Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty
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Once back home she collapsed into the comfort of her reading chair. After hastily shopping for sustenance supplies, denuded of the racy latex gloves and camouflage headscarf, Bette B licked her hands. Having squeezed a plop of Purello on her palms and given them a brisk rub, she’s taken to licking them clean, finger by slick finger. There’s an unpleasant aftertaste but once accustomed to its bitter sting, the buzz offers a quite singular jolt. In fact, if pressed, she’d have to describe the sensation as similar to the initial ping one feels when pushing off in the Corridor; that heady, intoxicating synthesis of decisiveness and the out-of-control that accompanies a “what if.”

What she would not say in this description, what she’d keep to herself out of embarrassment and a contrived sense of decency, is that she takes as much pleasure in licking her fingers clean as she does the alcoholic buzz it engenders. Perhaps it’s the ironic paradox that accompanies the act that amuses her, eggs her on in an unspoken complicity. It’s the delicious transfer of the 500 or so odd bacteria that coat every human tongue to her antiseptically protected hands, in a perverse cleansing gesture, that thrills her. How many species bathe this way she wonders? That she can’t see the microscopic, swarming activity every lick perpetuates enhances the gesture’s
wild relevance. Like a Wiccan offering, it thrusts her into the tumult of belief and disbelief structures. She horse jumps, thinking thoughts at right angles to the expanding infinities of cosmologies and quanta, of ghosts and dust, of monsters and pets.

Absently, lost in starry haze of unseeable charm quarks, she gives a final über-hygienic lick to her right pinky finger. She’s back to a tactile reality, reconsidering the double agency of the Purello, part purifier, part hallucinogen. A quasi substance if ever there was one. How is it, she wonders, that the all-too-anthropocentric, semi-psychotic, vari-phobic, disinfectant, cultural ritual of ridding nature from flesh has become an urban obsession, a medical necessity, an anti-contaminate sensibility? Sure, deadly plague-like infectious disease is passed to humans through animals. Rats > Bubonic, Chimps > HIV, Fruitbats > Ebola. These are the hypotheticals of biological science, built upon the historical dynamism of “facts,” those slippery bits of data that hold a position of “truth” for a while and gradually succumb to entropic erosion like just about everything else humans think they know. She doesn’t get the nature/culture rupture at all. Never did. Squirting another round of Purello on her hands, she licks its residue more aggressively now. She’s seeing things, seeing things otherwise.

In a moment of oneiric clarity, Bette B recalls a recent event she’d scribbled into her lucid dreaming journal. The desire to examine the entry overtakes her. Standing up a bit too quickly, she steadies herself from a dizzying head-spin. Breathing deeply, she grabs the notebook from the bed stand and flips to an entry from 5 November:

Dusty, matted with years of whatever it is that gets into the seams, creases, cracks, and texture of objects over time, this weathered SLR film camera of no particular brand was owned
Real Hallucination

and used regularly by a professional photographer. It came loaded with a roll of black and white 35 mm film; the type, age, and ASA were unknown to me. The camera was shoved into my hands by an older man with shoulder-length white hair and a grumpy disposition. He reminded me of a shaman, a Don Juan, or the director of an art school. The gesture was meant as a provocation, a challenge and a threat; the task was to shoot exemplary advertising images of various models of horse-driven chariots and wagons from a luxury vehicular company. Something unspoken was at stake, probably my career. On a dirt track outside the aluminum structure that housed the studio equipment and darkroom of the deceased photographer, I opted to shoot the seven horse and carriage types as they ran at breakneck speed toward my position in the middle of the racing lane. The 180 mm telephoto lens was stuck fast with the accumulated gunk of years in the threaded body casing. As the pounding flesh, metal, and creaking wood approached, I snapped the wild eyes and drooling mouths of horse and human as they rushed towards me. Having calculated their approximate distance and speed, I was able to leap from the path of the oncoming tonnage just in time, each time. Any hesitation or klutzy stumble could prove fatal. I repeated this feat seven times with varying actors, models, and athletes in the role of horse, rider, and wagoner. I hoped for decent photographic results but wasn’t sure how to get the film from the camera body once I’d finished shooting as it was sealed closed by the residue of time.

This being the far riskier aspect of the assignment and terrified I’d expose or damage the celluloid images, I suspended the task and hopped a small water taxi. I arrived at a former warehouse that now served as a collective studio space for interdisciplinary artists including my old friend Babs whom I hadn’t seen in decades. She was working tech for the performance installation of some celebrity artist. The concrete floor of the workspace was littered with lighting equipment, cables, projectors, theater props, and lunch leftovers from the past week. In this black-box setting, a bright white light lit up a five-meter section of the floor
in what appeared to be the center of the space. Several people were gathered, sitting, squatting, or standing around on the cold concrete. I joined them, curious about the small black elliptical objects that sometimes sped through the brilliant light and over the laps and feet of the concentrating spectators. From a seated perspective I realized with a small jolt that the objects were rat bodies, scurrying over, under, and around the laser light beam. The other guests had adjusted to the initial shock of holographic rodents running over their limbs. As I relaxed and enjoyed the realistic and startling speed of these virtual creatures, a palpable sense of anxiety spilled through the installation as one of the rat figures seemed to be slowly morphing into a “real” rat as it scurried in and out of the light. Indeed, the figure now had weight, form, hair, whiskers, and smelled vaguely animal. Several seated and squatting humans screamed and jumped to stand. Some ran. Having just been rushed seven times by living, snorting horses I was less inclined to fear and kept a grip on the performative context of the event though the effect was decidedly angina inducing. Was this animal presence outside the control of the “work,” a likely occurrence in this location? Was it a magical technological feat I knew Babs was capable of pulling off? I wasn’t yet in enough of a contemplative state to value the aesthetic experience. I was overcome by a raw sensation of sensation itself.

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Here Bette B’s journal entry for 5 November ends. She has no desire to continue reading other entries. This is enough agitation for one day. She grabs the Purello again to clean whatever contaminate might have jumped to her hands from the journal. It’s an excuse of course, for liberating her mind.