

Epistemology, Sex, and the Shedding of Light ·
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“GUESS WHO I SAW in a Chinese restaurant in Washington,” Harry asked me. He had just returned from offering expert advice on disaster relief to government officials.

“Henry Kissinger.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and his smile of anticipation vanished. “How did you know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, guess who he was eating lunch with?”

“Liv Ullmann.”

Harry stopped combing his hair and regarded me with some bitterness. His eyes had that disappointed look Rachel’s had when, a few years ago, she left the dinner table to go to the bathroom and returned to find Harry had finished her hamburger. He assumed she was done. She has never forgotten. “How did you know?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. Tell me how they looked, anyway.” That was not the whole truth. I read all the reviews of Liv Ullmann’s recent autobiographical book and learned that she had once dated Henry Kissinger. Still, that doesn’t account for my knowing.

I wasn’t reading Harry’s mind, either, as often happens. For example, five years ago he looked longingly at a box of saltine crackers on the supermarket shelf. “Do we need these?” he asked.

“We have saltines at home.”

“Oh.”

“Take them anyway. It’s the box you want, isn’t it?” It was a large square cardboard box with rounded corners, about five inches high. There were colorful flowers and curlicues painted on its sides. The metal lid in its center was round with raised edges, the kind that would have to be pried off with a spoon.

He looked distressed. “How did you know?”

“I know what you like. That’s your kind of box. Take it. We’ll empty the crackers into a canister.”

He was tempted, but his upbringing was too powerful. “No.” Harry is not self-indulgent, especially about spending money. Cash, that is. He prefers to write a check, or better still, whip out a credit card. As a result he buys big expensive things more willingly than small, cash-and-carry

things. Penny wise and pound foolish, one might infer, except here the issue is not wisdom or folly, only the degree of abstraction of the money.

With the saltines my knowledge, though seemingly uncanny, might have been traced to certain fleeting perceptions stored in my brain cells. It was quite different with the case of Henry Kissinger and Liv Ullmann, a true epistemological mystery.

Similarly, I have unaccountable lapses. In the Central Children's Room at the Donnell Library two weeks ago my dear friend Emily from California, my daughter Rachel and I admired a Gila monster on display in a jar of water. (Rachel was in the library to do research for a social studies report on Thomas Alva Edison.)

"Isn't it beautiful," I said. It was light orange and black, thick, powerful, coiled on itself. I felt an electrical charge of affinity with the Gila monster, though physically we have nothing in common, except that orange is my favorite color. After a while I added wistfully, "I think it's dead." Emily and Rachel burst out laughing.

"How could anything live in a jar of water?" Rachel said to me, with her twelve-year-old's stare of incredulity at my stupidity.

I was stupid indeed. I heard myself say in defense, "I guess I thought it was like a fish." I wonder how and why I could have assumed the Gila monster was alive. Apart from wishful thinking, I suspect it had something to do with the surprising appearance of Emily, whom I hadn't seen in over six months.

Emily was in New York on a flying visit; we spent an hour drinking in a bar near the Donnell while Rachel hunted for books about Edison. I was shocked when I first saw Emily, for she had cut off her hair and lost about fifteen pounds and was dressed in long black flowing garments.

"I'm thirty-eight years old," she explained. "I decided it was time to stop looking like a student at Music and Art."

"Well, you've succeeded," I said. "You look like a lady."

"Do I look like a lady poet?" She is in fact a poet.

"I think so. You look like a lady, anyway."

The transformation of Emily was so unexpected and disconcerting that perhaps it jolted something in my nervous system that subsequently made it possible for me to assume the Gila monster in the jar of water was alive. Perhaps.

At Hunter College the other day I asked my freshman students in Expository Writing to write an impromptu essay on a contention by Erich Fromm that education gives children a "fictitious picture of

reality.” I made quite sure to put “fictitious picture of reality” in quotes on the exam sheet so there would be no doubt those were Erich Fromm’s words and not mine. One learns caution when teaching freshmen. I suggested they support their assertions with examples from their personal experience. After a half-hour of quiet writing, a boy with braces on his teeth came up to me and asked, “How is the word ‘fictitious’ used here?”

Surely the answer “as an adjective” was not what he sought. “What do you mean, how is it used?”

“I mean, well, what does it mean?”

One also learns, teaching freshmen, not to show surprise or any emotion that might discourage progress. “It means made up, not true, like a story.”

“Oh. Thank you.” He smiled happily and returned to his writing. I discussed this incident with a psychotherapist friend, who said that for her the real interest of the story was not that the boy did not know the meaning of the word “fictitious,” but that he did not know how outrageous his not knowing would appear.

My own education, if more thorough, was equally unbalanced. As is the custom in schools, the teachers ignored connections and stressed facts, specifically facts regarding the Boxer Rebellion, Alexander Kerensky, the nature of scalene triangles, the names of the inns frequented or referred to by Chaucer, Shakespeare and Dr. Johnson, the principal exports of Uruguay, and the names of Cabinet departments (St. Dapiacl, an acronym now an anachronism). Up until the age of twenty-five I remembered it all, then slowly, like a steep weather-buffed slope, it began to erode, except for the Tabard and the Mermaid. The Tabard and the Mermaid, like seeds luckily blown to more fertile meadows, took root elsewhere in my brain, where I watered and nurtured them because I cared.

When Rachel first went off to be educated I used to pick her up every day on the Riverside Drive bus, taking along Miranda, two years younger. Once in a while our trips were graced by the glorious double-decker bus, whose erratic schedule we could never master, unfortunately. But most days, silent and absent, Miranda would gape morosely out the ordinary-bus window with a finger in her mouth. I naturally inferred boredom and resentment. When Rachel learned to come home herself I said to Miranda, “I bet you’ll be glad not to take that bus ride every day.”

“But I won’t get to see the statues.”

“What statues?”

She confided that she had a private story explaining the free-standing statues dispersed along the Drive between 120th and 81st Streets, which she told herself every day, going and coming.

The first statue, a man on a pedestal, is a king, she told me. Beneath him, a soldier with a flag is holding a woman who is on her knees. The woman is really a princess but she’s in rags. She is going to be put in jail and she’s crying, “Let me go, let me go.” (113th Street, erected in 1928 “by a Liberty Loving Race of Americans of Magyar Origin to Louis Kossuth the Great Champion of Liberty.” Below Kossuth are a soldier and a long-haired old man in flowing robes; they are gripping hands.)

The next statue, Miranda related, is a man who looks like Abraham Lincoln, with a pedestal next to him. He is the father of the prince, and he is going to get a drink of water. (112th Street, Samuel J. Tilden, “1814-1886, Patriot Statesman Lawyer Philanthropist Governor of New York Democratic Nominee for the Presidency 1876 I Trust the People.”)

The third is a man on a horse. He is the prince. He has heard the news about the princess and is going through the forest to rescue her. (106th Street, an equestrian labeled tersely, “Franz Sigel.”)

Last is a lady on a horse. She is the same princess as in the beginning and she got rescued and that is the end. (Joan of Arc, 93rd Street, armed and bearing a torch, mounted on a rearing horse, “Burned at the Stake at Rouen France May 30, 1431, Erected by the Joan of Arc Statue Committee in the City of New York, 1915.”)

I was disturbed by only one omission. “Why didn’t you use the Buddha at 105th Street?” (The “Buddha” is Shinran Shonin, 1173 to 1262, founder of the Jodo-Shinshu sect and presently adorning the doorway of the New York Buddhist Church.)

“Oh, him. He was too big.” Seeing my dismay she added, “I did use him once. He was a magician. He was trying to stop the Prince, who was going through the forest. He’s wearing a frown because the Prince got the Princess.” She hesitated. “But he’s really too big for the story.”

“And I thought you were bored.”

“I was, sometimes.”

I asked Harry at dinner, the night he returned from Washington, if he had thought of going up to Liv Ullmann to tell her he enjoyed her performance in *A Doll’s House*.

"Oh, no. They were looking for obscurity."

"What's 'obscurity?'" asked Miranda.

He told her. "Anyway, I eschew celebrities."

We laughed.

"What is 'eschew?'" asked Rachel.

"An obscure word meaning avoid," he said.

"I don't believe you."

"It is."

"That's ridiculous." At twelve, her only pejorative adjectives are "ridiculous," "gross," "disgusting," and "weird." "I don't believe there's such a word. It sounds weird."

"Go look it up in the dictionary." Harry spelled it for her.

"All right. But don't eat my dinner. I'm coming back."

"She'll never forgive me," he said. "She's like the elephant."

"Because you still do it," said Miranda. "You ate the M & M's I got from Willy's party."

"They were out on the table. I assumed they were common property."

"You should ask before you assume anything," said Miranda.

Rachel was chagrined to find "eschew" in the dictionary.

"While you're there," I called in to her, "please look up the Gila monster."

"God," she moaned, very put upon. She read me what it said about the Gila monster. Of course I have forgotten most of it. I do remember that it has a "sluggish but ugly disposition," because I found the phrase, with its assonance, extremely suggestive, and I was intrigued by the choice of the connective "but." I also remember that there exists a "closely allied form" in Mexico named *H. Horridum*. I will doubtless remember *H. Horridum* forever. These facts made me love it more.

After Rachel returned to the table I reached for my purse, which I had set down in the center of the kitchen floor when I returned from giving my class the essay assignment on Erich Fromm's educational theories. Somehow its entire contents spilled out. Harry glanced over at the array of objects scattered on the floor. "Where is your eye of newt?" he asked.

Every now and then he says something that makes me recall with jubilation why I married him.

"Eye of newt," I laughed, crouching on the floor. "How do you know about eye of newt?" He reads mainly the *New York Times* and books on the structure of society and how it can be improved.

He shrugged.

"Come on, where do you know that from?" I challenged him. "Tell me where that comes from."

He paused, frowned, looked vaguely at the children for help not forthcoming. "Shakespeare?" he asked finally. "*Macbeth?*"

While I was putting my purse back together he said to Rachel, "By the way, how did you make out with the report on Thomas Edison?"

"O.K. Did you know that Thomas Edison was deaf?"

"Yes," said Harry, and "No," said I, simultaneously.

"Was he born deaf," I asked, "or did he get deaf?"

"He got deaf, when he was around twelve or fourteen."

"How?"

"Thomas Edison," Rachel began in warm didactic tones, "had a job on a train, selling candy and stuff like that. When the train pulled out of the station he would grab hold of an open car above the wheels and pull himself up. One day he couldn't pull himself up so he was just hanging, and he knew that he could be killed, so a man standing in the car pulled him up by his ears. And Thomas Edison heard something pop in each ear and his ears really hurt for a while after that." She paused in reflective sympathy. "They really hurt a lot, and he began to get hard of hearing. And then his parents took him to a doctor, and the doctor examined him and said he couldn't do anything and he was going to get deafer and there might come a time when he would be totally deaf. And then when he was grown up another doctor offered to improve the situation but Edison refused, because he said he liked living in his laboratory without outside noises distracting him, and he was used to it."

I said, "That is fascinating." Rachel smiled proudly, as if she had made the story up herself, which, given my ignorance, she might have done. "Could he hear anything at all?"

"Yes," she replied. "He wasn't totally deaf; part of the time he could hear if people talked loud. When he was old he could read his wife's lips but it was easier for her to tap Morse Code into his hand. He was married twice."

"Which wife tapped?" asked Miranda.

"The second. He taught her Morse Code and asked her to marry him in Morse Code and she tapped back yes."

I was growing ecstatic over this memorable information.

"Also," Rachel went on, "when he was about six or seven he went

to this small school run by a man and his wife, and it was very crowded. They had kids of all different ages and didn't have much time to talk to each kid alone. He came home one day after three months and said to his mother, 'My teachers say that I'm addled.' So his mother took him and went to the school and she said to the teachers, 'This boy is smarter than you are.' Which in Edison's case was true. After that he never went back to school. His mother taught him and he taught himself and he was reading college books when he was about ten or nine. But he wasn't good at math."

"What is 'addled'?" asked Miranda.

"Confused," said Rachel. "Like you don't know what is going on."

"Did you learn anything else important about Edison?" Harry asked hopefully.

"No. I don't know. I don't remember." She stood up. "I'm finished. You can have that if you want it." She pointed to the remains on her plate.

Harry looked disturbed as he slid Rachel's plate towards him.

"Miranda," I said, lest she feel overlooked, "you'll never guess what nice thing happened to me on the way home from work."

"You caught the double-decker bus," she promptly replied.