3,972 words

# THE ORDER OF THE NEEDLE'S EYE

There would be a day, he assumed, when he would get over the guilt of his "good" fortune. Until then, he would be seen as forever being in a state of disdain over the benefits of what he was fast coming to think of as an inheritance of shame.

"You should join a cult," his wife of a few years told him.

"Which one?"

"The Order of the Needle's Eye."

Immediately, his eyes darted to the camel hair coat draped over the leather couch, his coat, his couch, improbable though it still seemed. They were in "his" study, also improbable though it sounded, a garret on the top floor of the Victorian house they—who was he kidding?—*she* had bought shortly after the marriage, in order to pay homage to the part of the world he loved most, where the islands and peninsulas were densely populated with trees and the rocks of the shore fended off the waves with the impassive power of the ages. The tufted leather couch might have been one of them were he unable to remember the three burly men it had taken to move it up here. Frederica now lay back

on it in a posture reminiscent of actresses of the past, her clothes revealing by their fit, athletic knees and modest if perfect breasts. The only thing missing was a long cigarette holder, a blessing, since he no longer smoked and wondered still, after three years of clean lungs, whether he could resist the temptation to light up. An absurd thought, for, besides money and its satisfactions, Frederica had no addictions. There was the sex, of course, but everyone had that. He hoped his interest in it would hold up. It was, he knew, the first thing to go in a bad marriage. Not that this was a bad marriage. That part of it anyway.

"I should think a writer would need a view with people in it," she had said. "Why this?"

"I imagine the people, not the other way round," he had answered, not really making sense and leaving out the bit about not having invented a single soul since moving in a month ago. The desk—swirled mahogany, trimmed with boxwood stringing, built to his own specifications, stood before a window looking out on a bay tantalizingly beautiful with its sailboats careening toward and away from one another, and with its lighthouse ever watchful at the end of its long jetty. There were, he thought of saying, people there, but not the inspiring sort, the ones with backbiting emotions that got you into trouble, that made your pen fly across the page.

"You're so old fashioned," she once said about him, "sitting there, nib in hand. It would be so much easier with a computer. You might as well use a goose quill, whatever the Founding Fathers used, instead of that Pelikan thing." Only days later, a package had come for him, the anticipated computer—he knew her only too well—with a memory large enough to put the universe to shame. And with it, its younger cousin, a laptop

capable of pulling in information from the wavelengths everywhere around him. Included in the package—he liked to think selfishly—so she wouldn't feel so guilty dragging him along on her worldly cruises. That the computers had come with elaborate tables to put them on had added greatly to the luxurious ambience of his "studio" (her word), only the ocean dividing their little kingdom (Queendom?) from Europe.

He used to dream of a room like this, in the days when there had been hardly room to turn around between the kitchen and living area. A plywood board elevated by two saw horses had served as a desk, a box of discount ballpoints for implements. He still had his old laptop, now unused, its foibles once hated, long since forgotten. Along with the Olivetti, the compact typewriter of his youth that now shared the same closet, though none of the affection he had had for the Olivetti did he waste on the Inspiron, whatever it had been called. It had had a will of its own, inserting words in unwanted places, the way Frederica inserted luxury into his life, bribes, he tended to see them, for his affection, unnecessary as it turned out, though for how long, who knew?

He used to think of the rich as having one dominant personality, Republican, defensively religious, the insistence on Jesus the ratiocination for the rape of the rest of the world. Now that he had married in, so to speak, he found himself in a kingdom heaped with surprises, people he liked the biggest one, all of the inhabitants preoccupied with the justification of desert, walling themselves off from the needy with an iron gate, unlocked twice a year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas, in order to minister to the poor. Be seen ministering to the poor, he had liked to say before walking home through the gate himself.

Yes, justification was a large part of it, of having so much money. His justification was, of course, love. He had married for love, therefore had had to bear the circumstances inconvenient to his wants and desires in order to accommodate a spouse. How different it was from what people—those on the outside—supposed. They didn't say it but he knew they thought it, that he'd married her for her money, money he hadn't even known she'd had when they first met. A fairy tale, really. The man seduced via a test of his virtue by a pretty woman in jeans, at a Seattle Starbucks at that, his eye catching hers looking over, the smile, her approach. She held the book in front of her, proof of the reason to confront him with the coincidence, proof of common interest, the two of them reading the very same book. In the same edition. Whether she had also bought it next door he never dared ask, knowing the soliciting of a lie to be a dubious test of a relationship. The fact that neither of them had finished the book they had both taken to be proof of similar good taste. He married her for her humor, he told someone once, the truth, received, he had assumed later, as justification, so he never said it again.

There were other things he also claimed, more often thought. Such as: travel was good for writing. If you were a travel writer, certainly. And one of those he had become, a natural addition to his skills as a writer of heady thrillers. More heady than thrilling, it had been said in reviews, but page turners nevertheless, to those in the relaxed circumstances (beach, mountain resorts, penitentiaries) where patience added to the atmosphere of anticipation. Refined action, he had insisted to his agent, can sell books too, even to the rich. He should know. That Frederica had read his entire series of Art Coleman Mysteries had proven, at least to him, that there were sincere motives holding their marriage together, not just her desire to "travel incognito," as she put it. They never

talked about his books. He suspected that a brief quiz on their contents might reveal less of an acquaintance than he was fond of bragging of her, but let's face it, he told himself, what we remember of even the finest literature is slim, and that mainly because it has the advantage of beckoning us to second and third readings. His books suffered the reader no such obligation.

"Hendrick doesn't know his own mind," he'd heard on the other side of an editor's wall. And there was truth to it, he knew. He didn't. No one did. But at least he examined his own motives, a little too often, according to some. Compulsively, according to Frederica. He married for love, he told himself, wondering if he had himself all wrong. The question came up often, mostly in luxury hotels and shops, on Greek islands and along the Riviera, places he had never till his marriage seen but had, with effort, grown to admire. Frederica loved them, so he made the effort. As he did in the bedroom, where he naturally kindled his affection for the woman who had so mysteriously sought him out among the millions of males on a planet swarming with them.

"You are the love of my life," she told him, still told him.

"And you're mine," he said back, gazing lackadaisically at the warm aquamarine of the Mediterranean, hoping it was true. Sometimes he had to fake passion with her, make believe he was so ardent they'd have to return to their hotel suite immediately. It worked ninety percent of the time, and she loved it, good enough justification right there. And he did too, though the ardor grew more difficult to manage. As it would in any marriage, he told himself. At least it had in his first marriage, now conveniently behind him, now that he could so easily afford the alimony. The guilt again, addressing the envelopes with the checks enclosed, which meant revealing itineraries, through the

Bahamas, Beijing, London, Rome, Darjeeling, places Alice, his first wife, had always wanted to see but he could never afford. Sometimes there was the urge to include a note, but there was nothing that could be said: *Wish you were here* (not in any sense the case); *Not all it's cracked up to be* (true to some extent, always, in travel, but tactically wrong and transparent to the point of being pathetic). Once again, it was guilt speaking. What he wanted to say was something like *If only I could supply you with a parallel trip to all these places you may still so eagerly seek.* He'd imagined asking for such a gift from Frederica but thought better of it, fearing it would be taken as the first fault in the mantle of love. "I don't understand why you bother with that," Frederica had said to him one day, as he wrote out the monthly check. It took him aback. "It's the law," he had replied.

"No. I mean, why don't you just do it through automatic deposits?"

Her whole life, as far as he could tell, was managed through a series of direct deposits. Not to mention the manager, paid a handsome fee, who booked travel, paid rents, took care of things Hendrick couldn't imagine. How much was she worth anyway? But it was a question you didn't ask, like: *when did you first masturbate?* Or: *what do you most fear revealing about yourself?* If you revealed it, you hadn't feared it that much, had you? He had once wanted to ask a miserable excuse of an editor how much *he* earned. At least there was no more of him in Hendrick's life. Like a deliverance, really. Frederica's personal secretary had somewhat the same personality. You always expected a bark or an order. Instead, *Good morning, Mr. Hendrick; nice weather we're having.* The social lubricant of money. Still, he could see the hate in the man's eyes. Why you and not me? Why a two-bit writer and not someone already in charge of millions?

Everyone hated the rich, it was an axiom. Everyone but the rich, of course, who hated everybody, or scorned them at any rate.

Was it okay to have whatever you wanted? It was okay to want, was it okay therefore to have? He buttered a scone while sitting in the bay window high above Penobscot Bay, the lobster boats scurrying around like cockroaches when the lights go on. Fun to watch, as long as you had nothing to do. He was not on assignment; there didn't seem much urgency in scraping together a story for the few dollars it would bring in. Will there ever be a day, he used to think, when I no longer have to do this? He fiddled with his new smart phone, his silver laptop (one of them) and was grateful, though he no longer had a local editor to call. But watching the bay from the hill was nice. For a while anyway. Until he had memorized the scene, the rim of rocks at the shore, the trees like erect soldiers on the barred island, the boats, interchangeable, going in and out past the breakwaters. How he had wanted this, to have it so available, at the ready, before him, to be surrounded by it. And yes, to own it, a stretch of Maine coast all his own. Only the fish and gulls would be free to trespass, come and go as they pleased. A fantasy—own a stretch of incomparable beauty—a fantasy.

Until now.

He remembered longing for a car without problems, without rust, without a hundred fifty thousand miles on the odometer. Now he had two, a new Subaru (for the snowy winters), the Audi for the rest of the year. (She had offered a Jag, but he drew the line at conspicuous consumption.) Even the wish for a wife, one to cherish—he might also say *obey*, had been answered. No snob either. Who said money had to come with stuffed shirts? Hard to believe he was her first. *I waited for the right one to come along.*

She had actually said that. Reeled him in, you could say, with the book ploy, genuine though he had come to believe the story had been. To want was human, to be granted what you wanted rare. He began to want bigger and better things, but they came with so much responsibility—summer houses with caretakers, vehicles with chauffeurs and mechanics—that he refrained from asking for them. Besides, the thought of passing one of his old friends on the street in a chauffeur-driven automobile was too mortifying to contemplate.

He could still remember doing things himself. *Enjoying* doing things himself. He had been good at fixing the carburetor, hanging a door on new hinges, just about anything to save paying for the service. But now, with all this perfection around there didn't seem much point. Was there such a thing as wanting to want?

There must be, for it was the only way he could explain his present state of psychic entropy. How nice it would be, he thought, to want what he had now, to want it without the hope of having it. To visit a favorite Maine cove on a brilliant summer day and know that it belonged to someone else. To see a *no trespassing* sign, and to disobey it. To see the house of your dreams in an architectural magazine, show it to your wife and have her say, "Oh for the means to afford that," instead of, "I think we could manage that if you think it would suit us, though it would mean unloading another property first." Was there anything he could want and not have? Another wife came to him as an answer, but a false one, because, annoyingly generous though she was, Hendrick really loved Frederica, especially entering the room as she was now, carrying a plate of marinated herring on toast points, his favorite. Especially with the champagne, here, in the study overlooking the harbor. Their harbor.

Of course there were things you could wish for and nobody could have who didn't already have them: the rings of Saturn, a few inches added to your height, genius. He had never wanted extraterrestrial property. Nor did he feel his height—five feet eleven—a disadvantage. Genius would have been nice, except for the deprivation that was said to come with it. The novel of genius had never been one of his goals—genius and thrillers didn't go together. He had his skills, the geniuses had theirs. He was happy with that arrangement. Chalk up another satisfaction to his list of complaints. How hard it had become to find something to want.

Even the critics played into—whose?—his wife's?—hands, praising his latest—*Island Hopping*—for its urbane and witty worldliness, its attention to the issues far and wide. "Literary thrills," one called it, a term he'd have scoffed at in the company of his own writing crowd, back when to be looked down upon was a sign of integrity, proof you were your own man entitled to the badge of Honda and jeans. If the Honda had suffered a humiliating trade-in, at least the jeans—no designer tag for him—still bore the hint of a proper background.

Of course, within the lists of wants you had to include the unwanted, what you had to have or do but didn't want. Had to *suffer*, to use the language of a past life. The trips to the Cape had been at the top of the list in his first marriage, the broiling sun his nemesis, as his wife did her best to "darken her skin," book in hand, between forays into frigid ocean water. The only way to cool off, therefore shared, with a grudge that grew from year to year. "It's the one thing I ask for and it is met with nothing but resentment." It had been hard to argue with that, even if it wasn't exactly true, the other requests unattainable under the restraints of their collective income. Small price to pay.

Likewise, if your “wants” included the “unwanted” you had to have someone sympathetic to complain to, even if that person had to be conjured, which, in his case it did. “For heaven’s sake,” he’d say to himself, the only person who’d listen, “I don’t think I can bear another trip to Paris and Nice, St. Petersburg. How much nicer to stay here in the shack to watch the seals play in the harbor.” No man can write contained within a single studio, thus the shack, a refurbished chicken coop in the woods by the shore where he took a notebook from a bundle bought in bulk years ago) and a favorite pen (Pelikan, Vollfederhalter, generously bought for him as a gift by his first wife) to the plywood table he’d built himself from scraps found around the estate.

“I think I can still smell chickens in here,” Frederica had said on her one and only tour, once he had set it up.

“Builds character,” he’d replied.

To keep from hurting her feelings he saved the shack for first drafts, typing them into his computer(s) in the garret she had so proudly enabled him, looking out with the prospect of a widow’s walk from the Maine house. The shack it was that he missed most, however, studying the little plaster Puti in the Paris hotel room, or while trying to figure out how to make the European douche mechanism work for him in the bath. Give him an outdoor shower on a sunny deck any summer day. He must remember to mention the need for one at dinner. The request led to a change of room in Nice, one with its own deck and shower. Not quite the same, but appreciated nonetheless.

Two things put life in perspective for Hendrick, although, as was the case with most omens, they made little impression on him at first. There was the post card from the Cape waiting for him at home, and, before that, the nagging cough that took up residence

in his throat, flying from Nice to St. Petersburg. Annoyances are so often meaningful. The card was from Alice in Orleans and it was brief. “Dear H, (she had always called him “H”) I’m getting married. No more need of support. Thanks. A.”

Talk about a mixed cocktail of emotion. He coughed three times before reading it again. The picture on the card was nothing special, a triptych of Cape cliché’s, swimming, sailing and fishing, a message if there ever was one, though of what he couldn’t quite make out. Why not a picture of a favorite shared place? This card could have been bought anywhere. Perhaps “he,” whoever he was, had picked it out for that reason. Why a card instead of a letter? And the “Thanks.” For what? The alimony he had to assume. Who wouldn’t feel diminished by such a card, even if his earnings had not lived up to the monthly demand, though it hadn’t proved a problem. Not too many things had.

“That cough needs attending to,” said his second wife, who had silently wafted into the kitchen. Advice, like all advice he ignored until his obstinacy proved foolish.

“A bad cold,” he had maintained against his wife’s skepticism.

“In August?”

“Airplanes are filled with disease the year round,” he maintained, an undeniable truth in his defense, alas, the wrong defense, for germs and viruses have nothing directly to do with the causes of lung cancer. Tobacco did, even when used earlier in life, before an ineffective oath to rid the body of its harmful effects.

Through the ensuing ordeal, Frederica never left his side, at least seen from his perspective. “Surely, you must have more important things to do,” he said, sometime after the removal of his left lung.

"I never have; I never will," she replied, as faithful to his bedside as a supplicant waiting to hear read the contents of a much anticipated will and testament. She had become gaunt, her appetite having fallen off from its robust norm. Even her most elegant garments hung on her like sheets draped over a standing lamp. Unable to find the right words, he told her she looked undernourished. "You need to eat more, live a little," he advised.

"Oh, H," she answered, concern everywhere marking her expression, for she had at last come around to using the name he liked best.

He took her hand. "Carpe diem," he said. It was the first time he had ever been called upon to use the expression. Not only did the love he had for her pour forth, but—and it was much the same thing—he did not long for something he did not have.

"You're shivering," said Frederica.

"Yes, bring me my coat. Please."

He lay on a single bed in the small room across the hall from the marital chamber, in order to isolate Frederica from his nocturnal coughing. Even so, she rose several times in the night to look after him.

"Which one?" she asked, referring to his request for a coat, even though there was only one realistic choice; it was now February. She had never cared much for the long camel-hair coat of his. She brought it anyway, smelling of mothballs, from the hall closet, and draped it over him, working the soft collar up under his chin.

"I want for nothing," he said, gazing into eyes that were filled with tears. "I think I'll sleep now." She kissed him and left the room, thinking how much he resembled

Tristan on his couch in the third act of the production they had seen at the Staatsoper in Berlin the previous winter.

Hendrick called for her early the next morning, repeating the phrase, “I want for nothing, thanks to you, Frederica.” He died in her arms at 4:26 a.m. A month after his burial in the hard ground near the shore of Penobscot Bay, not far from the desk where he had penned *Island Hopping*, Frederica left for Europe, never to return. She had few friends, perhaps the reason she had been so strongly attached to H., but her house manager, for whom she no longer had need, and to whom she left the Maine house, reported many years later that the last time he had heard from her she had retired to a remote part of Finland, there to remain faithful to her husband in widowhood.

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