

How Someone Can Not Recognize You

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Six days after my father dies, seven blind masseurs hold hands and leap from the Han River Bridge in downtown Seoul, into the shallow water beneath the lighted apex, their bodies a disruption in a mirror they'd never seen. I read about this in the newspaper I collect from the front of my father's house, all damp and bleeding ink from the past week's frost. In my father's office I spread the papers out on his desk and trace my fingers down the pages, to see if I've missed anything. I'm looking for murders, plane crashes, natural disasters, economic collapse, impending apocalypse. I stop at the society pages, the comics, the crosswords. For several minutes I consider an eight-letter word for "felicity." The only answer I can come up with is, "felicity." Sometimes it happens that way.

The Korean masseurs' story catches my eye because they have a large color picture of the bridge. It must be one of those time-lapse photos, where the car lights ghost into a gold blur and the surface of the river is steely and reflective. Four vaulted columns rise from the river and hold a statue of a torch, under which I imagine the masseurs must have jumped. How could they have jumped from anywhere else on that bridge? But then, how would they know? How would they know that that was the center? Did they feel the wind die down under the canopy? Did they hear it slice through the steel cables? Did a sighted woman lead them there and say here, here is where you would jump if you were going to jump, not that you are, and then they laughed, and took off their glasses, wiped their eyes of sleep, or of drink, said thank you, you're kind, leave us now, we just want for a moment to enjoy the view.

Jeremiah comes on the second day after my father dies. He knocks on my father's door at 7 a.m and I answer in my father's robe. The sight of him, this man who loves me, standing in a cold California morning, eyes baggy from the red-eye, gripping the handle of an electric-blue roller bag, smelling the moldy, wet, wood-paneled smell of my father's house and not minding—is enough to make me say yes, yes I'll marry you someday, yes White Plains, yes the dog, that awful ring, I forgive you, whatever, so long as you don't ever leave this doorway.

"Thank God," I say. "You're not carrying a casserole dish." And then I start to quietly cry into the palm of my hand.

For the rest of the day, Jeremiah answers the door and takes food and flowers from the neighbors. He says, No, Jane is asleep, we shouldn't wake her, while I mute Jerry Springer in the den. Jeremiah washes the sheets of my father's night sweats. He folds my father's dirty clothes, careful not to let the smell go out of the cloth. Jeremiah makes Reubens that I don't eat. He vacuums the crumbs that fall from the things I do eat. Jeremiah calls the funeral home and the hospice center and the crematorium and that church we never went to. He picks out an urn over the phone while I smother my eggs with too much ketchup.

"I don't need to come see it," he says. "The silver with the gold trim will be fine."

I mouth the word "tacky" and ketchup slides out the side of my mouth. I wipe it on the sleeve of my father's robe and soon Jeremiah is hanging up the phone because I'm wailing too loudly, the kitchen smells of eggs, and I'm naked in the middle of it, because there's ketchup all over the sleeve of my dead father's robe and it looks like what leaked out of the plastic bags of blood he vomited into for seven hours before he died, the plastic bags I threw in the dumpsters across the street. While Jeremiah wraps his fleece around me and holds me up against his own frame, I can see the dumpsters out the kitchen window. There are swallows on the edge, pointing their nervous beaks to the garbage, to the heavy bile they can't reach without diving in.

It's that the Korean government was trying to take away those masseurs' livelihood. There's a law there that says only the blind are allowed to massage and then there are these horrible sighted people trying to rescind that law. All their lives the blind masseurs were told that this was their one profession, that you didn't need sight to knead bodies. And then they did it so much, for generations, that it became something they loved. So that when someone finally said,

Find something else to do, some other job based on touching, they became angry, and then they became sad, and then they had no choice but to jump. I imagine when they were told they could no longer massage that it felt like being choked. As if someone had reached inside them to close off the windpipe and there was nothing they could do.

On the third day Jeremiah tries to have sex with me. We are sleeping in my old bed, the twin I slept in until I was eighteen, and then for three months when I was nineteen, and then only intermittently, when I came back for holidays or major events—the neighbor’s grandkid’s bris, the diagnosis, the surgeries. My father kept the sheets pink and the same blonde wood headboard I’d stenciled with my name and the names of the celebrities I imagined I’d take to this bed someday. It sits low to the ground, just below the window under the eucalyptus my father tried to cut down, but never could.

Jeremiah presses his pelvis into my back and cups my left breast in his hand and breathes wet breath into my ear. This makes sense. I once dated a poet who pulled me toward him in a bed in a corner and said, making love to you is like being in a grotto, which I took to mean, he couldn’t help it, there was no other choice. Being in this twin bed in this house, how can I blame Jeremiah? He’s hard and I’m here, sad and warm and when he runs his hand down my stomach I think I might throw up from all the touching, so I say, “I don’t want to live in White Plains and start a family.”

He stops and doesn’t say anything for a while. The thin, white leaves of the tree brush the window pane, leaving behind a layer of ash. Jeremiah leans away from me. “Do you mean now or ever?” he asks.

“Now. Right now. Right now I don’t want to live in a house in White Plains. I don’t want to leave Bensonhurst to water the lawn and pick up dog shit.”

“You don’t want to water the lawn or you don’t want to start a family?”

“I don’t know why you won’t listen to me.”

He sighs and reaches his hands behind his head, pushes against the headboard, but goes nowhere on this short mattress.

After a while he says, “Why is Kevin Bacon’s name on your bed?”

I say, “Because I was going to marry him someday.”

He says, “There’s still time, Jane,” and he turns away from me, as much as he can. When I reach around his lap and feel for his crotch, he slaps my hand away and then, when my hand isn’t doing anything at all, he slaps it again, this time harder.

On the fourth day we don't speak, except once, when Jeremiah comes into the room where I am sitting on the floor to say, "I got you a dog while you were gone. I named him Manhattan." Because I can think of nothing crueller to say, I say, "Four days ago my father had a tube that went down his throat to his stomach and it pumped out all the food in his body into this tank by the bed. It was purple, the tank. Everything in him was purple."

The thing about the blind masseurs is this: they jumped from a grand bridge on a clear day in November and couldn't even see how far up they were, how long they would have to fall. I can't figure out how they knew to be afraid, if they couldn't see the distance they would have to go before they hit water. I read once that fear of heights is rooted in visual perceptions of danger, that even babies can see the danger in a cliff. But if you couldn't see it, would you fear it? If you weren't able to witness your own death, would it still feel like dying? Or would that be exactly the reason you jumped—because you knew at the beginning it wouldn't feel like anything at all.

On the fifth day I make a list of things I've seen on this trip, while I was away from Jeremiah. This is the list:

So you know:

Crater Lake, from the plane. We should go there someday.

A helicopter pilot smoking on the edge of the hospital roof.

A man throwing a box of unlit cigars into the trash can outside the maternity ward.

A nurse forcing a half-inch tube down my father's throat into his stomach, while he was awake.

Vomit, retching, dry-heaving, puke, stool, bloody stool, bloody nose, dry mouth, white sores, throat sores, sores on the thighs, buckets, buckets of throw-up, of mashed potatoes, of spit, of steak, of imagined steak, of Oxycontin, morphine, Zoloft, needles, dirtied gowns, adult diapers, gauze, flowers, fabric flowers, trees, mini-trees, sand, rakes, ice, pus, piss, and then water, just water.

The Price Is Right, from a hospital bed, nine times.

How someone who loves you can not recognize you.

How you wish no one would recognize you.

Us at Crater Lake, and we were alone, and we went swimming.

I give the list to Jeremiah at dinner, not because the time seems appropriate, but because it is the first time I see him after I finish it. He has heated up

someone's chicken parmesan. We sit on opposite ends of my father's mahogany dining room table. I pick at the day-old salad. The marinara is drowning my chicken.

Jeremiah chews his food as he reads the list. He looks like a real man sitting across from me at the table. A studied face and brown hair cut short, long neck, broad shoulders, a collared shirt even though it's a Thursday and he hasn't been at work in days. His own mother held him close, taught him manners and how to treat people well, and then let him go at the appropriate time.

"Jeremiah, I taste rosemary in this," I say.

"Jane."

"It's fantastic. It's like . . . it's like you just made this. Out of entire rosemary flowers."

"Jane, this list."

"I know."

He gets this look on his face, a look like crumpled sympathy on its way to empathy and defeat, and then he says what I knew he would say, which is the right thing. He says, "Crater Lake is too cold to swim in," and then, after a minute, "Well, maybe not in the summer."

We sit at that table for a time. The chandelier is perfectly still above us, but I keep expecting it to move, to jingle in a nonexistent breeze. The cabinets and sideboards that line this room were my father's, and inside them are the china and the silver we never used. I know that inside the bottom drawer on the left, behind Jeremiah's chair, there is a manila folder filled with newspaper articles about the car accident my mother died in, and the public trial and lawsuits that followed. I was not old enough to remember her, or the accident. I was only four. I have always felt bad about that—as if by not remembering I was denying it as a fact, an event. I think my father saved those articles for me, so he could from time to time say, here, look, this happened.

Jeremiah fingers the list and I think something in my head, repeat it to myself over and over again, working up to saying it aloud. Finally, I am reduced to whispering. I whisper, "I was the witness." I whisper it again.

So this is the part of the article that killed me:

Blind protesters jumped from the Han River Bridge, to protest a government proposal to license skin-care specialists to also give massages. The protesters demanded that the skin-care specialists be permitted only to massage heads and hands, leaving the rest of the body to the blind.

The blind were willing to give away heads and hands, but the sighted wanted the torso—the vertebrae and the shoulder blades, the muscles stretching across those blades, the tendons that bloomed from sacrum to neck—and they wanted the legs, the calves, the feet, even. They wanted the feet. They said, you can have the head and the hands, but please, leave us the rest.

On the sixth day, I cut out the article about the blind masseurs and I put it in my father's china cabinet. After the funeral, Jeremiah begins to pack up my things, and his things, too. He says, "We have to go back."

I know we do. The house will be on the market in a month and I'll come back when it sells. I've marked for the movers what to save, what to store, what to sell. After dinner Jeremiah makes sure we haven't missed anything in the house. He walks past me with various objects and asks "Save, store, sell?" For example, my first piggy bank—store (after Jeremiah suggested "break"). My father's cream suit from 1987—sell (but didn't Jeremiah look good in the coat, for just a moment). And the wingback from the front room—save (for White Plains, though I haven't told him yet). Then there are things that don't fit into any category. The eucalyptus, for one. If I could dig it up and hoist it on my back, I would.

Jeremiah and I sleep in my bed again, and though he falls asleep fast and sound, his heavy arm thrown across my chest, I am wide awake. I am the kind of awake that is so focused and constant that it mirrors a kind of sleep. I hear a loud, sharp crash, like something falling against a door, and I think I imagined it, dreamt it. After I realize I wasn't asleep, it takes only a few seconds and I'm in my father's bedroom, tugging at his closet doors, the stupid metal folding doors that won't fold right now, because something's fallen behind them. And then Jeremiah's tugging on them too, and he's tugging on me, and suddenly the doors are open, because we've broken them, the hinges popped off and the bottom of the doors forced out of their runners, and we're on the vacuumed floor of my father's closet, breathless and half-dressed. That we kissed shouldn't be surprising.

"There's nothing here," I say, padding around my father's empty closet, hitting my head on loose hangers.

"Did you think there would be?" Jeremiah asks.

When he rigs the door closed behind us, the darkness is new and black. When I reach for him and when he finds me, the air gets damp and close. His holding me seems violent, but that's OK, I want it that way. The touching makes me feel a little sick, but I'm willing and I close my eyes through it,

until, with my face up against the closet wall, smelling the very inside of this house, and Jeremiah behind, locked on my neck, hands anchored on my hips, that sickness turns into something else, an opening up after a pulling back, an opening up through a pulling back.

We came to the wrong place. It becomes clear to me that the crash came from the dining room, from the inside of a china cabinet, maybe, that the sound was unwrapped champagne flutes falling into the glass doors, or the support of one of the drawers cracking, the drawer buckling backward into the recess of the cabinet. Jeremiah must have known that, but he followed me here anyway. He followed me straight into the closet and lifted up my T-shirt, pulled back my thighs, and didn't try to make me less afraid. He is bold, and I am willing.

Is this what the masseurs felt as their feet left the bridge? Fear so fast it really felt like dying—and isn't that unfair, to *feel* dying—but then transformed, quick joy, the thinnest of raptures, the final pleasure of all the senses screaming, including sight, because you saw the blackness more intensely then. You saw the shapes through the blackness. You almost saw the steel cables of the bridge stretched taut and furious, and by seeing them you touched them, and it felt like holding on to the tightness in the air, the cylindrical constrictions of your own personal atmosphere.

“Jane,” Jeremiah says, and I say, “What?” but he's not saying my name for any other reason than just to say it. To hear himself say it. To have me hear him say it, like a testament. A hanger falls between us and the cold metal sticks to our skin. We forgot to label the hangers. Oh God, where will the hangers go?

And then there are other questions I have. Did they hold hands all the way down. Did their terminal velocities differ, did one's affect the other. Did they smell the rose oils still on their hands, or did they smell the river. Did they make noise, and if so, how did they know when to stop making noise. How did they know when they were nearing the water. How did they know if anyone was watching. In all that distance, did they have time to think of the things that made them happy, did they wish they were touching someone then, and by touching I mean kneading, rubbing, working out a spot until it popped, moved, broke, and then released.