplied our heating oil and a car wash. Seated at a booth in the corner, we were being ignored by the waitress, until Joan stood up and caught her attention. I would later recall that when the waitress finally did come I did not put on my glasses to read the menu, but merely told the woman what we wanted.

We sipped brown beer, made by a local micro-brewery, while waiting for our food to arrive. Two television sets cantilevered from the wall at either end of the room were tuned to a news channel, but the sound was a loop tape of 60's pop tunes. Captions, probably designed for the hearing impaired were doing their best to keep up with the visual images. Facing the nearest TV screen, I remembered reading some of the headlines to my wife. As my distance vision was acceptable, I did not put on my eyeglasses to do this, nor when the antipasto came, or when the pizza arrived considerably later.

After we finished eating, Joan announced she would like to stop on the way home and rent a movie. She was going away tomorrow on a three day work trip and wanted to relax. This prompted me to visit the men's room while we were waiting for the bill, even though I didn't have to, just in case the movie selection took longer than anticipated. I remembered coming back and signing the credit card voucher, squinting and holding it at a distance, but not resorting to my eyeglasses.

The movie rental place was on a busy avenue, serviced by several other busy streets, which were busy because the neighboring quiet streets prohibited through traffic. I turned down one of the quiet streets. Being a law abiding citizen, I suggested that we leave our car by the park at the end of the street and walk the remaining half block, and then drive back out the way we came in. As it was a nice night, Joan agreed it was a good idea. We both could use the exercise.

The small park had one basketball court. At the north end six Asian young men played on the half court. On the south end four black youths

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did the same. I wondered if the two groups might be joining up later for a full court game.

"I didn't bring my glasses," Joan said, handing me the French video tape she had pulled from the shelf. "Can you read the small print?"

"I can't," I said reaching into my inside jacket pocket for my eyeglasses. They were not there. "I must have left my glasses back at the restaurant," I declared somewhat alarmed.

"I don't remember you having them on when we were there. Maybe you left them in the car?"

I thought for a moment. I was reaching that age where it was important to have your memory working, or at least to pretend it was intact, for if it was not it was off to the funny farm for you. "Yes, I know I didn't wear them there, but I remember taking them out of my jacket pocket and putting them down on the table next to me. I can see them lying there in their brown case."

Joan said she could not recall seeing them lying there in their brown case.

Based on what little we could read on the jacket, which are never very accurate anyway, we decided to take out the French movie Joan had in her hand, and then go back and get my glasses.

When we walked past the basketball court again, the black youths were using the full court. Back at the car we conducted a thorough search for my eyeglasses, between the seats, on the floor, behind the sun visors, and in the rear.

"Maybe you didn't bring them with you," Joan speculated, "maybe they're still on the table at home...."

"I'm positive I brought them, I remember putting them in my pocket," I replied brusquely, but agreed to go home to check first as we were closer to our house than the restaurant.

My misplaced eyeglasses were not at home.

"Okay, I'll go over to Pizza Milano and pick up my glasses," I said.

"If they have them," Joan replied. "Why don't you call first?"

"Remember how slow the service was. They probably haven't even cleared our table yet. I'll be there and back in no time."

An hour later I returned home, without my eyeglasses

"They must have fallen from my pocket when we were walking from the car to the video store," I surmised. Taking a flashlight from the drawer I announced, "I'm going down there to look for them."

"I'd better go with you, Joan volunteered. "That's a pretty tough neighborhood at night."

"I'll be okay," I said. I fished my driver's license out of my wallet, tucked it into my shirt pocket, and left everything else at home.

When I drove up no one was playing basketball. The kids were sitting

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on some benches in a darker corner of the park smoking. I could feel their eyes following me as I got out of the car. Walking past the group I recognized the sweet, pungent smell of the weed they were puffing. Although it was now quite dark, the way along the park had sufficient lighting so that I did not need my flashlight. I went slowly with my eyes down, checking the sidewalk and the curb.

Arriving at the video store without having found my glasses, I went in and asked for them, although I doubted they would be there. One of the clerks smiled and looked in a drawer that was apparently the lost and found department, then yelled out to the other help scattered about the store. They all shouted back that they had not found any eyeglasses. All the customers waiting in line turned and looked at me. Embarrassed, I thanked the girl and hurried out of the store.

On the way back I again carefully scanned the sidewalk. Going past the park I noticed that no one was playing basketball even though the court was lit. With a start I saw where the group had moved to. My heart froze. They were all sitting on, or leaning against my wife's three week old Hyundai. I slowed my pace, trying to think of a plan, the blood pounding in my temples. One of the boys was casually bouncing a basketball off the car's hood.

"Dis here yer car, Mista?" a voice came out of the darkness. I could not tell which one of the group had spoken. It was hard to see, the nearby street light was weak. The air had grown oppressively hot, and the night sky had turned from deep blue to an evil looking shade of black.

"Yes it is," I stammered, "and I'm going to leave now...."

"You-all hear the man Leroy, git off the car, he's gotta go now...."

"We ain't hurtin' it," a different voice said, "jes sittin' on it. Takin' a lil' break from our game."

"Oh yeah, like you ain't got no game, man...." another voice added, pitching the ball rapidly to the boy who had previously spoken.

"I didn't say you were hurting my car," I said, carefully maintaining my distance from the group. "I just told you that I was leaving...."

"What's yer hurry, man? Stay here and play some b-ball with us."

"I'd like to, but I'm not very good at basketball."

"Ain't nothin' to it, jes watch Leroy there...."

It all happened suddenly, and very fast. Someone passed the ball to Leroy, who pivoted and came dribbling at me.

"Put your arms out man, don't let him get past you," a voice shouted. "That's how ya' play defense."

I didn't do what I was urged, but instinctively stepped back. Leroy charged into me. Having knocked me to the ground, he continued to dribble around my body. I watched the bouncing ball as if hypnotized.

"Now look what you've done, Leroy, you-all knocked the man down. You should say you're sorry for what you did." Another much smaller boy was helping me up. "Are you hurt, Mista?"

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The boy's eyes seemed kindly; his stare locked on me. I could not turn my gaze away. The only sound was Leroy bouncing the ball.

"I'm okay," I said, not quite sure if I was or not.

"You're all dirty," the boy said. Still keeping his eyes fixed on mine, he began to brush me off.

"Leave me alone, I'm okay!" I shouted. I felt hands on me, sliding up and down my body. Someone tugged at where my wallet should have been. I panicked. "Get away from me!" I screamed pushing free from the small boy's groping hands.

"Don't bother with the man, Lejune," someone said. "Can't you see he don't wanna play no b-ball. Let's get back to the court 'fore someone else takes it." With that the entire group abruptly turned and quickly ran off in the direction of the park, disappearing into the darkness.

Like an amputee reaching for a missing limb, I patted my empty rear pocket before getting into the car.

I had intended to lie, and not tell Joan about the incident with the boys from the basketball court. However, the expression on my face when I arrived home must have told her something had happened.

"What's wrong, John?" she asked. "You look ashen."

I replied with the unembellished truth, which was what I always did in situations like this.

"I told you I should have gone with you," Joan said after I had recounted my story. While I was out she had checked the whole house, scattering the cats into a panic, but not found my missing eyeglasses. I did not sleep well that night, pitching and rolling on the sea of my dreams.

Finished with the oat meal I ate to lower my cholesterol; I went out to the car. Joan had eaten breakfast earlier and was upstairs packing. The thought of my missing eyeglasses was already obsessing my not quite awakened mind. I wanted to give the Hyundai a thorough search before Joan left on her trip. I looked in the front and the back, under the seats and between them, in the glove compartment, and behind the sun visors. Having not found my glasses, I went back inside and began to look in the phone book for an optometrist who might take me on short notice.

"Well, I'm on my way," Joan said, coming down the stairs.

"I'll carry your bags out to the car."

The Hyundai was locked, which was strange. I did not recall locking the car after completing my search; in fact I specifically remembered leaving it unlocked as I had anticipated coming back out in a few minutes. I went into the house for the key. Having not yet gotten the drill down for the remote keyless entry, I unlocked the door using the key. I remember clearly kneeling on the driver's seat and leaning over the back to unlock the rear door. I stowed some of Joan's gear in the back and put the rest in the trunk. I also recall opening the trunk by releasing the remote latch located on the floor next to the drivers seat, an action which put my eyes about two feet above the drivers seat, a position from which it was not possible to avoid seeing anything lying on the seat.

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We said our goodbyes, and kissed. Joan promised to drive carefully, then got in the car and started the engine. A surprised look came over her face, and then a smile, she reached under her and held up my missing eyeglasses.

"Where were they?" I asked, with a sense of incredulity.

"I was sitting on them."

"No...."

"I sat down and felt something hard, and there they were. They must have been there all the time."

"Impossible," I said, beginning a litany of all the times since leaving the restaurant last evening that I had sat on that same seat, looked at it, kneeled on it, shinned a flashlight on it, touched it....

"You must not have noticed them...."

"Impossible!" I repeated my litany.

"Then how do you think they got there?" Joan asked. "I surly didn't put them there. Do you think I would play a trick like that on you?"

"So how do *you* think my glasses got there?" I asked.

"I have no idea. What do you think?" Joan said throwing the question back at me.

"I think someone put them there...."

"Don't be silly. You just overlooked them. Often times we can't see things which are right in front of us," Joan said with an apologetic laugh. She put the car in gear and began to pull out of the driveway. "Luv you ... take good care of the cats and don't forget to give them fresh water ... see you on Sunday night...."

I stood in the early morning sunshine, watching as the Hyundai slowly trundled down the gravel drive. Joan's explanation of the eyeglasses return hung in the space slowly widening between us. I wanted to believe my wife was right, but could not. I had not simply overlooked my eyeglasses on the seat. I had had too much contact with the driver's seat in the past twelve hours. There had to be some other explanation, although I was not quite sure what it might be.