

SPECIMEN SOULS

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Her childhood had been Catholic and easy: days and years undifferentiated except by occurrences that usually had nothing to do with her. What she would remember was the quiet of the household and the stillness of the town where she grew up. In her memory, pages turned noiselessly, people spoke in whispers in the street as though not to wake some community of sleepers, balls bounced in a vacuum. In such an unruffled quiet, things seemed to happen at a great distance, so that even those events that did touch her life passed only half-noticed; that was part of the easiness. Even her father's death was such an event, for he died after having made so little disturbance that years later she could still only call his face and voice to mind with difficulty. It was strange to go through the old albums and come on him looking at her out of a photograph – as though he were a faked memory, part of some counterfeit past.

Her adolescence she spent anxiously measuring herself, trying to keep up with what her classmates were interested in, having crushes on boys who were seldom interested, and trying to live down things she quickly forgot. The measuring – and the anxiety that accompanied it – went on past her teens. Always taller than every boy but one in her class, she continued to grow, slowly, until she was twenty-one, when she stood slightly over six feet three-and-a-half inches. That was just about the time her mother died.

Afterwards she sometimes wondered whether it had taken the shock of that death to stop the awful growth, whether she would have just keep growing, Alice-like, taller day by day, even if only infinitesimally, if her mother had lived. For it had come home to her then with something of a shock that she would have to do something to earn a living, and that she knew nothing to

earn it by. That death also brought her to the city; with no one else in the house, the place seemed quieter than ever, obtrusively quiet, so she sold it and its quiet and moved away. All of that money went into a bank account – where it remained, untouched. The little that her mother had left her got her an apartment in the city and kept her afloat while she took lessons: her father had been a pressman (and what she remembered about him was not his face his hands, which he had brought home each evening black with news) so, like a pale refinement of her father's species, she learned to type. Now she was so good that she did not have to read a word of what went on the page; while her fingers made only a slight disturbance in the present, her eyes moved undisturbed through the past.

Ruth liked remembering, like nothing better than just to lie in the dark in a warm bath and let things form in her mind coming from far back. Just small things. She could shuffle the memories backward and forward; that way the future was a kind of remembering, too.

One evening, out in the rain on her way to a movie, Ruth saw her face on exhibition in a gallery window. Glancing into a lighted display she saw, among other photographs, one photograph with her own face, and she stopped and stared at it there behind the glass.

"Well, I'll *be*," she said aloud. That had always been her mother's phrase.

The photograph was unmistakably of her. She was seated in black and white at her kitchen window in her old green robe with her chin propped in her hand, her elbow propped on the sill, a portion of the brick wall of her building framing her on either side. The Currier and Ives reproduction of a sleigh ride was visible behind her on the kitchen wall – exactly where it still hung. Her face seemed very large to her at first, round as a doll's face. Her hair was pulled back as if she had just washed it. Her lips were slightly parted, though not wide enough to show

her long teeth. The streetlight outside must have already come on, for its light made a bright point in her eyes.

A card beneath the photograph said:

PEACE AND SORROW IN OUR TIME

S. Marlow

\$35.00

also available in a set of ten
photographs for \$300.00

Ruth had lived in that apartment for almost eight years, and things about her hand changed so little that she had only her own face to go by in guessing when the picture had been taken. It must have been taken in summer, for the window was wide open, and the thick foliage of the tree across the street could be seen reflected in the upper pane.

Then, while trying to compare the photograph with the pale reflection of her own face, in the glass, superimposed there like a moon come out before dark, thin as rice paper and nearly transparent, she felt a wave of resentment against this anonymous photographer who had put her face on show. Ruth quickly looked over the rest of the photographs in the window to see if she was in any others, but that was the only one. Some of her anger softened as she glanced at them, as if the company of these other subjects lessened the extent to which her own privacy had been violated. They were all portraits and all had titles. Ruth wondered if all the people in the photographs were from this city.

The rain was making itself felt. Too excited for the movie, Ruth turned back for home, wishing that her mother were alive to tell this to. She could hear herself telling her mother about the photograph and could hear what her mother would say. She could picture her mother's face

clearly. It was odd to enter the apartment and walk around it now, hanging up her coat, turning on the television, passing the Currier and Ives. She felt as though she were on the set of a movie she had seen a long time ago. It seemed odd to have the window there, intact. The bare tree across the street, rattling soundlessly in the wind and pelted by rain, seemed a fake.

The following Saturday, Ruth went to the gallery to see the rest of the exhibit. Alone in the place except for a woman at a desk, Ruth moved almost furtively from picture to picture. Another print of herself was hanging inside, looking harsher in that lunar atmosphere of white walls and black polished floors. Next to it hung another photograph by S. Marlow that was similar: a shot of an adolescent girl seated on what looked like the base of a statue, her head turned in profile while she gazed at something in the distance. The title of that one was “Eastern Harmonies.”

After a second look at everything, Ruth read once again a posted sheet, as if for some clue she had missed. It said, “S. Marlow. Studied: Parsons School of Design. Residence: New York City.”

“Excuse me,” she said to the woman behind the desk. “This doesn’t say if the artist is a man or a woman. Do you know?”

“It’s a woman. Sandra Marlow.” The woman pronounced it “Sawndra.”

“Have you ever met her?” Ruth was surprised that the woman had not recognized her.

“Yes...”

“What’s she like?”

The woman shrugged. Ruth wondered if that meant she did not think very highly of Sandra Marlow’s work.

“I only ask because I’m the person in the photograph over there.” Ruth pointed. “Peace And Sorrow In Our Time.”

The woman cocked her head and looked at her and said, “So you are,” giving Ruth’s entire person a fast inspection that took in her coat and purse and hair.

“You don’t know Sandra?” she asked. “You don’t have a print of it?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you ask her for one?”

“...?”

“I’ll give you her address.” The woman had already opened a card file.

“I couldn’t do that.”

The woman gave her a crooked smile.

“It’s your face, isn’t it?”

She copied an address and a phone number, and as she handed it to Ruth she said, “Tell her you admire her work.”

Ruth thanked her and left quickly, still muting the sound of her heels on the floor. At home, she read the paper with the address one more time, then put it in a kitchen drawer.

Three weeks later the photograph was gone. Ruth had walked out one evening to look at it again and when she stepped up to the window she saw in her place a color photograph of sheaves in a field by someone else, a man. Ruth gave the new display a cursory look, then returned home, disappointed and wishing she had bought the photograph while she had had the chance.

And thirty-five dollars had seemed exorbitant for a picture that could not even be called a likeness – for it was not as if it was a picture of *her*. It was a woman in a window. What was

more, the photograph was in black and white, unlike the snapshots of husbands or children posed on desks at the office, or the gorgeous polychrome shots of trees or lakes or sunsets everyone brought back from vacation. Seeing herself in black and white, Ruth could only think of photographs in the newspapers, which were almost always of victims.

That evening she took the paper from the kitchen drawer and dialed the number. A woman's voice interrupted the first ring.

"Sandra Marlow."

"Hello, Miss Marlow," Ruth began, "you don't know me..."

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you."

"Miss Marlow, you don't know me, but my name is Ruth Doyle and I'm the person in Peace And Sorrow In Our Time."

There was a slight pause on the line.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm the person you photographed..."

"Oh. Peace and Sorrow. Really."

Ruth hurried on with all the things she had prepared to say beforehand, telling how she had noticed the photograph while walking by the gallery, and how she had gotten Sandra Marlow's number.

"I didn't have – I mean, I wasn't able to buy a copy of the picture..."

"I'm glad you didn't. I'll give you all the prints of it you want."

"That's very nice of you." Ruth tried to sound pleasantly surprised at the offer.

They arranged to meet the next evening.

Sandra Marlow's address was in an area Ruth was not familiar with, and she was surprised the next evening when the cab let her off before the door of an old warehouse, with a sign advertising STORAGE over the door, partly covered by another nailed over it that said LOFTS FOR RENT. Ruth thought that she had the wrong address, and was going to call the cab back, but then inside the door she saw a business directory which listed several names, S. Marlow among them. The elevator, which looked like a loading elevator, was broken, so Ruth walked up four flights to a landing on the top floor. She groped there for a doorbell, but before she found one the door opened to a door chain's width of brightness and someone looked out at her.

"Hello?"

"It's Ruth Doyle."

The door closed, shutting Ruth into darkness, a chain rattled, and then a woman was standing in the doorway smiling at her.

"Hello," she said, stretching out a hand. "I'm Sandra. Sorry I'm such a mess but I've been in the darkroom all day."

For some reason Ruth had expected a young woman, but Sandra Marlow was fifty or more, with gray, short-clipped hair and a pale smell of liquor – gin or vodka – about her. She was dressed in jeans and an old shirt that made Ruth self-conscious about the good dress she had put on. She felt Sandra's gaze pass over it and record it with the little invisible *click* of a lens.

The place Ruth walked into consisted of one long, high room extending far back past lights and some furniture into a dark area that seemed to be filled with equipment. A mobile of metalwork butterflies suspended from silver branches hung over the near part of the place like a curious chandelier, catching and throwing light in wiry patterns as it turned. Most prominent,

though, were three photographs of a naked pregnant woman in full face and left and right profile, blown up larger than lifesize and hung across the greater part of one wall. Seeing that, Ruth felt the color rush into her face.

“That’s old,” she heard Sandra say.

“Oh. It’s old...”

Behind her, Sandra Marlow had poured two glasses of wine and as she came round close and handed one to Ruth she said, “You still look like the picture.”

“Yes, I don’t really change very much,” Ruth said, feeling a bit proud, oddly, as if she had honored Sandra Marlow’s photograph by not aging past its one moment.

“What are those lines? ‘She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy...’ Something. Kiss? ‘Forever wilt thou love and she be fair.’”

“That’s very nice.”

“Though thou hast not thy Keats.”

But Ruth hardly heard, preparing how to ask when the picture had been taken.

“I’m still so much the same I couldn’t even figure out when you took it,” she said.

“Tell you in a sec.”

Sandra strode to a table and flipped open a card file.

“Seventy-four,” she said, holding up a card. “June 23. Do you happen to remember what you were doing on the night of June 23, 1974?”

Ruth laughed. “Sitting home, it looks like.”

“And here’s the evidence.” Abruptly Sandra asked, “Do you like? The picture, I mean.”

“Yes I do. Very much.” Her attempt at emphasis made the words come out strange.

“Must have been weird, seeing yourself like that. Coming on yourself looking at you out of a window.”

“It was. It was. But actually,” Ruth said, “after I got over the surprise I felt kind of angry...to tell you the absolute truth.” Ruth tried to make it sound as friendly as she could.

“Why so?”

“Because of the way you,” she almost said “took advantage,” “the way you took a picture without asking.”

“It happens all the time, what with tourists and camera bugs and whatnot.”

“But it doesn’t usually mean getting put in a window someplace. On display.”

Sandra laughed. “Sounds like an honor to me. Christ. It’s *fame*.”

Already prepared with the question, Ruth asked if she could see some of Sandra’s other work. Sandra turned on a lamp over a very long empty table and from stacks of numbered shoe boxes took a handful of small envelopes. From those, she removed slides which she arranged in rows on a raised plate of opaque glass. Then she turned off the table lamp and touched a switch that lighted the glass from underneath. She beckoned to Ruth, and as Ruth approached she saw on the glass what looked like glittering fragments of stained glass in tiny white cardboard frames.

“They’re in color.” Ruth was surprised.

“Yes, I’m into color now.”

Sandra handed her a magnifying glass. Bending close, Ruth ran the lens along the rows of slides. The wine had begun to take effect, slowing the light between herself and whatever she looked at, and now she felt as if she were peering into minute aquaria, for there seemed to be the slightest finlike flutter of movement down there. Even with the help of the magnifying glass, however, she had difficulty making out of the nature of all the figures in the slides.

“It’s hard...”

“Just needs a little practice,” Sandra said over her shoulder.

A bright lozenge on a green background resolved itself into a lawn chair. Under the lens it wavered, grew larger, swam away. A wavering tentacle in another slide became a piece of driftwood. What had been a dark red smear in another slide became a beach umbrella.

“Do you like them?”

“Yes. Very much.”

Sandra smiled sourly. “Not *too* much, though. Too *bourgeois*? Lawn chairs and things?”

“No, really, I do like them.” Ruth groped for something more to say. “But you had more people in your other pictures. The ones at the gallery, I mean.”

“True. True... They just seem to be getting rarer. People, I mean. And not so interesting sometimes as...lawn chairs, or... But then it’s always like panning for gold.”

“You know actually,” Ruth heard herself saying through the wine haze, “I was only angry at first about the picture. About you just, you know, taking me. Taking it.”

“Yes?”

Sandra’s eyes were fixed steadily on hers.

“Because your picture doesn’t show how tall I am. It showed... I don’t know. Something else.”

She had wanted to say that. All the way over she had planned to tell that to Sandra. She added:

“Since I am very tall.”

Now that she had said it all, she laughed a little, embarrassed at her awkwardness in getting it out. But at the same moment, she realized that she had made an awful mistake, that she

had unknowingly touched something she had not meant to touch, and she felt tears pulse into her eyes. The room bulged and swam. Ruth was puzzled to see Sandra moving forward, indistinct in the aquarium of her tears, and was puzzled too by the touch of the woman's hand on her arm. She felt a light kiss. Then another not as light.

"Oh," she said, stepping back. The shock of it made the tears come in earnest, and the room and Sandra blurred away altogether.

"I'm sorry," she heard Sandra say.

Confused, Ruth looked about herself, then down, to look away from Sandra, even though she was still half-blinded. Something soft was pressed into her hand: a tissue.

"My mistake," she heard Sandra say. "Too much drink. I'm sorry."

"No, it's..."

Ruth wanted to say "It's all right" but that did not seem to be right, or to describe what she felt. For a moment it had not mattered that Sandra was a woman; the kiss had been a kind of flattery and she wished that she had not been so taken aback. Now Sandra moved away from her quickly.

"It's really all right," Ruth said lamely, hardly loud enough to be heard. For a while she heard Sandra rustling about doing something in the dark.

Then Sandra came back toward her, holding out a greyish whitish blur from her hand. It hardened and took on edges and Ruth recognized a matted copy of her photograph.

"Thank you," she said, taking it and staring at it as if she had never seen it before. Two other prints of it were underneath. On the matting of each had been neatly penciled the title, Sandra's name, and the date. "Thank you very much."

She smiled moistly, and Sandra smiled automatically in return.

“Would you like another glass of wine?”

Ruth shook her head.

“Anything?”

“Actually I should be going, I think,” Ruth said, as embarrassed as if she had instigated that scene just now. But its traces were only faint in the air; it seemed hardly to have happened at all. Only now Ruth was aware of the sound of rain drumming on a skylight overhead, and of the way the lightning outside made the place seem to sway, as if afloat.

Ruth was about to ask if she could call a cab when Sandra asked, “Would you mind if I asked you a favor?”

“...?”

“Would you let me take your picture again, now?”

Ruth hesitated, her eyes flickering to the pictures of the pregnant woman. Sandra laughed.

“You don’t have to undress for it.”

Ruth said, “All right. But should we do it here, where should we...”

“Yes, this is fine. It’ll be completely painless. You won’t feel a thing.”

Ruth saw that Sandra already had a camera in her hands. She was about to ask where she should stand, when a flash went off. From behind a wall of glare, Sandra said, “That’s it.” Blue and red spots blinked around Ruth, enclosing her in an animated, substanceless foliage that dissolved while Sandra phoned for a cab.

Until it came, Ruth stood near the door talking with Sandra about houseplants and apartments and cats, with the prints in a manila envelope in a plastic bag under her arm. Then the

buzzer sounded. The two women shook hands quickly and Ruth hurried down, clattering on the wooden stairs.

Halfway to the bottom, Ruth stopped and called up into the stairwell:

“Let me know if it ever gets hung in a window!”

“What?” she heard.

“Let me know if it ever gets shown!”

“Right!”

“Goodbye, Sandra!”

“Bye!”

When she arrived home it was too early for bed. She took the prints out and set them on the kitchen table – three versions of herself, each the same. She reflected that someday, when she *had* changed and aged, this photograph would look like the portrait of a child of hers. That face had held so many others to come.

Unable to decide what to do with the prints, she slipped them back into the manila envelope and put that into the bottom drawer of her dresser, recalling as she did so that she had once given her mother an expensive sweater for Christmas and that, going through her mother’s belongings after her death, she had found that sweater in the bottom drawer of the dresser, sealed in a plastic bag. Her mother had always said that it was too good to wear, and so had never worn it. Ruth did not want these prints put away for good like that, but knew she would feel silly if she hung the picture and someone saw it and its title. In the end, she decided to store the prints in the drawer until she found some way to do the picture justice.

She put on the radio then and lay in a hot bath with the lights out listening to music, as she so often liked to do. Then, after the water grew cold, she put on the faded green robe of the

photograph and sat at the kitchen window to watch the people in the street, amused to be re-enacting the photograph like that, feeling watched, posing.

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