

Sentimental Exorcisms

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**Just Watch:
An Apologia**

It was the simple logic of two premises and their inevitable conclusion that ultimately led me to become a voyeur. First, a few feeble acts of missionary sex with my co-operative former girlfriend had numbed me to those pleasures (A_1 becomes B [oring]); escorting her to the door, I reflected on the nature of desire, on all the trifles already discarded by my sensuous and sentimental appetites (other A 's had become B). My conclusion, if predictable, was persuasive: attainment is annihilation, is liberation (all A 's become B). Rhomboid ruby, pubic crown, that word-bearing wispy crux of a girl – I shut the door behind her, picked up *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and read.

Five or six monastic weeks passed, me burning the midnight oil. As one of the University of Toronto's top English undergrads, living on my own, I was free as an eagle and happy as a lark. I wrote a first-rate essay about Wilde's influence on English Modernism, listened to Schubert, dreamed in heroic terms. Meanwhile, my spurned libido: like the turgid buds loosening in the kind spring sun, dropping pollen on the lawn, it grew – a glance at a time – out from the shadows, as exclusively orificial in its aims as ever, and demanding enactment, yes – but like the writer who requires mere crumbs of the outer realm to feed his creation, I no longer wished to participate.

Oh, my dear girls, you deceptively simple compositions: one stands on the corner, shouldering an attaché case, and by accident exposes her scarlet bra strap; another makes sure nobody's looking before she bends like a beast for a box of condoms on the bottom shelf. I could go on ad nauseam, listing contradictory attitudes, on and on about feminine wiles and their cracks, invaded by jeans that are far too tight, or by a sweaty pair of Spandex short shorts.

Things came to a head in July. A mass of hot American air slammed Toronto on the first of the month, stinking of brewer's yeast and lake sewage, and the streets thronged with thousands of practically naked girls. I bolted myself inside my apartment, tried to keep at my studies like a good responsible son. But the mere click of a female's footfalls past my gaping window and I'd be done for, a wreck, slumped across my desk with no place to go.

A week of air-quality advisories came and went. My books abandoned, I prowled the city in a maze of longing, ratiocination and untested hypotheses. Finally, Saturday morning, lying tangled in my sheet, I deemed my logic sound – i.e., satisfaction effects elimination, so to root out my one irregular vein of sexuality, I simply had to indulge it. And if my plan of action did not exactly qualify as an uncompromising categorical imperative, nor was it simply me mindlessly succumbing to my urges. For the sake of my studies, for my expectant parents who had invested so much in my nebulous future – for the anonymous wife at the centre of that distant nebula – I had to get on with it, to slake my impossible thirst before the thing got away on me and my light summer course load.

You must understand there are few more upstanding than me. It's my conviction that both rapists and wife beaters should be castrated as a matter of course. For I believe in the larger good, the big picture. The need for pragmatic action. 'Minimize harm,' my dad would say. But as so often happens with situational ethics, I was caught on the horns of a dilemma. I hesitated before the ladders, stacked in front of the hardware store, and considered the harm that either action or inaction might entail. By proceeding, I'd clearly be committing deliberate – if hands-off – incursions into people's sacred privacy. But if they didn't

realize, was harm done? On the other hand, indefinitely suppressing my desire as best I could, praying that my academic standing wouldn't sink along with my parents' pride, seemed a risky bet. Of course the possibility of being caught red-handed had to be factored into the equation. But so did the common knowledge that an initially quite innocent frustrated desire is often the seed of more sinister tendencies. I weighed a sixteen-foot aluminum ladder and decided it was right.

The cashier, a kitteny teen, managed to evade my smiles. Then her nipples responded instantly to the one downward glance of my flashing gaze. I pictured those nipples all the way home, hard like my resolve. But with an overdue paper on psychosexual symbolism in *The Turn of the Screw* suddenly heavy on my mind, there wasn't time to daydream. I muffled the tops of the ladder rails with old socks and duct tape, stashed the thing in a dilapidated garage behind the building and raced inside for a shower before putting my nose to the grindstone.

Admittedly, certain windows had already caught my passive eye, on my way home from the library late at night, or returning from my friend's (whom I'll call 'Albert'). Once I glimpsed what looked to be flesh; but, despite backtracking and slowly passing a second time, I couldn't ascertain whether it actually was an object of delight. I began taking evening strolls, following alleys behind houses and the peripheries of parks. Such activities sound suspect, certainly, but from my perspective they remained well outside the bounds of voyeurism proper.

That Saturday evening I was completely out of sorts. I phoned Albert, whom I've known since boarding school, but hung up after three rings and angrily searched the freezer for a bite to eat. Cursing, I tried him again, this time letting

him answer; finding his voice tedious and slightly enraging, I barked that I was far too busy to play chess and ordered myself a pizza instead.

The vapid television. Gorging on Hawaiian deep-dish, I scanned my umpteen channels over and over until 10:29 on the DVD clock finally became 10:30.

Off with my gym shorts – on with crisp new jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, both black. I looked foolish, somewhere between a friendless wannabe rocker and an unconvincing artiste, nothing like the upright fellow in white or tan khakis and a collared blue shirt I normally present. But the white painter's coveralls (another life: I painted houses the summer between high school and university, with Albert, who by rights should come clean about those filched undies he probably still keeps in a shoebox under his bed) that I pulled overtop seemed a bit more a part of me and certainly gave the right impression. I turned off all the lights and left.

It so happened I'd become aware of the habits of several local households. A young couple, for instance, lived in a house that backed onto the alley behind my building. He was a typical male, egotistical, bent on pornography and computer games, essentially a cipher, while she had a compact, underappreciated little body on her. They usually made for the bedroom shortly after eleven. But that night their house was dark as an unburgled tomb. Helpless as a child, I stood staring at the windows opaquely reflecting the city's jaundiced light.

My second prospect was only four backyards away and housed a large, cumbersome family: three kids, a husband and a wife. She was one I'd seen out walking, long skirts billowing like curtains, and I happily recall her struggle as a pursuant wind kept at her, kept at her substantial, round behind. A television flickered downstairs; above, a half-drawn blind winked a heavy lid over the lighted bedroom window. Setting down the

ladder, I penetrated a low border hedge and stole across the lawn, to peer breathlessly inside: children, on the floor, under a blanket, engrossed in the screen. Good enough. I stripped down to black and angled my ladder next to a fir tree.

I started to climb with tentative steps, almost afraid a rung might snap. But those aluminum ladders, with each step they flex, to thrust their climber after grand ideas. I stopped just below the windowsill, knees bent. Blood drummed in my ears, my hands and feet were numb, but nothing could be done for that. I simply tapped the same intrepid resolve with which I used to dive straight into icy water at good old Camp Kamachee and straightened my legs.

Bathos: Greek for *depth*. A shallow-bottomed lake. I banged my figurative head against the following scene: a television at the foot of the bed showed the throes of some bloody chaos; immediately below me lay the flaxen head of my curvaceous doll, sleeping; and the torpid husband beside her was about to lose the glasses off the tip of his whistling schnozz. This signally bleak *tableau 'vivant'* was crowned by a fat brown beagle – of the smelliest sort, I could imagine – laid out between them and gnawing the remote.

I wanted to smash the glass and tear off their sheets! Stifling a scream, I descended the ladder as swiftly as quietly possible and beat a fast retreat across the yard. My only remaining hope lay with the evening's last possibility, an ess-y, svelte black girl.

Tall and lean, she'd kick when she walked, reminding me of a wishbone. I don't remember the short dash to her house, only crossing an empty lot, reassured by the protection it afforded. A room downstairs was bright: there she sat watching TV alone. In the window above, an air conditioner hummed and ticked. I set my ladder beside it and, tucking myself under a lilac, was surprisingly content to lie embowered by the protective bed of night, with a sporadic breeze southing overhead.

When the downstairs light went out, I scrambled up to the second-highest rung, not generally a safe place to stand, but to keep from being seen I'd have to watch downward through the top pane. She entered – a faint halo caught in her loose evening afro – before I'd even had a chance to adjust myself properly, and was tugging off her clothes, tossing them in the corner as she made a beeline for the bed (to masturbate, I grinningly surmised), forcing me to dodge from sight before the essentials were off. But I cautiously espied her dark arm peeling back the bedspread, a tantalizing prologue, followed at once by a flash of the novel piece that her fine black body was, all that for so long had insinuated itself into my heart from under tight hobble skirts. She switched off the light. I kissed the cold bricks and raced home to flip through some magazines before retiring as well.

One tiny blue tablet, a draught of water: a heavy, satisfied sleep.

A month of twice-weekly expeditions ensued. Mondays and Thursdays were my nights of action. Steadfast abstinence at all other times ensured I went unnoticed and afforded me a sense of self-restraint. My spare hours I spent artistically detailing a map of the neighbourhood, soon to cover an entire bedroom wall, and also monkeying around with a branching agenda.

My first conclusion: most people's lives are boring. A couple of unusual encounters aside, I'm not exaggerating in saying that three quarters of the couples I tracked led unremarkable – virtually non-existent – sex lives. I blame the flaccid husbands. True, women reach their prime long after men are spent, but even the youngest bucks behaved like neuters. I quickly learned that if I was to have any hope of vanquishing my overweening desire, I'd need to expand my territory.

In accordance with the first rule of strategic planning, I

took to my desk and prioritized. Intellectual honesty was indispensable, as well as a willingness to sacrifice certain secondary attractions. After much typing and deleting, probing myself from every angle, I cleared the screen and with deliberate keystrokes distilled the spirit of my lust into three main objectives: 1. Observation of lesbians; 2. Observation of a Chinese girl fornicating; 3. Observation of a woman being sodomized. It seemed to me that by witnessing these scenarios I'd exhaust my spectator's desire and – sated, bored and happy – could revert to an orthodox lifestyle.

It's incredible what one can accomplish if one puts one's mind to it. My parents used to tell me that, but I never gave it much thought. Objectives 1 and 2 were notched in my belt, so to speak, within a month of conception. Just as my parents counselled, it took patience, discipline and an open mind.

First, I dropped my summer courses. That a couple of poor grades should tarnish my transcript, perhaps preventing me from graduating with distinction, all because of a fleeting distraction, was absurd. Better to concentrate on the task at hand and re-enrol in September, refreshed for my final year. Thus relieved of obligations, I deepened my commitment, exploring promising neighbourhoods during the day – Chinatown, the University District, Gaytown – and returning at night to climb and shimmy, quick with great expectations.

I witnessed a lot that harried month, acts that surprised and disgusted me. But I'm not writing pornography, so only two notes are germane to the present discussion: 1. I did taste success, 66.6 percent to be exact, inadequate but sufficient to prove my father's sententious counsel sound: 'Accomplishment is a triune consummation of vision, imagination and application!' – an aphorism he'd pen inside the cover of my daily planner at the beginning of each new school year. 2. Objective 3 was the 33.3 percent I sorely missed.