

“Seibert”

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It had taken Sylvia years to notice just how relentlessly she judged the world. She'd always known she was critical, she'd been educated to be that way, to eye with skepticism whatever experience presented, cutting away cliché, bad faith, and vagueness in the never accomplished mission to discern truth and value, in other people, in their views and actions, in culture, politics, certainly in media, and most relentlessly of all in herself, where deceptions petty and large were unavoidable, requiring all the more vigilance. Until the last few months, when she'd begun to meditate for half an hour each morning, she'd always thought of this disposition of hers as existing somewhere outside of her, a few feet in front of her, where she could see it, like a tool on a work table, an implement of daily use, picked up at will. But in trying to focus on her breath moment to moment she'd been confronted with the near constant distraction of her mental patter, a low-level, incessant, and repetitive self-narration —I am brushing my teeth, I am using too much water to brush my teeth, as I always do, the Rio Grande no longer reaches the Gulf of Mexico, the Nile no longer reaches the Mediterranean, I need to get to the drugstore to buy more toothpaste, I will forget to do this, that shower curtain needs cleaning, etc.—on and on, ad nauseum, the proverbial stream of consciousness minus mytho-poetic significance, functioning more like the metastasized brain of a hamster, yet so familiar as to go as unnoticed as the landscape photographs she'd hung in the apartment hallway a decade ago and on which her eyes hadn't paused in years. Judgment, it turned out, didn't wait for her to apply it to the clear objects of her attention. It applied itself, to everything, unendingly.

And so also to the fact that again this morning she checked her email before getting out of bed. This despite her promise to herself not to do this because of its tendency to throw off her routine, her mind skipping first and second gears, shifting straight into keen anticipation of Big News or the disappointing lack of it. She dated this particular apprehensiveness to 9/11. Before that day, opening her browser to the *Times* had felt no different than taking the paper out of its blue plastic sleeve to peruse the headlines: curiosity, a touch of leisure, even luxury, the moment given over to something entirely without immediate productive value, just taking the world in. But that was all gone now. Every time she opened Firefox, a small, deep part of her flinched in anticipation of catastrophe: mass death, plummeting markets, nuclear meltdowns. If real disaster preparedness

meant go-bags and stored spring water, this was the shielding mental equivalent: don't be taken by surprise, anticipate the disaster before it occurs. But this hadn't limited itself to bracing for the apocalypse. It had bled into the anticipation of merely personal news that now preceded every click of the inbox and slide of the answer icon on the phone. It was a readiness shot through with a drama of absolutes: save me or damn me, immortalize or kill, to which the desultory dribble of fundraising pitches, event reminders, and mass-mailed joke videos from quasi-intimates seemed a constant letdown. But a letdown she forgot as soon as she clicked again, hoping for something more, splendid or disastrous, she almost didn't care which. This was where she and most everyone she knew now lived, in a kind of hysterical normalcy, a low-grade fantasy-dread of nothing in particular.

The task of life seemed to be to discover a way to squeeze some recalcitrant meaning from this desert of distraction. And there was, of course, nothing like an Internet coffee date to promise just such a slender chance of escaping the void. A promise that this morning's pre-shower, pre-breakfast email delivered.

This one's name was Seibert, which, together with his enthusiasm for Robert Musil, suggested he might be capable of what she'd found to be that rarest of things since breaking up with her previous boyfriend, Peter: the capacity for sustained conversation.

At five o'clock that Saturday afternoon she was waiting for him at an outdoor cafe in Dumbo, the latest *Harper's* open on the table in front of her unread as she thumbed through headlines on her phone. When she glanced up to see if anyone had arrived, she discovered him directly in front of her, still as a post, a faint, quizzical smile turning up the edges of his lips. Huh, she thought, interesting. The glasses of a Belgian architect, clean, rimless, and hip; a pale Nordic complexion to match; but hair a bit of a mess and not of the affected sort--glossy and curled--but an honest mess, matted on one side and a cowlick on top. His thin frame was clad in a finely striped Oxford shirt tucked tightly into gray pants with zippered front pockets. The absence of a foreign accent came as a surprise. Seibert! Dear, Seibert. Not down the wide, forgiving, sloppy path of American masculinity had he strode. No. There had been thought and books and wonderment at how others moved so effortlessly through the social world. It turned out he'd grown up in Erie, PA, the son of a chemical engineer and a yoga instructor, the only child of a loving marriage that had been lived out in semi-wistful exile from coastal urbanity. And so to the city he'd come with hip glasses and a BA in History, first to Bushwick, then to Windsor Terrace, and now to a loft conversion in downtown Brooklyn. His profile had said thirty and the claim didn't seem inaccurate. A little on the young side for Sylvia, but within her stated range.

So what about you? he asked. He'd ordered an Orangina and a piece of banana bread, without apology or explanation, which Sylvia appreciated.

Me? she chuckled. Well...

There were so many ways to go here, so many paths not to be taken. Her family, for one. They usually made their first appearance in a prospective relationship three or four weeks in at the earliest and sometimes not all if things were looking dim. Which left "Interests," an insipid little topic contrived to elicit responses of sufficient banality to link you to the thousands of others supposedly riveted by movies or hiking. In a rare move for New York, Seibert had left out a description of what he did for a living, and this had given Sylvia a welcome opening to do the same, this otherwise being the obvious, limiting choice. Instead, to her surprise, she found herself telling him she was an agnostic, which was true. She'd been a thorough-going atheist all through high school and college (her parents had never said much one way or the other and stopped going to church on Christmas and Thanksgiving after she was seven or so, the question of faith never having arisen); but a few years ago, during a spell of unemployment, she'd taken it upon herself to read most all of the work of Immanuel Kant, an experience that impressed upon her the intellectual hubris of atheism as clearly as the hubris of absolute faith. Within the limits of reason, agnosticism was the only honest answer. Hokey as she feared this might sound, it had made her look at the night sky differently than before. No matter how refined, all science could ever do was describe, not explain.

The coffee turned into a dinner at a Mexican place around the corner. Her hunch had been right. Sustaining conversation wasn't a problem for Seibert. He did just fine in that department. Raising his soft-spoken voice to be heard over the din, he told her about his upbringing as a Methodist and how he still went occasionally when he visited his parents, though more as a social matter than a religious one. He was at his cutest so far when telling her this because it embarrassed him slightly, his cheeks showing a touch of color.

After a long pause, he said, this is fun.

They walked across Cadman Plaza, and then through the empty commercial streets north of Fulton, out along Willoughby. The night air was still and about room temperature, making it seem as if there was no weather at all, as if they were walking through some vast, shabby interior domed by the haze of city light. The gum-stained sidewalk, the silent parked cars, the empty lots behind chain-link fence all appeared different seen walking at this slower pace, with someone beside you, more limpid, their weight settled into the earth like the bones of the meditator, the need to narrate laid aside.

Right on cue, as they reached the steps of his building, he asked if she'd like to come up for a drink. They'd been together five hours and had entered into that suspension of regular time that sometimes occurred with strangers, with people met while traveling, your sense of a beginning, middle, and end dissipating into the unknown. Three beers helped, too. Seibert! Dear Seibert. He was practically crimson now in anticipation of her answer. Of course, of course, what use was defensive etiquette against this rebirth into the present, the unjudged present.

She was prepared for the place to be a sty, male roommates, potential dankness, but the unvarnished wood floor of the living room was freshly swept and on the square coffee table arts books were stacked in neat, low piles with a few *objets* thrown in, practically Tribecain, suggesting the glasses weren't accidental, that he was in architecture or design. He led her to the couch, where he dropped her off before fetching them drinks from the kitchen at the back, giving her a moment to take in the bookcases, thriving jade plant, and serious looking stereo equipment before he returned with water (considerate) as well as beer, at which point they started kissing. Tentatively at first, mutually cautious, and then deciding together we're here, this is it, opening their mouths wider and exploring with tongues and hands on each others backs. Another perfectly reasonable place to stop, of course, a little making out on the couch after the impromptu dinner, but nothing more, no further risk to body or mind, no revelations of nudity and self-consciousness to break the pleasant semi-trance. But he was holding her. He wasn't simply touching her. He had warmth. His motions had none of the awkwardness that his thin frame had suggested. It occurred to her that she hadn't checked her email in hours and that moreover she had no desire to. This was getting serious. There could be sarin gas wafting through Penn Station; factory riots in China; a currency collapsing somewhere on the European rim. Things of consequence happening fast elsewhere that she wasn't paying the least attention to. And what a relief that was. Sylvia was the one who put her hand on his inner thigh, not the other way around. She found the hard-on in the gray pants, her eyes closed now, wanting to keep letting go, to dissolve as she tried to inhabit each out breath of her meditation, unknowing herself one breath at a time, and what better test than this, to let the hard reference point of general fear that made up a good deal of her waking self soften into what amounted to blind faith, that he would not hurt her, would not rape her, would keep sensing his way along with her, which he seemed to be doing as he unbuttoned her shirt and undid her bra, and let himself without asking put his lips on her nipples, causing her to smile at the sight of him staring through his glasses at her breast.

I'm going to take these off now, she said, lifting them from his nose.

His bed was neatly made! His shoes all in a row under the windowsill. There were more books in here, and records, vinyl records stacked in milk crates.

We don't have to--

She put her finger across his lips. They sat on the edge of the bed, one lamp on his little table casting the rest of the room in shadow. She closed her eyes again, breathed out, and pulled him back toward her, letting him roll her down onto her back, feeling the weight of him for the first time, that blessed weight that broke the tension on the surface of her skin, moving it down her sides and into the bed, sinking her back past herself, from where she gently rebounded, meeting his lips again, running her hand down toward the small of his back. It had been so long. A shameful stretch of celibacy. What a strange world, she thought, where that could be true, where shame turned its face to those committing no sin at all, accusing them of ugliness and anonymity and the specter of loneliness unending.

Is it okay if we turn out the lights?

Sure, he said.

She climbed under the sheets. Who was this guy? They had to be an eight-hundred thread count at least, and fresh. An actor, maybe? Someone who knew how many women were disarmed, at least on first impression, by a touch of shyness, though not too much, a bit of self-deprecation to ward off the standing fear of absolute egotism. If so, he was a good one, one she wanted to play along with. And that trembling in his chest wasn't acting and it wasn't from any chill in the air. Leave yourself alone, get out of your way, that's what the meditation instructor had said, not to stop thinking, but to let the thoughts pass unfollowed and unfussed with.

You sure you're ok, he asked--whispered actually--into her ear. Their breath smelled a little of beer but neither of them was drunk. Just tipsy. She sucked in a great gulp of air as the head of his sheathed dick pressed into her. The flesh of his ass was warm to the touch. Seibert. Dear, Seibert. The name didn't seem funny anymore. In fact, it disappeared altogether. A word that some couple she'd never met had dreamed up in a hospital room thirty odd years ago in Erie, PA, but what did it have to do with this man's breath, his painful erection, the rise of the vein on his slender arm, a decently handsome animal at labor. Who knew?

For all this release, there was still the old blast wall of dense thought. She didn't need to raise the scepter of judgment against him or open the critical eye. The sub-routine ran itself, ran her down, and him with her: the lonely onliners groping in the dark, the friendless and the awkward, and on and on and on, but so what? Let the dying shouts come. They were making love now, or something very much like it; he was still holding her, making sure she was all right. Though of

course at a certain point the question became both meaningless and mildly irritating because how else to answer it but, yes, yes, and yet nonetheless so much happier than the opposite, so much better.

It took him a long time to come, but he stayed with her, didn't close his eyes or drift off into mechanical thrusting, that silent imitation of porn she knew well enough most men slipped into to finish the job, and to her considerable amazement, as he reached down to finger her before he was done, without really letting him know, she came, a quick, ripping shudder from pelvis to forehead, which caused her jaw to open so wide it hurt. After that, she relaxed, and let him keep at his efforts, running her hand over his cowlick, feeling it spring up again, wondering who on earth he was, feeling him expand inside her for a moment before ejaculating, hoping to god he owned decent condoms.

They lay on the bed side by side a good ten minutes or more after he rolled off of her, not saying much, holding hands. Then he sat up and turned on his bedside lamp. His back was damp with sweat. She felt entombed in the bed.

Do you want to shower?

She should want to. And she should want to let him make her tea, as he offered to now, sensing her hesitation, and she should want to return to bed with him afterwards and sleep till morning, open to whatever might unfold. To remain in this fleeting lack of vigilance, uncertain, agnostic, where life as she'd always imagined it might actually occur. And so it was with passing horror that she realized she desired none of this. Another message from one of the dating sites could be waiting for her. Friends might have texted. There would be email. In the darkness on the backs of her eyelids, she saw the turning wheel of the browser loading headlines and longed for the real thing. Something new. Anything, it hardly mattered what, to pull her up and away from here.

I have to go, she said.

He turned to look at her, astonished. The slight, hopeful smile that had played across his lips for hours was gone. He reached for his boxers and held them scrunched over his crotch, as if only now aware that he'd been naked. Such tender eyes.

Seibert. Dear, Seibert.