

ACEDIA AND THE RUSSIAN BLUE

by

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I am a professor of economics at the University of Washington. After my last class, I park my bike and gather up discarded papers and food containers from my apartment to take to the complex's refuse and recycling area. The alcove is pristine except for a piece of paper on the tiled floor. I notice the handwriting first. It is bold and black and written in a style that reminds me of calligraphy. The unfolded sheet of paper is torn from a spiral notebook. The writing is so clear I can read the words while standing up. I see a date, September 10, at the top of the page. My heart beats faster when I recognize the exact configuration of letters spelling out my name: Dr. Clifford Osborne, Apt. 8B.

I bend down, scoop up the paper, and crush it into my pocket. Inside my apartment, I smooth it out on the kitchen table and see that the writing is set up like journal entries.

Sept. 10

Looking from my window, I saw Dr. Clifford Osborne, Apt. 8B, park his bicycle this evening. He was carrying a brown paper bag, probably his dinner. I wonder what kind of food he likes? Hamburgers, tacos, noodle soup? Maybe he likes sushi.

Sept. 12

This morning I was standing next to Dr. O. in the elevator. I could see his left eye twitching beneath his wire-rimmed glasses. He seemed absorbed in his own thoughts and was unaware of me. I wanted to rub my head against his leg and

The journal entry ends; there is nothing written on the other side. The writing was most likely continued on another page. My fingers play with the frilly pattern of torn circlets on the left side of the paper. For the past few years, I have taught and done research in economics at the University of Washington. Bike riding, chicory coffee, an organic diet, and running keep my body lean and wired. Living in Seattle, in a fashionably shabby apartment, my possessions include vintage furniture, vinyl record albums, hardcover books, and an assortment of framed black-and-white photos of alleys, taken around the world. I pride myself on being an independent thinker with an analytical mind and am in the thick of what should be a seminal article on macroeconomics and the global economy. It should be finished any day now. At forty, I suppose my students think of me as an irrelevant, aging hipster. My hours have been spent conducting classes, going to meetings, and writing this paper in the hopes of getting a tenure appointment. I do not waste time examining my

emotions, but right now, I am perspiring and agitated.

I wonder if one of my colleagues at the university has left these notes to distract me from my paper. Oliver Simon has a blog where he has been predicting economic ruin for the American economy as has happened in Portugal and Greece. He has been deriding my advocacy of vast government policy changes to stabilize the economy in the hopes of maintaining the middle class in this country. Oliver maintains that tax cuts for the rich, the so-called job creators, are needed as a continued policy to stabilize the economy. He has termed me a socialist and naive optimist in my advocacy of make-work projects to update infrastructure. Even in Seattle, I sense a trend of mean-spiritedness toward those who have less. I pour myself a glass of pinot noir and look out the window. A stocky woman is walking a sleek blue-gray cat on a leash. The contrast in their appearances and the fact that it is an elegant cat and not a dog out for an airing gets my attention. I watch the pair walking along the tree-lined path until they are out of my view.

* * *

The next morning I am jogging and out of breath when the woman and her cat pass me by. I shout “good morning” and run in place while commenting on her cat’s beauty.

“Thank you. Isis is a Russian blue; I rescued her from a shelter. She reminded me of an Egyptian sculpture; that’s why I gave her the name Isis.”

Isis is stretching, as cats do, head down, tail in the air; she curls and uncurls her toes in the sand. She stares at me with malachite eyes. Isis’s owner introduces herself as Rebecca Jansen. We chat a bit; Rebecca is in the technology field. I feel the hairs on my leg come alive. Isis has begun to rub her head against my bare shin. Since the breakup with my wife, I have closed myself off from women, but I feel myself aroused and wish to swoop up Isis and take her along on my jog.

I continue my run and wave to James Hayes as he passes me from the other direction. James is a philosophy professor, a former Benedictine monk, and a colleague at the university. My first class is at noon, so I head home, shower, and sit at my desk. Pulling out a yellow legal pad, I jot down some notes on what I think are the determinants of long-term economic growth. My mind wanders to the torn journal pages from the day before; I ruminate and brood. I fall into a faint, unsatisfying sleep and awake with a throbbing pain in my neck. As if pulled down by invisible weights, I strain to get out of my chair. This is a mistake, I know; I will not be working on this paper again today. Perhaps I am suffering from adult ADHD and need medication. Maybe after years of scholarly pursuits, I am becoming undisciplined and lazy.

Leaving the apartment in hopes that the drizzle will revive me from my

torpor, I notice a piece of paper by the elevator door. Two simple declarative sentences curve at the top of the page.

Sept. 13

He thinks I'm beautiful. I had quite the effect on him.

Toward the middle of the page is a poem.

A graveyard

A sockeye salmon

Sockeye salmon lives graveyard

It plays life

I play you

Will we play?

Will you live?

Me.

We.

You.

Feeling a vague sense of nausea I retrace my steps back to my apartment. I text Suki Nakata, my graduate assistant, and tell her to cancel my classes for the day. Sprawled on my couch, I reread the journal page. I am not much for poetry but this Dadaist rant intrigues me. I listen to my voice mail. Sheila, my ex-wife, has left another message about selling our mountaintop cabin.

“Cliff, it’s me again. You never returned my last call. We never really use that cabin, and it needs repairs. I think we should sell it; I need cash to rent space for my nutrition counseling business. The agent says there is an interest in remote cabins in the woods for people who work from home. Call me, Cliff.”

Sheila and I had once loved hiking and camping. We had once loved one another. I remember with detachment the softness of her bare skin against mine inside our joined sleeping bags. Her eyelashes tickled my face as we wriggled together to get comfortable. I think of the Russian blue cat’s slanted, green eyes as she walks toward me. I fall asleep and dream about Isis. She has taken on human qualities and is standing upright on her furry legs at a lectern. Isis writes on a dry-erase board. Students are sitting in front of

laptops. I am by myself in the front row, naked, except for my white socks and high-top sneakers. Hoping no one notices, I slump down in my seat. I see the words: It plays life.

Isis looks at me and asks: “Tell us, Dr. Osborne, how are you playing at life? Are you living or pretending...are you living or pretending...are you living or pretending?”

Despite my nudity, no one in the lecture arena is looking at me; it is like I am invisible, but I feel ashamed and vulnerable. Isis’s words change into babble and I try to respond to her question, but no words come out. I awaken to bright light and panic; my body is at the very edge of my sofa. Swinging my legs downward, my feet reach the floor and I sit upright.

Unable to muster up the energy to work on my article, I transfer mental energy to physical energy and wander around my apartment. I feel as though I am in a trance. The familiar objects around me are losing their original purpose and transforming into an ugly arrangement of soulless junk. I have an urge to toss it all out. Instead I go into the bedroom, darken the room, and lay down on top of the covers. An internal monologue drones on in my head; the images shifting across different time periods in my life.

I am a little boy playing with my Nana’s cat, Puff. She is a yellow-and-white-striped beauty. Every day after school, I walk down the street to Nana’s house to play with her. My mother is allergic and we can’t get a pet of our own. I remember a picture I took of Puff sitting on Nana’s front porch. I also recall a picture of me at my lectern giving a talk about macroeconomics to a group of undergraduates posted on Facebook. I was a popular adjunct then, passionate and younger. Social media, I think, is “collective narcissism.” I should have moved to the East Coast and taken the job at NYU, but relocating was too daunting, and Sheila wanted to stay in Washington. I see the diminutive Oliver Simon, at his tenure reception, holding court with a glass of wine in his hand. That Napoleonic toad, relentless self-promoter, and insufferable raconteur! How did I end up an economics professor anyway? I loved photography but was told I couldn’t make a living, and now I rarely photograph anything. I see the mountaintop view from our cabin window and think about the incomplete rock and herb gardens. Nobody really cares how the economy functions! Nobody cares about the relationships between national income, consumption, inflation, savings, international trade, and finance. People just want jobs to pay for things, without understanding the factors involved. I am stuck; I can’t figure out how I will complete the article or make it meaningful. Will we play? Will you live? Me. We. You.

* * *

Two weeks later I am still in bed. Before disabling my smart technology, the only person I communicated with was Suki Nakata. I told her I had the flu.

In a way, I am experiencing flu-like symptoms: headache, body aches, and not giving a damn. She is now pounding on my apartment door.

“Dr. Osborne, Dr. Osborne, it’s Suki! Are you all right? I brought you some miso soup. I forwarded you all the term papers from your classes. I even corrected them for you. You did not respond to my emails. Dr. Osborne, are you inside?”

I know I must answer the door. I comb my hair, splash water on my face, and hide the torn notebook pages, strewn around the apartment.

I open the front door. Suki looks concerned and frightened. She peeks behind me before coming inside. Suki updates me about my classes and tells me the student work was passable, but not terrible. In my kitchen she finds a bowl and heats up the soup in the microwave. She walks around the apartment, opening windows, plumping pillows, and organizing clutter. She makes a pot of green tea and starts to clean my bathroom.

“No, no, Suki, you have done enough. Any day now I should be back to work.”

I speak with little conviction. Suki is small, serious, and smart. Her long black hair held in a high ponytail matches the color of her narrow-framed glasses. She wears black leggings, a floral tunic, and hiking boots. I know very little about her life outside the university except that she shares a place with other graduate students on the third floor of my apartment complex.

“Dr. Osborne, I think you should know that Dr. Simon is posting, well, unflattering comments about your research on his blog. Since you are ill, and, uh, if you need assistance, I can help expedite your work. Of course, I would expect no credit for your ideas. Think of me as a sort of a secretary.”

I am surprised by the offer as well as relieved and a little embarrassed. *“Is my deterioration and incompetence so obvious? Pull yourself together, Cliff.”*

“No, no, Suki, you are too kind. The work will get done...soon, very soon.”

I grasp her hand and thank her. She looks uncomfortable and giggles in a girlish sort of way. Suki offers to go grocery shopping for me before her next class, Experimental Poetry.

“No, I’m fine and will probably go for a walk.”

Suki leaves. Without showering or brushing my teeth, I go outside. Dr. James Hayes, the former monk, now philosophy professor, is walking toward his car in the parking lot.

“Hi, Cliff, I’m surprised to see you; I heard you’ve been sick. Nothing serious, I hope.”

“No, just the flu, a virus, or maybe a breakdown. I think I’m depressed or in denial.”

James stops and scrutinizes my face.

“I have time to talk, Cliff; my first class is in the late afternoon.”

James gestures to a bench adjacent to the running trail. James is movie-star handsome and could play the lead of a conflicted priest in a drama about the Vatican. He is demonstrative without being intrusive, liked by many, but leading a solitary life. James is decidedly straight, but does not seem to date and is immersed in a world of teaching, study, and athletics. His most striking attribute is his aura of happiness and contentment. I feel I can confide in him and know he will not judge me.

I blurt it all out. My unfinished research project, my poor concentration, my divorce, the cabin, Oliver Simon, my lack of sleep, my fixation on a Russian blue cat, and the diary pages are unburdened before my expressionless colleague. Without hesitating, James offers his diagnosis.

“I don’t think you’re depressed; it sounds like acedia. Acedia is a state of listlessness where you are unable to work or concentrate. The term originated with the theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who observed and described the hazards of a monastic life. During the Middle Ages, monks often worked alone, studying in libraries or meditating in their cells. Acedia was called the “noonday demon” and considered similar to sloth, one of the seven deadly sins. At some point, most thinking people experience dissatisfaction with life, the tediousness of it all. Some monks were unable to pray; you’re unable to work. Despite all the connections we think we have today, whether electronic or human, they are distractions. We must reach inside ourselves for meaning, because in the end...we are alone. Be grateful for your life; the paper will get done. Things will get better, and you will achieve better understanding of yourself. And by the way, Cliff, I don’t think a Russian blue cat can write.”

We are silent for a moment. “Who says philosophy is dead?” I say.

“Don’t sell that cabin yet, Cliff. Take some time off.”

I wave to James as he pulls away and sit in wonder at his astute assessment of my mental state. A cool wind chills me, but I linger alone on the bench. When it starts to drizzle, I go inside. My suitcase is in the bedroom; I have decided to go to the cabin for an indefinite stay. Passing my desk I pause to look at the dusty laptop and piles of notes for my research paper. The university would probably grant me a leave of absence, I think, and start to

throw clothes into my bag. Sheila has taken the good luggage, and I must resort to this beat-up antique. In a pocket of the suitcase, I find the snapshot of Nana's cat, Puff, taken thirty or more years ago. The colors have faded, but Puff sits, timeless and pure. The tears come quick and messy. Vision blurred, I prop Puff's picture on my desk, open my laptop, and begin again.