

The Meeting

by stephen hastings-king

When he leans back from the telescope through which he had been looking, he sports a derby and a Hercule Poirot moustache.

He says: I do not know any more now than I did before I began observing. But I have engaged in a practical activity the result of which is a new hat.

When you investigate, it is important not to be tied too closely to the point or end. The end is just a device for setting a process into motion. A process may or may not produce the outcome you intend. But it always produces outcomes.

Coffee?

I say: No thanks. So I hired you to find what is missing, and what you're finding are new outfits.

He says: I'm not finding outfits. The outfits occur as a result of the activity of trying to find what is missing. Such things happen all the time. Whether you see them or not is a matter of what you're open to.

When I began my identity as a detective, I was quite committed to sifting through contexts, extracting & reordering with the idea of reconstructing a hidden narrative embedded in reality that would lead me stepwise to what is missing. Sometimes it worked out. Sometimes it didn't.

This inspired me to learn more about this business of being a detective. So I started reading criminology and detective fiction. Soon I realized that so long as I was reading I would never know the business. Writers know the business. Each demonstrates their knowing when he or she writes criminology or other detective

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fictions. So I decided that the only way to not merely learn but to know what I should be doing and not what should be done in general was to start writing myself.

My first novel taught me about process and outcomes. That's when the outfits started. I also discovered that much of the fun in being a detective comes from writing about yourself. Most detectives write after hours. Each story is an advertisement. No doubt one of mine is what drew you to me.

I say: I had no idea you wrote anything.

He waves his hand. The derby and moustache disappear.

Then why are you here?

I say: This is a small town. I lost something. You are the only detective in the area. I was hoping you could find it.

He is silent for a moment.

The room resembles a 19th century small town pharmacy: to either side and behind the desk are cabinets with glass doors behind which are rows of jars filled with variously colored powders, medical curiosities suspended in formaldehyde, specimens of yellowed grasses. On a shelf in front and below them is an array of microscopes, magnifying glasses, kaleidoscopes.

He says: In the beginning of my literary career, I only wrote about cases that I solved, that is about cases in which the result of my processes of observing, gathering, sorting & reconstructing coincided with what the client wanted. With time, I began to realize that these stories had a vast public not because I solved this or that case, not because the degree of difficulty increased or decreased,

but because of reassuring nature of the plots and the interactions that necessarily followed involving a range of stock characters.

When you begin being a detective, you find these people. It's like they spend their lives waiting. What does a femme fatale do the rest of the time? She gets ready to be a femme fatale when the curtain rises. And when does the curtain rise? When she decides to find me and in set into motion the plot that enables the self she's cultivated to unfold.

I look at the cabinets again. I am increasingly unclear as to where this meeting is headed.

He says: This leads me to an important consideration that I want to impart to you, sir. Not long ago, you came here to hire me to locate what is missing. In doing that, you crossed a threshold that separated the rest of your life from a narrative about your life. In that narrative, you are a cipher, a negative space that enframes a desire: to find what is missing. In the story I shall write about this case, it will be unnecessary that I say anything about what you look like, what you do otherwise, how you are. You are a function. Readers will know you because of that. Your story is no longer yours.

In a way, you are like Judas.

I say: What?

He waves his hand at me.

He says: No matter.

Judas was necessary for the setting into motion of the story of the crucifixion. Perhaps then his was not betrayal at all but an act of self-sacrifice. Or perhaps he followed out a plot set up in advance. Or perhaps there really was a betrayal. Regardless, without Judas

nothing of the story of Jesus' death and all that could have been set into motion. But this is an old story. There are only old stories.

I say: Why are you telling me this? Are you equating yourself to Jesus?

He says: Don't be dense.

People hire detectives because they like to think that what is missing is merely hidden. So the world is a closed system in which there is a relation of foreground to background that is proper. In that proper relation, what is missing never goes missing. Then there is an inversion. When that happens, what was foreground is collapsed into background and new foregrounds emerge. Now, what was not missing before is missing. This enables the missing to find itself as missing.

People hire detectives because they want to believe that beneath the effects of this inversion things no longer visible continue to be passed through stories just like before, except they are now hidden. While hidden, things are passed hand to hand; they travel situation to situation. Other invisible elements come into contact with it. They acquire meaning because of that contact. And each retains it like a glow.

When any of these other elements migrates back into the visible, it retains the glow of contact with that which is missing. It becomes a clue.

So in secret spaces objects fashion trails that lead you back to them. Like they love you back and miss you and so want you to find them. Nothing ever really disappears.

People hire detectives because they're Platonists.

I say: Platonists.

He says: Yes. Things in the world are expressions of eternal forms. Nothing comes into being: nothing passes away. Everything is always the same. There are only perception problems. Detectives are Outsiders. They help clients see what they can no longer see.

Detective stories concern the revealed and the hidden, the thresholds that separate them and points of passage from one to the other. Reading them is like being a god. They're immensely therapeutic.

But things pass away, sir. Things pass irrevocably away. The world is not a closed system: what you see is not linked to eternal forms. There is no inversion of foreground and background. Sometimes what is gone is not hiding. Sometimes it is gone.

I say: So you didn't find my briefcase. That's what you're telling me.

He says: Not only did I not find your briefcase, but until now I had forgotten what it was that you asked me to look for. When you first came here, you remember I was taking notes. You imagined I was writing down the relevant facts as you stated them. But I was just listening: when I listen, I like to doodle. It did not matter what was missing: what was missing is simply a structural requirement for an adventure. The adventure is about itself. If by some happenstance that adventure leads me to find what is missing, then fine.

I say: But you took my money. We made a deal.

He says: We didn't make a deal: we signed a contract. That contract was not contingent on my finding what was missing. It simply enabled the process to get underway.

But do not despair. I am writing a story about this case. And I am doing it from your viewpoint. I will make you famous.

A story.

That's right.

Do you publish these stories?

He says: Were this already one of my stories, in response to that question I would no doubt insert here a discourse on the corrupt state of the publishing industry. It would be the product of long cogitation, a ripping social critique.

I should make a note of this. Perhaps this is a good place for a chapter division. I could be more expansive that way. Yes. And the conversation can pick up again on the far side. O that's good. That is very, very good.

For EK, madre mio, on the occasion of her
diamond jubilee.

