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The Mind Doctor

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The Mind Doctor

There are no characters in my novel, Genevieve was saying. That's not the kind of fiction I write.

I see, her host said, nodding as if he had been listening to her when in fact he had been rehearsing what he wanted to say himself. Harry offered her, with a magnanimous gesture, anyone in the room as a character but three that absolutely belonged to him.

It's only those three that interest me, she teased, noticing over Harry D. Gaulle's shoulder an oriental woman coming toward them with a bomb on a silver tray, the fuse lit.

Harry, for God's sake, look out, Genevieve said.

Why, he was saying, if you can have any of the really extraordinary people in this room, some of whom are more accomplished than my characters, do you insist on running off pell mell with mine?

The bomb went off just behind his ear. Genevieve threw herself toward the rug, wrenching her faith in human nature.

I can't understand it, Françoise Gaulle said in a confidential manner to her guests. We always treated Doris like a member of the family. If I'm not mistaken, she's even a moderately sympathetic character in one of my late husband's books.

Harry D. Gaulle had always hungered for recognition, someone was saying in an authoritative voice—it was the cultural editor of the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*—was the first of his crowd to misperceive any given fashion. It was a function of his integrity, don't you know, to miss the point.

The hostess had no choice under the circumstances but to reemploy the maid (good help in Paris hard to find that spring) to sweep up the remains of her late husband.

I appreciate this, Doris, Françoise said. I don't know what we'd all do without you.

Genevieve was in a state of minor trauma from the explosion of her host in mid-sentence. What remained unsaid left her feeling that her life was incomplete.

Bobbie Mitchum, a passing acquaintance, offered to accompany the distraught Genevieve to her hotel.

I shouldn't, she said.

You might not want to, he said, but should or shouldn't should not be the issue. Maybe you find me unlikeable. Said as if it seemed out of the question.

Oh no, she said. My husband doesn't like me to take rides from other men and so if I accepted your offer I would have not to tell him, which would lead inevitably to further deceptions.

You have a compassionate nature, said Mitchum, and seem to be tied into a robot-like system of self-denying imperatives.

She agreed that there was something in what he said.

Mitchum took her to a hotel room which, prior to their arrival in it, had no claims on either of them. Neutral ground, he called it with joking authority.

"Out of Harry's ashes," Genevieve would write, "I sought wholeness with one of the characters he would deny me use of in my characteristically characterless novel. I wanted husbanding and healing and the sweet son of a bitch spent the evening telling me the story of his life. He was the half-Jewish motherly doctor all my high school Jewish girl friends' mothers wanted them to bring home for dinner."

Mitchum told her his story which up until his telling had been hearsay. He was a practicing alienist happily married to a well-preserved wealthy invalid ten years his senior, a lady of extraordinary courage and good cheer.

You're a good man, Genevieve said, turning away so as not to let him see how moved she was.

If that was her opinion, he would respect it (he said), though he thought of himself as a man removed from such uptight distinctions. Most of the time, he said, we say good or bad when we are talking about pleasure and pain.

She repeated to herself what he had said in case she might want to use him as a character in her novel. A tormented man, she put him down, his affability a disguise.

My marriage is collapsing of its own weightlessness, she confided, though privately thought her own marriage superior to his. She envied him his larger sadness, bags under his eyes and chest.

I don't want to talk about my husband, she said. I've been married to Joshua for eight years. He has blue eyes and a red beard.

Maybe the trouble is that your wife and my husband, I mean it the other way around of course, are crowding us out of this bed.

She said I won't make love to you again if you insult me. I've never been so happy, said her lover, blowing a smokescreen of Marlboro between them, as I have with you here. My wife, though a wonderful woman, has been deaf in her right ear since the accident.

The Prussians had invaded Alsace-Lorraine and were on the way, according to the underground radio, to Paris.

It's not our fight, said Mitchum, lighting two cigarettes in his mouth. They stood at the window and watched the fighting that was not theirs (though whose was it if not?) in the streets below. You could count the injured on one hand. The room was smoky from the cigarettes.

She opened the window and sang in a high clear voice the first stanza of "The Marseillaise."

Je suis Parisienne, she said.

Some, those who knew the words, sang "The Marseillaise." Others hummed along. Nevertheless the bloodshed had stopped at least for the moment.

Those people love to fight, said Mitchum who was an expert on the local customs.

Genevieve scribbled a hasty note to her husband and sent it to his hotel by messenger.

We can cross the channel by nightfall, said Mitchum, and be in Dover before sunrise. Have you ever seen a sunrise from the white cliffs of Dover?

It was one of the many things she had missed in her marriage to Joshua, she said.

He went on about the sunset at such length she felt compelled to put on her dark glasses. I don't like to know how things turn out before I see them for myself, she told him. To anticipate something is to set oneself up for disappointment.

Yes, he said.

Once they were safely in Dover, not so much on the cliffs as in the neighborhood of them, she thought if she had to do it over again she would do it differently. Escaping across the channel in a rowboat was really too much to do in a single night, too tiring really, too cut and dried. There was hardly time for serious conversation. Too much ducking of heads under tarpaulins and holding of breaths. It was not her idea, though she liked excitement, of an evening's good time.

Perhaps it was something she had to get through in order to get to someplace else.

Mitchum took up with another woman in Dover, a hard-as-nails cabaret entertainer, whom he described as having an extremely fragile psyche. Genevieve talked of suicide. She was reading *Anna Karenina* and missed her children.

Mitchum said when she talked of jumping from a window or throwing

herself under a train that he wanted more than anything in the world to make her his wife. Only . . .

Only what?

Mitchum goes to see his wife Meg on their plantation in Brazil to ask her for a divorce. He has made the same trip with the same intention five or six times before with the same failed result.

When he sees her brave stubborn trusting little face tilted toward him, he is unable to tell her that another great love has entered his life. What usually happens is he kisses her on top of the head which gives her great pleasure and they talk about irrigation and gardening and the problems with the natives.

The natives have been extremely restless, Meg says in her charming accent, happy to discuss the problem with him.

He can see that his visit, although all too brief, has brought a little sunshine into a life of unremitting convalescence and he feels free to return to his work.

His life's work—he has done a number of famous monographs on the subject—is to find a cure for female emotional disorders with particular attention to traumatic schizophrenia. This work brings him into intimate contact with fascinating troubled women in all parts of the world. In the course of bringing these women through his (as of then) unorthodox ministrations into the painful light of reality, the doctor has occasionally fallen in love with one or another of them—he is human after all—and has considered divorcing his invalid wife Meg only to give up on the idea each time at the last moment. At the instant he opens his mouth to say I am in love with someone else, he finds himself mute. It is clear to the professional eye of the alienist that she needs him too much, relies for her sustenance on his periodic visits.

All of this is made known to Genevieve on Mitchum's return from the jungles of Brazil.

Genevieve says that she could empathize with poor Meg, that she would never do anything to add to that brave woman's pain.

She decides never to see Mitchum again and leaves him a goodbye note when he is out of their hotel room buying a packet of fags or on some obsessive errand of mercy.

When he finds this note (and the room empty of Genevieve) he perceives that his whole life has been a misperception of reality and he rushes down seven flights of stairs into the blistery Dover streets.

Mitchum wanders the streets of the foggy coastal town crying out Genevieve's name in a variety of pronunciations, pursuing empty spaces. He drinks heavily and loses his sense of dignity.

If only she will consent to meet Meg, Mitchum thinks. The two women

can't help but admire one another, each having the qualities the other lacks. When they learn to know each other Genevieve will understand why I can't possibly leave Meg and Meg will understand why I have to have my freedom. The nature of my work requires sacrifices. The doctor catches a chill and stops off at a pub called The Queen's Cross for a bit of cheer.

The bar lady, whose name is Katie Cornell, falls in love at sight with the brooding sad-faced middle-aged mind doctor.

You have super eyes, duck, she says, refilling his glass of bitters. I hope you don't mind my saying it. I mean no 'arm.

Mitchum could tell from her manner, which hid more than it revealed, that the girl had severe emotional problems and he asked her to join him at his table for a bit of talk and a drink.

It's agin rules, duck, she whispered, winking. I'm off duty in a half a now but me old man's a bit of a tartar.

Mitchum studied his pocket watch for almost a minute before shaking his head slowly in incomprehensible gesture. You're frightened of something, he said. He was particularly good at picking up on errant fright.

Katie shuddered, said G'wan and returned to her place behind the bar. A few minutes later a heavysset man in an apron came over to Mitchum's table and sat himself down.

Mitchum said hi, though he could tell from the man's manner that he was angry as a bull and looking for trouble.

The man held out a beefy hand as if it were a sample of something he hoped to sell when the market for such items improved. Now we're both grown gents, said the intruder, you and me sir, ain't we? We've seen a bit of the world to be sure and we're still around to say boo if that's the noise that wants saying. Aint we, friend?

He put his heavy (unaccepted) hand across Mitchum's back and breathed his beer and garlic breath into the wings of Mitchum's classic nose.

Was that lovely little girl that served me bitters your daughter, Innkeeper? Mitchum asked.

Used to be, said the proprietor of The Queen's Cross, Wild Irish Cornell. Since January the ninth the little bird's been me wife.

The last announcement sends waves of shock through the pub and even Mitchum, who has seen plenty in his day, is rendered temporarily speechless.

The innkeeper explains that the bird had been his stepdaughter—the daughter of his first wife—not his natural daughter, before he made her his second wife.

Hiding his heartbreak behind a professional smile, Mitchum indicates

that his interest in the innkeeper's wife had been primarily that of a doctor's toward a patient with a baffling illness, that something about her had whetted his scientific curiosity.

My wife's not me only daughter, says Wild Cornell. I have another who's bedridden poor thing. She hasn't left her bed in seven years and I'd be much obliged if you took a peep at her doctor, much obliged. Up until the time she stopped walking, she had been me favorite.

Mitchum sees no graceful way of refusing his host's request and follows the colonel (an honorary title) to the bedside of his invalid daughter, Sonja, in a small apartment two stories above the pub. The girl is very pale and wizened, a patina of perspiration covering her diminutive face. She raises her head but is too weak to make herself heard.

She had not spoken a word in seven years, her mother/sister reports.

The colonel gets maudlin at the sight of his stricken daughter and throws himself at the foot of her bed, letting out a long heart-rending sigh.

Mitchum has no patience with grandstanding and tells the weeping colonel to stop competing with his bedridden daughter for sympathy.

Mitchum's insight produces a mild shock of recognition. How could I be such a bloody blind fool? Wild Cornell rages, tears streaming. I'd give me life if the darlin' would walk again. I'm the most worthless dog that ever drew breath.

If I'm going to pull this girl through, I'm going to need your help says Mitchum. Can I count on your support, Colonel? (The colonel grunts in the affirmative, falls shamelessly to the floor in an abject posture.) What I'm going to need you to do, says the doctor in his clinical voice, is to go in the kitchen and boil some water. In the meantime I'd like to talk to the patient without interference.

When the room is cleared, Mitchum sits down on the bed's edge, concentrating his entire attention on the speechless girl. His smile radiates confidence. The girl smiles back though it is unfelt, merely a gesture of the mouth.

You're a beautiful child, says the alienist.

Surprise lights the small pinched face. She shakes her head very slowly, all her energy centered in denial. Mitchum repeats his compliment, insists on it. I . . . she starts to say, pronoun at her tongue's length. She mouths the words: *I'm awful*.

Oh yes, you *are* awful, he whispers as if it were a secret they alone shared. I've known that from the first moment I saw you. I said to myself that beautiful child is awful. She's awful and at the same time remarkable. She's special, that child, and I'm going to do something for her.

Muck off, she says clearly and distinctly, her voice like the hiss of a kettle.

Mitchum laughs his boisterous roar of a laugh. You can talk, can't you, little darling. And I'll bet you can walk too. You've had them all fooled, haven't you? Well, good. Hooray for you. But I'm not like the other doctors and your father and your stepmother or anyone else you've ever met. I don't believe you're incurable and I won't leave your bedside—I promise you—until you give up all this nonsense about being sick. What do you say to that?

Her answer is to pull the covers over her face. After a few minutes, suffocating, she tears them away.—I couldn't breathe, she mouths. Why didn't you take them off?

If you don't want to breathe, little darling, he says, that's your business. The cover over your face didn't bother me.

You're cruel, her mouth says quivering. I won't get better for you. You've lost your chance.

Good, says Mitchum in the same false hearty manner. I'm glad we're agreed on that.

A gleam of stubbornness registers on her stricken face. No matter what you do, the gleam says, I will hold tenaciously to my right to be incurable.

I don't care, little darling, he says. I love you just the way you are.

She raises her wizened head to stare at him. I'm no way, she mouths. Leave me alone.

He leans over—his bulk casting a huge shadow across the bed—and kisses her between the eyes. I can't leave you alone because I love you, he says.

You can't love me, she whispers, the voice ghostly. I'm the most awful thing.

Tell me why you're so awful, little darling.

The question returns her to her former muteness. She shakes her head and tears leap from her eyes like flying fish. She writhes, screams silently, bites her lip. Blood flowers at the bud of her mouth. After awhile, all gestures of anguish exhausted, she makes the following report.

They always hated me because I tried to be good, she says in a death rattle of a voice. (He has to put his ear to her lips to hear her.) I overheard them one day planning to get rid of me. It was my mother's idea. She said to my father: Little Sonja breathes too much air. The child is greedy for oxygen. If we don't get rid of her, there'll be nothing left for the rest of the family. Their plan was to take me to the country one day, pretending it was a picnic, and leave me behind in the woods. I made my own plans. The day came. After lunch my mother and I went for a walk in the woods. I pointed to a mushroom, asking her what it was. When she bent down to look at it, I hit her with a rock on the back of the head. We looked a lot alike and I changed clothes with her, telling the others

when I returned alone that Sonja had gotten lost in the woods. It worked for a couple of weeks but then they found out and made me suffer, which was only right.

Another bad thing I did was spy on them. I would pretend to be asleep. They would say a lot of strange things when they thought I wasn't listening and I would write them down in a secret notebook. It was the only way I had to protect myself from their meanness. If they did something mean to me, I would give away some secret of theirs. That was awful, wasn't it?

Mitchum nods. I've never heard of anything more awful, he says which elicits a smile.

I'm not even telling you the worst things I done, she says. One time I stole a pint of milk from the front of an old lady's house. In its place I left a bottle of cat piss.

She hasn't quite finished her recitation when her father comes in, carrying a lobster pot of boiling water.

Hope I'm not intruding on nothing, he says.

Make him leave, she whispers.

The colonel slaps his head in astonishment. Them's the first words the little doll has spoke in two years. You're a miracle man, doctor.

He rushes to the daughter's bedside and embraces her feet.

Leggo, she screams. I won't have him doing that.

She's right, the colonel says. I'm not good enough to kiss her feet. Though good enough I suppose to pay for famous doctors to look after her.

Somehow Sonja (in the confusion) has gotten her hands on the pot of boiling water, which she holds by its sides as if her fingers were nerveless.

Mitchum is too far away, too caught up in his analysis of the situation to stop Sonja from tilting the pot (who would have believed she had enough strength for that?) so that the scalding liquid drenches the head of the figure embracing her feet.

There is nothing anyone can do, everyone moving in slow motion as in a dream. Mitchum does his best—physical medicine after all not his specialty—to save Colonel Cornell's life. If he survives, the innkeeper will have to wear a mask to conduct public business for the rest of his days.

The stricken daughter rises from the sick bed that held her captive and embraces her dying father. Papa, she says, don't leave me.

Where the ministrations of science have failed, love and hate effect their own remedies.

The old face is gone, she says gently. The new face will be better.

If Colonel Wild Cornell's tear ducts had not been burnt away by the boiling water, he might have shed some tears at his youngest daughter's words. He stumbles to his feet and surges blindly across the room. His daughter trails him, begging for his forgiveness.

Look Papa I can walk, Sonja says. She takes two steps and falls down. The colonel squints his one sighted eye, helps her to her feet and they embrace for a second and third time.

You won't be neglected never again, says Colonel Cornell. I give you me word in front of the doctor. . . . Where is that big fellow?

His job completed, Mitchum has slipped out of the apartment unnoticed and down the stairs and out into the foggy Dover streets. He puts up the collar of his trenchcoat against the cold and lights a cigarette—two at once—in the shadow of The Queen's Cross.

It has been a long emotionally draining day and night for the itinerant alienist. He has loved and lost three times. Three women have entered and departed his life, leaving him with a sense of void.

Who is that bloke? someone in the pub asks someone else as Mitchum shuffles by on the way out.

I never did get his name, says the other, but that big fellow is the goddamndest mind doctor you ever want to meet.

Mitchum climbs into his rented Vauxhall and drives off past the cliffs of Dover into the muted English sunrise, another chapter of his life behind him.

POETRY / BROWNE, COOPER, SANER, RAMSEY

“Talk to Me, Baby” / Michael Dennis Browne

1

A friend at a cocktail party tells me
of being on a fishing trip up North
and meeting some men from Illinois
who showed him how to clean and filet a fish properly;
and of how, when one particular pike
was stripped almost clean, almost all of him gone,
the jaw with the razory teeth opened
and some kind of cry came from the creature,
that head on the end of almost no body;
and the man with the knife said:
“Talk to me, baby.”