

# A Sight Worth Keeping in View

*by* strannikov

Don't ask why, dear, but I decided to treat myself to the picturesque Starbucks experience, as offered by the franchise here in Middletonburg. I'd agreed to meet Gladys Milroy and Ruth Ann Clovis there early Saturday afternoon, they were to convene after a morning of shopping and I had only dashed out beforehand to pick up some Paris green—not at all, dear, no no no, for the rats in the back yard!

By the time I arrived, Gladys and Ruth Ann were sipping their raspberry lattes or cinnamon cappuccinos or vanilla mochas or whatever foul things they were sipping outdoors, I ordered a black Italian Roast which, not contaminated with other flavors, was well-brewed and strong. The afternoon had grown blustery with a warm breeze, and as I walked out, both were yammering at full voice in forest green plastic chairs beneath the green-and-white Starbucks umbrella planted inches from the curved end of the drive-through lane. I braced myself for a rundown of their hours just spent at Dillard's and Macy's and Belk's but was instead treated to a lengthy discussion of the virtues of caffeinated coffee versus caffeinated tea versus caffeinated soda.

Gladys, dull shapeless girl that she is with her pre-pubescent figure and limp lifeless hair, then thought of nothing more interesting to launch into than yet another recitation of her expense of \$26,000 on the wedding for her second marriage, which lasted all of two years. This was the same story, word for word, she'd recited countless times at meetings of the Thumbs of Green Club, the Friends of the Library Association, the DAR, and the Shriners' Ladies Auxiliary. Ruth Ann, being a relative newcomer of only a few months, had heard the story only a handful of times and could not be expected to have the whole account memorized. Gladys's recitation

led without surprise to Ruth Ann's repeated boast (I'd heard at least twice in two months: at the May meeting of the Azalea Society and at the bridge tournament Dorothea Pittscairn had hosted soon after Ruth Ann arrived in Middletonburg) that "seven hundred attended my wedding", the preamble to her rewarding eleven-year marriage that ended the day Ralph suffered his final stroke fighting a swan that had moved his ball from an eighteenth green down at Hilton Head. I listened with patient nods and lips pursed with concern, adjourning briefly for a second cup of Italian Roast and a tolerable pumpkin bread cupcake.

Their chatter continued into the following quarter hour and the subsequent half hour, fumes from passing pick-ups and SUVs and sporty coupes blowing through or past, depending on the prevailing gust. Then, who should saunter up but Tiffany Gallbone, whose arrival cued Ruth Ann's abrupt silence, which Gladys took as her signal to launch into the matter of the upcoming Junior League cotillion. The woman would not pause even to sip her cold coffee as long as Tiffany stood there, and Tiffany herself had neither the sense nor the courtesy to leave. Although Gladys's non-stop performance doubtlessly kept Tiffany from asking me outright for design ideas for her breakfast nook, I instantly ceased to wonder that Sam was no longer with Gladys, the woman is tireless when it comes to mindless chatter. Tiffany just stood in her habitual slouch, wouldn't sit, hadn't ordered one cup of coffee of any type, Gladys droned on and on, I wanted to put Tiffany out of her misery and mine and shove her in front of the next large vehicle hurtling down the drive-through lane, until she curtly interrupted Gladys to say she had to go get her BMW washed, but not leaving before promising to call early in the week with a question or two. I nodded without the least trace of a wince!

Ruth Ann now exhaled in preparation for resuming her turn. She launched directly into her other predictable monologue on how the dinosaurs did not merely hang on but thrived, not for a few million years but for tens and hundreds of millions of years, a lengthy spell by every calculation. This, though, was not the second or the third time she'd broached this subject, no, over the past

months she'd managed to introduce the subject dozens of times, if I hadn't heard it myself I'd heard reports of it from at least a dozen acquaintances. As usual these remarks were simply prefatory to her cheerful emphasis that happy days must lie ahead for humanity, endowed as it is (as we are) with native nobility and the cunning inherent to the species—but then, just as characteristically and predictably, Ruth Ann proceeded not to mention our anthropogenic talent for lying and misrepresentation, the countless ways in which human pettiness could erupt (however spontaneously) into malicious deeds of revenge or envy, or into provocations to murder simply to prove a trifling point (such as one's superior aim) or into less frequent provocations to murder out of mere aesthetic regard (the propriety of murdering one's parents or siblings, spouse or children, or step-children, for instance—I for one, as you know, dear, refuse to exempt the impulse to murder from reason altogether, this I shall not condone, although I concede that some rationales for murder must simply fail to be articulated).

No, as Ruth Ann regaled us with her optimistic crypto-socialist bonhomie, I differed from her, quite markedly, in complete silence and within the privacy of my own mind. Men, I concluded as she spoke, are men. When men are not being leeches or worms, reptiles or rodents, snakes, snails, or slugs, when men are not being mandrills or baboons, peacocks or pigeons, men behave and comport themselves ably as men, spineless vertebrates or bipedal imbeciles though most be. Plus, they lie whenever it suits: I tell you, for my money, the Turing test will be passed reliably only when our computers and robots begin lying to us without provocation, for no utility other than convenience or spite.

No, when not being altogether less than human, men are only exactly and utterly men, each living his life somewhere between the poles of incessant Awe and enduring Indifference. These are the men who live on and off the pages of history, or the men who have waded into history just far enough to think that they are mastering it, the more foolish among them thinking they are called to be History's guides, leading the charge of yet another high tide: these

men who have emerged from the gene-permissive and gene-constrictive histories of the planet's nations, tribes, and peoples. I long ago decided: a man with his penis engorged, his circulation diverted for the moment, if you will, such a man has ceased to think clearly or properly, explain it as you will but he's no longer engaging in a strictly rational pursuit. Of course, much the same can be said of any woman having her clitoris stimulated—it's been a commonplace at least since the days of La Mettrie's "Man a Machine", but who reads La Mettrie today?

No, I did not agree with Ruth Ann's rosy and superficial assessments, though along and along I offered genial nods and sweet smiles. The peculiar thing about our afternoon at Starbucks was that, after a half-day's lapse, I instantly recalled the need to go let Esmé, the Komodo dragon, out of her basement confinement, the bodies in the old coal chute had tormented the poor dear for days already: Garrick and the step-children would soon be missed, it had been a week since I'd set the boat adrift down at the dock. And, drat and confound it, I had neglected earlier to pick up a fresh bottle of Pine-Sol, that spatter at the top of the basement stairs still needed to be dealt with, and I would not likely permit the stains to be discovered by the likes of Tiffany Gallbone. But whenever would I finish my shopping!

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