

## When Desire Can't Find Its Object

*Three snowy egrets.* The birds floated through the viewfinder. *Stillness.* I turned north, drove hard a thousand miles back to where I'd lived my entire life at the bottom of a bag—a *cul de sac* cut right out of a cornfield. Then, all but home, I had a change of heart. I went to see Iris. With no photographs to show, I handed her a slip of paper:

*Three silk fans floated up to the sun.*

"Happy birthday," I said. "I didn't have time to get you a card."

Iris was my best friend's mother and the mother-in-law to my wife's cousin. She mouthed the words...*fans...floated...*before saying, "My birthday was months ago. Go home to your bride."

"Let's celebrate," I said. I offered her a white paper deli package and pulled a jar of mustard from my jacket pocket. "I heard you weren't eating your dinner." I hadn't heard. It was just that I'd been overwhelmed with opposing urges. It was two o'clock in the morning when I'd stopped at the local convenience store to call Becky and, when she'd said what she'd said, I'd gone back inside for a pound of pastrami.

Iris jabbed the air with her right index finger, a finger weighted by a faceted crystal ball. "Dinner... *BAH!*...My refrigerator is full of food. It doesn't have any taste." She had a perfectly puckered mouth ready to explode with laughter, but time and again, I found myself caught in her eyes.

"A girl's gotta eat," I mumbled.

"It's been awhile," she said, as her fingers carefully opened the pastrami's paper wrapping, only to smooth it flat, re-create its folds and wrap it back. Before I knew it, she had carefully retied

the package with its red and white striped string and pushed it away.

"*White Castle?*" I asked. How many dawns had we driven forty miles for those tiny, square, smelly, greasy, onion-drenched gut bombs? Even with the miles I'd traveled that day, I hoped she'd say Yes.

"No."

It was true. I hadn't been around in a while. I'd been on the other side of town, mostly. I'd managed to avoid induction without running to Canada, like some, like her son Mick who was still up there planting trees. I'd married, but hadn't adjusted, no more than I might to boot camp—or war. Yet, by anyone's measure, I was set for life: I had a house, a car that was paid for, a union job spot-welding batteries at the edge of town. It just didn't taste good.

"What is it you *want* outta life?" Becky had demanded. There was nothing I could name—not anything I could tell her. I'd bought myself a Nikon, taught myself F-stops and shutter speeds, and struggled to keep my subjects inside the viewfinder long enough to bring them into focus.

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When Iris moved to the sofa and I slipped onto the camel saddle at her feet, she gave my knee a firm but gentle pat. The room was open—a great tiny room with a kitchen and living area rising to an unoccupied loft. A color TV in a far corner—a giant whispering night light—relieved the darkness.

"Where've you been this time?" she asked.

"The gulf."

"The Gulf? So tell me...what got away?"

Iris had a system, asking first what most interested her, then politely asking about the rest, one question each, before looping back to the start. It was as if she was afraid you might be called away too soon and she'd be left alone again to ponder the lives of others in silence. I told her what I knew, without mentioning

Becky, and once we'd compared notes on Mick, I launched in again where we had started.

"In Louisiana, there were those snowy egrets..." They had floated above an emerald knoll as if pulled up out of a canal on a string—white fans edged with the gold embroidery of the sun—black legs, yellow feet dangling like tails of kites. She devoured my reverie. *Plantations. Churches. Cemeteries. Canals.*

But what more needed telling?

The first time I saw Iris, Mick was marrying Becky's cousin. For that occasion I had no camera. Not even a Kodak Instamatic. Iris wore a platinum blonde wig from her collection of blonde wigs, a black-and-white, floor-length kaftan, and a gold-braided purple vest. Her mother-of-the-groom shoes were sandals, the kind that cut between your toes. I didn't need a photograph to remember the details. The gold lamé toe thong was bejeweled with big, colorful rhinestones.

I was drifting. This was the last of several days I'd stolen from Becky. I was AWOL. When I got home I'd find my dark-room supplies in the trash. Still, I stripped off my shoes and socks, and stretched out on the chaise. Alone there, I sank into its beat-up cushion. Black beauties had gotten me this far. I popped another.

"How old are you now...?" She always asked.

"Thirty," I said. "Too old to be trusted." I reached to touch her hand, but she held it to her breast. When light from the TV skipped onto the facets of her ring, a rainbow sprayed between us.

One week before, sitting alone in a motel room late at night, I had imagined Iris on Johnny Carson. A twin to Lillian Gish. Gish, large-eyed, thin-faced, delicate, curved at the spine, wearing an ill-fitting black pants suit. Once a goddess of Hollywood, now wearing orthopedic shoes on late-night TV, her black-sequined skull cap letting little ringlets of gray spill out—and I had fallen madly, insanely in love.

"Nobody gets any older than the day I met them," she mused.

That's when the amphetamine kicked in again, and I began to talk endlessly of plantations and cemeteries, egrets and alligators, and the moldering smell of the French Quarter and the melodious remnants of clarinets and saxophones, caught like stars, in the night sky. For each bite she took, I offered more.

At dawn, she pulled herself from the sofa depths to draw back the café curtains. Even as she dumped freeze-dried coffee crystals into mugs and poured in boiling water, light spilled into the room like cream into dark French roast. And I told her how wonderful the *beignets*. How the air in Jackson Square was admixed with sugar. How it wafted in clouds outside the Cafe du Monde. How I'd tried and failed to photograph the breeze that sucked the sugar off the plates of little powdered donuts. How the breeze had ruffled the powdered sugar into the hills and furrows of a patron's long glossy sable.

At this, she cricked her index finger, with its miniature disco ball, to warn me. "Don't you even think about it. I haven't had my picture made since..." The finger examined her face. "*Here...* The doctor did a good job, didn't he?...*Ha!Ha!*"

I sized her up, touched her shoulder. "If I was going to take your picture," I said, "I would want you to turn your head just a little... Yes, just there."

By the way, it's *not* true what they say—a picture is not always worth a thousand words. Iris would be beautiful at any age. But what would my camera see? Her faded, long black cotton gown. Her skin, once translucent and ivory, turned to silvery, finely crackled porcelain. Her long hair falling in a thin braid, not silver or gray or yellow, or any color. Its corn gold left only for me to see.

She straightened herself. Uncertain, I turned, but saw everything was the same. Posters of B. J. Thomas and Three Dog Night, not far beyond, hiding cracks in the bedroom walls. School pictures—so many children of her long-ago acquaintance—papering the inside of the back door. A framed photo, Mick's daughter, stationed on the TV.

Until the cancer had poked out of Glen's ear like a finger,

and Mick had run off, and the dog Geoff died—and then the pet monkey—this had been a family home. Without Moj’s cage, the kitchen table was cluttered with bundles of unanswered Christmas cards and letters and unopened packages. A bottle of corked wine. A box of half-eaten fudge.

Around us, zebra pillows. No bong—only cigarettes allowed here. Bookshelves with curios floor to ceiling. Replicas of Greek and African masks. TV trays holding jewelry boxes, one box with a ballerina spinning on a pond of glass ice, and large chunks of costume jewelry, perfume, and a plastic elephant tusk with intricate “carvings.” Spilled shoe boxes and hat boxes. A termite-eaten *Webster’s World Dictionary*, and the Flaubert novels I had studied in high school and should have learned more from. The clerk in *L’Education sentimentale* was myself.

We talked then, as we always talked, she a part of me. In her bedroom, a faded cigar box rattled with heartbreak—engagement rings that her daughter-in-law would, soon enough, strip of their diamonds. In the loft, a journal I would inherit and burn.

Five mobiles hung from the loft’s railing. Twenty-eight yellowed snowflakes, each the size of a giant cookie, cascaded at odd angles just above our heads. Free-flying metal birds, paper fishes, ceramic squares and ovals, and red and gold embossed paper dragon parts floated from above. And Tibetan temple bells on a rope. I found the stepladder tucked behind the sofa and unfolded it.

Iris laughed—not that mindless shrill that trips from the tip of a girl’s vocal cords, but a bird song that resonated from the ground swell of her being. She needed my help. She squeezed my hand. I gave her a boost. One step and then the next. Though cautious at first, carefully examining and polishing the center of the nearest snowflake, she was quick to reach higher, wider. She was three steps up when I stepped in behind. The painted bracelet, a gift from my last visit, slid from slender wrist to slender forearm and stuck. I thought of Becky without longing.

A snowflake twirled, and then another. We sneezed reck-

lessly, elbows beating the air. And then the dust cloth dropped away.

All began to swirl—snowflakes, birds, fishes, squares, ovals, dragon parts. I held her closer. There were strings and wires and a sudden marriage of fish and birds. Then a burst of light as a serrated edge of the dragon’s tail caught my eye. I ducked sideways and its head, legs, and torso swung wildly after me. Bells rang. I felt dizzy. Faces asserted themselves from dark shadows. Apparitions. Eyes—eyes hung at eye-level. Accusing eyes. Mocking eyes. Studio portraits. Mick, kindergarten to graduation. Glen in pinstriped suits.

“Two women came out from Social Services. They were going to clean,” she coughed. “It seemed like a good idea. But they didn’t understand. They just stood there. And looked. And didn’t understand. I told them it was alright. That they should go home....”

There is a crash, a lamp, a vase, maybe. We are in a violent struggle. The ladder drifts. I am whimpering, “Becky wants to divorce me...” and then we are not moving at all. We are suspended, draped and bound in broken, twisted wires and strings. When our breathing grows quiet, I help her down. Broken snowflakes and the harsh skin of dragon parts pierce our feet.