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Kevin Clouter

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SUNDAY STORIES

SUNDAY STORIES: "ELLA"

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by SUNDAY STORIES



Ella

by Kevin Clouter

The first day—many years ago, in a life so pregnant with possibility I woke up some mornings an artist and other mornings an astronaut, though in reality I held a health-insurance-less position at a pharmaceutical company—she was waiting for me. The first day I noticed her hair, which was the sort of blond that’s probably natural. That seems, in any event, like it’s natural, though what do men know about these things? What does it even matter? Her hair didn’t glow. It was pretty. I noticed.

Her eyes were more than pretty. She’d focused her attention on her eyes, which were a green I couldn’t place. Certainly, this green didn’t exist in my family. Maybe you could find it in the ocean, though nowhere close to shore. This green changed everything; it made her face possible. Not that she would have looked bad with brown eyes, only she wouldn’t have looked like herself, which she understood. She knew who she was, and she didn’t pretend it were otherwise, or exaggerate it for that matter. She’d put on eye makeup. I don’t know how much or what kind, but it brought me to her eyes, and once I was there, I stayed. She let me look. Not every woman does that. Some turn their heads, but she didn’t mind. A difference between me and other men, something I was proud of, was that when a woman offered me something, I didn’t reject it.

Then she gave a curt little nod, and we were walking. The hallway was narrow. I needed space to think, but there wasn’t going to be any more space. I looked for someone who might help. Nobody could help. I dropped onto a couch, and she sat—erect, curious—on a chair perpendicular to me. I said we ought to get started, and she nodded, but I didn’t want to get started. I wanted to be sitting somewhere else. A delicate, compact man walked past us with delicate, compact steps. I meant to say something. I took out my notebook, which was empty. She laid a very full folder on the table, which was no place to work, which

was actually a display case people kept stopping by to admire. It was displaying the accomplishments of an entrepreneur who, earlier that day, had died.

We didn't mention it. We got started. She had a lot of questions, none of which I was eager to answer. I needed to get comfortable. Too many people were listening, or could be. I tried to gauge how much they were listening. She pretended not to watch as I did this. I needed to stop. I gave her my full attention, and she took it. We'd been commissioned to work on a project, the particulars of which escape me now. I was sales, and she was media, but these were clothes we wore uncomfortably, if not ironically. There was no threat of either of us taking the work too seriously. She smiled whenever she became animated, as if to say, Don't think I'm being too serious! When she smiled, I smiled back, involuntarily. She had no scent, or maybe the scent of everyone around us.

Eventually, we left the display case. The moment someone settled behind the information desk, I peppered him with demands for a conference room. He obliged only to rid himself of me. Did cruelty or chance deliver us a room with a gigantic nude painting? Incredibly, she didn't notice—or was too polite to—and I steered her back to it. Need I add that the nude was male, one who'd twisted his hirsute torso so as to emphasize his horrifying anatomy? It wasn't even a good painting, neither sufficiently realistic nor unrealistic. I thought less of the whole enterprise for this painting, though the conference room was otherwise nice.

She had an idea. We'd strategized enough. We'd covered the major principles—it wasn't true—and we deserved a break. Not even a break because we could talk while we walked. The best ideas were generated that way. I didn't ask where because I didn't care. I would have followed her anywhere, though somehow I was leading us out the front door and into the midday sun, which pulsed dimly behind a canopy of clouds, which covered the tops of the tallest buildings, making them look as though they might rise forever. It was terrifying to consider. She said it looked beautiful, but she didn't mean it. We were joined in fear and awe.

I knew little about the neighborhood beyond an insufferable coffee shop I liked. I headed there. She didn't ask questions. She was glad to be led, to be out of the small, bright building. We both, I suppose, felt like we were getting away with something. Who was watching us now? Nobody I could see. When I offered to order for her, she squinted at a chalkboard with minute demarcations of flavors. I felt humiliated and exhilarated in equal parts. She shook her head slowly, and I plotted in my mind a walk that would take us far from everything we were supposed to do.

The café was filled with good-looking, busy-looking, rich-looking men and women of all races—really, all blends of races. I wondered what was being filmed. I was ready to become part of a catalogue. I tried to look less obviously medium-everything. She didn't notice or maybe didn't care. She poured so much sugar into her coffee, not even good sugar, unrefined sugar in an unbroken stream. When she looked up, she grinned apologetically, and I thought this day is not like every other day. What's happening now doesn't have to be forgotten. She said, "What next?"

I had an answer. It wasn't far to a park, not a good one but a famous one, which overlooks the harbor in such a way that it might as well be the entire ocean. I wanted to sit on a bench with her and wait for boats to appear and disappear. Then I wanted to walk to another bench. I wanted her to follow me, or to follow her, for it to be unclear who was following whom—mostly, I wanted to keep moving because that way the day didn't have to end.

I didn't know what she wanted. She stared steadily into the water, as though she'd just learned of its existence. Only occasionally did she turn to me, perhaps to confirm I was still there. I had no intention of leaving. I was willing to watch her watch the horizon indefinitely. In profile, she seemed sadder and a little worried—you can never hide it long. How can I describe her nose, except to say it was imperfect, thank God? The slight bump that likely worried her throughout adolescence

saved her from the boredom of classical beauty. She had a face you wanted to talk to and think about, rather than simply admire. I'm not usually like this. I was like this with her.

She stood, so as to see something drifting into our view, but I remained fixed. I wanted to see what earned her attention. I thought maybe I could learn from it, but she sat down hurriedly, and I didn't learn one thing. I was already anxious when she asked if I could roll my Rs. It was very important that I be able to do this. I couldn't, not at all, and she stood again, as if that settled everything. I needed to stress that it didn't settle anything. She tapped her thighs impatiently. She was wearing jeans. They were tight but not so tight they looked painful. Naturally tight. Everything was natural, or made to look natural, which is maybe the same thing. Did she let me appreciate her jeans while standing? There was not one crease. "What next?" she said again, this time as a challenge.

I started walking. I resisted the temptation to take her hand, which would have been crazy. I was beginning to feel a little crazy, but she appeared unphased. She didn't look bored, not yet, which I seized as encouragement. I could be forgiven for many sins (so I imagined), but not for being boring. Certainly, I would never forgive this. I asked her to roll her Rs, and she refused. She walked quickly, though unrushed. I tried, unsuccessfully, to decide if her legs were long. I wanted her to decide something about me, though I feared her decision, predicted its going against my favor, which preemptively depressed me. For the next block—we were walking along the water, so I'm guessing—I moved with sullen torpor. This turn toward melancholy interested her. Perhaps I was deeper than she'd imagined. Perhaps I was deeper than I'd imagined. She stopped in direct sight of a famous statue and grabbed my hand—not my hand, exactly, but the iron railing where our hands rested. I knew enough not to say a word. We continued walking.

This park, I should note, stretches along the harbor unevenly. You're always running into a fence that takes you away from the water before being permitted to return. The challenge of simply getting from one place to another helped maintain her interest, or so I decided. She remained silent after rejecting my R request. She might have been punishing me for making fun of her (I wasn't), or she might have been thinking something I couldn't guess (I hoped for this), or she might just have been walking (impossible). Finally, we arrived at the end of the park, where she examined me with naked curiosity, as if perhaps I were the brother of a friend, someone she'd known forever but never expected to be alone with, a situation that wasn't exciting or frightening so much as puzzling, a moment—how long life could stretch without one!—where she had absolutely no idea what to expect.

Without touching or even really looking at her, I guided us underground. The opening had only been visible to me and only at the last moment. I'm not sure the subway stop is still there; possibly, it just existed in the moment. Certainly, there were no other people waiting for the train, though the one that arrived was so full I considered letting it pass without us. She insisted we battle our way inside, though she didn't know where we were going. Never, at any point, did she ask. I agreed without hesitation.

But I forgot to mention something, someone really, that happened before we went underground. In certain parts of the city, sketch artists are so ubiquitous they're impossible to notice: You pass right by their flimsy easels and hasty examples (models who refused to pay?). This one was different only because he called for my attention, or maybe hers. We both looked at him, and he looked at us. He lifted his oversized pen expectantly. I smiled a meaningless smile I could instantly feel draining from my face, but she looked down, the only evidence I had she was capable of embarrassment. The artist had already moved to his next target when I looked for a reaction. Did we look like we were together? I didn't care if he only said what I wanted to hear because I wanted to hear it. She was staring straight ahead by the time I turned back to her.

There wasn't enough room on the train to stand without smashing into someone else, but we avoided smashing into each other. We clung to the same high bar. I'm tall enough where she had to look up, which pleased me irrationally. Only here, in

stunned anonymity, did she begin to talk. She talked about her mother, a visual artist of some consequence. Had I heard of her? I can't remember how I lied. So devoted was I to an expression of listening it was hard to hear a single word. Certainly, she talked about her father and stepfather, who merged into a single embodiment of polite disappointment, a man too unchallenged and unchallenging to reach anyone. She was telling me who not to be, and I was listening. She saw me listening, and her eyes focused on a point just past my eyes.

Each time she looked at me, I saw someone different. I was constructing a memory I could return to later, but it was so new—she was so unexpected—I kept erasing the memory and starting over completely. Then she would look at me again, and I couldn't believe my luck. Was this the same person? I haven't said anything about the way her eyes flashed before she almost smiled, or how her lips trembled imperceptibly with what she wasn't saying. In an alternative universe, I raised my hand to her chin. In this universe, I swayed with the rest of the train.

The train was going too fast. Soon we would be dumped onto a platform where there would be no choice but to go. How much better to be carried, hostage to a woman who hours before didn't exist. I needed to figure out how to stop time or at least the train. Surely, there was a hidden station—I knew I'd passed them—where we could open the doors fast enough to slip out and sit on a bench and eat plums—there would be nobody to ask why—and continue our conversation, which was really just my listening to her. I had so many things not to say.

But the train wouldn't be stopped, and we exited with everyone else, blinking into the sickly overhead light. I watched the emptied train forlornly, imagined us as the last passengers, and realized for the hundredth time what a mistake I'd made, how easy life can be if you allow it to be. This time I followed her, but there was no magic permitted in the space. You could only be happy leaving.

She understood as well as I. We searched the giant electronic board together. For the first time, I had the feeling she was waiting for me to say something. I didn't meet her gaze. Each time the board updated, disappointment surged through me. I had no interest in being reasonable. I hoped she felt the same way, though we didn't talk about it. We stared dumbly at the board, as though it were capable of something more than tracks and destinations, as if a crucial piece of information were about to light up the screen, which only we would be able to decipher.

I stepped back, or she did. We had the humble information we required, and there was nothing to do but use it. I accompanied her to her gate in silence. Already a restless line extended beyond the door and into the wide space where—no, I don't want to think about that space, not when there was the museum, just a week later, where we walked for hours without seeing anything until she found a bench at the end of a hall, and we sat and watched the park fill with rain. How long did we sit before the window? It was big enough to include every cloud in the sky. Eventually, a guard told us the museum was closing, and she hurried to a bathroom, and I adjusted my tie in the reflection of the glass. My face startled me. It was like someone lighting every lamp in the middle of the night.

When on the short walk to dinner I proved incapable of keeping us dry with a single umbrella, she clung to my right arm. She was warm and smelled like rain, and I didn't want to do anything but walk the wet streets with her whispering into my shoulder. Or there was the time I drove her home, and she invited me inside, where her tiny mother and shirtless stepfather sat wordlessly at the dinner table. She showed me framed photographs, scarcely concealing her excitement over my confusion. You didn't think I still lived with my parents! You didn't expect to see my fifth-grade trip to Disney, yet here it is! Her mother kept looking at her stepfather, who kept not putting on a shirt. I redirected my attention. I complimented a chandelier, half-afraid it would crash onto my head. She asked how I took my tea and didn't wait for an answer before disappearing into the kitchen. Her little brother appeared in pajamas.

After tea, she suggested we repeat the night in reverse. It would be fun. We said goodbye to her family and got back in my car, which was unexpectedly cold. Summer had slipped unannounced into fall, and neither of us could tell if this marked a beginning or an end. She sat cross-legged on the passenger seat. I could only see her face when a passing car threw its headlights toward us, and her beauty grabbed at my throat. I understood, in an instant, it would be taken away.

Those early nights! How could I ever convince her happiness still came to me, if only in secret?

She must have seen in my face then what I saw in the museum window. She looked down quickly. It was the second time I saw her embarrassed, but I wasn't embarrassed. I was grateful, even relieved. It had happened. It was possible. I felt wise with anticipation, electric, because soon another car would pass and she would lift her head—curiosity insisted—and know what she alone had launched inside me.

End

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