

The Man Who Noticed Everything



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*For Darcy, who allows me to notice—
and who herself never fails to notice everything*

The Man
Who Noticed
Everything

Hard Water

The frost on the windowpane is thinner. I begin to notice figures on the road again. Not in droves but one by one, coming on slow as the springtime. From where I sit above the road, in an old wicker chair at my bedroom window, the destinations of the figures, simply put, are not mine, and I don't tend to wonder past what I can see. Country trash in battered traps, a tinker with a burlap sack full of lightning rods, occasionally my neighbor, Penderton, a cottonman, or one of his sulking negro boys on his way to the sundry or still for provisions, not that it is any of my business.

I am mostly in the habit of watching these days.

Even the traveling medicine show, with its slim, murky vials and malformed proprietor, interests me no further than the filthy wagon tarp, the swelling clatter of the wheels, the snuffle of horses gone by me.

When I think of the lip of the world, and I do, I'm thinking of my own front yard.

Every so often, I see the boy. Not that I am watching for him. He walks with his satchel at his hip up the parallax of birches that lines the dirt road. He walks in a way that his left arm swings free, as though with a mind to be elsewhere. Sometimes he stops just in front of my gate to blow back the hair from in front of his eyes, or to pivot the weight of his satchel behind him, and having done so walks on. Once I even called his name. Benjamin, I said, it is me, Colby Marshall. But he did not seem to hear my voice, or maybe I spoke too quiet.

When I am not at the window, I tend to my plants. It is small, steady work, and belabors the nerves. These are vital hours for my crop of White Burley, if they are to make it to hogshhead come summer. The leaves are yellowing in their beds, peeping hello above the edges. My hands shake a little in the gloom of the barn as inch by inch I trim them green. As for the fields, they are fallow and scentless. Sometimes in the morning, or before the sun drops, a limbo of fog from the mountains hangs over them, and lends the earth an untold depth.

In the evenings, when the traffic on the road thins out and I have done all that I can for the plants, I sit in my parlor and read the book. Don Juan, it is called, by Lord Byron. I have other books, too, nigh a whole parlor full, propped spine to spine along rude wooden shelves, some of them come from as near as Atlanta when I go there to meet with distributing agents, others as far as San Francisco, delivered by post, after weeks. Entertainments by Stevenson and Defoe, who big city readers might label as common, illumine no less my place in the world than the sublime compositions of Wordsworth or Shelley, not that I put much stock in the words of those who do not do. And unlike most who take their ease on a chilly spring night with a book, as I do, I sip PG Tips instead of spirits, which I have found augments perception. This rare leaf makes it way to my crockery across the Atlantic every month; with it come soaps, water crackers, cologne and a case of Bordeaux I will save for the harvest. Byron's epic poem was a gift from the boy so I might better grasp his leaving; every spring for three years, I have read it afresh, so I might grasp, in turn, some comfort. But this spring I am no closer than I was the last, nor was I the last than the spring before that. And so it continues on and on.

I fear before long I will have it to memory.

In the portraits I've found of Lord Byron himself, I recognize particles of the boy. Byron, of course, is the boy gone to pot from the excess of his later years, but the pitiless beauty of his face suggests, in good light, a former softness. If the boy was anything, he was

soft. I could have balled him in my hand. And wherever he is, be it Spain or Greece, at the mouth of the Danube or waist-coated London, I hope he has retained his softness, and yet cultivates it for me, his friend. At present, I am groping through Canto V, when Don Juan finds himself on the Turkish slave market.

The irony is not lost on me that shackles do not make the slave.

It is getting on toward April when I see the drifter coming. I know he is a drifter for he drifts, though on horseback, sloughing side to side across the withers of his mount. The horse is little better than a nag, journey-eaten. Though it feels early yet for the plague of blow-flies that descends on these parts with the first of the heat, the nag shakes its head and bares its teeth with the old agony of a darling. From my window, the rider's face is hidden. His hat brim hangs over his face like a caul. He reigns up his horse at the gate to my house, a modest one, if that. I live alone. A galleried porch with a screen door behind it, whose keeper spring cackles as I come through, is mirrored by a second story tier right above it, better painted than the first, like a stale wedding cake.

By the time I am off the front porch, moving toward him, he has dropped from his mount and is wiping his face. He wipes it with the hat brim that formerly hid it, a long, sponging motion from brow to chin, and having achieved, then, an optimal dryness, wrings it out in the dirt, sets it back on his head. Despite the mild air, he is covered in sweat, as though he'd been riding for miles at a gallop.

Fine morning, he says, though it is noon. I'd ask if you might have some work that needs doing.

None I haven't got a start on.

Well, says the man, as he hitches his trousers. Well, he says again. He squints.

He is powerfully built I can see now I'm nearer, in a dirty white smock unlaced to his sternum. Save for the straight line of his jaw, muzzled with a few days' beard, there is a strange asymmetry to his features that is hard to pinpoint from the place I am standing. The

face is not ugly, or even unlovely, with its leading man's lips and denuding bright eyes, but then, drawing closer, it's the eyes above all that I bring to account for the face's keel, for lo one is set higher up than the other, like a portrait warped by damp.

Been riding since Macon, hang sleep or a meal. I wouldn't tell either to shoo, if you'll have me.

I'm not for handing out, I say.

Well, he repeats, with incantatory slowness. Folks is got their own philosophy.

I lean on the gatepost, which ventures a creak. I have kept my eyes on him a moment too long.

Macon's not so far from here.

On this here maggot trap it is. He slaps the nag's flank and it grumbles a pace. Ain't that right, John Wilkes? he croons.

I run the place myself, I say. Good morning to you all the same, and I turn, but then I hear him crossing the road in my direction. Wait up, friend, he calls. Whoa there.

I turn to find him standing on the crossbeam of the gate with his elbows hunched over the top. He waves me over.

I could do other things for you too, I expect. Just a man getting on with no wife, by hisself.

No thank you, I say. You heard me the first time.

Sure, he says. You run it yourself. No pies in the windows that I can make out. But hey, he waves me closer, I'm telling you now. We could squeeze one off later on, if you like.

For a scorched, airless moment, I can only stare at him. The touch of another, no matter how light, has pummeled me once and then twice in the face. I see that his eyes are not only uneven, but different colors altogether; the right one, set higher, is pearlescent and grey, while the left, more or less where an eye should reside, has a rheumy, washed-out bluish tint, like a thimble of cheap cologne.

What's your name? I ask him then.

V, he says.

The letter? I ask.

Twenty-second of its kind.

Though I know it matters little, I take in the road. A breeze stalks the trees, on a wag or a beckon, but other than that it is empty and still.

I nod to V's horse: You can tie him out back.

Didn't catch your name there, friend.

He is still hanging over the gate, staring at me.

Beg pardon, he says to my back, and comes on.

I watch over V while he hitches John Wilkes to a muscular tree in my back yard. As soon as he's knotted the reins at the trunk—a fisherman's knot, I note, what kind?—its shabby knees buckle and fold in the dirt and its head cradles onto its forelegs. It is a pitiful creature, befitting its rider, who seems to see it more as a friend than a horse. Though I should wonder from its carriage and the scarlands of its flanks if the friendship they share is reciprocal.

Set tight, there, John Wilkes, says V. Dream a little while while I'm gone.

The horse grumbles.

So what all did you have in mind? he says, looking at me, framed against my empty fields.

The rows need turning, I say. Groundwork. I'll fetch you a harrow directly.

Ain't you got a team for all that? he says. Or is you still hitching up niggers?

No, no team, I say. Too expensive. I run the place myself, remember?

I ain't forgot what you told me, he says. And I got elbow grease to burn.

I leave him there braced at the edge of the field while I go to the shed to retrieve him a harrow. In the gloom the farm tools have a sinister look, like the cutlery of a giant.

When I come with the harrow pitched over my shoulder, V is still beneath the tree. Aside from that tree, my lone water tower and the jumble of Penderton's distant spread, he and his horse are

the sole occupants of the gradated planes that align in my field. And I find—with the pain of a poet, perhaps, who has sought out his subject and found it in want—I can summon no sorer pair in creation than the one bearing up at me presently. John Wilkes is still beached in his own slow ruin, mumbling in the sere March grass. V has plucked from somewhere an untimely thistle, which he gums and gives suck to in place of a smoke.

Ain't never turned for tobacco, he says. Come up from fishing stock myself.

Principle's same either way, I assure him. Out with the old, I tap the harrow's thin blade, and in with the new beneath it.

I weren't never much good with the principles neither. You might want to show me a turn, you got time.

Don't turn yourself in knots, I say. I won't fault you any for an honest mistake.

What other kind is there? he says, on a grin.

He is a finely calibrated sort of a creature, I decide, as I lead him through the gate between yard and field to the terminus of the western row. Here I hitch the harrow in the earth at my feet, which receives the blade as dryly as a pick upon shale.

Though the parry and thrust of our banter is light, suddenly I feel exhausted. Perhaps it's the strain that this wretch and his horse have visited on my idle fancy, or even the season of their coming, which forever ushers with it recollections of the boy, but I find, standing there at the edge of my field with a murder of crows enervating the silence, I can no more expound on the soil's subtleties than account for the presence of him, here, beside me. Without a word to him, I demonstrate turning, pushing the harrow across the stiff ground. He watches from a distance with the thistle in his teeth, sporadically nodding to show that he kens me. The blade of the tool, which has seen better days, pushes no more than a mound out before it.

Futile though it seems, there is something mesmerizing in the scrape of the harrow down the rows. Before long the drifter has