

THAT SECOND PAIR OF GLASSES

Isaac said to Harry the optician, operating from a booth in a flea market and wanting it known that he was *fully licensed*, that they must and could only be blond tortoise shell. He said he had lived out in the cold for too long with the silver titanium frames he was presently wearing, and that it was time to go with a color and material that warmed his face. Harry had a look that was dark but not invisible. You saw him as a kind and alert animal who had a side to him that wanted more than your money. It could only have been Sedona, Arizona, his town of birth, that did this to Harry, Isaac knew, some desert experience in which the devil had been everywhere but in which God himself was also present. The two of them went deep into their time together with only diffident contact and yet progress was being made, if you considered the number of frames Isaac tried on and rejected. Several times he was ready to call it quits and cried out in his distress that he was wasting Harry's time, but Harry came back strong with his reassurances and gave Isaac the encouragement he needed to go on. Isaac was up front with Harry. He told him that he was working from the idea of the perfect shape, which would be round and not too small, as his previous glasses had been, and that he had seen something approaching this ideal at a nearby store, and perhaps the thing to do was to purchase those other frames and come to Harry solely for the lenses. We cannot say with full certainty whether this information galvanized Harry to extend himself beyond his normal range of service, but we do know that he showed a persistence that suggested a sale was in front of him if only he went the extra mile, and that a question came from Isaac in the midst of this process to modify the manner of their interaction, the question being

why this small accessory should be so important, causing Harry's face to light up as he delivered the answer that glasses came to represent a period in one's life and an association of pain and hurt and disappointment with them and so the fussiness was an attempt to find a new pair that wouldn't take the buyer back to that old and, in memory at least, sad place. Following this Harry said he had an idea and went to the back of the store, returning with a pair of frames he said had just come in, frames of exquisite quality from a well-known designer, and yes, they were the blond tortoise shell and though their shape was square it was found by Isaac that they were rivaling the pair that approximated the ideal. And although it was many minutes before Isaac could come to a final decision Harry saw that he had him in the bag.

Afterward we saw him walk with a happy face to the post office for stamps. We saw him rush to the Chow Time deli for a container of fat-free vegetable barley soup before returning to the office. We saw him, because he was in the phase of extended down time, go through several chapters of a computer manual that afternoon seeking if not to master at least be knowledgeable of the basic and intermediate levels of Word and Excel and any other software programs that might impact his job, that he really did not wish to be a forlorn straggler in the recently arrived twenty-first century or any other century coming along, that it could not be all idleness and play even in a period of extended down time, that if cannons of greatness were not to be fired at least let him struggle along in the fields of mediocrity and collect a reasonable pension and live secure in a warm home and in a position to offer the pigeons daily fare. But we did not hear him crash-land into the fields of the past, there to be administered to by his departed sister Rachel or any of the others who fit the requirements for that place and position. Oh they were there and he was troubled with a crying love but knew well enough the time had not yet come to land. Of this we are certain. This we can surely say we know.

Harry was not present when he picked up the specs. Instead a chipmunk was behind the counter, a toothy little guy with a naughty smile that said he was fooling the grownups and maybe sooner or later was going to catch hell for it. So far so good when Isaac tried the glasses on, staring into the mirror on the counter at his image. The tint—Harry called it a blush—gave his pale, dry skin a tan and it was like looking out at the world through a light brown filter. We heard Isaac concern himself with this blush. We heard him ask the chipmunk whether a non-reflective glare would be preferable to the tint and we heard the chipmunk respond in cagey chipmunk style that the blush served some of the same purpose as the tint. Isaac suspected the chipmunk was being less than straightforward, but something in the way of contrariness made him buy into the look. Yes, it was like having heavy furniture on your face, but it was famous designer furniture. Not that he considered himself fatuous enough to have bought the frames on that basis alone. The square shape of the lens was not your award-winning round shape. These would be glasses that people would have to fight to like, and yet they would have the stamp of authenticity. He would be not like the schlemiel Woody Allen with his glasses that never ever tried to hide themselves but more along the line of Jean Luc-Godard with glasses that were not all over his face but on his face. And so he could leave the chipmunk wearing the frames and catch his reflection in the windows of the stores in the midtown area and search the faces of women for their reactions.

We know that the first person whose opinion he asked was the receptionist, a woman named Lin Yu who made a face and reluctantly piped up, “Well, they’re all right, I guess.” Taken back by this response, he retreated to his cubicle and when the time was right, when his co-worker (yes he knew the word *colleague*) Brenda Farkin had demolished her sandwich from Deli DeLite, he asked if she would be willing to be a fashion consultant. She laughed good-naturedly and offered that she would try, but

when he donned the specs he could see from her expression when he appeared before her that she was taken back by what she saw. She raised up from her chair so she could regard him with a more level gaze and finally had this to say: ‘Well, yes, I think your face can carry them.’ So that he could clearly see that he was now 0 for 2 in the count, and so it was to Molly Ireland, also a member of the department, that he went for the third and final strike, and yes, she went up the ladder on him with cold heat, saying bluntly that they didn’t work at all and afterward coming to his cubicle with a full-page ad from a magazine showing a man in a blue suit and a huge pair of glasses walking with a frosted blond model. “If you want to get the girl, you have to have the look,” Molly said. Whereupon he was heard to ask if he could have the glasses without the girl, who looked like she had a film of grease on her. We also heard him say that the man looked like a walking cadaver, like someone who had been on a heavy six-month heroin run. He had to have something to drive Molly back with, and maybe humor was his answer. Molly was a woman of immense dignity and style. She was set aside by beauty and by motherhood and by wit. Molly knew how to charm. Isaac couldn’t prove that this was so. He only knew it was. Over and above this she had many pairs of glasses. The pair she was wearing were drab union things—thick lenses and a clunky frame. But it was just part of her formula for life to be wearing them, because she knew she had a whole arsenal of gorgeous frames back home and to be leading with *drabness* was simply part of the pleasures of the *rotation*. Did he, Isaac, wear a scintillating pair of underpants every day? No such thing could ever be said of him. He savored those days when in place of boxers with luminous dots or brilliant stripes he found at the top of his underwear pile the old faithful faded ones that, as the great Jerry Seinfeld said, were practically vaporized after so many washings. Because it was the drabness that gave brilliance meaning, and one could not have joy without the other to play off against, and so it surely had to be since ever the world began and bounty and choice began to make

themselves known. And so Molly in the plainness of her specs was a champion of the world as they all were, working out the details of their finery in view of one another.

And so there was a roaring in his ears made by the seeming discordance of his glasses with his face, as reported to him by the three women, and from a place of exultant anticipation that the union of rotation was at hand with the arrival of his new glasses there was now only the place of plummeting despair where he was finding himself, and many anxious trips did he make to the bathroom there at the org. and later that day and into the next day to inspect himself in the mirror, contrasting the new blond tortoise shell glasses with the old, the square with the round, and yes, finding himself defeated by the overwhelming but not altogether conclusive evidence that the round was winning, because some voice deep within him said the square were the ones to cut his new teeth on and a means for birthing himself into a new chapter of his life with solidity as one of its leading facets, while the round could only hearken him back to an old and very gone chapter in which, yes, there had been one who adored him in those specs *even as she envied him the fact that they were on his face and not on hers*, and it has to be reported that several on end were the nights of his anguish and agony, reaching their extreme that weekend, when the new glasses seemed a blight on his existence no matter how many times he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and the full-length mirror on his bedroom door, and we know that other things got large in his mind, that he looked about at the filing cabinets and the shelves containing his manuscripts and it suddenly seemed that his life was a gray horror of false starts and that he had defied the principle of unity by venturing forth on separate documents instead of keeping them together as one and that now he was in an endless forest of paper from which he would never find his way out, that he was a fifty-year-old man with a spreading bald spot receiving membership invitations from the AARP.

And so he left his apartment wearing black jeans and a brown corduroy shirt and an olive-colored field jacket, and he had not expected the sun to be beating down so hard on an October morning, he had not expected the film of sweat that formed on his body and the gross discomfort he felt about his appearance, witnessing the evidence of his drabness in the reflections of the store windows. He had in hand the new glasses as well as the old blond tortoise shell pair. Harry had a booth at the flea market on weekends. He would go to Harry and Harry would make everything all right for him. Harry would remove the tint from the square glasses that gave the world a brownish coloration and obscured Isaac's eyes, depriving people of the opportunity to appreciate them. Harry would do this for him, as he had promised to do if Isaac were not satisfied with this cosmetic touch, and then Harry would add the non-reflective glare, so that people would not see the sun bouncing off the lenses and be able to focus on the real him. Harry would make it all right for him. He was counting on Harry to do this for him so that, even if he did look ugly and awful in his present *outfit*, he could have a full arsenal of accessories to work with in making him feel all right about himself.

It came not as thunder or lightning in his heart that the flea market was closed on Saturdays, and that in its place were young ones being tough on the asphalt court, showing off their many moves to the hoop for the women and any other desirable parties of America. Isaac had a lot of things to do but the call of the court was too much for him. He threw away his list and asked if he could play ball. A chunky black man in a black and yellow bumblebee uniform said sure enough but could Isaac sky? Isaac assured him that he could and had thrown it down with authority on the best of them, not only in New York but in many different states. He said he had a vertical leap that would take him over the highest flying aircraft. "It's you and me, bro, down to the ground and rocking to rise for all time." The black man looked at him skeptically. He had a bald head and wore a long droopy shirt down to his knees and gigantic shorts that came to

the middle of his calves and black hightop sneakers. He said his name was Eduardo Fast and that he was from a tribe somewhere in central Africa. He said his ancestors had lived their lives in trees to keep them free of the lions that marauded on the ground. He said that they had built elaborate constructs between the trees to keep themselves out of harm's way. He said that as a result elevation was an essential part of his journey here on earth, that even without the benefit of trees they had to be able to sky, that though they were the most grounded of people, the ground could never be where they lived. "You have come to me with signs of white man's abjectness," Eduardo Fast said. "You have come to me because you have nowhere else to turn. In that sense you are a desperate man, ready to see God where he is not." With this he punched Isaac full in the face, sending him down down to the ground with the powerful blow. Blood flowed freely from Isaac's mouth and nose and as he knelt on the court Eduardo gave him a few strong kicks to his head and stomach and sides. The pain was there to monopolize his attention and he fell onto his back holding his face.

Time seemed to have gone away, leaving him where he was in a space cleared out of people. Into it came his creator. He told Isaac that he loved him with an unforgiving love because there was nothing to forgive and that abuse was the calling card of the demented and insane. He made Isaac very happy. Isaac went far up into the sky, so far that he was among the stars and the hissing meteors, with the earth of no more abiding interest than the blood caking on his face. He thought for a while that it might be an agreeable change to be in a place where time and distance had no meaning and to be swallowed whole by quasars bent on eradicating his existence and to be one with the moon in its ceaseless orbit but without a chair to sit on or without a Breyer's ice cream cup from his childhood to lick what could existence mean?

And so by the next day he was back on the ground, and while his face hurt he took it as a badge of courage that he was enduring this pain and seeking to learn from it,

knowing that to whimper or cry out loud over the ravages to his person would only serve to make matters worse in that he would be giving power over to the thing that had happened rather than focusing on the signal reality of liberation from the body and *wasn't it time to go deeper with this thing so he could know where he was?* At the same time the pall of isolation was all over him and in a neighborhood café where he stood by the door of the unisex bathroom waiting for the chance to relieve himself, a woman with a fanny pack emerged and said "Excuse me" in a daintily peeved way and she was fiftyish and had once been pretty and *no one had been able to touch her since she was touched those many times in childhood* and it was for Isaac to hate everything about this woman on her pathetic little outing and he chased after her down the street and screamed out to her that every dinky thing she did in the way of charity and what-fucking-have-you she did to stave off suicide and for no other reason and that fanny packs were gross, gross accessories on people such as her and telltale signs that all they cared about was themselves and their own comfort and all they ever fucking did was walk alone through Central Park farting through their Eddie Bauer jeans and reading their pathetic Barnes and Noble books and watching fucking Channel Thirteen and the Discovery Channel and then he fell weeping to the pavement because he recognized that the *West Side* woman was none other than himself and that all around him were the signs of people growing old without desires met.

While down there Isaac asked his creator if he could come to him yet. He said he was tired of walking the streets. He said he didn't see the point of it anymore. He said he was much more in contact now with what his older sister Rachel had gone through. He said he understood why it was she had checked out and why, before that, she had spent the majority of her time scanning the sky for signs of Jesus. This he told his creator. He said all he ever wanted to do anymore was cry. He said it was just like this for him and that life had too many repetitive acts to be anything but fully pointless.

Isaac couldn't tell how long he had been on the pavement when he remembered Harry and suddenly once again the square-shaped glasses were there and more important to him than the moon he had been a part of and the streaking meteors with the vicious dips and darts of Major League heat. He got up off the sidewalk where he had become something of a spectacle and staggered down to the flea market, where he found Harry hanging the banner advertising his booth with the help of one of his assistants. "Don't ever hang your light under a bushel, Harry," Isaac shouted, coming upon the scene of morning industry. Harry gave him a scrutinizing look.

"What happened to you, man? You look like someone threw you a beating." Harry's face was all tanned concern.

"It's the desert in you coming through," Isaac said.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"Your tan, man. Your tan. You could only get that in a bright and shining place."

"Let's talk business, Isaac, so this thing can have some shape."

"It's my glasses, Harry. I'm struggling manfully with them, if you can believe such a thing, but I'm having trouble making two into one go."

Harry signaled to another employee. "Manuel, I need you." A short man responded, shorter even than the chipmunk holding up the other pole to which the banner was attached. Harry got the two of them to deal with the thing so he could come forward into Isaac's face and study the situation with him.

"What are we talking about here, Isaac? What's this two into one stuff?"

Isaac chose to go with the idea that Harry wanted to believe him. He explained the principle of rotation and the window of opportunity which the glasses gave him to grow through to a new and fully realized chapter of his love.

"You said love, didn't you?" Harry asked. Harry had that sly but warm look on his face.

“Sure I did, Harry. Sure I did. But you and I both know I meant life.”

“Do we, Isaac? Do we?”

“Ah, Harry. I don’t dig the shrink scene too tough. I’ve left it alone for the spaces of death you have to go to on your own. But the thing is that you’re from a holy place. You have mystical qualities. Your origins are in the desert and so you have to be willing to save me.”

“Let me see the specs, Isaac. Let me see them.”

Isaac showed him the new and heartbreaking pair of square-shaped glasses.

“So what’s the problem?” Harry asked.

“They’re no good. I’m batting 0 for 3 with them. Three people said they were duds. They whiffed me with cold heat, Harry.”

Harry smiled. “And the next three? What did they say?”

“I figured it would do me no good to ask.”

Harry cleaned the lenses and carefully placed them on Isaac’s face. The angle of his vision was to look up at Isaac’s troubled eyes with eyes by contrast that were merry and gentle with their own strength. “They’re a fine pair of glasses, just as they were when you selected them,” Harry said.

Isaac took them off and put on the round blond tortoise shell things for Harry. Just doing so made him feel like he was from an earlier chapter of his own life. “So what do you think, choosing between the two?” Isaac asked.

Harry must have heard his thought stream, because he said, “Go with the square. Go with the new. Your life is ahead of you. Walk out that door and into it.”

Isaac kissed Harry, right there in that flea market. Then he wobbled out of the place wearing his new specs. Halfway down the block he paused. He suddenly had another anxious question regarding the glasses for Harry, a concern about whether they were too far from his eyes that threatened in a monstrous raging way his newfound

peace, but something told him not to turn back, that Harry wouldn't be able to help him any further and only total dissolution would await him. The voice of kindness told him to go forward into his day, and claim the wholeness that had found him. His feet resumed their forward motion. He looked around and saw what he could see.