

Blanche: A Baker's Dozen

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i.

"Why do you go around with her," my wife asks.
I answer with a shrug.
Let her detectives guess.

ii.

Blanche's thighs are overweight. They jiggle when she skips into the ocean. They swell over the straps of her garter belt and her pantyhose leave blushing indentations.

She's sensitive about her thighs. It's not my doing. Though, perhaps if I could hit on something right to say . . . "Well, your knockers are terrific!" But she'd find that too indelicate. Ironically, she tells me it was her old lover, the Baroni, who made her self-conscious in the first place. One day, referring to her genitalia, and prodding her thighs gently with his cane, he said, "A jewel like that should have the proper setting."

iii.

Lately, my wife has found a way to bring Blanche up without really mentioning her. She refers to me as "oh you poor dear."

iv.

Blanche had a black eye today. I've noticed marks on her from time to time, rather regularly, when you come down to it. Since she's never mentioned them

neither have I, but this time, it being so obvious I asked: "What in the world happened to you?"

"It's my son," she said, "I never told you but he's mad."

v.

The other day I visited my friend Randel. He's a kind of writer. He doesn't like to be thought of as an artist. "Jest folks," he says. Mostly he writes about the midwest corn belt—Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska. He was trying to persuade me to drive into the country with him and watch while he had intercourse with a horse.

"Can you make her come?" I asked.

He admitted he couldn't but argued that wasn't the point, that a natural curiosity in all living things should make me want to go, and that if it didn't then I was in big trouble.

"Besides, what else better do you have to do," he asked.

"There's always Blanche," I said, just joking.

vi.

When I got home my wife asked if I'd had a good day, if I'd run into anyone. Her detectives obviously had reported the meeting with Randel, but she was beginning to worry about the veracity of her own detectives. I knew she'd already switched agencies three times in the last year. She suspected they made things up about me at the end of the day and didn't really surveil me at all, but rather hung out in cocktail lounges or worked some other case at her expense. So she'd started asking me herself, trying to corroborate their stories. Anyway, to put her mind to rest I told her about Randel. I did it in a sarcastic way, speaking of him as if he were a fool.

"You don't have one friend whom you don't abuse behind his back," she said.

She ran through her litany of charges: I was a hypocrite, I was incapable of sustaining a relationship, etc. etc. She even dredged up a remark she'd overheard me drop once at a party: "When all my friends were poseurs at twenty they were a hell of a lot more interesting than now, since they've gone on this fad of being brutally honest."

vii.

After the rain her closet smelled like smoked fish when I reached in for my umbrella.

Outside, the streets lined with puddles, pink and violet under the shop signs. Green beneath trees.

"It can't be just take take take. There has to be some give give give once in a while too."

In the park I stop at a fountain to rinse my mustache.

viii.

Ever since I made that joke about Blanche, Randel's been trying to get me to introduce him. The other afternoon it finally came out: would she be amicable to riding out in the country and having sex with an animal—certainly not a horse—a big dog perhaps.

"Wherever did you get that idea?"

Well, then would the two of us want to watch him at a little of his horseplay?

ix.

For some reason I've developed the habit of listening at her door before knocking. Sometimes the radio's on or the TV or her toilet flushing. Sometimes I hear her singing on the other side. Once she was laughing so loud and spontaneously that I thought she must be entertaining someone. But I knocked anyway. I'd made myself promise that if I'm going to permit myself to listen, then I mustn't let anything I hear prevent me from knocking. As it turned out she was completely alone.

x.

Another conversation with Randel:

"You lie to her, don't you?"

"Why worry about someone you never met?"

"You're a cynic. Negative!"

"Define positive."

"I wouldn't lie to get laid."

"Would you tell the truth to get laid?"

xi.

I heard her sobbing hysterically behind the door and knocked. The crying which had sounded so uncontrollable stopped abruptly.

"Just a minute," she said evenly.

I waited there the full minute.

When she opened the door she was wearing a silk kimono. It made me realize

she'd been sitting there naked and bawling her eyes out. They were still red and swollen underneath. We sat down at the kitchen table. She lit a cigarette. After awhile I reached across the table and put my hand on top of the hand without the cigarette. Tears welled up in both her eyes and spilled down her cheeks tracking through the rouge and plopping on the oilcloth.

"I visited him at the asylum this morning," she said. "The last time I was there I noticed the turntable on his record player was spinning. 'You left your turntable on,' I told him. 'That's alright,' he said, 'the hum keeps me company.' So this time I brought him a record, the Tijuana Brass. 'Thanks a lot,' he says, 'but I can't play it.' 'Why not?' 'No needle in the phonograph—they take everything sharp away—everything but my teeth!'"

She broke down sobbing, her forehead resting on the table, and I got up and put my arm around her and led her to the couch and got her a box of kleenex.

"Look," she said and opened her kimono holding one of her large breasts up towards me in the palm of her hand. There was a bloody ring of teeth marks around the nipple as if a lamprey had been feeding.

"Just because he's crazy is no excuse to let him get away with this shit," she sobbed, shaking her head no.

xii.

I haven't seen the detectives for the last week. When my wife asks what I've done I can't answer. I don't know what they've told her. If I were a detective who was going to lie I'd wait until I'd established some pattern in the suspect's life and then base my fabrications on that—they'd be more like predictions than falsehoods. But I'm not sure they've discerned any pattern in me. More likely they've observed my wife and realized she could be swindled.

xiii.

"I saw what you were doing in there."

"What?"

"You were looking through my medicine cabinet."

"I have a headache. I needed an aspirin."

"You looked at my bottle of Nytol, you looked at my birth control pills, you looked at my Ex-Lax, you looked at my Kotex, you tested my deodorants, you checked the cabinet under the sink with the douche and makeup kit and stuff for my hair like the FBI or something, you were checking through my hairbrush, for what? grey hairs . . ."

"Jesus Christ! So what if I did? I'm married you know. I'm used to human functions."

"You stuffed your finger down my drain and felt for what was clogged, you smelled my houseslipper and made a face . . ."

“Well, if you’re so shocked, what in the hell were you doing watching what I was doing when I was in the bathroom?”

“I’m not Jackie Onassis you know, who has a million dollars a week so she feels like a woman.”