

Sitting In a Tree

Penelope had decided about everything by the time she was fifteen and never revisited a subject once she'd decided about it. Anyone who disagreed with her was wrong, and anyone who tried changing her mind was insensitive, unless they were men. They were always sexist cavemen for not respecting her opinions enough to agree with them. This was one of the things she had decided about when she was fifteen.

Penelope had always believed decisiveness was the greatest virtue a person could boast of possessing and seeing others lost in endless rumination nauseated her. She had, over the years, honed her ability to come to a conclusion almost instantly about any subject and remain fixed there defiantly, regardless of what contradictory facts may come to light, having some sense that any opposing view was caught in limbo so long as she held her ground.

“You'd have to be standing on your head with one eye closed as you read the Bible to walk away thinking that's what it meant.” Oscar had blurted one day without thinking.

The lecture she had been giving the day Oscar made this unfortunate comment was on the right women had to hold equal status and influence within society with their male counterparts. In her zestful sermon she invoked God, saying that this had been his intent upon creation and it could be clearly seen throughout the Bible. Penelope had never read the Bible but had decided it was right about everything one day when her preacher told her it was.

“What's that supposed to mean?” She asked with her arms akimbo.

Oscar had only been half-listening as he flipped through a magazine and was yet to recognize the peril he was in.

“Wives submit to your husbands and all that stuff.” He said, trying to find the article about how to organize his closet. “Other than Esther and Ruth I can't even think of a significant woman in the Bible that isn't defined by her stupidity or by

the condition of her hymen. Eve was stupid. Delilah was a whore. Mary was a virgin. Then there was the adulteress that everyone wanted to throw rocks at. It seems like there was one who couldn't stop menstruating." Oscar looked at the ceiling to help himself remember. "Oh, I forgot Jezebel. She was eaten by dogs. Compared to Moses, Noah, Abraham, David, Solomon, the Apostles, Jesus, and the big guy himself it doesn't sound too even-Steven to me."

"You're very insensitive, you know that Oscar?" He looked up, instantly terrified after finding that her jaws were clenched. "You're like a caveman!"

"What?" He scrambled to his feet, discarding the magazine. "No, that's not what I meant. I agree with you that women should have equal rights. I swear I do. All I meant is that the Bible doesn't say that."

It was too late for that though. She had decided and disappeared to their bedroom. Oscar heard the little click that meant it was unlikely he would be allowed entry and dropped his shoulders.

He was used to this sort of misunderstanding. Oscar had fallen for Penelope sometime during the fourth grade and had never shaken the feeling. He had liked her dimples to start with and this proved a sturdy enough foundation for his love.

When it came to Penelope he always felt he was walking up to the plate with two strikes already counted against him. She had been hurt by a few before the time she reluctantly gave Oscar his opportunity so he inherited the blame the others had earned. She was always suspicious and disappointed with him for the things she knew he would one day do or the things he wished that he could do even though he hadn't done any of them yet.

He was optimistic about their relationship however, thinking of how far they had come. In the beginning she dismissed him completely, pretending she could not see or hear him when he mustered the courage to approach her as she stood in line in the elementary school cafeteria to ask if she would like to play tetherball with him the following recess.

Now they were grown and together and she shared her bed with him, so long as he maintained perfectly unbroken eye-contact, used his hands only for balance, and refrained from making unnecessary noises. The breaking of any of these rules

would only be evidence that sex was the ugly, unequal exchange she had always suspected and had been his sole motivation for pursuing her from the beginning. Back when he was crying alone by the tetherball pole.

Oscar was no stranger to adversity and knew well the stoic resolve that was required to face such a foe. He was most likely the only male in the county not to have been circumcised as a newborn and every boy in his gym classes growing up wanted to be sure he knew it. He was called Schmuck, Philistine, Turtleneck, Long-Sleeve, and Beak-Dick for so long that he sometimes forgot about the name his parents had given him, which made trouble for him every time Teacher took roll.

He never allowed his chin to sink to his chest and his dignity never wavered in those days. Instead, he made lemonade from his lemons and collected \$14.70 one summer charging boys and girls in the neighborhood ten cents to see for three seconds what Nature had intended. During his freshman year of high school his abnormality proved profitable again when the senior, Tonya Benson, found him alone after school and expressed how curious she was about such things. He had held steadfast to his pride in the face of adversity and stood triumphant in the end.

Oscar intended to show the same tenacity when it came to proving how genuine his love for Penelope really was and trusted that all would work out as it should.

“Please don’t be angry, Penelope.” He called under the door from his knees with his cheek on the carpet and his ass in the air. “You can’t be this way every time I give my opinion about something. I never get angry with you when we disagree.”

“That’s because my opinion never says you should be washing dishes or making my dinner.”

“I told you that’s not what I meant.”

“That’s right. You were just telling me how ridiculous my religious beliefs are. I remember now. You don’t even know how to read the Bible, Oscar.”

“I know how to read and comprehend, Penelope. I’ve been doing it for a long time now.” Oscar was making a face and rolling his eyes, though Penelope could not see him through the door.

“It’s in a kind of code.” She said impatiently. “Just because it says something, that doesn’t mean that’s what it means. You have to know which parts are literal and which parts aren’t and stuff like that.”

“I didn’t know that, I’m sorry.” He hoped a peace would be agreed upon soon.

“Plus, words don’t mean what you think they do all the time. Sometimes they do but sometimes they don’t.”

“How do you know when they do or don’t?”

“You ask the preacher!” He did not need to see through the door to know that her open hands were extended in front of her in frustration.

“Alright. I didn’t know that. I’m sorry about everything. Could you just let me in? Or you could come out and we’ll watch television. What do you say?”

He waited quietly for her answer, running his eyeball along the gap under the door in hopes of finding her feet. She was on the bed though wearing headphones and listening to music. Oscar spent another fifteen minutes in his submissive position calling to her and watching for her feet before giving up. He stood and bent backward to stretch.

He was due to meet Johnny Johnson Jr. soon and Johnny Johnson Jr. would not stand around waiting for anyone. He did not need to with his prices.

Oscar went into the gas station and found Johnny Johnson Jr. standing beside the cherry slushy machine behind his dark aviator sunglasses. Oscar tipped his head to greet him as he would with any stranger he came across before examining the miniature donuts.

“Wait a couple minutes and then meet me in the parking lot.” Johnny Johnson Jr. told him without turning his head as he passed.

Oscar nodded covertly and casually walked the aisles, giving the clerk an occasional friendly smile. He took an individually wrapped gumball to the counter and paid with a nickel.

“Did you get me one?” Johnny Johnson Jr. asked after watching Oscar toss away the wrapper.

“Oh, I could go get another if you want. I’ve got enough for another.”

“I can afford my own gumball.” Johnny Johnson Jr. said, lowering his open hand.

“But that isn’t really the point, is it?”

“I’m sorry.” Oscar apologized. “I guess I just didn’t think.”

“I guess you didn’t.”

Johnny Johnson Jr. put his hands in his pockets and his sunglasses were looking off toward the horizon. Oscar stood anxiously waiting to see if he had soured the deal by being so inconsiderate. Johnny Johnson Jr. turned his head after several moments of contemplation and spit on the sidewalk to signify he had decided to be benevolent.

“Alright.” He said, opening the trunk of his car. “How much did you bring?”

“One hundred seventy-three dollars.” Oscar said. “It’s the most I could take without the bank closing my account.”

“This one is a hundred sixty-five. You want the red velvet box, that’s another eight bucks.”

Oscar held the ring up in the sunlight.

“What are those?” He asked, squinting with his index finger pointed at the diamond.

“It’s called a yellow-speckled diamond. It’s a very nice stone. Very rare.”

“It’s rare?” Oscar asked. “That’s good. It’s rare, just like Penelope.”

“Sure.” Johnny Johnson Jr. answered. “It’s just about as rare as Penelope. So you want it or not?”

“Would you take one-fifty?” Oscar hoped. “I’d like to buy her some dinner to really make it a special night.”

“Look Foreskin, I’m not an auctioneer. You want the ring it’s a hundred sixty-five and another eight for the red velvet box.”

“Oh, I want it.” Oscar handed him the money without taking his eyes from the ring.

“Listen,” Johnny Johnson Jr. put a strong hand on Oscar’s knobby shoulder and used the other hand to point at the tip of Oscar’s nose. “You treat my sister good. It wouldn’t bother me to kill you.”

“I know. You already told me but don’t worry Johnny. I’ll be good to her. I just hope she says yes.”

“The ring is yours anyway.” Johnny Johnson Jr. reminded. “I don’t give refunds.”

Oscar stood out on the stoop and collected himself. He flattened his shirt with his palms and checked for any stray lint and after drawing a slow and calming breath he stepped into the house.

Penelope sprang from the sofa and appeared in the entry. She had been crying and she looked worried as she twisted at her hands.

“Where did you go?” She asked, trying not to seem too curious.

“No place.” Oscar answered and then seeing her red eyes he added, “Penelope, what’s the matter?”

“I thought you maybe were angry. I thought maybe you’d finally had enough of me.” Her quivering chin began expanding again until her lower lip butted up against the bottom of her nose.

“Oh no, Penelope. I haven’t had enough of you yet.” Oscar ran to her side and put his arm around her and the two went to the sofa.

“I just get worried sometimes.” She confided. “You’ve got so much more experience than I have and its intimidating, you know? You’re only the fourth person I’ve been with and I’m just number 149 on your list. Sometimes I feel like you’re Frank Sinatra or something and I’m just some dumb farm girl from Kansas that you’ll get tired of.”

“No, that’s not true. You know I don’t see it that way. I only told you about the summer business I had and about Tonya Benson so there wouldn’t be any secrets

between us.” His eyebrows floated up to show how much she meant to him. “If I could I’d go back and change everything just so you’d be my first.”

“I would too!” She smiled with watery eyes. “I’d go back and change it so that I was your first too!”

“Good. Then we won’t talk about it anymore?” Oscar asked, brushing her hair away from her face.

“Alright.” She agreed.

“I’m afraid I did lie to you though.” Oscar failed to suppress a smile. “I wasn’t no place, like I said.”

He got down on one knee and presented the red velvet box.

“Would you make me the happiest man in the world by being my wife?”

Her hyperextended fingers danced in front of her astonished face.

“Yes.” She squealed.

As her unblinking eyes glared ceaselessly at his pupils ten minutes later he did not mind holding eye contact. They were going to be married, together forever. He knew that sometime during forever she would sneeze or look away reflexively at a ringing telephone and Chance would grant him the instant he needed to glance down at Penelope’s nakedness for the first time. This night was about something other than amorous and lustful whims like trying a trick like that. It was about romance and for Penelope romance was a quiet and respectful staring contest between two lovers covered to their ears with a comforter.

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