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Often I can identify a film after hearing only a few lines or a bit of the music, it's intimate to me, a kind of inborn gift. For instance, just now, I recall John Merrick, the elephant man, in the austere, upper reaches of London Hospital and the groan and crash of the ponderous clockworks housed above him. I think of Merrick lying awake during the most unguarded and derelict hours of night, stirring warily and restively in his bed. But the isolation ward, if dour, had it all over his former digs, a sooty and dank, gas-lit flat where he was exploited and abused by an enterprising cretin of a man named Bates. All this was described to me in enthusiastic detail by a regular named Claudette. His head is very oversized, and his mouth is kind of twisted, it looks painful, and he has these... growths or strange tumors all over one side of his body.

Neurofibromatosis, I thought, posthumously diagnosed and named or were they calling it something else now? However, despite these deformities, the doctor went on, the patient's *genitals* remain completely intact and unaffected. He was winding up his lecture now, aided by living exhibit. Poor John Merrick was in for it all over again, objectified once more, at least at first, by the torn but compassionate Dr. Treeves, along with London Society's set as well as its nadir having a crack at him too. The medical students applauded as the curtain was drawn, and I bought us both another Tangaray.

You don't have to keep buying, Ethan, said Claudette. I don't mind telling you what's going on, I like to.

I know, I said. I wasn't suggesting ... It's just—

She squeezed my arm. --Here comes Anne Bancroft. God, everybody's in this.

By the time Barber's Adagio for Strings was ending, I was sitting, my arms resting on the bar, my lips trembling and a tear or two sliding diagonally into the corner of my mouth. This did not go unnoticed. I felt Claudette's moist hand on the back of my neck, pulling me toward her, her parted lips causing mine to part as if on a spring. I remember our roving tongues made me think for a moment of the serpents entwined about the staff. Then, with her free hand, she took mine and placed it on her breast. I could feel it through her light, silk blouse, round and embonpoint, the nipple like a tendered olive. A flush surfaced and scattered across my skin, when I leaned back and felt her fingers brush at my cheek.

Sorry, she said. Good movie, yeah?

\* \* \*

I lie, propped up enough to see the tree through the window across from the foot of my bed, the black trunk at an angle leftward, its leaves up and out of frame. It possesses no background to speak of; It could easily have been one broad stroke slapped across a blue palate, though, that's no reason not to befriend it, I decide. It's a peaceful and plaintive picture and, years from now, wouldn't I come to appreciate it even more in memory? I think every so often of heaving myself out of bed and walking over to it, hauling the IV on its pole behind me like a long, morning shadow. But I know this is unwise, if not outright forbidden--and besides, would I even make it that far in my condition? a condition the doctors are at confounded odds to diagnose.

This morning they and a nurse hustled in a machine on its trolley, pasted me with electrodes, then watched as the current overran my nerves, causing my fingers to twitch and my arms to jerk at my sides like eels on a chopping block. They recorded their findings, stripped the cups from my body then wheeled away the machine. The nurse with her gentle hands carefully wiped away the conductant gel then told me I could rest for a while.

Now, I stare at the tree, while my hand roves over the remote control, then I press a button, and the tree disappears.

\* \* \*

I opened my wallet on the counter and removed a folded five and four ones not folded. I hear it's twelve in New York now.

I heard that too, the girl said, sliding the ticket through the opening in the glass. Her voice was small and soft, and I imagined it stirring up no more air than a moth might. Enjoy the movie, she said.

Pardon?

The movie. I hope you enjoy it.

I will, I said.

If anyone were astonished by seeing me enter a movie theater alone, they've never once given voice to their consternation. A man at the top of the aisle said: hello tore my ticket and handed me my half. He didn't offer to help me find a seat, and I didn't ask. I knew where I wanted to sit. I wanted to sit in the center section, ten rows back. I'd tried sitting in the front row the first few times, but this had brought me too close to the speakers, which only plunged me into a stereophonic vortex. So, eventually, I moved back to where the sound had room to take shape, rather than overwhelm.

I tucked the stub into my pocket and counted my way down the aisle, my fingers tapping the back of each empty seat until I came to my row. I sidestepped across to the fifth seat and sat down then laid my cane on the floor at my feet. I'd thought once of bringing something to read while I waited, but the seating was too close. Braille is large, and opening a book would surely cause an unwelcome intrusion into the space on either side of me. So I sat, my fingers spread on my knees, and thought. It was a sci-fi film I'd come to see, not exactly my terrain, but I'd read good things about it and knew of the venerable book on which it was based.

People were beginning to file into the theater now. I could hear them padding down the aisles, whispering to one another, as if the picture had already begun. Someone took the seat to my left. I needed to know right away if it was a man or a woman. Experience had taught me that women were more likely to excuse slight impositions. Say if I were to ask: What's happening?

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What happened? What are he, she, they doing? A woman was more likely to answer these questions without showing, at least, any outward signs of irritation. I smelled perfume. That was good. It was not strong, and it wasn't cheap either--not a hint of any dollar store alcohol base. Lilac or lavender or something like that. I made a show of flipping open my watch and feeling it, letting my finger linger over the dial much longer than necessary. It was 9:05. I closed it with an audible snap then tried thinking of any other telegraphing gestures I might make before the lights dimmed and the picture began. Was she aware of my cane lying at our feet? My constant companion lay there amid the slops: the popcorn, the chewed gum, the flattened Junior Mints, and spilled soft drinks. I put out a foot and rolled it back and forth a couple of times. I felt it bump against her feet. I'm sorry, I said.

It's all right, she said. Her voice was dulcetly alto, Chelsea.

\* \* \*

This evening I have a visitor. She sits beside my bed. I'm still groggy and have to ask her what day it is. It's Wednesday, she says. They didn't find anything, did they?

No, they didn't, I say.

What do you think is wrong with you? She strokes the top of my hand with her fingers.

I don't know. Your thoughts?

I heard the knock of pipes in the wall, then the sound of running water. I'd been sponged down that afternoon and talced, then fed a little broth.

I don't know, Ethan, she says. Just so they don't go cutting you open again.

Yes, just so they don't do that. Would you raise the blind please? I ask.

It's already raised.

I don't see anything, I say.

It's night time, Ethan. I have to go pretty soon.

But you just got here, didn't you?

You were sleeping, she says.

How long?

I don't know. I've been sitting here for a long time.

No? I say. No.

I have. She rests her hand on top of mine.

No, I see orange outside, I say. All orange and black.

That's the television, Ethan. You haven't heard, have you?

Heard what? I ask. What haven't I heard?

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Try to sleep.

\* \* \*

George Clooney was upset. He cursed and slapped himself several times. I had to ask why.

He's just awaked from a dream, the woman whispered, and now his wife is in the room with him.

Rhea is his wife? I asked.

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to tell you that. You would have figured it out later on your own.

You've seen this?

No.

So she has read the book then. Damn, Or seen the Tarkovsky version anyway.

Excuse me? she said.

Nothing. I'm sorry.

I remembered ransacking the stacks at the Jacobus Tenbroek Library for the Blind for a copy. They seemed to have every book Lem had ever written, except for this singular title, the one for which he was most well-known. I had come across similar anomalies, but this one had me particularly frustrated, I was pissed off. I wrote a letter to the National Library Service for the Blind in D.C., and was perfunctorily informed that my suggestion would be considered.

So that dream was a flashback?

Yes, she said.

Rhea was showing up all over the ship now, and Clooney was falling in love with her all over again. He was sternly warned by one of the remaining crew that she was not real, not human. She was dangerous. She was a guileful simulacrum framed up by Solaris and its torrid, orange sea. But Clooney would not be swayed. He ran through the passageways crying out her name, Rhea Rhea Rhea amid the sounds of fulminating steam and the shuddering breakdown of the ship, in its last gyrations of dying.

I walked diagonally through College Square Park. It was quiet except for a couple seated at a picnic table, laughing softly. I could smell marijuana. I could also hear a dog following me now, the jingle of its tags and the skitch of its nails against the sidewalk. I came to the corner of College and Dodge Streets. It was not a controlled stop but a negotiable one, especially at this time of night. The dog fell back, and I could hear the couple in the park calling to it in imploring syllables. Ridd-ley. I turned onto Lucas, almost home now, and still distracted.

I sat on the couch with my shoes off and my hand resting on the remote. I had the sound on the television turned down, as I noticed some sighted people do now and then, and wondered how she could have been so helpful. I followed her up the aisle and nearly caught up to her under the marquee, but by then she was gone, just a fading tap, tap as she headed westward toward the river. After a minute, I turned and walked east toward the older part of town with its mature trees and established houses. Maybe someone had read her the book, something I'd never been able to persuade anyone into doing beyond a few fumbling and cropped beginnings. I got up and walked to the shelf where I kept my copy in Vintage Paperback,

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thinking I would thumb through it for fun, then heard a knock at the door.

Yes? I said.

Ethan?

I recognized the voice then turned slowly and crossed the room to the door.

Claudette?

Ethan, hi. I was wondering if you wanted to watch a movie.

A movie?

I have a DVD, she said, called Solaris, but it's subtitled, so I thought you might like to watch it with some one. It's the kind of thing I think you might like.

I raised an eyebrow. I was bemused. Tarkovsky. She's brought the Tarkovsky. I wouldn't mind, I said. But I just got home from seeing a movie.

Oh. Can I still come in?

I thought of the neighbors and the hour, then stepped aside for her. I listened as she dropped her purse onto the floor.

I want to have sex with you, she said.

What? I stood holding the door.

I want to have sex with you.

Why do you want to have sex with me? I asked, closing it with a soft click, then bolting it, then unbolting it, then bolting it again. I turned, and she put her arms around my neck and began to sway from side to side.

Because ... because you're so sweet. You don't have anything to prove, do you, Ethan. You don't have anything to prove to anyone.

I don't know what you're talking about, I said. She kissed me, and she tasted like gin and wintergreen Altoids.

I love it when you talk. But you don't talk very much, do you.

I knew she had a boyfriend, but I couldn't quite recall his name. It was one of those whose sound connoted utter obtuseness like Craig or Butch or Bob. She slid her hand inside my shirt and said:

Mmm. She was still swaying, though less now. You're so smooth.

No, I'm not exactly what you'd call hirsute, I said.

Say again?

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I'm not hairy.

I know, she said. Where's your bedroom at?

What about the movie? I asked.

You said you just saw one.

She wasn't tall; the top of her head came to about my nose. Her hair smelled like smoke and citrus. I put my hands in it. It was soft and hung straight to her shoulders.

What color is it?

My hair? she asked. Kind of auburn. Do you like the way it feels?

Yes. I put my hands on her waist to steady her. Do you want to sit down?

No, she said, then kissed me wetly on the neck.

Is this the sort of decision you'd make while sober? I asked.

What decision?

Wanting to have sex with me. I felt her take my face in her hands and tilt it down a few inches toward hers.

I made it while I was sober, she said. It's just now that I'm acting on it.

I had to admit that she felt pleasingly rubenesque in her thin, cotton t-shirt and soft jeans, and her answer was so guileless that, despite myself, I felt my apprehension giving way like a wall of wet Kleenex.

I see.

So is that satisfactory, Ethan?

Yes, that is.

\* \* \*

My paralysis is pretty much complete now, although I can still speak, and my visitor is back again, sitting next to my bed.

What's the diagnosis? she asks.

There isn't one, I say.

I'm sorry. Her voice is dulcetly alto, Chelsea, and it makes my skin hum.

Well, it could be only temporary. Nobody knows.

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We'll wait and see then, she says.

Surely you have other ... better things to do.

No, I don't. She strokes the top of my hand with her fingers.

I can feel that.

See, she says. We'll just wait. She lays her hand on top of mine.

Where were you before you came here? I ask.

What do you mean?

I said: where were you before you came here?

I don't understand.

It's a simple question, I say.

Maybe it is, but I can't answer it.

You sat beside me in the theater, I say, the Varsity. I tried to follow you.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Can you tell me your name then?

Mona.

Would you raise the blind then please, Mona? I ask.

It's raised.

I open my eyes, and there's an orange, smoky glow. I think of the sea of Solaris, or the photographs taken of my eyes years ago at the University Hospital, The orange retina all spotted black with clotted pigmentation.

You aren't going to ask me, are you?

Ask you what?

Have you always been blind? It's a tedious question.

No, she says. Why would I?

Every stranger asks me that.

You think I'm a stranger.

I don't know who you are.

I'm Mona.

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Yes.

I'm here because you're alone.

Okay.

\* \* \*

The following morning, I awoke before she did. I lay there listening to her breathing. Now and then, she would emit a little snore then move her foot slightly amongst the sheets. I sat up and touched her shoulder. It was round and soft. Her hair lay across the pillow in a satiny wave. I touched her cheek and her neck, then her hip and her leg without causing her to stir, when only the night before this had urged from her throat soft little moans and sighs before our bodies had melted together then trembled. I lifted her hair then let it slip through my fingers. She felt womanly, soft, and vulnerable. I wondered if Craig or Butch or Bob had ever gotten rough with her. The thought unsettled me, and so I tried pushing it from my mind. I thought of the Elephant Man, nocturnally terrorized by a loutish night watchman and his company of paying on-lookers from the local pub. The poor man was dragged roughly from his bed and paraded about, while they gazed in, rapt and horrified through the window of the hospital. Then, finally, he was kidnapped by his former exploiter, the opprobrious Baits. I had to admit I had a childlike want to rescue these people, these characters, and not only to rescue them but to avenge them as well. How much I would like to have been nurse Mothershead when, finally, she'd cold-cocked the night watchman with a 2 by 4.

Claudette awoke at last and slowly rolled onto her back. Hi, she said.

Hello. How are you feeling?

Mmm, rested, good, she said. Have you been sitting there watching me?

Not watching, I said. I touched you.

Did you? She stroked my chest. Come here. Her sleepy voice suffused and softened the air between us, and I leaned forward into her arms. We made love last night, didn't we. Her hands moved slowly up and down my back.

Yes, I said.

Are you glad?

I thought about this for a moment then said: I'm not unhappy.

You've done this before, haven't you. I'll bet lots of times.

What makes you say that? I asked.

I can tell. There was no coyness in her voice.

I *am* nearly forty, I said, sliding my hand down her back and onto her hip. What's this? I asked. It felt like eczema. I hadn't noticed it before.

It's a tattoo.

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It's three dimensional, I said.

It's fresh. It hasn't healed yet.

Does it hurt? I asked.

That's why I wear silk panties. Can you tell what it is?

I ran my fingers over it lightly. No,

I said.

Guess.

A flower maybe?

It's a red rose, she said, then kissed me. Where's your bathroom at? She slid from beneath the covers.

It's in here, just to your left. I pointed with my foot.

I heard her cross the room, then slap down the seat and pee without closing the door. She spun the toilet paper then flushed. She was at the sink afterward, a long time washing up, then assiduously rinsed her mouth, assaulting the porcelain with a lot of turgid spitting before turning off the taps.

Back in the bedroom, I could hear her gathering her clothes from the floor and sliding into them. I'm sorry to leave so sudden, she said. But I have to get to work. She walked to the bedroom door. What is this? She said, her back to me.

What? I asked.

There's a lot of Black smoke pouring out of this building high up.

What do you mean? I heard her cross the living room and turn up the sound on the TV.

\* \* \*

Mona is sitting beside my bed. The blind is raised, but the tree is gone now. She holds my hand.

You're getting well, Ethan.

How can you tell?

Your hand is closed around mine, she says. You couldn't do that before.

Yes, you're right, I say.

So all we have to do is wait, like I said.

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Then what?

Then you'll go home, she says.

Where will *you* go? I wiggle my toes. She's right.

I don't know what you mean.

I mean, where will you go?

I don't know.

Yes. Okay, I say. The tree, what happened to it?

The tree, she says, was something you saw a long time ago, when you were in the infirmary at the school where you lived. You were nine years old.

I suppose you must be right. I wouldn't see a tree now if it were an inch in front of me. But tell me about the colors.

You already know what those are, she says. You've wanted to know where I come from.

Yes. You were sitting next to me in the theater.

I don't know what you're talking about, she says.

I feel the fingers of my left hand begin to tingle. Who then? I ask.

Again, I don't know, she says. Maybe you should try and find her, or maybe you were dreaming.

Our joined hands are warm, and I want to ask her to lie down beside me. Will you? I ask.

I can't, she says. But I'll stay here until you're well.

Then where will you go?

You've asked me that already.

Will you go to someone else?

No.

The IV on its pole makes a clicking sound, dispensing more medicine.

When will I be well?

You keep asking me questions I can't answer. But you will get well.

Somewhere I hear a clock chime. Unusual for a hospital, I think.

Did you hear that? I ask.

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What?

The clock.

Yes, I did.

Where did it come from?

Maybe you're thinking back again, she says, to when you were a child.

I feel my left foot move a fraction of an inch. Yes, there was a bell tower on top the building ... at school. We went up there once. The attic was enormous, like a cathedral. I remember we could hear birds nesting high up in the beams. The bell was connected by cables leading four floors down to a clock standing next to the auditorium. The clock was set back into this arched recess in the wall. It barely made a sound, but I remember I liked squatting down and watching the silver disk of the pendulum swaying back and forth, back and forth. Someone was always walking by telling me to get along to class. ... When will I get well?

I don't know, Ethan, but you will get well.

Tell me what you remember, about anything, I say.

I do remember things getting closer.

What things?

The rooftops, the street. I closed my eyes.

You'll stay a while?

Yes, she says.

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The words came clamoring out of the set, the newsmens' explanations all addled and disparate. Then the second one hit, and she grabbed my hand.

Ethan, she said. *What is this?*

Standing there, shivering now, I couldn't answer her or say anything. Then she clung to me.

I don't think this is an accident. I don't believe this. I don't know. Ethan.

It was then I started to feel the gradual welding together of my joints and, after a minute, my back hurt so badly that she was the only thing holding me up.

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**John Riley** lives now in a small town in southern Iowa. He attended the Iowa School for the Blind from 1966 to 1979, and then entered Cornell College in Mount Vernon, where he majored in music. Since then, he has worked for The Iowa Department for the Blind and the Des Moines public schools, teaching braille and adaptive technology. In the past few years, he has devoted himself mainly to writing.