

J. C. Whois

Sightseeing



Bootleg Books

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Once upon the table, I continued to dance like a madman. Glasses and dishes were flying away in every direction, hitting the walls and creating an effect not unlike what you see, and sometimes pay for, in one of those neo-post-modern happenings people go to God knows why. I had lost all self-respect, and all my friends, for that matter, after Louise or whatever her real name was dumped me right in the middle of the party. It's not the fact that she dumped me, but the rather hyperbolic way she did it, ripping her clothes off and revealing herself as the man she had always been. In a voice I had never heard before, she yelled her lungs out - «I'm sick and tired of your romantic sex-after-marriage-only bullshit» and walked not so gracefully out the door. We had been going together for 6 months by then, I should have known. How on earth could I not have known? That's what everyone in the room thought. That's why I went berserk and started dancing frantically to the sound of *Take a walk on the wild side*, one of my Lou Reed's favorites.

For the next few days I felt like a hunted man every time I had to leave the apartment. The thought of meeting someone who had witnessed the scene or heard about it was so dreadful that I got used to walking as fast as I could, half-running, always looking down. Bumping against anything that would be in the way got me some bruises and a permanent headache, since my head seemed to be the part of my body most prone to make contact. After a week I was totally rundown and in desperate need for a change of habitat.

I had seen this film about Brooklyn (*Blue in the Face*, I guess the name was) and the easy-going atmosphere there, all sorts of people doing and saying all sorts of things, so I thought that might just be the kind of place a guy with a shameful past like mine could start anew. It took me two more weeks (and a lot of painkillers) to find something I could afford. Finally, on a bright Monday morning, I moved away from Hell without even looking back, thus avoiding some strange consequences that are known to derive from such a dangerous temptation.

The good thing was I could keep my part-time job making deliveries for an obscure publishing company – Bootleg Books. I had started working for them a couple of months before through a newspaper advertisement and had never met anyone there. I didn't even know what they published. I got the packages by mail with an address for delivery and a check to pay for the service. I suspect they had some ingenious way of making sure I didn't keep the money and the books, but I never gave

it much thought. After all, I was happy with the deal: the pay was more than fair for the work I did, and I had a lot of time for myself.

For a time, I wandered the streets of my new surroundings trying to figure out a way of getting back a tiny bit of my shattered self-esteem, but that didn't seem to help much. No woman would give me the slightest interested glance. Only one did, but my recent traumatic experience made me stare at what I shouldn't – not on a first glance, at least – and I was literally incinerated by a pair of ravaging black eyes. A ray of hope shone briefly somewhere inside my brain – maybe I could do that phoenix thing and rise from my own ashes - but it didn't happen. Maybe I was just too young to pull the trick.

And then one day, something happened. I was sitting on a bench drowning in self-pity, when I saw what seemed to be a booklet in the trashcan nearby. Any average person wouldn't give a damn about it, but I'm one of those compulsive readers who will read just about anything for the sole reason that it's written. I picked it up and looked at the cover. It promised a much more interesting reading than I had expected:

BCLA (Brooklyn College for Low-Achievers)

Seminar on Creative Writing

Theme: As far as the eye can see

Type: Short fiction

I. C. Knot

Brooklyn 2002

I lit up a cigarette, sat down on the bench and started reading.

“There's this old man in Brooklyn I see every day on my way to work. He has sort of established his office on the large sidewalk near a subway entrance. A portable table, lots of bags with God knows what inside and a poster of *Star Wars* nailed on the door of the crumbling building behind are his setting. His stage, so to speak.

You might wonder why I call it his stage, so I'll have to tell you something more about this man. The first, and perhaps most important fact, is that the man is blind. The second is that he considers himself a poet. Not the kind of poet you study at the university (if you ever get to study there, I mean) or talk about in fashionable literary meetings of the kind “Have you read his latest? Pooh, what a bore. It's all about himself, and no juicy details...”. He is more of a dissident sort of poet who is not willing to go through all the fuss of finding a publisher, negotiating percentages

and getting conned with a smile, a pat on the back and the usual you're-the-best line. The problem is poetry, of any kind, has a bad reputation among the masses. They may buy half a dozen poetry books on sales to decorate the shelves, just in case some loony they work for or want to do business with comes for dinner, but that's as far as they'll go. Buying sheets of paper with verses on the street is out of the question. They are visually worthless. So our man had to find a way of making a living and selling his poems, and he found one. The word spread that he could not only foresee the future but also answer your spiritual doubts. Customers started to show up, a few at first, but he quickly made a reputation as a true oracle and the business took off. He charges for his prophecies and bundles one of his poems in the deal. Yeah, that's right, I know what you mean, but many people come to see him, so, if it works and is economically viable, what the heck, it's a free world.

Living in a consumer society with an obsession for labels, you're probably eager to know his name. Well, I can't tell you that. I mean, I could, but I won't. A name would inevitably destroy the character. An oracle with an earthly name, like Peter, or Paul or (not Mary; you have to pay attention, the character is a male) let's see, Wang, as a tribute to the Great American Pot or The Melting Dream or whatever, would be a loser from day one. I'll tell you his nickname, though. The man calls himself The Eye. Hold that laugh just yet. It's a perfectly suitable name for someone who does what this guy does. Seeing what was, is and will be is not a physical thing, you really don't need your eyes.

I forgot to mention (well, I didn't really forget, but the description was going for too long and I had to make sure you wouldn't just turn on the TV and watch one of those shows that cripple your brain) that The Eye has a dog. Cliché, I hear you scream - the superlative of *déjà vue* is a blind man with a dog. I could tell you about reader's expectations, cultural codes, and all that theoretical crap, but the issue here is plain and simple: it's what educated people call a moral dilemma. I had to choose between art and doing the right thing. You wouldn't really want me to let a blind man wander the busy streets of New York without a dog, would you? What would that make me? One of those art-for-the-art's-sake creeps?

Now, the funny thing about the dog, if you're given to finding such coincidences amusing, is that it is a one-eyed dog called Hawkeye. A big, mean, black half-bred German shepherd with a handicap and a metaphorical name. (When I come to think of it, if my publisher was Ms. Politically Correct, I would have to describe the

dog as favored in size, with enhanced aggressiveness, of black color - African-American wouldn't do here -, from ethnically different parents, half optically challenged with a metaphorical name, though I'm not sure if metaphorical would survive the editing).

Apart from his normal duties as a blind man's dog, Hawkeye is also in charge of the box where The Eye keeps his daily income. People don't pay him directly, that would be unfit to the dignity of the function. They put the money in the box and, if they are niggardly, take the right change. That's where Hawkeye's intelligence really sparkles: he can always tell when someone is cheating. I guess wicked hands have a different smell.

The most precious object The Eye has with him is a crystal ball that he keeps on the table in front of him. You need that kind of stuff in this line of business, it's a sort of prop to help set the right mood. Now, you may criticize his very commonplace choice, but when you come to think of it, it was the only choice possible. Cards, the Tarot or any other sort, don't suit a blind man. Throwing bones, even if he could read them with his hands, was out of the question with Hawkeye around – what a horror sight, a dog chewing the fortune-telling bones. A water bawl would pretty much be in the same category – the beast gets thirsty too.

Now that I've made my act as a know-it-all narrator – the kind that knows a whole lot more than the gossip lady next door (or man, if you're deep into feminism) - I need to put some action into the story and bring my lazy self to do something.

The fact is that over time I grew dead curious about what The Eye told the people who come to see him. I tried getting near to eavesdrop on the interactions but I had a furry 90-pound problem with a creepy snarl to deal with. No way would Hawkeye let me trespass on what he considered to be sacred territory. I made all kinds of attempts to get him to be a bit more cooperative, but nothing seemed to work - not meat (tried all kinds), not sweets, not bones, not anything. Then suddenly it hit me – I was taking the wrong approach, treating him like a dog. What I needed was a business approach in the American way. I kissed 20 bucks goodbye and threw them into the box. There was a snarl, all right, but ten more were enough to close the deal. I didn't have to wait long for my opportunity to show up. That afternoon, a man in his early twenties approached The Eye's table in the usual tentative manner the common mortal approaches someone of Power. I heard him mutter something about deceit, shame and desperation, and I thought I heard the name Louise, but I cannot be sure about that.

The man was talking really low and getting closer would scare him off. The Eye took a long, deep breath, caressed his crystal ball with his head bent backward, looked right at the man as if he could see him, and uttered in a much stronger voice than you'd expect from such a figure:

*As far as The Eye can see
Nothing will forever be.
No two mornings are the same
Every day is a new game.
Many answers you shall find
Will bring new doubts to your mind.
Let the knowledge soothe the soul
That no truth is one and whole.*

You've noticed the awkward way The Eye talked, right? That's because he has a very deep sense of performance. He really knows how to build a character and create an effect on his audience. Not that he went to Actor's Studio, or seen a lot of movies, or been to one of those workshops where they teach you the ten easy ways of doing these things. He's just a natural, it's in his genes. Again, it's a question of credibility. This oracle thing goes a long way back, I mean, a really long way back. I'm talking ancient Greece and the like. The oracle is in touch with the realm of gods, some of them as old as the world itself, some even older (these are rare). He can't talk about Time and Fortune in a common language with a Brooklyn accent. Who would take him seriously? On the other hand, it's always best to be cryptic when making prophecies, that is, leave it to people's interpretation – if something goes wrong, they won't blame it on you. As a matter a fact, the least people understand what you say the higher your reputation is (no, I am not talking about literature).

The man stood there for a while, motionless. I don't know if he was trying to make something out of what he'd been told, waiting for The Eye to put it in plain English or simply feeling overwhelmed by the experience. Finally, he reached for his wallet, took out a ten-dollar bill and put it in the box. He didn't take any change. He grabbed an envelope with a poem from the pile The Eye had upon the table and went away. I kept looking at him because he walked in a strange manner, half-running, looking down, and bumping against anything that would be in the way. I saw the

envelope slip out of his pocket when he bumped hard against a lamp post, but when I got there he had already disappeared. He sort of vanished without a trace.

I picked up the envelope, opened it and read the poem inside. I reckoned that might be considered included in my deal with Hawkeye. As for you, though, I have my doubts. I guess I could leave it to your imagination to decide the kind of poems The Eye writes, that is, tease you as modern readers like to be teased. I'd be doing you a favor, giving you what you expect to have. But then again, everybody knows that readers aren't to be trusted, and God knows what many of you might come up with. So, as a sign of respect for a man I have come to know and like, I decided to share it with you. Here's how it went:

I've seen golden days of Autumn
And the scented days of May
I've seen minds that fully blossom
And some showing their decay
I've seen warm hearts in the winter
And cold souls on a hot day
There's one thing I've never seen though
And that's a cat on the subway

I've seen lives darkened by fear
Haunted by the Judgment's Day
I've seen evil lips who mutter
Holy words in church on Sunday
I've seen those who never doubt
And those who have lost their way
There's one thing I've never seen though
And that's a cat on the subway

I've seen some who reach success
While some others go astray
I've seen people who are faithful
And some others who betray
I've seen sad faces depart
And others who chose to stay
There's one thing I've never seen though
And that's a cat on the subway

I've seen cities void of life
Where all hope withers away
I've seen houses built like castles
Where no child would dare to play
I've seen truth and love on sale
And a crowd willing to pay
There's one thing I've never seen though
And that's a cat on the subway.

It's no Walt Whitman, I'll give you that, but at least it's not about having eaten all the plums that were in the refrigerator. For some reason that guy Cummings always wrote his name in small letters.

Now you know it all and can judge for yourselves. I still carry this poem around with me in its black envelope with two words printed in red and white: Bootleg Books.”

I felt a chill working its way up my spine. I didn't know what to make of what I had read. It was very unlikely that someone would give himself the trouble of writing a fictitious assignment just to play a prank on me, and leaving it in a trashcan for me to find it seemed even more improbable. The most incredible thoughts zapped across my mind, and for a while I saw myself in one of those *Twilight Zone* episodes. I'd swear I even heard the music. Then, little by little, I came to my senses. Maybe this Knot guy heard my story from someone that knew about it and decided to mix it with his own personal material for this assignment. Maybe they told him his work was below standard, even for a low achiever, and he threw it in the garbage. Maybe he really wanted to write, no matter what, and distributed his works through a fake publishing company called Bootleg Books. Maybe working for that company and finding the booklet in the trashcan were just weird coincidences of the kind you hear about but never believe can happen to you. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

The fact is that the sudden awareness of the unsolvable ambiguities I was faced with brought me a much desired peace of mind. I could let go and leave things to follow their own obscure ways. They would anyway, regardless of what I did. That made me feel a free man and put a smile back on my face.