



Ho Lin

Tableau

Saturday morning at 11:03 begins, as it always does, with Nat King Cole and “Walkin’ My Baby Back Home.” Outside the café, a van bounces by with a hiccup of white smoke. The scattering, adorable little footsteps of children are heard but not seen. So it was, so it is now, so it will be.

The café does not exist anymore, nor does the van, the children, the turntable in the corner upon which the Nat King Cole record spins round and round. Yet here they are, every component of 11:03 a.m. present and accounted for. She sits alone in the center of the café, facing slightly away from the door so as to grant herself a bit of privacy. It is the optimal location between the café’s stereo speakers. *Gee it’s great after being out late, walking my baby back home*, Nat croons. The waiter places coffee cup, spoon and saucer just a few centimeters beyond her right hand resting on the table. She doesn’t look at him; she has never looked at him, so she can’t start now. If she did look at him she would notice that it is not always the same waiter who serves her, but the cup and saucer are always placed in the same position.

It wasn’t too long ago (she flatters herself it wasn’t too long ago, even though it was at least decades previous) that she was in a foreign land and found herself in this café, or rather, a café exactly the same as this. An unremarkable café overall, but something about the white lace curtains, the daintiness of the porcelain, the way the sun played across the walls and the breeze stole in to ruffle the napkins, reminded her of even earlier days, when her world

was cobbled streets and fields under crisp autumn skies, long before palace intrigue and chauffeured rides and glimpses of faces in multitudes of crowds. Happy with her anonymity here, she drinks her mocha in two sips. It tastes the same, then and now.

Arm in arm over meadow and farm, walkin' my baby back home. Here the record skips for a second and a half, as it always must. Back when there were millions of LPs, the man who was once a journalist collected them. Albums at his home were catalogued by genre and artist, entire walls devoted to his pursuit, museum and mausoleum. He had a talent (he would say curse) for cataloging and recalling everything: conversations, sights, even the smells of a place.

One day in a foreign land, preoccupied with the notion that he would never write something original, that he would forever be a chronicler and not an artist, the journalist found himself in a café. He sank into a seat in the corner, swarmed by his thoughts, all track time of lost. The next thing he knew, it was an hour later and he was the only customer left. The turntable was repeating the first track from Nat King Cole's "The Billy May Sessions." *Arm in arm over meadow and farm, walkin' my baby back home.* Then the record skipped for about one and a half seconds, the equivalent of a breath. It was enough to snap him back to the world.

And that was that, the incident dormant in his mind, until years later. After all the wars, long after that foreign land had been razed, its population dispersed, long after there was a need for journalists, some very polite men had sought him out. Yes, he had been in that particular café on that date. Yes, he could recall the details of the café. After all, his mind was nothing more than a bloody recording device. No, better than that, he was assured – not only could he observe, he could also *discern*, and discernment was paramount.

It is 11:04, and Nat proceeds: *We stop for a while, she gives me a smile, and snuggles her head on my chest.* The fly enters, as it always does. A fat bauble razzing and buzzing, it skirts past her ear and settles on her bare left arm. Human and fly gaze at each other for a few moments, sizing each other up. Then with a swish of her napkin, her arm is covered, the offending beast trapped. A brief application of pressure, and the fly is crushed. Dots of blue and red soak the napkin where it was. She stares at the spot, as if she is the

one exterminated, and is more keenly aware of life than she has ever been.

Since flies no longer thrive in this part of the world, fresh batches must be constantly flown in. They are trained for months, and even with all the thousands to work from, only one or two at a time gain enough skill to qualify for the honor of undertaking that predetermined suicide mission from doorway to arm. The mocha is equally rare (black market, fees still within reason), as is the turntable (under the perfect replica housing, a Frankenstein of circuits from a half-dozen dead components), as is the van that passes by (since she never actually sees the van hurtle past, one need only replicate the noise of the motor, the specific ingredients of its exhaust smoke, the impression of a vehicle moving from left to right), as is the Nat King Cole album (a mint version unearthed from the journalist's collection, with a scratch of specific length and depth applied at a precise position, so as to create that second-and-a-half skip).

It is the former journalist's job to ensure that everything in this café happens as it must. The weight of the lace curtains as well as their look must be judged, so they always billow the same when the artificially-generated breeze blows through. The cuffs on the waiter's sleeves must eternally be buckled just so. Even the aggregated smell of the morning's fresh baked goods must be fabricated – it is a tricky thing, manufacturing a scent that is indeterminate yet spot-on. Every week is devoted to rehearsal, preparation, evaluation, all for that moment at 11:03 a.m. every Saturday when she is seated, the song plays, the mocha is delivered, the song skips, the fly arrives, the fly is extinguished.

At the next table over, a college boy and girl murmur to each other. For a few moments she listens. *It's just better not to talk*, the girl says. *Half the time you're not thinking when you talk, and the other half gets misinterpreted anyway*. He teases her back: *What if you're a good listener? You gonna discriminate against good listeners with your silence?* These words are spoken in a foreign language which she will never understand -- not that she cares. (Just like the cover of a book, the journalist muses – sometimes you fall in love with a cover, and engaging with the actual contents would be a letdown.) Reconstituting this conversation required interviews with survivors and relatives as well as tireless linguistic

research, and then it was a matter of finding correct actors for the roles, at least until they outgrow them, whereupon new actors will be recruited, and repeat, and again. For now, it is enough for the boy and girl to play their drama for the woman's benefit. She detects love behind their words (or at least imagines so, it is open to debate as to whether they actually loved each other), and smiles. On cue, another breeze scuttles across the room. She absently clears her hair around her forehead, caught up in the simple pleasure of it all – mocha, tissue on arm, boy and girl laughing at each other, breeze, and Nat's next verse: *She's 'fraid of the dark, so I have to park outside of her door till it's light.*

She is unaware of the journalist's existence. They must never meet, because that would introduce subjectivity, and interfere with the integrity of what has been created and reinforced. The journalist has been told that this is the last time she had something approximating happiness, and it has been decided by all parties (he is never told who comprises "all parties," although he assumes that none of this can happen without her consent) that she wants nothing more than to replicate this moment, drown in it.

She is attractive, she is known to many -- apart from this, all he knows of her is contained within the café. Two sips of mocha. Fly on arm. Smile at boy and girl. Hundreds of times he has witnessed this scene, and yet, somehow, all that occurs happens as it always has. It is akin to watching a trapeze artist. He is mesmerized by the spectacle, by her.

Why not drugs? Virtual reality? No, he has been told, nothing matches the tactile. Movements through time leave more of an imprint on memory. She is past caring about public opinion or legacy. Her recollections have been transferred to him through third parties and married with his own remembrances, the accumulated knowledge codified in notebooks, outlines, draftsman's contracts. He is often reminded of something a fellow journalist said once: *History is written by those who take the time to write it.* He is regressing from journalist to historian. At this rate, nothing he does will ever be his own. And yet, it is clear this is his talent. This is the first time in his life he has committed to something beyond himself, and finished it.

She is given a snack: peanut butter brittle with wasabi sprinkles. She cracks a piece in half and swallows, whereupon her hand goes to her throat. Something caught there, just for a moment. A whole peanut seed. It is of no concern, at least none related to health. She swallows hard again, seed released, and she imagines it will tumble into her stomach, where it will take root and grow. How wonderful it would be. *Silly*, she says out loud. As always, no one notices her outburst. Everyone in the café is aware of it, of course, but no one can betray that they have noticed.

The journalist has witnessed this particular scene hundreds of times, from hundreds of vantage points. He sees what no one else sees, not even the woman, especially when she raises her hand to her throat. Her fingers are starting to shake just a tiny bit more. She is growing older. Yet she still wears the same smiles, reacts the same every time. This routine is burned into her reflexes, her veins. Would it be right to say he loves her? Every time he watches her, he wishes to take action, maybe even make a suggestion that will result in her walking out of the café and never returning.

At 11:06 a man enters the café. It is not known then or now who the man was. He sits in the corner, near the turntable, forming a vertex equidistant from doorway and cashier. The woman's back is completely to him. She remembers this event because she can smell his cologne. Woods and waterfalls. Her spoon is in her hand, poised to stir her fresh cup of mocha, and she considers turning, even for just an instant, to look at him. It seems preordained. Nat King Cole, mocha, fly, boy and girl, fresh breeze, peanut seed. This should be the next event in this crucial chain. But she is exhausted; much to do, many responsibilities to honor, and she is not used to entertaining so many idle thoughts. Not even the mocha and the dead fly on her arm can forestall sleep. She has heard of a spoon siesta, where one takes a nap with spoon in hand, and when the spoon drops from your grasp to the floor it is time to wake up. Content with that knowledge, she sits, and waits, her eyes closed.

The journalist sits in the corner. It is not his first time there, and others have taken that position, but he is there now, fulfilling the historical imperative of What Really Happened. He knows one thing more, though. He was in that corner so long ago, in that café in a foreign land, behind her. He wasn't aware of this, of her, back then -- it was the one time he had refused to pay attention to the

world, to catalogue. But he has come to realize that it was him. He cannot divulge this fact; if he did it would break this loop, change her irrevocably. The café would no longer exist, and he would no longer have an opportunity to play this part, to sit in the corner, to watch her, watch the spoon poised between her fingers, watch her lips go soft as she becomes drowsy and invites dreams that will not come true.

Walkin' my baby, talkin' my baby, lovin' my baby, I don't mean maybe... Walkin' my baby back home.

The spoon drops.

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