Last Year at Betty and Bob's: An Adventure

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Infrared on Black

I’m one of the few GenTel Bettys. The founders, the primaries, all hail from pre-CRISPR generations. Right now, only UVB and me are the tweaked ones. I transduced from a proto-Betty to the real thing a while ago, but don’t ask me how they measure this. I think Red’s fall left a hole at end of the spectrum that only I could fill. Gamma Betty, the intern, is also Gen Z GenTel (or GenTelZ as we fondly self-identify), so our numbers are growing in the group. Honestly, I’m not at all clear what difference it makes to anything though the old ones are always claiming the world has gone, how does White Betty say it – “to hell in a handbasket” – and that we, the young ones, are only borderline authentic. It’s a form of tribal intolerance as far as I can tell, but they insist it’s their ethical resistance to eugenic practices. Which, OK, is a fair point. Black Betty Bob remarked that he grew up in world that considered genetic design racially motivated. He has a hard time fully accepting a GMO ethos. He always reminds me the “crispy critters” epithet is a racial slur I should be more cognizant of.

I’m very fond of him, Bob. He’s helped me understand certain tensions. The Bettys’ predisposition against genomic tinkering is deep-seated though malleable. They try to be open and non-judgmental, roll with the times, but an
implicit wariness roils beneath the surface. The primary Bettys, oh how they insist they don’t judge CRISPR offspring. “No blame,” Orange Betty always says and follows it with “namaste.” UVB and I doubt their sincerity but we all do, we Bettys, manage to have a laugh together.

I can’t speak for other designer-DNA babies but I can say with certainty that my parents, both control freaks, engineered my code with vigor. They admitted as much. My mother, born in Port-au-Prince, is a professor of microbiology at Uni-3. Her interest in toying with chromosomal strings is pretty straightforward. She could so she did. My dad is another story altogether. He’s a manicurist. He likes to stress the man in the curist. He’s hyper-concerned with ornamental details and the healing potential of beautification. I guess both my parents are in their ways. My dad’s background is Māori. He has traces of tā moko on his cheeks. Thrilling little spirals. They met over a manicure in NZ when my mother had a research fellowship in Wellington. She blissed out over those spirals as my dad painted tiny roses on her ring fingers.

They haven’t told me exactly which gene clusters they messed with. They, my progenitors, said it was better I didn’t know. Like in the old days when schools would redact IQ scores. But of course I know, I’m the one in my body. My parents swear they only meant to tinker with health-related tendencies. Wanted to save me from Aunt Fabiola’s breast cancer. They’re not as transparent as they think they are. They’ve left me wondering if my non-binary inclination is au naturel, engineered, or simply trendy. I’ve decided to insist on a genderqueer pronoun in any case. It’s what we feel.

Betty Bob is always taking photos. He says I’m a great model, “unperturbed by my own beauty” is how he puts it. He tends to take gauzy, out-of-focus black-and-white
shots so I see myself through his eyes as form in motion. But I see him in all his hot heat and I love what I see.

My chosen pseudonym is a giveaway to my condition, so no spoiler alerts here. I get so tired of seeing everything in this fucked-up world all the time. No off button anywhere. Even in the dark. There’s no respite. Others need special hardware for this trick. Me, I have the gift of unobtrusive night vision and it’s a mixed blessing. I’m told by neurotypes that evening darkness brings a very necessary escape from the visible spectrum of reflected reality but I can find little solace in a midnight sky.

But that’s only half the story of my schizo vision. My nights are a concert of greens. My daytime is an unremitting symphony of red. I’m told my vision is measured in the near infrared spectrum but sometimes, and I can’t control this, it goes all thermally. Meaning, I see heat. Technically that capacity is in the far infrared spectrum. My mutated rods and cones respond to light in a manner comparable to Kodak’s obsolete Aerochrome III film. Lucky me.

Sorry, back to Bob. He always tries his best to share my worldview, shoots with analog film when he can get his hands on the stuff. It’s dis/continued, hard to find. He prefers Kodak HIE black and white for his work but sometimes plays with color infrared to capture a range of hues similar to my day vision. Even though we know the values are impossible to measure and replicate, I guess it makes us feel like we can share sensations of redness, of blue-ness, of other-than-green. When he develops the images they’re often glitchy or fogged as the shelf dates are way over. He uses color filters and has an uncanny sense of exposure time. That’s a cool detail about infrared film, there’s no ASA, the instructions say “speed inapplicable.”
Think about that, uh, a minute. In any case its fragile exposure process is all about light and temperature.

Bob’s curious if my vision behaves like the finicky film but how am I supposed to answer that? He says shooting with celluloid film helps him better understand the impossibility of deciphering appearances in my world. The always-on rosey glow of my trees, the beet red of my pastoral landscapes. He tells me he’s anxious about the film supply drying up and the inevitable switch to entirely digital processes. Photoshopped infrared images are anathema to him.

He’s earnest though, Bob, he really wants to prehend my prehensions. His phrasing not mine. Sometimes he calls this desire a process of transindividuation. He says he wants to feel what I feel when I see the world. I admire that intensity. When we make love we sometimes wear blindfolds, each of us, so we field our feeling in monochrome. We even cut ping pong balls in half and made Ganzfeld glasses to get the sensation of a total white field as well as a black. The sex is haptic and olfactory and aural and tasty.

For me, imposed blindness is a relief. For him, well, he says he likes it but I’m not convinced. I do think it effects his conflicted sexuality. The repression he submits his heteronormative preferences to when they pop up. He’s been slow to feel comfortable with fluidity, though I consider him a true pioneer in that regard. I don’t think he even realizes how outside the box he was with identity politics in the paleolithic era of feminist and gender activism. In any case, enforcing an absence of light can be numbing if obligatory. He reassured me the constraint is liberating, unleashing erotic vivid fantasies that satisfy in unexpected ways. Always the smart one, he showed me images from an infrared analysis of Picasso’s Blue Room.
he’d flirted with a few nights ago when he went down on me. He admitted identifying with the bow-tied man lurking beneath the naked female figure. I responded badly to that remark, telling him it felt sexist and he should maybe better keep his orgasmic fantasies to himself.

He’s loquacious enough on his own. And elegant. He stopped wearing all shades of green because he knows there’s too much red in my life already. He’s always experimenting with complementary colors that will freshen my palette. Surprise me. He puts purple food coloring in the broccoli soup, that sort of thing. Yesterday, inspired by the Picasso, he wore a blue bow-tie with yellow polka dots. For me it was bright yellow with swimming aqua
spheroids. No matter what he wears, his skin always looks dazzling, glows.

But I want to say one more thing about the photos he takes for me. When he shoots black and white infrared film the results are, how can I put it, a solace for my overwrought sensations. As the near IR spectrum reflects off the green of leaves it glistens a smooth white. Details are bleached clean. Objects have brilliant auras when the light’s just right and the exposure a tad long. As the lightwaves are absorbed by a blue, blue sky, it’s rendered a deep black. The contrast is magical. This inverse worlding as Bob calls it, reveals the intensity of my everyday. It’s what my dreams look like. I often wish I could retrofit my retrofit and turn off the color gene entirely leaving me the glorious wash of a monochrome, near-infrared spectrum. Dump the far-infrared thermal entirely.

Honestly, I don’t know what my parental units were thinking.

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Bob’s obsession with contrast, with lightness and darkness, is a fetish I can embrace. I find his obsession with monsters strange though. I can’t yet wrap my head around the Grendel and Geryon thing. I probe but don’t get much response.

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We took a trip to Spain last fall. Loved sleepy Granada. Visited the Alhambra. We share concerns with the damage wrought by neoliberal tourism but travel anyway. Bob brought his old Leica with a fanny pack of filters
and a light-sealed changing bag he uses for loading and unloading film canisters. The process is tedious and couldn't be more different from the split-second impulse of the selfie. He prefers analog flow to the digital sample. It's a generational thing I guess. Indicates the gobs of cultural space-time between what remains of the boomers and emergent GenTelZ’s. He took an image I like of an unknown guy shooting us, his camera lens a black hole against the glowing archways. There's a reciprocity captured in that encounter I find strangely dangerous and charmed. I have often wondered why taking a photo is called shooting?

BB also got a wonderful exposure of a semi-crouching woman in snap mode. The postural resemblance of concentrated assertion reminded me so much of White Betty that we gave her a print. She framed it and hung it over her refrigerator.