

## Aperçus

“A man was here looking for you, Mark,” Pam Weeks said without looking away from her computer screen. “After you left last night.”

“Did he say what he wanted?” Mark Person was removing his jacket, hanging it on the coat tree.

“He asked if you worked here is all and when I said yes but you were out, he just thanked me and left.”

Mark Person worked in the admissions office at Hausner College, a small Presbyterian liberal arts college about an hour and a half from Washington in more-or-less rural Virginia, an assistant dean.

“What did he look like?”

Pam had a clear picture in her mind of the hulking figure with a pompadour and what appeared to be a cleft palate that had been surgically corrected, a baby face, paradoxically emphasized by a downy eye-brush mustache that shaded the harelip, but she also had trouble articulating exactly what she had seen. “Medium height,” she shrugged. He’d been wearing a cheap-looking wrinkled sports jacket with a plaid sort of pattern and a blue Oxford shirt, open at the throat to reveal the top of a white undershirt, but she didn’t know if Mark cared what the man had been wearing. Or that his ears had stuck out and he smelled of minty soap.

“He didn’t leave a name?”

“No.” Pam thought to mention the vaguely British or Australian accent, but she couldn’t decide which it was, so she held her tongue. Besides, it could have been

a speech impediment owing to the cleft palate.

“Oh well,” Mark sighed, feeling vaguely ill at ease. Who would be looking for him? Pam’s vague description made the stranger seem threatening to him, as if he were going to be blindsided.

Mark Person entered his cubicle and logged on to his computer. Before getting down to the work that awaited him, he checked his e-mail account for *The Cantwell Review*, the online literary magazine he edited. His nemesis, George Clark, had sent him another e-mail. Clark was a rancorous community college professor/poet, self-styled “revolutionary,” whose poetry Person had rejected and who had subsequently taken to sending abusive, vaguely threatening e-mails. They came more and more infrequently, but they always sounded the same.

“I won’t even bother submitting anything to your journal since all you do is bask in the cleverness of your *bon mots* and your precious *aperçus*. How gutless you are, Person, serving the politically correct pablum to your establishment audience. When the revolution, comes, watch out. People like you will be the first to go.”

What the hell was this about *bon mots* and *aperçus*? And all at once Person wondered if his mysterious visitor had been none other than George Clark himself. Talk about an *aperçu*. From the past participle of the French *apercevoir*, to perceive, a clever insight.

What exactly *was* an *aperçu*, anyway, Mark wondered. Was the observation that one appreciated the smell of one’s own shit, despite the general shittiness of shit, an *aperçu*? The word was onomatopoeic in a way – a delicate sound for a nuanced

perception.

Mark poured himself a cup of coffee from the office Mr. Coffee coffeemaker and from a drawer in his desk retrieved the package he kept of Nature Valley granola nut clusters, his breakfast of choice. The package had already been opened and resealed. He'd always been amused by the message at the top of the package that said, "resealable for your lifestyle." The hell? His "lifestyle"? And now he asked himself, is this an *aperçu*? Reading the fine print and being struck by the implications?

Or again, he wondered if when he had listened to "Baby, You're a Rich Man" on his CD player coming to work this morning and was sure he heard John Lennon as the song faded away at the end sing "Baby, you're a big fat Jew," if *that* was an *aperçu*, something small he'd noticed – unless he'd just misheard the line. He'd have to Google this.

But an *aperçu* wasn't the written statement, was it? You inferred the *aperçu* from the written observation since it was an act of noticing, not of writing. Or was he nitpicking? Still, it seemed worth noting since reviewers and critics always alluded to alleged *aperçus* without pointing anything out in particular, and, like Clark, with something of a sneer, the way a Republican political observer uses the word "liberal," with contempt. Baby, you're a rich man, baby, you're a rich man, baby you're an *aperçu* ... Maybe, like Person, they were just half in love with the word itself.

Mark loved the little tail hanging off the c, its magical power to change the pronunciation from a "k" sound to an "s" sound. How powerful, how sexy, just like the word itself. Curaçao was another one, he reflected. From a Portuguese word

meaning the state of becoming cured, referring to sailors who, after months at sea having contracted scurvy would eat the vitamin C-rich fruit of the island and become cured. As if that little tail hanging from the c could make cripples walk, restore sight to the blind.

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“Is Mister Person in?”

Pam Weeks looked up at the hulking but gentle figure of the man who had come the day before. He still smelled of soap.

“I’m sorry!” she cried, “You just missed him again. Can I take your name and number and leave him a message to call you?”

“Oh, no, thank you, it’s quite all right. I’ll try another time,” the man said, blushing, already backing away.

“But if you’ll leave your name –”

But the man scurried out the door. Almost apologetic. Almost frightened.

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“He was here again last night after you left,” Pam told Mark the next morning. “The man that was here asking to see you the other day.”

“And you didn’t get his name?”

“He didn’t say.”

“It wasn’t George Clark, was it? His name?”

“He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Wouldn’t tell you?” Person felt his paranoia start to tick like a geiger counter

detecting radiation. “You asked his name and he wouldn’t tell you?”

She hesitated because Mark made it sound as though the man had refused, but it hadn’t been so much a *refusal* to tell as a reluctance to bother her. But all she said was, “Yes.”

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A Google search told Mark Person that a rumor had been started that John Lennon had sung, “Baby you’re a rich fag Jew,” as a reference to Brian Epstein, the Beatles manager who died three months after the song was recorded. The lyrics really *were* sung, “Baby, you’re a rich man, too,” at least according to Google. So – he’d misheard the lyrics. Wouldn’t be the first time.

Person wondered: Could a mistake be an *aperçu*? He remembered the time he was on an airplane awaiting takeoff and the flight attendant referred to the two “accidents” over the wings. Hadn’t she meant “exits” over the wings? Had he misheard her? A Freudian slip – or an *aperçu*? The classical radio announcer introduces Pachelbel’s *Canon in D major* and Person hears “Taco Bell” – the fast food of classical music? Pachelbel’s “greatest hit,” indeed. But – an *aperçu*? Nah.

But finally, just this morning coming to work, Person could have sworn he heard the news announcer saying something about “the shoplifting industry.” But it turned out she’d said, “chocolate industry.” Not an *aperçu*; he was just going nuts. Then again, he might be confusing an *aperçu* altogether here. True, it was an immediate apprehension of something, in the sense of insight, more appreciative than analytical, an *experience*, but wasn’t it also the expression, the sketch? The insight

shared? In the case of “Baby, you're a big fat Jew,” if it *had* been accurate, if he *had* heard it correctly, would the *aperçu* then be some comment on British anti-Semitism with regard to the Liverpoolian working class? Or some insightful commentary on the irreverent, inappropriate, embarrassing punk humor Lennon sometimes displayed?

So what *were* these *aperçus* that Clark had been referring to in *The Cantwell Review*? Maybe he should ask Clark to point them out. But no, just leave Clark out of it, hope he goes away, crawls back under his rock, turns his sneering attention elsewhere.

Was Person simply paranoid about this mysterious visitor who kept asking Pam if he were in? Person got so few visitors. Dean Connelly was the one who usually talked with prospective students. This wasn't a student, was it? Pam had been vague but she clearly indicated that his visitor was a “man,” not a “kid,” which was how they usually referred to students. A parent? Unlikely. In the back of his mind, Person was sure this must be Clark. And he was sure Clark was packing a gun.

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Pam Weeks walked across the campus to the parking lot, after work. She reflected that Jeremy would already be with his father and the house would be empty when she got home. She should take advantage of her freedom, but how? What should she do? In the two years since the divorce she had not been on a date. It wasn't just that nobody had asked her, but she hadn't felt inclined to seek the company of another male, either. Still, nobody *had* asked her, and yet, at 38 she was still reasonably attractive, worked at keeping her figure, colored her hair, wore make-

up. But the idea of going out to a singles bar, alone, for instance, had no appeal. She was out of the mating and dating habit, had forgotten the rituals; after nine years of marriage, Pam hadn't been in the market for over a decade.

As she approached her old blue Saturn, out of the corner of her eye Pam saw that man, the South African or whatever he was, the one who'd come by asking for Mark, sitting on a bench outside the library, and from the way he moved his head when she turned, she suspected he had been watching her and didn't want to be caught at it, didn't want her to know. Pam stifled an impulse to wave at him, but as she opened her car door, she became more aware of herself as a desirable female, and all at once it struck her that the man had not been coming into the admissions office in search of Mark Person at all. He had come to see *her*. Pam didn't know whether to feel threatened or flattered, but from that slight, almost imperceptible movement of the head when he'd shifted his eyes away from her – which as good as said, “Okay, you've got the goods on me” – she *knew* beyond a doubt, a perception quick and incisive and without contradiction.

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