

The Proposal

Anticipating his guests, Peter Nester paced the library. His new Bally shoes squealed with each pivot. Above his head, a vaulted ceiling reproduced the outside heavens with their myriad constellations, none of which Peter could identify despite the book stretched across his right forearm. He leafed through the pages with his left hand, pausing near the centerfold, lost in thought. The expression is literal. In times of intense pressure, Peter's thoughts drifted inevitably to the cosmos, where they lost all sense of direction, as now. He felt as if his mind were a ship at sea, torn loose of the puny anchor composing his body, which he pictured as a skeleton. "Why!" he exclaimed. "Why why why won't this evening betray its intent?" At length, he dropped the book to the speckled marble floor, where countless unknown constellations had been charted by his feet.

Suddenly, the clock chimed. "They're late," Peter said. A flush of excitement gurgled upward from his heart, reddening his neck. As the doorbell rang, he was aware his tie was tight.

"Do come in," Peter said, opening the door, the immense width of which gave way, in terms of appearance, to two identical women. On the left was Susan, whose brimless black hat offset an arrangement of tamed blonde curls, like a sun. Her teeth were radiant, except for one hooked and muted incisor, like the only yellow kernel on a cob. In her hand, she held a rolled copy of the playbill from an obscure off-broadway show called "Doomda Doomdoom Doom." Its plot involved a desultory young woman whose sadness conceals its source from all cast members who venture stage right, as if plunging into fog banks of temporary yet total ignorance. At these times, the woman suffers involuntary

paroxysms of despair, weeping what hints at a jazz rendition of Mozart's Requiem. When the other cast member returns from stage right, the woman regains her composure and engages in a monologue from some point that is certainly not its beginning. Still, the returning cast member comprehends her speech with a rekindled empathy that seems to fuse their identities. Susan tapped the playbill against her leg, jostling its strange world. At her side, stood Eva, who had starred in the show.

"I'm still in costume," she laughed. Beneath her mirth ran a current of ridicule, Peter thought. But for what? He examined the two women, whose facial expressions flashed apart like the branches of a snake's probing tongue. Susan was not smiling at all, but consumed by terror, or perhaps indigestion. Her mouth sunk at both corners, as if burdened by the weight of her eyes, which threatened to swallow her whole head, and not yet be satisfied.

"Hurry in," Peter advised, host-like. He stepped behind the door, clearing unnecessary space. The women entered simultaneously, removing their shawls, which Peter bunched together and hung up. Beyond the foyer, the party came to the dining room, the darkness of which was broken by only a chaste glow of candles, themselves black. The room inspired a perplexing confidence that dozens, maybe hundreds of additional candles, unlit, stood within reach in all directions. However, the faint light confirmed nothing more than the table, which was bare. The party passed through the chamber like a whisper among its ghosts, whose undernourished portraits lined the two longer walls. In the library, Peter asked about the show, as if speech were again permissible.

"Eva was impeccable," said Susan. "She had us eating from her palm, like parakeets."

"Susan," said Eva, aghast, "you know I flubbed the speech about the winding river near my childhood home."

"Yes, dear, but your recovery was perfectly dauntless." Here, Susan recounted Eva's unscripted digression into details from Susan's nursery school years on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, which powered a gristmill built by her father.

"Yes," Eva remembered, "I held his hand, which had wonderful tender spots hidden under calluses like the surface of the moon might have. That's how I understood as a girl. My fingers composed my thoughts without any assistance from my brain. It was an easy life. The wind was the only friend I ever needed. It could tickle me in new ways every time, and I would laugh. Daddy threw a great cloud of crushed wheat into the air and it danced like a genie, fulfilling my wishes with the grace of its dance to implore them. I never knew where the river flowed, because I thought it flowed back into itself."

Again, Susan appeared horrified, or upset by her stomach. For a moment, the light patter of her applause sunk her deeper and deeper into a trance beyond time. Peter sandwiched her hands inside his own. He stared into her eyes until they registered his presence.

Meanwhile, Eva wandered the library, as if the act of acting was the act of acting and nothing more difficult than that, there to take or leave at her will, like so many books upon a shelf. Which ones would she touch, peel open like fruit? Her long index finger carved the silhouette of a mountain range along the dusty spines. At the corner of the room, she slid a thin volume from its slot and glossed its title, which read "The Non-

existent Book" in white letters on a black page. She separated the covers, exposing tiny, cursive handwriting, illegible. A small portion of consecutive pages revealed unsteady dashed lines perhaps indicative of guidelines for a scissors. Rather than chase the tail of her developing hypothesis, she turned to Peter for an answer.

"No," he said, "they're not all like that. Those belonged to great-grandfather. He hoarded them."

"We might be able to use them," Eva suggested. "Are there others?" Peter collected them from the various corners of the shelving. In the process, he seemed to lose all spinal flexibility, locking into a curious hunch. Yet his arms remained effective, his fingers nimble. In batches, he pulled slender black volumes from all over the walls. Eventually, there was a pile. It stood at the foot of the main bookcase like a shadow with substance. Eva scooped it gently and left the library for the study. She kicked the door shut behind her.

"Are you going to be all right?" Peter asked, settling beside Susan on the carpet.

"Did you just turn into a bat?" she inquired.

"Yes," he said, winking. He put his arm around Susan so that her rib cage settled under his own. For Peter, these quiet moments together with Susan were enough to justify all the long hours of scholarship thrust upon him by the trans-generational mystico-intellectual quest of his family, which had its origin in England. It was the documented belief of Benedict Nester, or so read the legacy of journals, that contemplation of the triangle could catapult the soul from the body into a third arena, which was neither physical nor non-physical. There, the common antitheses were inapplicable. For all its earthly utility, contrast disappeared. The ends of human imagination did not have limits,

nor diverge. From all accounts, the experience, in its earliest stages, was like the lifting of a headache. Yet no one had managed to record the sensation beyond that point. Either death was its next evolution, as suggested by the congenital heart failure of the Nester men in general, or its next evolution, as something other than death, for some reason undermined the original aim of keeping diligent records.

At times, Peter felt ridiculous, shackled by his responsibility, as soon as the sun rose, to contemplate triangles. Nor did he know exactly how to perform or structure his contemplations. According to his father, there were no specific guidelines precisely because no Nester knew if his predecessors had succeeded in catapulting themselves, or even to where they may have gone. Ignorance surrounded the entire enterprise, and the more Peter perceived this problem, the more it worked to his favor, he began to feel.

In recent weeks, a sense of futility had prompted a deeper self-loathing than Peter would have believed he could host. His daily inscriptions became more and more manic until he himself could not read them. His hands hurt and crimped so that to spare them further pain he wiped his ass only sparingly. In rare moments of introspection away from triangles, he wondered if his mania was causing his feelings of deeper enlightenment or whether the opposite were more accurate. Meanwhile, he believed that settling this issue was irrelevant, and that he must be progressing still further to abandon it without concern. There were three sides to every thought, he discovered. At times, the inside of his nasal passage became a protractor by which to measure and index the three angles formed wherever three lines meet.

But his greatest feat, Peter believed, was his ability to restrict his documentation so that it absorbed only four hours a day. In one sense, he wanted to write at greater length

because he perceived his accelerating transcendence not only of spirit and flesh, but also of his lesser relations, whose journals suggested only the mild illegibility of his previous year, long behind him. In another sense, his review of his latest writings frightened Peter, and he wanted to stop his writerly activities altogether before he crossed whatever threshold awaited the more successful of his relations, not far ahead. Again, his indifference for the seeming contradiction in his thoughts encouraged Peter as a sign of his progress. As a further sign, he experienced a simultaneous dread over that which made him hopeful. He saw himself as a wanderer in a vast garden, where there were only two tiny weeds. One was his dread and the other his cheerfulness, and they scorned all proportion. Somewhere there was Susan to tie them into a bow.

"Will you marry me?" he said, their heads tilted together, forming an apex. Susan's breathing pattern changed. Her rapid, shallow inhalations jostled Peter's chest, in which his heart thrashed like a fish in champagne and a party hat.

"Did you pick out a ring?" Susan asked. Her eyes wandered along the walls to the fireplace, where a pile of ashes was caught in a draft from the flue. At unreliable intervals, small avalanches of soot cascaded from the top, formed eddies near the base, and assimilated into the pile again. Above this cycle, the lumber tray was empty.

"What do you burn there?" Susan asked.

"Damnit! A ring!" Peter griped, confirmed in his premonition about forgetting something crucial. At once, he rummaged all the pockets in his trousers and sports coat. "I'm not a man who carries much," he explained, producing an immaculate handkerchief, which Susan seized.

"I accept," she exclaimed. "But I must have one condition. You will meet it, won't you, Peter darling." His face lit up.

"Name three," Peter boasted.

"One will suffice," Susan drolled. Peter sealed his lips as, draping the cloth over her palm, Susan knelt by the fireplace and grabbed a handful of ash. With the precision of a hobo, she laced the corners atop the bundle and, again on her palm, carried it to Peter, whose eyes betrayed no expression.

"You will eat this," Susan said.

"You can't understand," explained Peter.

"If you don't pick out a ring, yum yum yum." Susan held the small piñata before her mouth and pantomimed its ingestion, as though she were biting an apple and chewing and enjoying it.

"We'll be married," Peter sang. A wave of happiness broke on him, inspiring him to dance, dragging Susan into partnership. Their jig toured the library's every inch. In the bare spots, Peter's new Bally's squealed like excited pigs. He kissed his bride-to-be on the neck and earlobes. She responded in reciprocal squeals.

All at once, in Peter's rickety arms, it occurred to Susan that yes, this was what she wanted, this fragile man, this sweet odor of barber shop hair tonic, this atmosphere of taxed concentration with gaping holes in its ozone. She anticipated evenings of wine in giant goblets, chandeliers with fifty candles and their confetti of drizzling wax, the thick weight of blankets upon an unhurried lovemaking, long drives through a country that existed in the greener regions of her mind. Peter's hands roamed the small of her back. She felt his finger slide against her skin between her blouse and skirt, stroking her fur.

"Sometimes it's so terrible," Susan gasped, removing herself to an arm's-length of Peter by clutching his shoulders. They stood directly in the center of the room, on the eye of the carpet's overflowing mandala, which shed garlanded tears.

"No, we'll be happy," said Peter.

"How she knows me, yet knows nothing! Knows something that wasn't until she found it among the garbage heap of my existence. She recycles lives, Peter. At what cost?"

"Yes, we'll tell her right away. Of course." In the study, Eva sat naked in the dark. Beside her, on the desk, her clothes were folded neatly into triangles, which she had stacked like stars of David. Her brassiere hung from the post of a mahogany chair. In her hand was a marker from the desk's top drawer. The Non-Existent books were scattered all over the desk top, pressed open.

In the interval of Peter's proposal, Eva began to ink her entire body in accordance with diagrams and prescriptions she interpreted from the journals of Peter's great-grandfather. On her face, she reproduced his exact moustache and the dark bags under his eyes, and also divided her legs and arms with dashed lines. A thick coil spiraled either out of or into her navel, and her breasts bore crosses. As Peter and Susan came through the door, Eva was coloring her tongue.

"You will not be happy," she said, removing the marker.

"Eva!" exclaimed Susan.

"Peter?"

"She said yes. I need a ring."

"Or else in forty years," questioned Eva, "I'll tell the story? Of your promise to eat the ashes of books you had burned in defiance of your heritage? To ingest them as obedience after all? As the inescapable price of your happiness? No, I will not know that."

"What will you know," said Susan.

"That somewhere in the house, hunching over a series of journals, a man called my husband is training himself into a different reality, his proximity to which can be measured by the increasing similarity between his handwriting and his electrocardiogram. That for all his shortcomings he understands his heart more intimately than any living man, and chose me to live inside it. That I bore him four children, one of whom died at birth of heart failure. That the other three children betray their incestuousness for the proud thrill of hinting at its intensity. That the boy must take his place among the men of the family, and that he has. That the day is for solitude and night for society. That my husband's hands make less sense to me than my father's, and always must. That for good or bad or both at once the memories of childhood are stamped into me and my children and worn on the skin. That these walls were a second skin and buffered my frailties. That I missed out on nothing. That the dead child is Eva."