



The Reader

by Richard Leise

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It was one of those magazines that featured a short story. The author's name would either be simple and recognizable or difficult to decipher, a first and last name gender neutral (or so it would seem) with one or the other pivoting upon some exotic letter—like a *j* or a *z*—and probably containing a digraph and so stuffed with vowels it was as if the writer's father, angry he had sired a child, set forth to create an interjection. Peter smiled. He reached for the publication.

Peter knew where to look. He wasn't surprised to find the word *fiction*. He recognized those fonts shaping the title, the byline, the first sentence, and the words within their narrow columns. Those pages soft as skin. He lifted a hand and rubbed a thumb against an index finger, not expecting, despite how it felt, to find ink, a blotch of smeared blotter. He was right about this.

Yes. It was all here.

And yes. Peter recognized the writer.

The illustration was irritating. Of course they always had been, but now, when print

journalism was supposedly dead, to discover that the magazine continued to devote an entire page to a picture? Well, what, really, was going on here? Was he supposed to find this decision bold? Refreshing? Because he didn't. Peter would have preferred an article. About anything. Or Peter would have preferred anything. Even an advertisement—none of which, individually (unlike this picture), were meant to be taken seriously—might have offered something amusing. And Peter equated amusing with interesting. But even putting this to the side, articles could be ignored and advertisements dismissed. But one page given over to a picture? What was this, a museum? Not only did the editors expect you to look—to, indeed, pay attention—there was extant subterfuge; there was so enclosed within this smug editorial decision the expectation that he was supposed to feel something. And that something being grateful. This, and that he had been given something. This something being Art. Something Artful? How lame. And how terrible.

Worse than any of this, though (and Peter leaned back in his seat, he held the magazine before him), while the image—computer generated—was original, there was about the picture something ingratiating. Like looking across the ocean, like a platitude sewn into a pillow, the image was an idea the magazine's editors expected him to consume, to appreciate as part of any decent human being's world view. In actuality, what the animation amounted to was a trailer. A preview promoting exactly how he was supposed to feel after, and probably even while, reading the story.

White, male, and made in scale so as to appear not so much small as dominated by a swimming pool—whose outrageous size assumed the circumference of a martini glass—the swimmer, of which Peter was presented a bird's-eye view, crossed water Tanqueray and tonic clear and cool. There was nothing particularly human about the swimmer. He looked like a Lego. He wore olive-green trunks. Legs straight, the swimmer's feet pointed towards the bottom of the page. Left arm extended, the swimmer, his face in the water, the back of his head a reddish-brown rectangle, made no splash, he left no wake. His right arm was obscured, tucked beneath him, seemingly amputated at the shoulder. Without reading a word, Peter knew what to expect from this story, an impression that didn't run counter to his understanding of the writer.

The story was great. Peter had not given thought, as people often do, to the reality that while reading, he was reading. Momentarily distracted—Peter arched his back, closed the magazine, and used a finger to mark his place—he had forgotten that he was tired and uncomfortable, his shins ached from crossing

avenues and walking the eighty-something blocks from Penn Station, and that he was cloistered in Sloan Kettering's waiting room. Crashing in upon his consciousness was an awareness of the floor's condition—stained and sticky as dried urine—and the weight of his bag on his lap, and that the space smelled of some stranger's head cold. Disgusting.

Peter listened to hip-hop, and he often drew upon his favorite rapper's metaphors. Lesser forms of non-sequiturs, they often made no sense. This was why he liked them. Peter insisted, if only to himself, that he wasn't racist. He couldn't help being white. But he did think that most rappers lacked a truly clever command of language—why else invent words?—and that most of their best work, from a lyrical standpoint, arose like accidents. This last position probably was racist, at least a little bit, but he accepted this. Because, what of it? Peter would never properly think about anything if he went about policing everything, so he set his thoughts, which, admittedly, he kept to himself, free. But still: He had them. And he was fair. He reflected. He misconstrued many of the lyrics for accents—or was it the other way around?—but did that really matter?

Now, as he had before, Peter took in the people occupying the space around him, people talking, crying, or (the worst) talking while crying, and as he processed the realized promise of the room's few smokers and people otherwise sick coughing—ripe, fleshy sounds, like tossed globs of fruit scooped from melons, and upon their sputum casting any array of airborne pathogens—he, to borrow from Kendrick Lamar, didn't like their colors.

Why had he stopped reading? Peter

couldn't be sure. The room wasn't quiet, but the area had been busy when he began reading. If anything, several of the others had left. Most who remained sat in silence. Occupied within their own concerns, these people had nothing for expressions. So it wasn't noise. He hadn't been confused, either. The story was fun and interesting to follow. Peter wasn't a swimmer, but he found that this worked in the writer's favor. Peter knowing nothing about what the writer described made purpose more powerful. That a grown man couldn't find the words needed to express the contempt he felt for other grown men who didn't hurl themselves into water? Fantastic. Maybe that had been it. The writer's words. The prose, while transparent, possessed diction and turns of phrase both perfect and provocative. Like a fish leaping from water, you heard the splash and turned. You saw what wasn't there. A wake. Perhaps this is what had disrupted his reading.

There was one aspect of the writing that Peter did find somewhat confusing: He wasn't sure if the story was supposed to be funny. Like *Twin Peaks*, he found specific plot points both bizarre and comical. Only he wasn't certain that this was the writer's intent. The fact that a grown man cared so much about swimming? I mean come on. This is hilarious. But maybe Peter had it backwards. Maybe Peter had it wrong. Perhaps the story was supposed to be taken seriously. The setting not so much Connecticut as Camelot, the swimmer was wealthy, his reality a world wherein swimming pools were not concrete and concave constructions, but actual earth products, spring waters erupting from the golden, mineral-rich soil.

Peter examined the story with an editor's eye. There was that stream of swimming

pools informing the distance between a cleared hedgerow and the swimmer's home, the broad bend of a dramatic dogleg easing eight miles south of the Westerhazys' backyard towards Bullet Point, the mouth of the swimmer's crazed river. Maybe swimming was like tennis, or golf, a sport these rich white men took seriously. But wasn't the swimmer decidedly not a prankster, the sort never to play the fool? Hadn't Peter just read this? Yet, at the same time, didn't the writer want Peter to believe that the swimmer was going to leave the Westerhazys' pool and, sertoiously, swim his way home? Was it possible to be both original and drape a sweater over your shoulders? Could a man, quasi-legendary or otherwise, swim home to his wife (to whom, if you've read the writer, you knew the swimmer had been unfaithful) and his four resplendent and unimpeachable daughters via some suburban tributary?

Maybe.

Or maybe, and Peter closed his eyes, the story wasn't "ha ha" funny.

There was a draft. Like very early this morning, when Peter, taking a moment before walking uptown, sat inside the train station, that terminal where sliding doors opened and closed on dark lots, buses idling, letting in incorrect amounts of atmosphere. Also like this morning: The man on his right had nodded off. To look at this man was to see a different sort of death. Whomever that man was visiting, that person wasn't heading home. And then Peter realized what it was!

It wasn't the writer's words.

And Peter definitely wasn't confused.

Reading, he had zipped along, not so much constructing as consuming all sorts of meaning. And of course, this wasn't to take anything away from the writer; after all, who

else could have dreamt such a wonderful story? The swimmer's decisions were predictable; what happened was exactly what Peter had anticipated. But just when things were getting really weird?

The writer used an exclamation point.

How annoying. The symbol functioning not like a punctuation mark—shaping something Peter had just read—but rather, like a caesarean section, the sign had served to signal both the end of one thing and the beginning of another. Ripped from the story, Peter had turned his attention to what he had ignored—the cartoon.

Of course, the magazine was famous for them. The magazine made calendars from them. Even now, online, the magazine held contests with (or for) their cartoons, competitions wherein “readers” were given only the illustrations and a couple of weeks to come up with the funniest caption. Peter didn't actively pay attention, but unless he was mistaken, he was usually impressed, believing that, more often than not, the amateurs and their entries were rather clever, with some, maybe many, outdoing the professionals.

Personally, his mind didn't work this way. Usually, he didn't find humor in anything scripted. Television? Movies? This was the stuff of artifice. Some of it was entertaining, with much of that being quirky. He could appreciate such efforts as clever, but this was never what he considered funny. Laughter—when it came—was the result of something unexpected, a product of one such inconsequential mistake meeting the mundane. His wife said that his sense of humor wasn't funny. Had Peter been Snoop Dog, he would have called her a bitch.

Peter's uncle was funny. High and drunk, he regularly tweeted. Peter didn't often

communicate with his father, but occasionally he would receive an email, his father writing, and pasting a copy of the link, that once again his brother was in the paper. Following something like a dog show, Uncle Bob would tweet: “At least the Knicks weren't the only dogs in the Garden,” and the editors—it was only the sports section, but still—would publish what he had written. Peter smiled then. And he smiled now. Until thoughts turned to his father, who, with Peter's mother, was waiting in a different sort of room, a hallway away. It was better to think about something not funny—like the cartoon.

Black and white, the cartoon was “carelessly” drawn, a series of simple slashes and strikes which worked together to amplify eyes and insinuate the inventive gestures of a married couple window-shopping in the winter. In the foreground, a Christmas tree. A couple blocks away, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the structure's grand spires scribbled to make of the horizon something more than an outline. Surrounding this husband and wife were pencil-thin suggestions of snowflakes, the pair considering fur coats shouldered by mannequins. Dangling from sleeves were oversized price tags. The cartoon, centered and set atop the page, cut into two of the three columns comprising this section of the story. Peter read the punch line, delivered, ostensibly, by the husband, whose mouth was open: “I'd like to take Jesus shopping to see how much he could save.”

So. It was one of those.

Were they all like that now? He couldn't remember many of the cartoons, but he did recall several illustrations featuring sandaled Gods, or some angels, or the pearly gates, or Moses—or, alternately, the devil—pointing down from cumulus clouds, or pitted near

hell's stinking flames. He did recall one cartoon that struck him, if not quite funny, certainly germane. Angel Gabriel, bursting through an opening in a barn, looked down upon Joseph, who, consoling a visibly upset Mary, mouth open, was looking up, and said: “We didn't want to know the gender in advance.”

Still. Either way. The effect was the same. Peter wasn't into porn, but he couldn't stand bland. Packaged edginess was the worst. The charade, the illusion of irreverence? So dumb. Secularism? Catholicism? Who cared? Whatever happened to fun? To whimsy? The genie, freed from the bottle, distressed and frowning, helping the fat, bald, and smiling old man fold laundry. Now that was funny. That cartoon didn't even need a caption. That cartoonist worked around words. Why was everything an argument? Who needed to be told how to read or to think? The only things dumber than arguing for or against anything were those people invested in arguing. Peter was pro-life. You know what he wasn't? A woman. Or a justice sitting on the Supreme Court.

This cartoon was, in a way, like the writer with his swimmer. The writer was making a statement. Only Peter wasn't in the mood to put on his thinking cap. Fortunately, he didn't have to. The swimmer was what interested him. The writer had created a feeling Peter played no part in informing. Utterly ambiguous. Like looking at one of those paintings that was just red and for some reason priceless. This was why the cartoon was so annoying. Peter wasn't asked to think of something, he was supposed to agree with somebody. Or somebodies. Shocking.

Inside the waiting room there were no windows. There were no good-looking women. There were no women particularly

fit. This, alone, was depressing. It wasn't like his mother was hospitalized back home in Endwell. Something like seven million people and this room wanted Peter to believe that not even one of the city's beautiful people was sick or had a dying relative. It wasn't as if money could buy you something much better than Sloan Kettering. Ugh. Well, whatever, then. With everyone he was careful to avoid eye contact.

A family occupied one of those partially walled-off rooms. Everyone was either talking into or typing on their cell phones, while, with one another, carrying on a conversation. The mother-figure and her four adult children plus some of their spouses, a handful of grandchildren, cousins, maybe something like a boyfriend. Speaking of advertisements, these people would photograph exactly wrong for a popular restaurant chain. Breadsticks and never-ending salad bowls. Wow, though. These latter-day Kardashians. This inane way of sharing information—Peter couldn't possibly call that communicating—while, no doubt, their patriarch, after for forty years smoking two packs a day, lay in some cold, quiet space down some wide, dark hallway, redolent of sloughed skin and flatulence, withering away.

Peter wasn't an extremist. And he wasn't ignorant. He didn't think of cell phones as cancer cells, defective, endlessly dividing and amassing to invade bodies and through something as pretty in sound as angiogenesis create those bloodstreams necessary to support tumors by the hand of God made malevolent. How could this technology be considered ingenious when, ultimately, smart phones functioned to devolve, to make of society one special mass (and here Peter allowed himself to rap) de-literate?

Along a wall there was a table. Here, a young man about Peter's age, maybe thirty, had created a small office. His laptop plugged into a wall, he actively conducted business. Jewish, his shiny kippah, bright like a light bulb, gleamed like an idea. Peter was confused. There had been no religious holiday recently. The next? Months away. Of course some men wore them all the time, but that sort also had the wild black goldilocks spiraling against the sides of their faces and were always—even almost exclusively, right?—much older. They were the church (or whatever) elders. Today wasn't even Saturday. Wait. Was it? But even if it was—Peter shook his head.

He picked up why the guy was here. His fiancé, a decent-looking Anglo-Saxon with very blond hair and a beautiful chest, was waiting for her mom to pass. Every hour or so she came into the waiting room and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. He'd finish what he was typing or reading, rise, and turn to face her. The fiancé would then answer his questions. His questions didn't vary, and her answers were always the same. Peter hadn't seen her in a while. That couldn't be good.

Now the man was making a series of phone calls. This was number four. After exchanging pleasantries, he spoke as if from a script: He was in a waiting room at Sloan; his fiancé's mom was expected to pass this evening; no, thank you, but there is nothing you can do; I may be off the grid for a bit and wanted you to hear this from me: We're pulling out of the Sachsman deal.

LOL. Peter didn't believe the young man had been told why, that he was anything more than some vice-president's son, but he definitely acted as though he did—knew something—and intimated he wasn't at

liberty to say. Pitiful. He grew bolder with each conversation. Like a woman from the eighties, he was wearing an expensive suit and white Reeboks. In other words, it could be his mom dying and he'd still be on the phone, all in. He ended each conversation with: This obviously goes without saying. And then he vouchsafed the names of those in the know, who else he was contacting, and how this wouldn't be made public until Monday.

(Maybe it was Saturday?)

Peter wished the writer had not opted for that exclamation point. He was totally distracted. And from where he left off to where he'd encounter the next paragraph break? He flipped through the magazine. This ran at least two-and-a-half pages. He didn't want to begin reading only to—

“Peter?”

Peter had expected to hear his name. Still. To hear “Peter” arrive framed in an accent so heavy as to render the syllables all but undecipherable? To appear in sound as some form of castrated Australian water fowl? Strange.

Yet there was no mistaking the kindness. There was a universal softness that cut through the incidental harshness of the oncologist's cadence. Also, there was the weirdness of hearing this while being in this room in this building in this city made of great—and greater—buildings that made all of this awesome. Almost overwhelming.

Peter closed and placed the magazine atop the stack where he had found it. From where—even though it was old and worth money—it would be thrown away. He took a breath. He shouldered his bag.

And, just like an idiot, Peter raised his hand. ∞

**“You’ll never know what
sort of person you
might have been if you’d
read different stuff.”**

**—Lucy Ellmann, author of
*Ducks, Newburyport***

