

COLLAPSIBLE

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Those who make a practice of comparing human actions are never so perplexed as when they try to see them as a whole and in the same light; for they commonly contradict each other so strangely that it seems impossible that they have come from the same shop.

— Montaigne

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ENANTIODROMIA OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

The world's foremost authority on werewolves is buying a new suit. This is a rare occasion but he acts unsurprised and the tailor moving softly about him knows better than to remark on his customer's misunderstandings of his gentle questions. A conference, the occasion turns out to be, an invitation to a select international conference. The gentleman will want to remember to undo the jacket when he sits, after delivering his address, of course. A shadow crosses the customer's face, and when it passes he agrees, yes, after delivering my address. In fact he has not considered that he might very well be expected to make some sort of speech — the invitation did not mention it, but certainly it seems a possibility, even a likelihood.

— If you would raise your arms just so, says the tailor, and hold them like that for just a few moments.

He does so, and thinks again about his ex-wife, again about whether it would be better to inform her of this honour, this expenses-paid trip to Geneva, this recognition of his years of painstaking research, or to keep it secret from her, at least for now, maybe even for as long as it takes for

her to learn of it from some other source, such as the mass media. He is no more able to decide now than he was yesterday, when the invitation arrived.

What sort of speech would be expected of him, he wonders as he pays the tailor, pays with money that would otherwise go to his ex-wife, she of little faith. It will be ready at the end of the week, the tailor assures him, but the world's foremost authority on werewolves, recently addressed as such in a remarkable invitation, is out the door with excited, troubled thoughts. He can imagine himself rising from a table, unbuttoning no buttoning the jacket to his new suit as he does so, and addressing the assembled experts. He can see it all very clearly in his mind, especially now that he knows what the suit will look like, but he cannot hear anything, cannot make out what he is so confidently and suavely saying.

At the snap of five o'clock the tailor closes his shop, the shop that his father had opened and worked in for nearly half a century, and puts everything in order. On the floor he finds a business card, which must have fallen from someone's pocket. There was only one fitting that day, so there's no mystery there, but he is puzzled by a word on the card: *Lycanthropologist*. He says it aloud, slowly, and though it sounds even more impressive than it looks, it is no clearer to him. He takes the card home with the intention of showing it to his daughter.

Deja is at the moment he arrives home making chili for dinner. This kind of activity is a definite sign that she is in good spirits, but, it is terrible to admit even to himself, he is usually suspicious at these moments. Of course he is

immensely glad to see her get the upper hand on the depression that so often has her in a fierce hold, to the point that she stays abed bundled thick in blankets on the hottest summer days, complaining of a cutting wind no one else can feel, and those are not the worst days. Of course he is glad to see her hopping around the little kitchen in the apartment they share, taking care to make a meal that they can share. How many times, however, has he found her animated in this way for reasons that were anything but assuring?

She brings him a taste of the chili on a wooden spoon, and they agree as they always have that this is what wooden spoons are for: to let one person give another a taste of something. It would not do to eat an entire meal with a wooden spoon, that special implement for stirring and sampling. The origins of this joke between them, spoony banter, are lost to both of their memories, but still they carry on, a kind of stirring.

— Deja, I wanted to ask you, do you know what this word means, oh now I've forgotten it. Hang on, let me find that card.

His hands, precise, she watches, check here and check there, discover, transfer to hers.

— This is a new word to me, she says, wrinkling her nose, but I can guess what it means. Is this one of your clients?

— Yes, a new one. He came in today and ordered a new suit. But I was hoping that perhaps you could tell me what it means, *lycan* what is it, *lycanthopolotrist*.

Her laughter is undoubtedly his favourite sound, the reason he wants never to lose his hearing.

— Lycanthropologist.

The chili is excellent, the bread is fresh. With dancing hands Deja explains that she has discovered a new bakery, down a little street that anyone can miss. Both she and her father must have walked by it any number of times without noticing it, but early this morning it was the magnificent smell that led her to turn where she had never turned before. A newly painted but modest sign announced a bakery, without further information. Inside two small women with bright teeth were delighted to greet her, to sell her the bread, to give her a packet of miguelitos free of charge, which Deja and her father would be having for dessert.

Dessert! The tailor smiles but is on guard: this may be going too far, an excess that indicates a problem, an overdoing of things. His wife, rest her soul, was always so much better at these things: so much more perceptive, so much surer in knowing the way to handle them.

— They were both speckled with flour, both with singing voices, and those identical crooked noses. I asked if they were sisters and they laughed, for they are apparently asked that all the time, but all the same their laughter was so genuine. They told me that they met a few years ago on a holiday, amazed to meet someone else so alike. And they discovered that both of them had always dreamed of opening a little bakery.

It is a sweet story, the tailor and his daughter agree as they eat their dessert, but there is more to the story than they know. There is a man lurking in the story, an admirer who cannot make up his mind which of the two women he wants to propose to, though he is determined to marry one of them. They have noticed him lurking, looking and not

looking, as he has been inexpertly doing for months now, even before the bakery opened. He is unmistakable, for he has a crooked nose and a nervous habit of scratching it, as though to make it disappear. One of the bakers thinks him somewhat amusing, the other thinks him somewhat sinister, and it is one of the few disagreements between them. It goes without saying that neither of them has any thought of marrying him, for they have each other and their bakery.

Their admirer is no genius, no millionaire, and thanks to his nose, not much of a looker: he knows all of this, he admits this to himself. His voice is not very pleasant. He also has no luck and little experience with or understanding of women. His prospects are incontestably few. But, rightly or wrongly, he prides himself on his patience.

— Circumstances change, he says to himself from time to time. Children in the market square watch for him every week, the man who talks to himself this way. They do not quite dare to approach him directly, but they have sometimes rushed by him in a giggling mass, almost tripping him up. They crack each other up by twisting their noses and muttering, skulking about.

The best imitation is Esteban's: this is the unanimous view. At nearly eight years of age Esteban also does very good imitations of the doctor with the limp, a couple of crosseyed priests, and the stepmother of one of his friends, a woman on whom they all have a hopeless, unutterable crush. A gifted mimic, his grandmother's assessment, may not be entirely praise. Hers is the only authority that Esteban acknowledges, for he knows that she sees through everyone, and there is no fooling the old woman who has seen and

survived as many marriages as wars. Never would Esteban dare even to attempt to imitate her sidelong glances, her pointing to a heaven that she denied was there, her little pouts. There was a certain manner in which she would set down her cup of tea or the book she was reading onto a table so as to announce that what she was about to say next required much of her and thus even more of her listener.

Many times she told her grandson about her sister, long dead, and her sister's firmly held view that life is chiefly composed of hallucinations. Not in the Berkeleyan sense, she explained, without stooping to define such terms to the boy. There were real phenomena, or real enough not to merit splitting hairs over, death and pain and hunger the usual and ungainsayable examples. Her sister believed that human relations were the central hallucinations of our lives.

— You think you know me but you do not. I think I know you or our father or the policeman across the street but I do not. You are as much a figment of my imagination as I am of yours. Not that I like you any the less for that, of course. Hallucinations can be very engaging.

— You're only saying this to keep distance between us, between yourself and other people. You're only saying these things because you're afraid of getting hurt.

— You misunderstand me. I am talking about a dissolving of distance and difference. As I conjure you up, make you real to me, I become you.

— I don't understand.

— It's not too much to say that we dream one another, her sister said, in a voice of softest resignation, a gentle animal going to sleep.