

Cloud Faces

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p 9-16

Blind Man's Bluff

She smelled of December: of winter air, wood fires and pine-resin. Her young skin yielded under the soft exploratory pressure of my fingers. I felt the underside of one of her ears, then the other, brushed firm cheeks, the gentle slopes of delicate, warm lips, the bridge of what seemed to be a small nose and the wispy locks of hair sticking out from beneath a chunky, woollen hat. I could hear her slow breathing through the scarf I was blindfolded with, and when my chilly hand brushed the swell of scar tissue above her eyebrow, I recognized the girl who was staying next door for the Christmas holidays. The prospect of being allowed to kiss her – as were the rules of the game – made me tremble. I hoped that the others wouldn't notice or would think it caused by the north winds that raced across the snow-covered square, where we tried to play games that would keep us warm during the short, dark days of the end of the year.

I spoke her name, it seemed to echo across the square for a moment.

Someone unfastened the scarf and after I'd blinkingly grown re-accustomed to the snowy light, I looked into the smiling face of the girl who stood in front of me waiting. The others shouted out as loud as they could, "Ki-iss! Ki-iss! Ki-iss!" I felt myself blushing as I bent down towards her and kissed her hard on the nose. It caused her to laugh.

It made me happy on that graphite-grey day which had begun with ice flowers on the windows and the shovelling of snow that had covered the roofs, streets and gardens with a knee-deep fresh layer. In the afternoon I had hurried to join the others on the square to make snowmen and bombard them with snowballs. The Christmas holiday girl with the pink scar on her forehead was with them. Her name was Lana and she became my sweetheart. For two magical weeks we played without a care in the blowing snow, which had come dancing down from the heavens in intervals since the last days of school.

Her aunt has asked whether it was alright for her niece to play with us. I had been the first to nod, amazed by the authority I was allowing myself – I usually went along with whatever the older boys and girls in the group decided. Lana came over to stand next to me and when we began with the first game and had to choose teams, I picked her out first. She didn't leave my side for the entire game.

The next afternoon she was already in the square when I arrived. She was wearing the same checked duffle coat with a knitted scarf wrapped around her neck. She'd borrowed an oversized red hat from her aunt to protect her from the wind which seemed even more biting that day. "Hey," she said and it sealed what we'd already known the day before, but which we'd never find the words

for.

She took out two snowballs from behind her back and threw them at me. After that she set off at a run. I chased after her and caught up easily. Just as I made a grab for her she slipped. She roared with laughter as she pulled herself to her feet and looked up at me, her face covered in snow, crystals dangling like Christmas bells along the border of her dislodged hat.

We left the square together and walked to the park and ran along the white paths past startled ducks and a lost dog near the pond. Young men and women and noisy children I didn't know were skating around the bases of two bronze female statues. On summer evenings fountains spurted onto illuminated curtains of water, but now there was a thick opalescent glass sheet above the water that silhouettes were gliding over.

It was already growing dark when we walked home together. The cold hung in the air. Lana asked whether I wanted to come into her aunt's house. I saw a Christmas tree in the hall, decorated with angel's hair, silver balls and garlands that glistened in the fairy lights.

Later, through my frosted bedroom window, I tried to make out a light in the room I suspected she slept in and I thought back to her story of how she'd got the scar above her eyebrow.

We celebrated New Year's Eve in the square with the neighbours. We stamped our feet warm on the impacted snow which shone under the colourful lanterns that some men had hung from the trees. There was *jenever* and sparkling wine and lemonade for us. We threw firecrackers into the bushes in the flower beds and someone had bought rockets and fired them into the new year's light at the first chime of the church bell. Bangs sounded out as hundreds of lights unfolded in the sky and snowed down. There was shouting, laughter and kissing. A woman stroked my cheek with a cold hand before throwing her arms around my father. Lana and I didn't kiss each other. For an instant it looked as though it would happen, but we hesitated, giggling, and in the blink of an eye the moment had passed.

She called round a few days later, before her aunt took her back to the station. She was wearing a different coat and bright blue mittens in which she held something hidden. She hesitated before showing it. It was a music box with a drawing of a weak sun sinking into the horizon in a red glow. When she carefully turned the handle with the tips of her thumb and index finger, it played the tune of an English nursery rhyme I vaguely recognized.

She asked if I'd look after the toy for her. She stood there rocking on the heels of her boots for a while. "Bye," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Bye."

She turned and strode along the snowy path to her aunt's car without looking back. As the engine sighed into life, I realised that we had only touched once.

Memories of that winter girl from my childhood float through the night past the house fronts of the inner city. The near deserted last tram slides through the narrow streets. It takes me back to the rooms above my mirror workshop and with each successive corner further away from the woman to whom I have read aloud one afternoon a week for the past four months.

There are hardly any passengers left on the tram. The man on the seat by the doors rests his hands on his knees and closes his eyes. He reminds me of the sense of expectation I had as a young boy when I'd close my eyes to delay the sight of a promised surprise for a few seconds. I believed it allowed me to feel the longing grow.

Leafing through the notebook on my thighs I notice how irregular my handwriting has been. How it changes through the years, moving from an originally rather clumsy fancifulness, to the doubts I had to conquer – at that point full of crossings out in a curly handwriting – to a much neater lettering full of conviction and determination, to the slanting letters of the final sentence on the last page: "...because the most sensitive part of a woman is her eardrum."

There is still a smear of blue watercolour paint on the side of my thumb.

On the other side of the aisle a woman presses her mouth to the steamed up window, leaving

behind the imprint of her lips. She briefly touches the print with her index finger then stares again at the scratched leather seatback in front of her. In the reflection in the glass on my side of the tram it looks as though the droplet running down the window is falling over my face, to the bulge near my bottom lip. Behind the glass the sky hangs open like a book, cloudless, with a cold October moon above the endless row of roofs.

Ten years later I saw her again. In the light of a hanging lamp in a student bar I frequented, I recognized in the young woman sitting at a table, the nine year-old girl I'd loved throughout my childhood. She had lodgings in the city, she told me, near the university, where she was reading History. I was in my second year of Classics and renting a studio flat five streets further away. When I sat down at her table, I saw how attractive she'd become. She had put up her long dyed hair with a comb and the hairdo lent a remarkable grace to her face. The scar on her forehead was almost invisible, sunk into a fine line, from which, I imagined, her first wrinkle would form. When she smiled a dimple appeared in one of her cheeks.

I told her that I had kept her music box, but it was a while before she knew what I was talking about. For the first few months after she'd been driven away out of my young life I'd often pressed it to my ear and listened to the metal teeth rapping against the mechanism. Sometimes I hummed along with the melody. 'Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream.' Afterwards I gave it a place next to the adventure novels I'd collected on a shelf on the long wall of my bedroom, but later it had to make place for other books.

In the weeks that followed we hung around together, in a tardy continuation of what we had broken off a decade earlier. We ate together in the student canteen and went to the cinema and parties. Sometimes Lana wore one of her woollen winter jumpers which touchingly sagged around her body.

She loved sky views, magnificent panoramas and wide, dense cloudscapes. On sunny days I took her to the hills outside of the city and we studied the clouds that hung like hammocks from the firmament.

"Don't look into the sun," she said. "Be careful of your eyes."

She gave the clouds names like spells I could hardly remember – cirrocumulus, altostratus and cumulonimbus – and told stories about them which I believe she invented on the spot.

One of those stories was about a man who was driven from his house by the gods and roamed around the mountains. He asked the rain clouds to tell his beloved on the other side of the country that he'd be home soon and promised that in return the maidens there would unveil their curves when the first drops fell onto their bodies, then they believed it meant that their time for love had dawned too.

Lana saw things in the clouds that I didn't see, even when she pointed them out with her fingers. She described the borders of Canada in the woolly bundles, a prancing unicorn, arum and dancing elephants, but however hard I tried, I couldn't see them myself. I could hardly say where a cloud started and stopped. I only noticed how they slowly changed form and languidly moved on to another corner of the afternoon sky and when I thought I could actually make out something in them, she'd already seen something else.

"It doesn't matter, Lambert," she said. "It'll come."

p 79-81

I have always liked being read to. Blind people are crazy about attractive voices. A voice is nothing more than the amount of air that is sucked in and blown out again, a vibration that moves inside a

person and is transported out again, but which always and instantly induces the image of a man or a woman, beautiful or unattractive, young or old, friendly or imposing. A voice evokes a figure, but also a stance or even a disposition, and a way of moving.

Sometimes I would forget that the people I was talking to could see me. Mostly I looked in the direction of the sound, as if I was clinging onto the hope that the speaker would become visible. Sometimes I wanted to touch or embrace them, as we'd done blindfold as children in the playground, running after other children and trying to catch them through the noises they made. Sometimes I realised that I was telling something to someone who had already gone.

I was never prepared for another person's presence. I never saw anyone approaching. People would always appear as a voice from nowhere and disappear again into nowhere. Neither could I conceal myself anymore. Frequently I wanted to walk away or hide my face. I didn't want to show my face to people who had no face to me. But there was hardly anywhere for me to go.

Here in my own home is the only place I can still see. I recognize and know everything here. I feel the proximity of each object and piece of furniture, I always know where something ends. All things end in the absence of the palpable. I can see the fridge in the kitchen and what I've put in it. I see the coffee machine, the eleven soup spoons in the cutlery drawer and the kettle in the cupboard. I see the door to the hall and the crack in the plaster behind it. I see the stairs to my old studio and Bregt's bedroom on the other side. I've left it as it was so that he can stay there whenever he visits from England. I see the picture of him on the windowsill, the only photo I've kept because I can still remember it: him sitting on the gravel court in his first tennis kit waving to me, his eyes squeezed into slits against the sunlight.

I don't turn on lights anywhere anymore. I climb the stairs in the darkness, carefully counting the steps.

I like stairs. They give me stability.

I once fell down the cellar steps under which I'd hidden in the dark. I was seven years old. As I scrambled up, feeling my way, I stumbled and fell on my face. I felt blood on my forehead. There was a cut just above my eyebrow. I had forgotten to count.

Counting is important. I recount the steps I heard this morning fading away down the path to my house. I count the number of words in the last sentence I heard. And I count the minutes that have past since my reader left me.

p. 113-120

"Can you tell me what the sky looks like?"

Lana had turned to face the window of her workshop, as if she wanted to ascertain that what I was going to say was correct.

I went and stood behind her and looked over her shoulder at the panorama of her back garden. I told her that the sky was pastel coloured, pink and blue and also a little purplish beneath the dark, full sweeps of cloud, the final traces of the displaced winter afternoon sky.

Lana nodded. What I said seemed to reassure her. I wondered what she imagined from my words, whether somewhere in that darkened head of hers she was assembling a vision from what I was providing her with. If she saw then what I could see.

"Tell me what I look like," she said.

She turned confidently towards me and brought her face to barely a half-arm's length from mine.

"I don't know myself anymore."

I leaned towards her, smelled her sweet breath and the balsam scent of her skin. I got so close I thought I could hear her heartbeat.

"You are beautiful," I said.

I studied her forehead, searching for the scar above her eyes, which looked past me with a clear yet

vacant gaze. I saw the familiar white line sunk into a shallow wrinkle.

"You have a scar above one eyebrow," I said.

She seemed to repress a smile.

"I know that," she said.

For a second I was tempted to reach forwards and glide a fingertip along it.

Lana turned to the painting cupboard and brought out an old radio from the bottom drawer. She plugged it unerringly into the socket next to the cupboard. She turned it on and looked for a suitable station. A repetitive piano solo in moderato resounded from the speakers.

"I want to paint the sky," she said.

She fetched a sheet of paper from the table drawer and took it to the easel.

"With you. You have to help me."

Feeling her way she clipped the paper to the back board and pulled the paint pallet towards her.

The pianist played variations around the same few chords. It reminded me of the snow storm earlier in the day. I saw snowflakes dancing against purple heavens and greyish smoke rising from a chimney. My head was full of winter for a moment.

"First the sketch," I heard Lana say.

She had taken a pencil from the case on the table and now measured with the fingers of her left hand a quarter of the way up the side of the sheet. Then with her right hand she drew a firm straight line to the other side. She felt exactly where the paper stopped.

"We'll keep the horizon low," she said. "I want lots of sky."

Above the line she drew the rounded baselines of a cloud composition. She turned around and put the pencil back in the case. She took out three flat brushes which she fingered and arranged on the painting cupboard. She set down a razorblade, tissues and a few cloths and then tapped the first tube of paint with her index finger.

"What colour is this?"

I read the name on the label, half-legible under a couple of smudges of hardened paint.

"Alizarin crimson."

She tapped two more tubes.

"So these are cadmium red and cobalt yellow."

She must have remembered the order the tubes were arranged in, I thought. She took the three tubes from the table and squeezed a line of paint from each into a hole in the pallet. Afterwards she did the same with the tubes of cobalt blue and ultramarine.

"Cobalt is the perfect blue," she said.

I noticed how the paint gleamed in the low bands of light softly filtering through the windowpanes. The piano music slowed. One or two stray snowflakes fell here and there in the winter landscape inside my head and a bent twig lost its covering of snow in the rising wind.

"Now some water," Lana said.

She took out a plastic beaker from one of the cupboard drawers and left the room with it. I heard the dull sound of her slippers on the tiles of the bathroom floor. Then I heard running water. I could have turned around the picture frames leant against the wall, but I didn't.

When Lana returned to the room, she poured some of the water into the pallet's reservoir by touch. She put the beaker down on the cupboard.

"I need your hand," she said.

It took her a while to find me. She took my hand, laid it on hers and led me to the easel. She gave me instructions, telling me what I should do with her hand.

First we wet the paper with a flat brush, then in the middle of the sky we added a few strokes of cobalt yellow and coloured the top part behind the clouds with a light cobalt blue base tone.

"Not too fast," Lana said. "Watercolours are unforgiving. Everything we do has a direct effect. We can't undo it again."

Following her instructions I pushed Lana's hand in the direction she wanted, guiding it to the

middle and then back to the edges of the paper, I took paint from the pallet, mixed it with water and added it with her hand in layers to the base.

I was her eyes.

We hardly made a sound. From time to time when the music paused we'd hear only the slither of the brush hairs. In the sky to the right we added random lighter stripes in cobalt blue and mixed this with some alizarin crimson and cadmium red. We marked the clouds with a small amount of ultramarine and made the sky behind them darker.

"Clouds aren't always white," Lana said. "And as they retreat they often gather together."

We removed some colour with tissues and softened the top part of the cloud formation. Lana had me accentuate the edges with a flat hog hair brush and add a few more puffs of cloud with cobalt blue on the bottom left.

"I want a lot of cumulus," she said.

She hesitated for a second. It was as if she wanted to listen more attentively to the slow chords of the next piano piece, in which different lower notes moved repeatedly towards a delayed final cadence.

"But I still like cirrus best of us, those high, hanging threads of angel's hair, as if they had been painted on the sky."

She made a new mixture of cobalt blue and ultramarine and found a clean flat brush in the cupboard.

"Now the sea," she said.

She placed my hand on her own again and had me make long, semi-undulating, transverse stripes with the smooth side of the damp brush pressed almost completely against the paper. Next we made a straight line of the horizon with the tip of the brush and with a clean, moist brush we wiped a number of the wave shapes away.

"We still need a vanishing point. Every painting has to have a point on which your gaze can rest."

First she had me remove droplets of spume above the remaining waves with the corner of the razor blade and make minuscule reflections in the sea's distance with a few straight marks of the blade. After that we painted a small sailing boat on the horizon with a fine brush and the rest of the ultramarine blend.

The pianist had begun a romantic piece. It evoked a strange kind of intimacy which rendered him almost visible. I imagined him in a corner of the studio, his fingers roaming across the keys, his eyes closed.

"Tell me what you can see now," Lana said.

I released her hand and looked through the half-light at what we had painted on the sheet of paper.

"Blue," I said. "I see blue. A blue sea, blue light, blue clouds and a blue boat."

Lana nodded. "That's good," she said. "That's what I like."

She cleaned the brushes with the remaining water and put the used tissues and rags in the rubbish bucket under the table. She put the razor blade on the window sill.

I watched as the paint slowly dried in patches across the paper.

"Can you like what you can't see?" I asked.

Lana turned towards me.

"Of course," she said.

With unerring accuracy she rearranged the tubes of paint amongst the others on the table.

"But if you hide beauty, does it still exist?"

Lana shook her head. "Beauty is a feeling," she said. "You don't have to see for that." She laid a hand on her neck. "It's a matter of maintaining distance."

She walked past me to the door opening and bent down to the frames against the wall.

"Look."

She turned the watercolours around one by one and set them in a row.

"I did these before I lost my sight."

The paintings were of three sea views with rocky spits of land and large areas of sky. They looked similar. In the first painting the key tones were blue and yellow. The receding tide had left pools in the rippled sand in which the rocks were partly reflected. The second painting was more delicate. The rocks were further away making them seem lower and less rugged. The last view was the bluest. The spurs in the sky led to two slender silhouettes walking close to each other along the tide line, accentuating the vastness of the empty beach.

Only then did I notice that Lana had painted the two figures on the second painting too, but even further away, so that they were hardly distinguishable and seemed to stand on the horizon like they were supporting the border between land and sky.

“Do you see?”

I turned on two hanging lamps with a switch next to the door. It had no effect on Lana. The mirror image in the window showed two motionless bodies, less than an arm’s length from each other. In the reflection of my face I saw the swelling near my bottom lip.