

*The McGugle Account*

We were all surprised when Brian hired The Cyclops. His references only spoke Greek. His sole job experience was shepherding. It was uncertain if he could commit to two years. No matter. Brian saw something formidable in him. He had followed a similar hunch when he hired me. Despite my lack of PR experience, and despite my nervous stutter during the interview, I had become one of our company's top performers.

I was speaking on my headset to a client when I saw The Cyclops for the first time. From my cramped cubicle I admired his backside as he exited Brian's office. I've always been attracted to tall men with broad shoulders, and given my collegiate foray into the punk scene, I didn't even blink at the tiny green sprig of hair that sat like a piece of unmown lawn atop his head. No, it wasn't until he turned that I saw why others described him as revolting: the large eye, settled like a rough diamond above his eyebrows (not under them, as many would think) was, to put it mildly, intimidating. But what an eye it was! The color of warm sand, bright and penetrating. So penetrating that when he caught my gaze I swore he could see the color of my bones beneath my expensive tweed suit and inexpensive (and somewhat gritty) bra and underwear. And that voice! I heard him now, as he spoke to Brian, and I stopped talking in mid-sentence to Mrs. Lipman so that I could eavesdrop more effectively.

I had barely begun to enjoy The Cyclops' melodic enthusiasm about working with our company when my client began chirping in my right ear. After her tedious public involvement with crank and the Home Shopping Network, she hungered for as much counsel as she could get. "Hello, Carol?" she said. "Can you hear me? You're speaking on your headset again, aren't you, Carol. I've asked you repeatedly not to use your headset. It makes you sound like some robot from distant space. Can you hear me, Carol? Good. You were saying something about my choice of tortillas, correct? About choosing the tortillas with the pink ribbon? The breast cancer tortillas? Instead of the white cheapies?"

“An analogy, Mrs. Lipman,” I said. “My point is that for someone so famous, the smallest choices you make will influence the media’s opinion of you.” She marveled over this statement, saying “Yes, I see,” pleased as she always was with any grandiose platitude. Around me, chairs scraped back and polite laughter ballooned. Brian was introducing The Cyclops around the office. I told Mrs. Lipman I would call her back and hung up.

Brian and The Cyclops approached my desk, smiling broadly. I stood and extended my hand to The Cyclops. Like prairie dogs having risen from their earthen holes, the heads of my colleagues bobbed above the cubicle walls, their expressions less curious than bored.

With a sense of wonderment I allowed The Cyclops’ hand to swallow up my own. “It’s a delight to meet you, Ms. Horne,” he said. “Brian was raving about your work here.”

So soft, his voice, as though it could lull you to sleep. He was very well spoken for a Cyclops.

I told Kent this later that day. Kent grunted and rolled his eyes.

“More proof of Brian’s incompetence,” Kent said. His gelled hair sat stiffly on his head like the shining blade of a guillotine. “He’s obviously a monster. Did you smell him?”

“Like cooked garbage,” an intern agreed.

“I thought he was nice,” I said. We were standing around the fax machine, five or six of us, waiting for our faxes to crawl out of the machine’s unsmiling mouth.

“‘Nice’ is the adjective people use when they don’t have something better to say,” Kent intoned. Then he sang loudly, “Carol’s found a new boyfriend.”

My coworkers laughed. “Yeah, right,” I said with feigned playfulness. “I mean, come on, he’s totally gross. Really, he’s disgusting.”

But truthfully I didn’t find The Cyclops gross or disgusting. Aside from the large club he always carried (“For wolves or worse,” he told me), and despite the smell of livestock that trailed him everywhere, he was far more refined and thoughtful than the other men in the office. His pants—while faintly stained—were always neatly pressed. He could quote entire poems of Yeats and Sappho. Even more impressive was that he always asked everyone, no matter how busy he was, how his or her day was going. Clients perceived his incongruity as a sign of superiority and began requesting his ser-

vices. To my delight, we were teamed up on a new project together, and after a few engaging weeks I complimented him on his impressive vocabulary and grammar.

"I read a lot of books in the field," The Cyclops explained. He meant field literally, as in the field where he shepherded goats. I pictured him lolling on a vast green hillside, his feet and chest bare, holding a hardcover book above his face at just the right angle to block the hot Mediterranean sun.

"Any favorites?" I asked. I had been a literature major in college and in my rare haughty moments fancied myself a scholar.

"Of our contemporaries I enjoy Cormac McCarthy. I like tales of war and death. But the authors I forever return to are long perished: Tolstoy, Homer, Proust. Have you ever read Proust?"

Proust was one of those authors I wanted desperately to read but knew I never would. I had been assigned a few chapters in college that I completely blew off for a week of reality television. For much of my life I wore my unfamiliarity with Proust like a red cloak of literary shame. The fact that even this spelunking Cyclops had read Proust was a bit humiliating.

"Proust," I said. "Yes, of course."

The Cyclops smiled at me, displaying the crooked gray kernels of his teeth. "I like you, Carol," he said. "You don't seem like the type that would work in a PR firm."

"Neither do you," I told him. This time I wasn't lying.

Why lie about Proust? Even as I was telling the lie some part of my brain was screaming at me, Don't lie you idiot, you won't be judged for it! But I had a severe problem with wanting to please people. Especially people I liked. Like Brian, my boss. Or The Cyclops. Or Kelly Davenport in grade school, whose hair was always smooth and shining and who could always color perfectly within the lines. I told her that I, too, used to be able to color fantastically, but after a debilitating car wreck that shattered my wrists (and scorched my hair, making it frizzy), it was all I could do to stay on the page. Kelly informed the teacher and the teacher called my mom and that night I had to lean against the cold bathroom sink for five minutes with a bar of soap in my mouth. This did not keep me from lying again, although it did make me more careful about the magnitude of lie. I shied away from the larger deceptions and began living in a white smoke of smaller half-truths. So it was when I lied

to The Cyclops about Proust. And it was admittedly gratifying when he beamed back at me. I could see my watery reflection projected affectionately in his enormous brown-flecked eye. But as ever when I lied, the gnawing disappointment in myself, and the gnawing feeling that I was about to get caught, diminished the magnitude of my triumph. I smiled back at him halfheartedly.

A few days later the McGugle Account was created. The Cyclops and I were assigned to the same team. I was typically the Go-To Girl in such situations, but the McGugle Corporation had fallen into near disrepair. The youngest McGugle son was in court, defending himself from three sexual harassment accusations. The McGugle trophy wife was an admitted cokehead and alcoholic. While on a wine-tasting tour of the Yakima Valley she had driven her car not into but through the brick wall of a winery's tasting room. Mr. McGugle, himself, was rumored to be the most avid patron of a high-class escort ring. It was a big company and a bigger mess.

"You mortals," The Cyclops muttered with a woeful shake of his head. We were eating pizza slices in the office near midnight. We were trying to find a positive light in all of this. "No matter what you have, it's never enough."

Kent found this remark offensive. "What about you? You were a shepherd. Wasn't that a blissful enough existence? It's not like you were recruited here, you know."

Some of my colleagues snorted. Earlier, The Cyclops had shoveled down an entire goat cheese pizza while the hungry interns glowered at him. They shuffled in their chairs and muttered angrily to one another but avoided any direct invective. The Cyclops' large spiked club lay casually on the table near his BlackBerry and the interns eyed it uneasily.

"For your information," The Cyclops said tersely, "my goats died." He had pizza sauce on his earlobe. He started to say something else, but then stopped.

"What," the boldest of the interns responded, "did you eat them?"

The Cyclops' face reddened.

"We're getting off task," I said loudly. "Let's please turn our attention back to the press release. I personally enjoy the idea of a McGugle Bazaar. Anyone else?" As the team began their vociferous opining, I caught The Cyclops' eye and touched my earlobe care-

fully. His eye widened and he reached up with his giant hairy hand to remove the sauce from his ear. It smeared onto his fingers like blood. He gazed back at me gratefully. I considered winking but abstained, as I assumed such an innocuous gesture could be offensive to any creature possessing only one eye.

An hour later The Cyclops escorted me to my car. He held his club menacingly and commented that a young beautiful woman should not be walking alone so late at night. I blushed. "Thirty-five is not so young," I told him.

"You're a mere girl in Cyclops years."

We reached my car and I jangled my keys. "Well," I said. "Thank you."

"No, thank you." His eye was staring down at me mushily. I was nervous that he would try to kiss me right then and there in the parking lot, where one of my colleagues might find us.

Instead he leaned against his club and looked up at the stars. "Desire makes everything bloom," he said wistfully.

"What?"

The Cyclops looked down at me again. "Don't you remember? Proust?"

For lack of an answer, I dropped my keys. I stooped to pick them up, and so did The Cyclops, and his forehead hit the back of my head so hard that I dropped to the ground. Yellow blotches swarmed like bees in my vision.

"Oh dear," he said. "That smarts, I'll bet." He helped me to my feet. In the lamplight, his face was wretched and scarred and now twisted with worry.

"I'm alright," I said, brushing his hands away. My ears rang and my head ached. "I'm alright."

I got in my car. He rapped on the window with his acorn-sized knuckles. I rolled the window down and looked up at him expectantly.

"I'm sorry about your head," he said softly.

"I know. It's okay. It was an accident."

"I really meant it when I said thank you."

I smoothed my skirt under my thighs and then poked the key into the ignition.

“You haven’t read Proust,” he said suddenly, folding his wide hairy fingers over the door. It was not a question. I sat back in surprise, my hands dropping into my lap. “I knew it.”

His voice was gentle, forgiving. Something like a large flower opened sadly within me. “I didn’t mean to lie,” I said, even though that was a lie, too. I wanted to recline in the front seat and go to sleep.

The Cyclops cleared his throat. “Lies are essential to humanity. They are perhaps as important as the pursuit of pleasure and moreover are dictated by that pursuit.” He crouched down next to me as he spoke, his big head hanging like a rough pale planet in the window.

“Proust again?” I said. He nodded and reached for me. He pressed his big lips onto mine and I was surprised at how gentle and sweet he was, quite the opposite of what you would expect from one so big and rough. I opened my eyes to find his wide high eye staring absently over my hairline. He released me and invited me to his cave, and despite my rattling heart I managed to say, “Should I drive?” He squeezed into my car by reclining the passenger seat down flat and lying prone, giving directions to his cave via the stars he read through the open sunroof. I was too nervous to speak now. I glanced at his enormous Grecian thighs in his khakis (where did he buy those, I wondered) and worried if making love to a Cyclops was even technically possible. These thoughts frightened me, but then he reached over and with his large hand stroked my hair, and the sweetness of this gesture soothed any worries. I was under a spell. When instructed I turned the steering wheel obediently, forgetting the blinker. When he spoke I listened with all of my heart. When we reached his cave half the night had passed and the spindly moon had already set, but to me, content in my lustful suffering, the drive had been a mere pinprick in the vast open wound of time.

We were somewhere far from Seattle. Eastern Washington, I assumed, in a land of rolling hills and no trees. Machines had carved enormous circles into the farmland so that they resembled landing platforms for visiting spaceships. We were on top of the highest butte in sight, looking out over the smaller hills that undulated like a frozen ocean into the dark horizon. The night was clear and the wind was fierce. My hair was whipped into my eyes as I stepped from the car, and the stinging strands were momentarily blinding.

One of my high heels broke but I did not complain. I merely slipped off my shoes and trod on the cool dirt toward the rocky outcropping where The Cyclops stood waiting for me. He motioned for me to go ahead of him. I walked bravely between two large boulders and into the hillside. The smell was very strong, farm animals and grain. I couldn't see anything in the inky blackness.

"Here we go," The Cyclops said, striking a match. A fire exploded into light and the room flickered into view. The high ceilings were domed nicely overhead and the rock walls were lined with large attractively painted jugs.

"Wine," he grunted, uncorking a jug and pressing it to his mouth. The wine dribbled down his chin and onto his Ralph Lauren polo.

He passed the wine jug to me. I couldn't hold it up, so he gingerly brought it to my lips. It was delicious. The taste helped to lessen the fecund animal smell emanating from the corner, where a pen of three goats bleated incessantly for their dinner.

"These are my children," The Cyclops boasted cheerfully. "Well, not really of course, but I take care of them like they are." He told me their names in Greek, but I only caught the name of Hector, a small gray goat with dull yellow horns. "I'm building up my flock again. Three is an okay start, but I'd like to have nineteen or more. Nearby there is a ranch with a dozen or so good goats. I'll hopefully have them by Friday of next week."

"How much do they cost?" I asked, genuinely curious.

The Cyclops waved his club through the air and laughed. "Gratis," he said. He set the club down next to a pile of straw that must have been his bed. After one last chuckle he grew solemn. We watched one another seriously for several moments and for once I was strong enough to look him squarely in the eye without turning away. "Come here," he said, unbuckling his belt, and I came.

Later, lying in the dark on the straw that was stabbing me relentlessly wherever I turned, feeling pleasantly bruised and pawed from the night before, I began wondering if I should escape. Blind him with a hot poker, maybe, and then flee clinging to the belly of one of his goats. The thought made me smile in the dark, because the goats were so small and smelly that I couldn't imagine their being an effective hiding place. More realistically, I could leave a note. Tiptoe to my car and drive the five hours back to Seattle with my broken shoe in the passenger seat. This was my *modus operandi* in those

days—initial excitement about becoming involved with someone, followed by an adrenaline-packed flight response that I assumed would protect me from future awkwardness and pain, whether my awkwardness and pain or the other person's, I was never sure. Somehow I thought The Cyclops deserved better, but I questioned my motives. Despite his being smarter, kinder and sweeter than most, and despite his being well-endowed (though not, fortunately, to the point where our coupling had been a disaster), I began wondering if I was confusing lust and pity. Maybe I was feeling sorry for him, for having to go through life as the freak, as the weirdo. I pictured us walking down the street together, him looming over me and the crowds parting before us, their faces twisted with curiosity and fear. I pictured the interns at our wedding ceremony, making farting sounds in the back pews, the other guests snarling with laughter. The Cyclops gave a loud snore then, an earth-splitting snore, and even one of the goats bleated in fear.

I lingered. Faint light began filtering into the cave and The Cyclops snored on. I turned to gaze at him and was shocked by his ugliness. The deep craters on his face (scars from Cycloptic acne?) and the bulbous eye wiggling beneath the fabric of his eyelid were newly hideous to me, and I chided myself for being so cruel. What fairy tale had I presumed would happen? That I would sleep with him and then find upon awakening that he had transformed? That he was a two-eyed handsome prince? That his dungy cave was an alabaster castle? That I was an honest person finding love and beauty in the monstrous?

This last part might have become true. But when The Cyclops awoke I was already buttoning my dress and shaking out my hair.

"Wait," The Cyclops protested, rising to his feet and brushing the straw away from his powerful figure. "I can make breakfast." He wrapped a loincloth around his waist and I realized that this was his version of hanging around the house in boxers. It was almost charming if I wasn't already feeling so pale and sick.

"I'll call you," I said. It came out coldly.

The Cyclops' eye flickered. In it there floated a flotsam of hurt. "Yeah right," he said, and it was the only time I heard him be sarcastic. "I'll bet." He walked me to the cave entrance. In the morning light, he was terrifying. I let him kiss me on the forehead. Once settled in my car, I breathed an enormous sigh of relief.



The following Monday we were all surprised to hear The Cyclops had been fired. Brian called me into the office, distressed. Only the day before The Cyclops had slaughtered the entire McGugle clan during an unscheduled meeting at their hotel. He had taken their carcasses back to his cave near Pullman and had cooked them over a spit. He ate most of them and then deposited their remains in a cornfield. He had called Brian that very morning to confess and apologize.

“I liked the old guy,” Brian said, wiping his nose. “True, he smelled horribly. Like a morgue. And his face was hideous. But what confidence! Really, a creative genius. Nonetheless, it’s impossible to keep him on staff after what he did. Reprehensible, really. I doubt I’ll even give him a letter of reference. As for you, Carol, we’ll need you to write copy for a new hire. I’d like to post it online today.”

“Where—where is he now?” My stomach had pierced the soles of my feet, and I stood there stupidly in its mucky glue.

“Gone, I guess,” Brian shrugged. “The authorities wanted to speak with him but he was long gone—his goats, too. My guess is he returned to his homeland, where this sort of behavior is more acceptable.”

I moved into the hallway numbly. It was not that I was in love. I wasn’t. Love wasn’t realistic. Love raised too many worrisome questions. For example: Would our children have three eyes? Would my hips be wide enough for their delivery? Would they have pale shocks of green ear hair? What would my mother say? But I kept thinking of his lips and the softness of his voice, and I wondered when it was, exactly, that my lying had become so deeply entrenched that I was now lying exclusively to myself.

My colleagues threw a work party in honor of The Cyclops’ departure. One of the interns baked cupcakes. “So long to the armpits of death,” Kent said, tearing into a bag of chips. The interns guffawed over their Cokes. I was silent. I sat in my cubicle, perusing the new résumés that were pouring in by the dozens. While a few prospects seemed promising, especially a Ms. Scylla, a successful head-hunter with specific maritime experience, none of them were lovable.

A year later I received a red crate from some remote Mediterranean island. It arrived at work. I asked Kent to help me lift it into my car. “Can’t,” he said, pointing to his shoulder. “Racquetball.” The

interns helped me instead. After dragging it into my house, I left it unopened for several weeks. Finally, during a gray rain that left me bored and depressed, I uncorked a jug of ouzo and sat on the straw pile in the corner of my bedroom. With a loud sigh I braced myself before attacking the crate with my hammer. I clawed through a cheerful cloud of cotton balls until my fingertips collided with the hard covers of several books. I pulled them out one by one. Marcel Proust. His collected works. They were frustratingly all in French. A small card with no name attached fluttered from the inside of the largest volume. A Proust quote, in English:

There is no man, however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived in a way the consciousness of which is so unpleasant to him in later life that he would gladly, if he could, expunge it from his memory.

Gladness returned to me then. Someone somewhere understood me and suffered as I did.

Whenever I begin to doubt myself, as I invariably do, and wish in terror that I had not turned out the way that I have, I open up these strange dusty illegible books and I reread this note. Then all seems benign again, at least temporarily, like there is a great eye penetrating my lies and observing the goodness within me.