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“A Trick of Woody Allen’s”

THE trucker believes it a trick of the light. He’s seen weird prism-like glints and other geometric shapes flicker across his windshield during night hauls, later explained away: modified high-beam, or hyper-luminous graffittied highway sign, or a firebug in the wiper-blade; once, he became so frightened while ladyfingers played across the road that he sped his rig to 92, before realizing the scrabbling digits were a blur of sparks from a late-night welding crew on a steel bridge superimposed over inferior tears...

At first, he tries to get his head round the light-trick.

“What the?” he asks the trick.

The trick doesn’t answer. The trucker reanalyzes it with his down-turned, sleep-deprived eyes. The Thing mocks a moon in the sky, skirting the top of his windshield. It doesn’t *feel* like a moon; wrong somehow, there it is, it did exist. He’s seen his share of celestial phenomena—the Northern Lights, the Aurora Borealis, wow what a show—and his erudition requires that the object change shape several times in his mind as he exhausts probable explanations for its existence.

Getting a dimension or proportion is difficult, it’s hovering. Much larger than a planet as seen by any eyes of the earthbound, the trick mimics the moon, excepting the color—too orange, or—and here the trucker’s sleepiness evaporates—too pink, too fleshy.

“What the?” he again asks the trick.

In response, the trick moves. It blots out more of the starry sky, its moonlike size morphing sunlike, except in an inorganic way; it was as if the trick were being pushed from behind, tearing through the cosmos. Like hearsay, a fist forcing its way through opaque window screening.

The trucker, now quite metaphysically detached from his limbs, from his face, manages to keep steady his rig on the road. He stares at the trick. It is a nose. A nose in the sky, hanging there, or standing there, or breathing there, pushing. On its way in. Or out. Backward/ forward? The trucker doesn’t know what to think, how to react—he can stare, mouth wide enough that any passing driver in his side mirror could see the glint of his spittle and fillings.

“What the?” he says in a paradoxical dance with his ability to register, deny, the superunknown.

The nose grows. Dense, intricacy porous and oily. It turns up its nostrils. The trucker knows the trick is smelling him, has invaded his world to get a good whiff; three days travel across the Midwest in the same clothes has given him a gamey odor, his armpits and his crotch, the grey-brown crud under his rag-tag nails doling a peculiar stench of its own. He's had little more than a rinse-off in a rest area shower, due to the happenstance of the other trucker's speedy paranoia about a double-bust—at least they'd cleaned their pipes first—and he knows he's overdue for another.

“You saying I stink? I know it already. Just unstick that nose you stuck in here, why don't you then.”

The nose obeys, leaving the night sky unmarred. A magical departure. Quickly, the trucker seeks a bright identifiable familiarity: the moon, which was a thin crescent hanging in the lower eastern portion of the sky. A little light. Where had it been? As a freight hauler the trucker prefers to drive nights; the experience makes a strong argument for daylight travel.

At the next exit, truck right-signals and pulls into the first Lodge.

Feeling like a partly-lit moon himself, the hauler finds the lobby, orders a single with king-size bed, pockets the key and wanders into the adjacent lounge. Under the sizzle of neon beer signs, the rig driver sits at the bar, which is very short, about six stools, and asks the bartender with the wax-laden moustache for a Black Russian. He expels the first breath he can remember, since seeing the trick.

“I have a theory about Woody Allen,” announces a fat-faced man in a tweed jacket, from the other end of the bar.

“Oh?” says the man's younger companion, smooth-shaven college coed, bored.

“About his *films*.”

“I gathered that.”

The waxed-mustached bartender chuckles as he puts liquor and ice into a shaker then strains it into a large shot-glass on the faux-granite bar-top.

“Did I say something *laughable*?” the cherubic guy in the tweed wants to know.

“Woody Allen cracks me up,” the bartender replies. “Never made a bad film, (excepting that musical with the dubbed-over Drew Barrymore—that one, I could never watch it again and be happy with Allen's oeuvre;) his movies are funny as anything, every one.”

The trucker watches a generic white cocktail napkin and then his Black Russian get placed before him. Mind still spun from the superunknown, wondering what it all means, if anything, or if It actually occurred at all... He cups the rim of the cold cocktail with his

left thumb and index finger. No ring yet to clink. He's young yet, astute yet, old.

"Really, I have a theory," the fat-faced one goes on. "Ever notice that the artistic style of his, it changes, awesomely, with each girlfriend?"

"Never analyzed Woody, actually."

"You should. Take his recent stuff, the cornball Hollywood stuff. You can blame that all on Soon-Yi. His intellectualism's gone soft. Those films are his attempts to please everybody (after that taboo thing he did). His murderers, the murders, they're deep-seated guilt personified. Absolutely! He's psychically... devastated... Yet, Hollywood moves along. Embraces a pedophile. Esteems Rhys Meyers. Forgives Scarlett. His choice of actors, his scripts: dark. Portrayals of inevitable corruption, these days alit with sorrow, dank with evil doings.

"His serious romantic-dramatic endeavors? The warped, semi-literate, whimsical s.? Mia—all Mia's doing. Lame brilliance, that one. A blond; do-gooder, passive-aggressive.

"Woody was *really* at his best while f.ing Diane Keaton. That's when his stuff was funniest, the most intelligent. The most innovative."

"*'Sleeper'*," the bartender bursts. "With the sex cabinet, that silver ball that made everybody high just by catching it, and then with him decked out like a robot, serving *everybody*? A slave, in love-me jest. Yeah, Professor, that's primo Woody Allen, all right."

"That film, it was residual brilliance; from his days with Louise Lasser, and Diane Keaton merely starring," preaches the prof as he sets his suede-patched elbows on the bar.

The trucker dips his finger into the Black Russian. Yes, it's wet. Chilled and wet, as a drink should be. With this new ground in reality, he can shove a new memory of the light-trick out of his mind. That is, until he lets one eye droop shut. Hovering over the rim of the lowball, the blurred and triangular tip of his own nose, nostrils flared, poised for fight.

"There was something funny about a proboscis," the bartender adds.

The rig driver can only writhe on the inside as his flesh goes numb. Somebody might just as well've blown a paralyzing dart at his throat. Was this the beginning of the answer he'd been searching for in his own mind?

At the other end of the bar:

"I think it was the nose of God, like, that's all the characters ever saw of God, or all that was left of God, or something," the friend of the guy in the tweed professes. "The God-

sniffer was sacred, and Woody had it, once; he lost it, and everybody else wanted it, the dropped knowledge, I don't know. It's been a long time since I've seen it. I was high, when I saw it, to tell the truth."

The bartender chuckles again.

"Woody's bedmates *do* alter his whole philosophical outlook," the fat-faced prof continues. "After Diane, he fell off his game. Smacked face-first into a metaphorical wall, he did."

The next Black Russian works, the trucker relaxes. He gives a perfunctory farewell to the barkeep and the guy in the tweed coat but not the guy's flunky, and discovers his room. Nose in the *sky*. While scrubbing his skin under a hot shower the trucker writes off his hallucination as a trick, of the light. A warning that his job is as perilous as his mind allows it to be.

The threadbare linens on and lumps in the king-size bed soothe him toward sleep but the idea of finding a good wife keeps him awake another two hours.