

THE EYE AT LARGE

(an excerpt)

By Crockett Doob

2,622 words

crockett.doob@gmail.com

Flushing, February 1995

The next day was Tuesday: therapy.

Oh, what joy, thought Philip. *What wonders will be discussed this time?*

A session with Dr. Barren was not cheap. Philip's mother paid for all of Philip's treatment on the pretense that Dr. Barren would figure out why Philip, intelligent as he was, able-bodied as he was, worked as a lowly temp. Which was, after all, a euphemism for the U word: Unemployed. The position below Temp being, in Philip's mother's mind, Vagrant. Other questions Philip's mother wanted answered: why was Philip unmarried, unattached, and practically friendless? (Although Dr. Barren had never hesitated to call Philip his friend.) Besides his mother paying for all the sessions, another humiliating fact for Philip was that Barren was a child psychologist. Philip had started seeing him when he was eleven, after his stay at Elmhurst hospital (the emergency room, then the psych ward) and continued to see him now that he was twenty-one. He was the only 'adult' patient of Barren's, and to see toys, board games, and puzzles strewn about the rug was a constant reminder. The toys looked expensive. Dr. Barren's rug looked expensive. In fact, nearly everything in his office--his desk, the thick hairy paper he used for invoices, ("Please give this to your mother when you have the chance...") his lamps, and, of course, his leather chair--looked expensive. He was a stocky man, filled with expensive food. He was a fan of tan clothing so slick Philip was surprised the doctor didn't slide off his leather chair.

Another point of interest for Philip--it wasn't just an interest; it was an obsession--was Barren's facial hair. It was either maintained professionally on a daily basis, or Barren himself spent his mornings in front of a mirror, like women put on make-up, trimming his beard. The hairs were cropped to various lengths: the neck and cheeks and the perimeter around the ears were shaved to the flesh; then, rather suspensefully, his hair grew longer and longer until it was so bushy that if Philip were hanging off the edge of a cliff, he wouldn't reach for Barren's hand, he'd reach for his chin. Finally, Barren had the most puzzling mustache Philip had ever seen. It was clearly massaged with wax or gel or some kind of thick cream. It did not curl up like a banker in a Western, but it pointed forward. So during a session, Philip could be assured that not only were Barren's eyes watching him, but the tips of his mustache were, too.

Barren began each session the same way, by asking, "How is your mother?" It was almost like Barren was a talk show host, who began the program each night saying, 'But before we start our show, let's take a moment to thank our sponsor.'

"She's fine," said Philip.

"'Fine?' Only 'Fine?'"

There was the inevitable pause before Barren began his inevitable lecture about the word, 'Fine.' He said, "Philip, 'Fine' is a word that means next to nothing. If I asked you, for instance, how was the last book you read, and you said it was, 'Fine,' you would have told me nothing. I wouldn't know if you liked it, if you didn't like it, or if it reminded you of other books you have read. Or, if it provoked memories," said Barren, hinting at something. "In essence, I wouldn't have any idea how you felt about the book. Do you understand?"

“Yes, I do.”

“So how is your mother?”

“She seems fine, more or less.”

Barren crossed his legs. Smooth flesh showed between the top of his golden brown socks and the bottom of his silky suit pants. Barren’s calf was hairless--something Philip had noticed before, but would forget, since the hair on his face stole the show. Yet the sight of his calves brought Philip back to the question: did Barren shave his legs? Were his legs part of the morning routine? And if the answer was yes, then where did Barren’s work end?

“We’re not getting far with your therapy, Philip. I’m concerned.”

“I’m not. I just wish we could play scrabble. Wouldn’t that be a bounty of Freudian slips? For both of us, I’d imagine.”

“Do you think that would be an effective form of therapy?”

Anything would be better than this, thought Philip. “No, I was just kidding.”

“Dr. Barren says you’re being obstinate,” said Philip’s mother over the phone. Philip’s mother’s name was Phyllis. Had Philip been a girl, he would have been named after his mother. And hardly a conversation passed between them where Philip wasn’t reminded of this.

“We may have to discontinue your therapy,” Phyllis said.

“Really!” said Philip. “Do you mean it?!”

“No. I’m ‘just kidding.’ Isn’t that what you like to say? Everything’s a joke to you?”

“What did the good doctor tell you?”

“He *is* a good doctor, Phyllis! I mean Philip! He said you take nothing seriously. He said you were mocking him. And you were mocking *me!*”

“That’s not true. And what did he tell you besides that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, ‘Nothing?’”

“Please just tell me what he said.”

“Well it’s a bit like this conversation, Phyllis. Philip, sorry. I’m sorry about that. It’s a bit like what I’ve seen to be true.”

“Which is?”

“That you’ve made no progress! That you don’t do anything to move your life forward.”

Philip’s mother’s words were repetitive, her sentences like a stutter.

“That’s not true,” he said. “I have a new job. Well, I *may* have it. There’s no guarantee.”

“What kind of job, Phyllis?”

“Philip,” Philip said demonstratively.

“Sorry. So what is it? What is the new job?”

“It would be--if I get it--a little bit of detective work.”

Philip was surprised when his mother burst out laughing. “You? A detective?” More laughing.

“It’s more like missing persons,” Philip said. “I’ll be helping someone find someone else.”

“How much does this detective work pay? Or let me guess, it’s pro bono until you succeed?”

“It’s not just about the money...”

“Hmm. Sounds familiar.”

“It’s more like credit.”

“‘Credit!’ Meaning you’re in debt?”

“Not really.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I’m *dealing* with it! Let me do something for myself just for once!”

“Phyllis--Philip! Whoever you are! Listen to me. You are *very* independent when it comes to incurring debt. You do that all on your own. Now tell me. To whom are you indebted to?”

That’s two to’s, thought Philip. *You shouldn’t say ‘To’ twice*. But he didn’t tell her this. What he said was: “Well, I can tell you one thing. I’m sure not indebted to Dr. Barren. I know you pay him promptly. He always has the loveliest smile on his face at the start of each month.”

“Dr. Barren is a lovely man, and you don’t need to mock him for making money!”

Your money, Philip thought.

But his mother bulldozed past him with more compliments. “If anyone deserves it, it’s him. But I hope you don’t think you can successfully change the subject. He tells me you do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Change the subject so you don’t talk about anything. You’re wasting money doing that.”

“So don’t pay him! I won’t go!”

Phyllis shifted her tone. “I’d like to have lunch and talk about your money situation.”

“Now’s not a good time.”

“Why? Would I be interfering with your gumshoe business? Are you in the middle of a case?” Her tone shifted again. “Phyllis--I mean Philip--are you working *at all*? Are you getting any calls from that man in Flushing?”

“Not at the moment. That’s out of my control.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“Why can’t you believe me when I say I am trying? I comb the classifieds like a...”

“Detective?”

“Yes!”

Phyllis sighed. “Maybe this ‘detective work’ will do you some good. Occupy your mind. Maybe you’ll have something to tell Albert--or rather, Dr. Barren--besides this inane idea of playing board games.”

“Albert tells you about that?” said Philip. Wasn’t therapy supposed to be confidential? Philip’s therapist was about as confidential as a parrot. “That’s not very professional, is it?”

“His professionalism begins and ends with me, Phyllis. Philip!”

Philip furrowed his brow. “Please let me stop seeing him.”

“No. Out of the question. We all know your history. You do, first and foremost. I will never cancel your sessions with Doctor Barren.”

“But why can’t I at least switch to a doctor I like?”

“Because it is good for you to deal with hardships! Not that seeing a brilliant counselor is such a hardship. But you must overcome this idea that life will just open up to you if you complain. Maybe you can--what do they call it?--*terminate* your therapy with Doctor Barren once you get a real job. But until then--”

“But I have gotten a real job!”

“As a Private Eye?”

“Yes. That and another job.”

“Doing what?”

“Nude modeling.”

“Oh Phyllis, please stop joking. Why don't you get back to your *clay* models? Like the ones you did as a child?”

It was true that Philip used to work with clay. But it was ten years prior, in 1985, when he was released from the psychiatric unit of Elmhurst hospital and began working with Dr. Barren, a child psychologist. Barren, also ten years younger at the time, was studying arts and crafts as a means for his patients to connect with their unconscious fears and desires. And little eleven year old Philip, after making a number of severed heads--portraits of his father that his mother absolutely revered--made a clay vagina, complete with hair, carving the strands with his fingernails. Barren assumed the sculpture represented Phyllis's vagina, therefore he never mentioned it to her for fear of her embarrassment and her subsequent termination of therapy. He kept the sculpture locked away in a closet in his office, a bit like a shrine to Phyllis. But Barren assumed wrong. It wasn't Phyllis's vagina.

Barren's hypothesis was since Philip tried to kill himself by beheading, he was rejecting his life from the very instant it began. His head being the first thing to experience life, to breathe air, therefore Philip wanted that part of him dead. Or, like Barren, perhaps Philip wished he had never left the womb.

“We all wish that, I assure you,” Barren guffawed once during a session, trying to get Philip to talk about the sculpture. But Philip divulged nothing. He, Philip, wouldn't say if it was his mother's vagina, nor would he echo Barren's admission about wanting to go back in the womb, which made Barren wish he hadn't admitted it himself. That was when Barren insisted on keeping the sculpture in his office to analyze it further.

For the first time, Philip, eleven years old at the time, snapped to attention. “But it’s mine,” he said.

“Don’t you want to get to the bottom of this? Of your motives?” Barren asked. “To find out why you made this?” When Philip didn’t answer, Barren continued. “I want to help you, Philip. And if you prevent me from doing what I do best, I can’t help you do *your* best. Do you understand?”

Philip understood that Barren wanted to keep the sculpture. And Philip didn’t need to be an analyst to know why.

Phyllis made a habit of staying in the waiting room while Philip was in session. She always said hello and goodbye to Barren, and, of course, handed him a check at the end of every month. Philip watched as Barren handed her something, too. He thought it was a love note the way their fingers almost touched, the soft smiles they’d exchange. But years later, when Phyllis stopped transporting him to therapy, he discovered it was just an invoice, printed on expensive paper with hair and fibers sticking out the sides.

For Dr. Barren, having a copy of Phyllis’s vagina to gaze upon whenever he wanted was like a professional dream come true. Barren set up a little shrine in his office closet. He put some candles out around the clay sculpture until he realized this might cause the sculpture to melt, so he purchased a quartet of mini lava lamps, which better added to the effect he was going for anyway. When Barren had time between patients, or after his workday was done, he would waste no time: open the closet, turn on the lamps, stick his face inside, and gently close the doors against the back of his head as much as was possible. He would close his eyes, and when he opened them, he was inside Phyllis’s womb. For Barren, it wasn’t enough to have sex with a woman--to be ‘inside her.’ What

Barren wanted was to be all the way inside a woman he was attracted to, to crawl inside her womb and curl up and twist and froth and make love to her like a fetus.

Barren's reality-fantasy was to be caught by Phyllis while he was inside the mock-up womb. Like if she were to walk into his office while he had his head in the closet and for her to ask him what he was doing there, and for him to show her her own womb and then for her to become aroused, and then for them to make love on his African rug, that was a pretty good fantasy, too. And Barren, for his part, came close to achieving it. Philip was prone to having coughing fits during therapy. Barren knew the cause of it was the air conditioner pointed directly at Philip's face. Philip teared up, embarrassed that that might be construed as crying, then he'd cough explosively, and would need to excuse himself to go to the bathroom. This afforded Barren a chance to take a brief look inside his closet into Phyllis's womb, while its owner was sitting in his waiting room on the other side of the wall! Though Barren wanted this to be the thrill of a lifetime, it proved unsatisfactory, because the lava lamps did not have time to warm up and create the proper effect. He couldn't switch them on beforehand for they would be too noisy and emit a glow from the closet, which Philip might ask about. Well, what could you do? It was not worth the risk. Better to simply go out into the waiting room and flirt with Phyllis. To Barren, it was clear that Phyllis was interested in him. Why else would she stay in the waiting room during Philip's sessions? But at the time, in the early days of his practice, Barren wasn't sure that pursuing a patient's mother was in his own best interests. For one thing, he was married--though he wasn't particularly a fan of his wife and wouldn't mind having a different one--but he also found Philip tedious and Barren knew he would have to put up with the boy for free if he pursued Phyllis. If he had an affair with the mother, the

client/patient relationship would have to end and Phyllis's checks were crucial to Barren paying his office's rent. And finally, in the face of all the other, more boring financial considerations--what was he, an accountant like his brother, Steve? No. The real, *psychological* question Dr. Barren had to ask himself was: would sex with Phyllis be better than his dance in his closet? He couldn't be sure of that. In fact, he was pretty sure he was closer to perfection now. Sex with Phyllis could very well be a disappointment.