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The Calculus of Felicity

There is a way he has of looking into the mirror that tells me he likes himself, but he isn't sure, each time he comes back to the mirror, exactly what to expect. The expression he sees on this face is clearly friendly. All its features are pleasantly proportioned—even its hair flops into acceptable arrangements without much fuss. But he doesn't look at the mirror to congratulate himself on this. He looks at his face as though it has assumed its pleasant appearance out of pure good will. It likes him, and wishes to please. He appreciates this: he smiles at the mirror just as he would at a friend who has done him an unexpected favor.

From my tree I can see them greet each other, the man and the mirror. If he tried, if he knew exactly where to look and what to look for, he could see my reflection just above his right shoulder. Nothing distinct, just a dark object at the juncture of two thick branches in a massive pine, roundish with little points on either side that are my elbows sticking out as they hold up binoculars. But there is no reason for him to look for me, and he never has.

It's a little spooky watching him boil water for tea in the same red and purple kettle I have at home. Of course the kettle is a coincidence—a present from my sister, not something I bought myself—but coincidences definitely contribute to spookiness. When we do our laundry, we fold the tee shirts, then roll them up, because they look sort of cool that way and you can find them more easily in the drawer. Who else does that? Our favorite late night snack is spaghetti with olive oil and red pepper flakes. We carry rocks home from the beach and stack them into cairns in the corner of the living room. We have prints of Tibetan tankas on the wall, we like maps, blue bed-sheets, certain shades of purple and dark green. I look at his bookshelves and half my books are already there.

I'm almost certain he's the one. But I've only been watching him for a month. This is so fast! I'm a little nervous.

He tests computer graphics programs. I edit technical manuals, including several that he uses. I have a book of my own, as well, a

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manual on how to write manuals: How clear can a sentence be? Sentences that go one step at a time. Friendly sentences. Sentences that already know exactly what you need.

The first time I was in his apartment there was a copy of my book on his kitchen table, propped open under a phone book that was slowly cracking its spine. He had been reading me over breakfast (tea and bagels). I had seen him with the book on the table but hadn't known, until then, that it was mine. "This is the most amazing coincidence," I wanted to write in the margin. "I don't believe in fate and therefore, coincidences impress me even more with their strangeness." But of course I couldn't leave any sign that I had been inside.

Looking straight from the tree into the closest bedroom window I see the mirror, mounted full length on the bathroom door. Through the other window, off to the right at an angle, I can see his bed, the head of it, the pillows. (He sleeps tucked up on his side, as I do, and doesn't snore.) To the left at a sharper angle is the living room. I can see the left half of the couch. When he reads he lies on the couch with his head and book showing. To watch tv he lies the other way. He turns off the reading light, and I study his feet through binoculars. His feet are unusually well manicured. He keeps a clipper on the low table between couch and tv, and during commercials he peels off his socks and inspects his toes, picking lint from between them and clipping any small corners of nails that have grown sharp.

At bedtime, if the television is on, he wanders from the bathroom and brushes his teeth in front of it, still watching. If the television is off he paces around the living room, circling the couch, thinking whatever he is thinking with a serious expression, oblivious to the toothbrush and all else. I have seen him circle the couch in hard thinking for twenty minutes at a stretch, all that time with the toothbrush still in his mouth.

The pleasure he takes in these small acts of grooming! In bed at night I've started to copy the way he stretches out his toes so there is space between each one, then curls them tightly, like fingers making a fist. It makes my toes feel warmer. They like the attention.

In a tree at night, watching someone in a room at night, you start to wonder about rooms, always being inside where the air (it now seems to me) has stopped. Lamps and papers are not rustling and

swaying in it. Things stay so still they look like photographs. Inside-things are our things, only ours, in a way that nothing outside can be.

With me out here most nights is the fog, the inquisitive ocean fog that wanders into my pine and gets stuck on the needles. It's like a neighbor, or a pet, going in and out; it doesn't speak, and has its own routines. Then there are the sounds: sea lions barking from rocks off shore, muffer growls, bird mutterings, insect trills. Distant sounds are the best, low moans like the fog horn passing through me as it fades. Or airplanes. Sound reaching out in the world: between my body and the airplane, only air.

Of course I love rooms, that is why I love to look at them. They are bright and dry and warm and everything easy. Cushioned chairs and couches, a floor underneath to catch the things I drop. If a man did not seem at peace in his own rooms, would I trust him? Certainly not.

The phone tap works well, but he doesn't get many calls. There are his friends Bill and Chad, arranging mountain biking trips; his parents on Sunday nights; and his last girlfriend, who moved to Florida to be a park ranger. She tells him about the birds she sees there. Roseate spoonbills, ibis, egrets and gray herons. "They're everywhere!" she says. I picture my tree full of large birds with long legs and long curved beaks, settled for the night on the higher branches, grooming their long white feathers. The ex-girlfriend has a nice laugh and sounds sad when they hang up.

I called him once myself. He was so promising that I moved the phone survey up to the second week: it gets rid of more men than any other test. And I like doing it. The questions are all written out so I don't have to worry about what to say next, and it's fun getting the answers. So much of the time I watch these men without knowing what they are thinking. They sit, and stand, and cook. Sometimes they get phone calls, or have friends over; occasionally there is even a party. Then I'll drive home and bring back a couple beers. Those are some of the best nights: sitting in a dark tree drinking cold beer, listening to music while the branch sways in the breeze, watching people dance, free to watch and listen and feel part of it all without having to hover at the edge of things trying to look like I fit in.

But most nights, most of the time, the men are silent. So when they speak—and for the first time, speak to me—it is like curtains are drawn aside and suddenly I can see into another window. I actually do picture the man I am calling sitting in a chair with a window in his chest, and through it I see his voice (it looks like a telephone) sitting in its own chair, a bright red high stool, lit up like a spotlight is on it.

I pretend to be conducting a phone survey of sexual attitudes for a well-known nonprofit organization. Though the questions must be convincingly generic (teen pregnancy, abortion, sex education in schools), I am always aware afterwards of having talked about sex. Is the man comfortable with these words—intercourse, condoms? Does he respond to them in my voice? Does he feel a tug but remain polite, nonetheless? If I have no urge, after the call, to leave my apartment and see the man I called—to be close to him—I give up and find someone else.

Such a phone call could easily lead to a hang-up from an otherwise desirable man. But I want a man who will tell me what I need to know: I decided long ago that people who draw their curtains at night are not looking for me.

As a follow-up to the phone survey I canvas door to door for the same organization. I gather contributions and send them in, quite legitimately. I know before knocking that the man is favorable to the cause, but will he be favorable to me? This test is unavoidable, but I dread it. The man will open the door and be standing right there—full size, taller than me, within reach. He will see me. Once I gave up on a man at just this point. I was standing at the door about to knock, my hand in a fist heading for the wood, when suddenly my hand slowed like it was screeching on the brakes, and by the time it reached the door it didn't make a sound. I didn't want that man to know who I was. (It is a test for me as well as for him.)

I had no such doubts this time, although I was awfully nervous.

His apartment was on the second floor. The landing by his door had a view (through pine trees) to the ocean, and to a lighthouse that is now a surfing museum. If the ocean were visible through my tree, he might have noticed me by now, some annoying obstruction to his view. But as it is, the ocean always draws his eyes away from me.

He came to the door in socks, and smiled when he saw me. I took a deep breath to see if there was anything I could smell: a trace of beer.

I was two sentences into my little speech when he interrupted—“Was it you who called last week? Sex in the schools, or no! Sorry, sex education. Oops.” He looked anxious until I laughed.

“Probably that was me,” I said. I didn’t want to go back to my speech but didn’t know what else to say. He had looked at me so closely, just the way he looked at his mirror, checking to see if things were still okay. Was he so insecure? But a touch of insecurity makes a man try harder.

“Well, you already know what we do! Can I leave you this brochure? It has the address if you would like to join, or just make a contribution.” He took it gently. I hardly felt the tug of paper passing from my hand to his. His hand was so familiar! From the binoculars. And here it was. The real hand.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Martha,” I said. I had a name tag on my jacket, to look more official. He smiled and glanced down at it: he already knew. But he didn’t just take my name, he asked for it, which pleased me. (He did not, however, seem to notice that my name was the same as that of the author of his manuals. Perhaps he pictured that author as a kindly but stern retired schoolteacher; others have.)

“Thanks. Good-bye, Martha,” he said.

It was a very good meeting.

I moved his score peg up the castle tower one notch at a time, as though he was working hard to earn each point, instead of always doing the right thing effortlessly, accidentally. In the farmer’s market a month ago, the way he shook a honeydew melon and listened to it (the slosh of loose ripe seeds) got him through the castle’s surrounding brambles and thorns. Once through the tangle there is the formal garden, with its labyrinth, and then, patrolling the moat, the fire-breathing dragon—the kind that asks riddles, clever and sly, not the kind you slay. (This is the sex questionnaire.) Then the moat itself: my man must be able to swim. The front door is open but there are guards inside blocking the stairs, so to avoid violence he must climb the castle wall. Plenty of ivy to hang onto. Anyway there are all these notches I’ve made for the pegs; easy climbing if you’re not afraid of heights. There are harpies circling: my loyal Shyness,

Perfectionism, and Solitary Ways. He must have a sufficient supply of biscuits (jokes and silliness) to distract and charm them all.

The perfect princess is waiting at the top, not asleep or enchanted as some princesses have waited, but standing in the open window looking out over everything. She's dressed in a lowcut blue satin gown. Glued to the necklace painted on her neck is a genuine diamond. But just in case something is wrong when she finally looks into his eyes, she's holding a canister of mace. (In the other hand, naturally, are her binoculars.)

Through her lips, where her tongue would be, is a small button. This is how I will fall in love: the peg which has climbed the castle wall notch by notch will finally fill her mouth like a deep french kiss. The button, pushed, will fall through a hole in the center of the castle tower and drop three miniature stories into a tiny feather bed. Boom.

So many people complain that they can't find a person to love. But what do they do about it? I used to sit alone in my apartment thinking about all the other people sitting alone in their apartments. A map of the town with tentative hearts marked in pink, several to a block. "Hello? Hello, are you there? If only they could hear us," the hearts think in their simple straightforward way. They know what they want.

One night at the grocery store I stood in line behind a man buying watermelon and limes, two fruits I love. The man was relaxed and friendly and just standing in line by him made me feel happy. I followed him home. That man was living with someone, but it was a start.

There are men out and about in cafes, markets, bookstores and theaters, on the streets and sidewalks, and if you look at enough of them sooner or later one will click. Don't I know him? you will think to yourself, though you also know that you have never seen the man before. If he is alone, I will follow him. There are more than a hundred I have followed. At this stage it doesn't take much to rule a man out: driving too fast, impatience with some guiltless inanimate object. (Kindness shows itself on all levels, I have learned from this watching.) Any excuse will do. I am utterly unreasonable and unforgiving, because after all, there will only be one. And that's it. One, and then forever.

Men are not sentences. I like to pretend they are, to think of them as things I can take apart and rearrange, but they are not. They have to be right all along. If you must edit, follow another one.

That is why sentences are so wonderful. That is why I wrote a book about them.

“As a sculptor sees his statue within the block of marble, you see an idea within your head which you wish to make apparent to others. But sentences take shaping just as marble or clay does. After all, we use these same words over and over again to say all sorts of things! So it is necessary for words to be slippery. Tumble them around; try them in different places, slide other words in and out. When the words are right it will seem you have found the expression that was there all along, peaceful and complete. Remember this: once caught, words stay where you put them. There are not so many things in life one can say this of. A sentence can be one of our few perfections. Know what you want; don’t give up until you have it.”

First the watching. Then the phone survey, then a meeting face to face: by this point I had given up on every one of the men I’d watched before. No one else had come this far. Next—not so soon as to seem more than coincidence, not so distant that the man might not remember me—another direct encounter, seemingly accidental.

The air was balmy, little clouds were arranged delicately across the horizon waiting for the sun to color them. The tide was low. It was a perfect evening to walk on the beach. I wondered if he would think of this: five point bonus, I urged him as he drank a beer. He was a little slow changing into shorts and sandals, but finally off he went. I followed.

He walked along the sea cliffs, took a path through the iceplant, and climbed out on a rock jetty alongside the beach. He stood just within reach of the seaspray thrown by the largest waves as they crashed the rocks. I knew he was capable of staring at things for a long time, so I circled down to the beach. I would appear from a different direction, climbing up the rocks behind him. It was only a week since I had knocked on his door, but I was certain he wouldn’t recognize me as I was—my hair was tied back, baseball cap pulled low, I had on a loose sweater and sweatpants. I planned to brush my hair out once I reached the top, quickly neaten up a bit. But halfway

up I slipped on a patch of wet algae and banged my knee. “Ow!” He turned to me and waved. “Hi, Martha,” he called. “You okay?”

I was shocked to hear my name. I was so used to not being seen that I thought of myself as invisible. It felt like a spotlight was on me, and I wanted to run, as politely as possible: wave, point to some people I might be with, turn and leave. But it was too late. He came over and reached out a hand, which I took, and he pulled me up the last steep stretch of rock.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem.”

We watched the clouds get pinker. We watched pelicans fly in a purposeful line down the shore from far left to far right. We watched a container boat traveling almost at the horizon. He borrowed my binoculars. I almost laughed when he looked through them: after all my watching, it seemed he would look through the lenses and see himself. His touch would turn them into mirrors.

“Wow,” he said, looking at the container boat. “It’s piled up with whales!”

“What?” I reached for the binoculars.

“No, wait . . . not whales, they’re big sacks of fishing worms. They’re sort of wiggling.”

“Uh huh. . .”

“Look! There’s like a million fish swimming after, jumping out of the water trying to catch them. They’re flying fish, they’re landing in the boat!”

“Hey, watch out behind you! Giant crab!” I said. He jumped, then pointed the binoculars straight at me, clicking with his finger as if they were a camera. “No, you’re too close,” he said. “Either that or your eyes are very fuzzy.”

We climbed back down the rocks and walked on the beach. The sky deepened, things turned blue. The ocean and the seagulls and the dogs chasing frisbees on the beach: I was perfectly happy, until I tried to think of something to say. Each time I looked up at him, he noticed and smiled back at me. I was speechless but definitely not invisible.

“Do you want to see a movie?” he asked.

Just like that. It was as though he had studied or practiced how to be exactly the way I wanted him to be. He had recognized me instantly, and now this, asking for a date—he might have enough

points to make it to the top. I couldn't wait to get home and add up his score.

"Tonight? Oh thanks, but I can't. I really should go. But, give me your phone number, okay?" And I gave him mine.

I waved and walked off. He looked disappointed, but still relaxed. While I climbed the stairs along the cliff I looked down and saw him take off his sandals and chase patches of stiff foam in the water, kicking them up and catching them in his hands.

I went straight home and added him up. I looked for excuses to take off a few points here and there, because no one is perfect and I wanted it all to be fair. But really, he was perfect. He did everything right.

I moved him peg by peg up the castle wall, and it was true: he would make it to the top. The harpies seemed to be sulking. I had to laugh at them, with those big ugly beaks and bright red feet, their terrifying claws that could do nothing to stop him—what about them, after all this time? Were they supposed to just fly away?

And the princess. Standing there with a hole in her mouth like there was something she wanted to say, her little pink mouth with its permanently worried, disapproving O. I got all the way to the top but stopped before pushing the peg into the last notch, through her lips. She looked frightened. I had a vision of her knocking on his door. He opened it (in his socks, which were a bright, furry red), and she held out to him a silver platter with her heart on it. Not a red valentine heart but muscle and delicate tissue crossed with veins, anatomically correct and still beating.

Some nights it's tempting to leave a note with a request: "Could you play some Talking Heads?" Those long nights when he lies on the couch and reads. I listen to the radio on my walkman. The light behind his couch shines directly at me, making needle and branch shadows on my chest and hands. When the book doesn't cover his face, I watch his eyes move across the words, line by line, and think about what is inside him, how he has words and songs and names and shapes and tastes and feelings inside him that I can't see. I think of standing where the book is, with my binoculars, to watch the words go into his eyes. I want to follow them to his brain and see what they do there.

Most nights he undresses in front of the mirror. He doesn't intend to, I think; it seems to draw him to it. If he is off to the side a little when he starts to pull up his shirt, he realizes he can't quite see, and by the time his arms are above his head he is in front of the mirror watching the effect on his ribs. He pauses with his arms high, the shirt held up, his ribs lifted and stomach stretched flat. He watches himself undo his belt buckle and step out of his pants. As soon as the pants are off he leaves the mirror and goes straight into bed.

How happy he makes me! Every night I stay till I'm exhausted. Very late at night the stars say things like, "the wax has not the sweetness of the honey, nor the fragrance of the flowers." I take the data and the computations home with me and pile my bed with pillows. I listen to the messages he still sometimes leaves for me, hearing them for the second time that night. When the lights are out I think I am sleeping in a nest on the tree trunk and must lie very still. All night I balance on six inches of curved bark.

This is it. Any time now, I can push the button and fall in love.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE FELICIFIC CALCULUS

Excerpts from *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*
by Jeremy Bentham

Principle of utility, what. By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.

- I. Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the ends which the legislator has in view: it behooves him therefore to understand their value.
- II. *Circumstances to be taken into account in estimating the value of a pleasure or pain:*
 1. Its *intensity*.
 2. Its *duration*.
 3. Its *certainty* or *uncertainty*.
 4. Its *propinquity* or *remoteness*.

5. Its *fecundity*, or the chance it has of being followed by sensations of the same kind: that is, pleasures, if it be a pleasure: pains, if it be a pain.
 6. Its *purity*, or the chance it has of *not* being followed by sensations of the *opposite* kind: that is, pains, if it be a pleasure: pleasures, if it be a pain.
 7. Its *extent*; that is, the number of persons to whom it *extends*; or (in other words) who are affected by it.
- v. *Process for estimating the tendency of any act or event.*
Sum up all the values of all the *pleasures* on the one side, and those of all the *pains* on the other.
- vi. *Use of the foregoing process.* It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgment, or to every legislative or judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view: and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such process approach to the character of an exact one.
- vii. *The same process applicable to good and evil, profit and mischief, and all other modifications of pleasure and pain.*