
Of His Mouth

I was sketching a tree in the park, and I was having a very hard time of it. I was so close to the tree that I only saw a straight trunk. Slouching back on the bench with my pen hovering between the two vertical lines I'd just drawn, I tried to figure out how to reproduce the smooth bark. I decided to draw a sort of wavy crescent. The effect was pleasing, but no one would have thought I'd sketched a tree trunk. I drew another sort of squiggle a little higher up, but the line got out of control and went on longer than I would have liked, so I added a cute hairpin turn and continued it back down, angling to the left and squiggling more to assert something organic. I drew a jagged line over on the other side of the trunk to keep things more or less consistent. Putting the pen down, I compared my sketch to the tree in front of me. The tree looked like a tree trunk, and my sketch of the tree trunk looked like the tar patterns on an old road.

As I slouched on the bench, thinking over my disappointing work, an elderly man holding a sandwich sat down on the other end of the bench and sighed. It was a sigh that conveyed an inevitability of attempted conversation, a sigh that couldn't be countered by anything less than removal from its vicinity. Well, I liked my slouch, and I would suffer the old man to maintain it. I looked up at the tree to find comfort that it too would be listening in the way big trees are said to listen to the passing generations. But the tree looked back with a distant and alien stare, so dissimilar from the sketch that I knew, that I felt a coldness well up in my stomach.

"They don't make sandwiches like they used to," said the man.

His sandwich was a half-baguette filled with a variety of things I expected him to soon discuss. There wasn't a wrapper or napkin around the sandwich, just his rough hands.

"People say things like that. But you know what? They don't mean them so much. They're just trying things out. It's like bats. Bats have a way of talking to walls so they can fly around at night. We talk to ideas and change our ways accordingly."

Some people also talk to walls, I thought about saying. The man only had one or two yellow teeth and something a little whiter in his mouth. The whiter something may have been a bit of sandwich, but it may have been some kind of dental something. When it comes to mouths, I only notice the bad ones, and this one was still talking.

"Some things really aren't what they used to be, though. I used to drink four beers for lunch at the factory. Now, I can only drink two, and I don't work at the factory anymore. But that's an illustration, you know, of something that changed. I'd better go back and say one or two things about my analogy. Some people don't know what an idea is. And some people only talk to one or two ideas, like a bat that never leaves its cave. How does this bat survive? It survives by picking insect scraps from the other bats' teeth while they sleep."

And what does that mean for your analogy? That the idea-limited people become dentists?

“They don’t make beer like they used to. That’s true. They used to make beer out back, but now it comes from a truck. But I was talking about my sandwich. I ate the same sandwich fifty-six years ago, when I first got off the train. I’ll send for my wife when I get settled, I told the guy next to me on the assembly line. You don’t got a wife, he said. And it was true. I was lying, and he saw right through it. But he had a wife, and she hit him every night because he smelled like other women. But you don’t smell like other women, I told him one day. I do when I get home, he said. But you know what it was? He wasn’t making it with other girls, he just sat nice and quiet next to them on the trolley car. His wife made him live up over where the tearooms were and where all the boardinghouses for working women were. The scents of all the girls in the trolley car would conquer the factory smell. It was that simple, but his wife never believed him nor stopped hitting him, and one day he didn’t come in. You know what? the guy across from me said, I bet she finally broke his arm off. And it was true. The guy’s wife had cracked his arm in half.”

I’d formulated one or two more replies—what about the sandwich?—but I dropped them as I found myself drawn in by the stranger’s meandering.

“But the oddest thing is this all has to do with bats again. Would you ever in your life have guessed that?”

Well, my life wasn’t quite as long as his, probably about a third as long, but he was right that I wouldn’t have guessed that it all had to do with bats again.

“The guy’s wife hit him in the arm with a baseball bat.”

Fuck off with that joke.

“No, no, that was just one of mine. In all seriousness, the guy’s wife had a big problem: she was blind. She can’t see nothing, the guy told me once, only just the insides of her eyeballs when her dentist shines his spotlight full at her. Well, she was like that since she was a baby on a farm. Now, you can see where I’m going with this one, I’m sure.”

Something to do with bats, I hoped. The old man had been sliding progressively closer as he talked and by this point, because of my slouch, he was peering down at me. I kept my mouth shut.

“When she was about six years old, a little bat flew out from the barn and straight through her open window. She found it by following its quiet wall-talk. She was blind, as I said, so she couldn’t see how ugly it was. She only felt its soft fur and smooth wings, and so she thought it was the cutest thing in the world and put it on her head, as children do with things.”

Oh, no.

“No, the bat wasn’t afflicted with the hydrophobia. Don’t worry. She took to wearing the bat on her head every day. See, she’d tie the creature’s wings down under her chin like a bonnet and listen to the little thing squeak, navigating by it.”

Had the tree just swayed?

“But they don’t make bats like they used to. This bat she wore on her head lived fifteen years, and it lasted right up to her wedding night. It died in an accident, if you follow me. She hadn’t trained it for that kind of activity. Her next bat died during childbirth, not its childbirth but hers, so that wasn’t even a year by my reckoning. And none of the following bats lasted much longer. The new bats were just weak little animals. And so, on the night she struck her husband’s arm near clean through, she’d been listening to a bat she’d caught that very morning. In the words of the foreman, she was still calibrating. She’d misjudged her swing and struck a foul rather than a fair ball.”

The man finally took a bite of the sandwich and looked away from me for the first time since he’d begun to speak. He scanned the park while chewing. I noticed his eyes lingering on the tree trunk. The depth of his speech surprised me, and I eagerly waited for more, but the chewing continued. His eyes dropped to sketch on my lap. They leapt back to the tree, questioning as he tilted his head slightly. I quickly shut my sketchbook. He swallowed.

“They don’t make sandwiches like they used to. This time it’s true. This sandwich is just an echo of the one I had fifty-six years ago. It’s astounding that only one or two ingredients can make such a beautiful taste, I remarked to the guy next to me on the assembly line. And now they make sandwiches with more components than I can count. You don’t gotta have nothing to have something, he told me. And that’s why I want to talk about bats again.”

The old man had resumed his position above me, bending over to look me full in the face.

“But first, let me just say that I think it’s in the teeth. People have more teeth than they used to, and that’s why this sandwich is filled with so many things. People taste with their teeth. Simple sandwiches bore them now. And so you might say that people think with their teeth. In any case, I was going to tell you something very important, you know. When a bat is flying around, you only see it as a dark trajectory. It’s hard to even know what a bat is when it’s flying. But when it’s hanging in the cave, you can see how ugly it really is. That’s what the guy on the assembly line was getting at. When you’re not flitting around, talking to ideas, that’s when you look like yourself. You always have that even when you don’t have anything else.”

He took another bite of his sandwich, and a crumb fell onto my forehead. Despite the ugly action of his one or two teeth attempting to chew, I found myself wishing he’d keep eating instead of resuming his talk. My enthusiasm for it had begun to wane as he proved unable to deviate from the subject of bats. Behind the old man, the tree loomed up closer than I remembered, and it dropped a leaf onto his white hair. He didn’t notice.

“The guy next to me on the assembly line met his wife at a dance. She had the wildest moves, and he was the only one courageous enough to

enter her radius. And no girl never wore a bonnet like she did, he told me. He only discovered that the bonnet was a bat on their third date. I met my wife at a dance too, I told him. You don't got a wife, he said. And he was right, but you want to know the funny thing about it? I really did meet my wife at a dance, only it was ten years later. She was a working girl who lived up over near the tearooms, and you'll never guess what her profession was."

Oh, please no more bats.

"She was a dentist."

And it was true. I never would have guessed.

"And she died, rest her soul, on our wedding night."

Well, that helped to explain his teeth.

"She couldn't take that kind of activity."

A stick clattered down from the branches of the tree and struck the old man between his shoulders. He yelped in surprise and dropped his sandwich in my lap.

"They don't make trees like they used to. God damn, that scared me. Wood is so weak nowadays. My first baseball bat lasted me fifteen years, and it only broke after we played a little baseball during a lunch break, after I drank four beers and left the bat up against the machine press. My next bat didn't even survive the year. I reckon these days you could hit more home runs with your arm before it breaks than with a bat. And trees are just so ugly, too, standing still all day. Just take a look at that sketch you did. The bark on a tree trunk looks more like the tar patterns on an old road than anything organic."

The old man's speech was cut short by the sound of a loud crack. Behind him, the tree trunk expanded in size as it came swinging down toward us. I seized my sketchbook and rolled out of my slouch and off the bench into the gravel. The old man was flattened.

It took a few moments for me to recover my senses. I was alive, and my limbs could move. Nothing was broken. But something still felt wrong. I was holding something soft. I hadn't saved my sketchbook. Instead, in my haste, I'd grabbed the old man's sandwich.