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Philip Horton

WHAT'S IN A CORNER

MR. WRIGHTMAN climbed into his bed next to the window and with a long sigh composed himself in his usual posture: hands clasped across his chest, legs close together and ankles crossed. He had once read somewhere that such an arrangement of the body in a cruciform pattern regularized the flow of one's psychic energies, and if his wife sometimes observed from the adjoining bed that he looked "just plain dead" lying there with his eyes closed and his mouth slightly opened, this only served to confirm his sense of profound relaxation.

The truth was Mr. Wrightman believed in ritual. It represented—as he had long since tired of explaining to his wife—the principle of pattern and therefore of order, and provided a stable framework within which one could collate, arrange and subsume the disorderly experience of everyday life. The posture of his body right now, for instance, he liked to think of as subsuming the psychic energies flowing through it. (For a moment he actually saw, pulsing from the toes of his crossed feet to the tips of his spread elbows and thence to the crown of his head, small scalloped waves of pale fluorescent light.) Meanwhile the posture of his body was contained and subsumed by the quiet rectangle of the bed and the similar shapes of cool sheets and warm blankets carefully aligned and tucked in; and the bed in turn, parallel to the wall, was subsumed by the shape of the room, and this by the shape of the house, which itself faced squarely on a street parallel to many other streets. . . . Mr. Wrightman gave a small sigh of pleasure, and in the act of groping on the night table for another tangerine his wife looked up from her book.

"Sleepy, dear?"

He lay very still, taking care not to interrupt his regular deep breathing. The sharp fragrance of tangerine and the sound of suc-

culent munching reassured him for a moment; but his failure to reply hung uneasily in the air.

"De-ear?" Her voice was tentative, considerate. "Now dear, don't go and go to sleep. I'm almost finished my chapter and then we can have a nice cuddly chat." She paused, then added coyly, "Or maybe, if you like, we could play the game."

Feeling the prying force of his wife's eyes on him, he bent all his will towards appearing even more profoundly asleep until the turning of a page told him he was safe for a few more minutes. But her last words had thoroughly chilled him and the fluorescent sense of well-being was gone. There were, he reflected bitterly, certain "cuddly" attitudes and impulses so firmly rooted in the deep animal recalcitrance to order and system that they could never be successfully subsumed in any reasoned way of life; and the "game" was pre-eminently among them. In a way, he supposed, it was a kind of perverted ritual, a ritual of unreason, like a black mass, full of obscene and malevolent parodies of the real thing. He sighed again, but this time inaudibly, with his internal organs. The posture of his body, now willfully fixed for fear of betraying wakefulness, weighed on him like a *rigor mortis*, and from time to time he could hear a faint whispering noise which presently he identified as his wife's toenails scratching absently at the sheets of her bed.

In his mind's eye he saw her as clearly, as immemorially as Whistler's portrait of his mother, but how different. She was sitting cross-legged near the head of her bed in a great swirl of blankets and sheets and pillows, crouching over her book like an animal and rocking back and forth with a gentle rocking-chair rhythm. Tossed in the wild convolutions of the bedclothes appeared the flotsam and jetsam of her evening's amusements: the rinds of several tangerines, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, the wrapper and gummy remains of a chocolate bar, discarded books and magazines and the mutilated ad section of the evening paper. And on the night-table between the two beds, like a senseless sal-

vage, a wet tea bag, an empty cup, an apple core already turning brown, and tumbling out of an overflowing ash tray a jumble of nasty balls of used Kleenex.

Mr. Wrightman itemized the familiar disorder with mingled affection and despair. Among the books he noted, as usual, Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* which his wife, when she read it at all, read backwards in order, as she explained, "to understand his premises in the light of his conclusions"; the *Garden Encyclopedia*; a whodunit by Dorothy Sayers; *Barchester Towers*, as a standard soporific; and the *Kinsey Report*, which she was now reading admittedly as a counterirritant to *Woman: The Lost Sex*, and which judging from her little grunts of triumph and contempt was admirably filling its role. He had often remarked that the more absorbed she became in her reading the more frequent and varied were the noises she uttered. In fact, in all her more



responsive and unreflective states she was addicted to making obscure animal noises, her vocal cords responding as mindlessly as the strings of an Aeolian harp to the unpredictable gusts of her emotional life.

Suddenly the light went out. He lay quietly, trying anxiously to fathom by the complicated series of sounds from the next bed the drift of his wife's intentions. The brisk, blubbery noises of the nightly facial suggested she was widely and vigorously awake. On the other hand, what followed—the heavy thud of the *Encyclopedia* slipping to the floor as she humped herself down in the bed, succeeded by the lesser retorts of Henry George and Kinsey and the swishing avalanche of papers and magazines—seemed to bespeak a blind and drunken determination to sleep at all costs. The alternatives hung suspended in the darkness along with the sticky fragrance of apricot face cream which was now beginning to settle over his bed like a creeping fog.

"De-ear? . . . Are you really sleepsey, dear?"

He made no answer, miserably taking the full measure of her determination from the extravagant gentleness of her voice. She was going to be sweetly reasonable.

"Now dear, you can't really be asleep. You've been lying there like dead for the last half hour, flat on your back without so much as budging, and people just don't sleep that way."

She herself slept like a disorderly fetus, Mr. Wrightman thought, some sort of animal fetus, a panda or a honey bear.

"It's unnatural," she went on, "and besides I've seen you often enough when you're really asleep. In the morning you're spread out all over the bed like a great octopus going every which way. I just know you're not really asleep, now are you?"

And supposing he was, thought Mr. Wrightman. He couldn't very well answer the question without coming awake, in which case he wouldn't any longer be asleep. The profound illogic and duplicity of his wife's insistence suddenly smote him with a great indignation. It was more than he could bear.

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"I am," he declared in a flat bitter voice, "profoundly and irrevocably asleep. Please to not disturb."

She sniggered into her pillows. "Now don't be angry, dear. You see, you weren't really asleep after all."

The complacency of this left him speechless, and his wife, sensing her advantage, pressed on quickly.

"Now let's play the game, dear. Just once. Just a little short one . . . and I'll begin."

This was what he had dreaded. It was not *The Game*, which at least had the virtue that it couldn't be played in bed, but *her* game, learned in the provincial hinterland of her childhood, which one night in the fourth year of their marriage she had abruptly rediscovered in the cluttered attic of her mind and had brought down, so to speak, to install prominently in the foreground of their daily lives, like the whatnot in the corner of the dining room which she had inherited with all its silly gimcracks from the Roxbury farm. And like the whatnot, he loathed it for its shameless quaintness, its blatant and abysmal frivolity. But now there was nothing for it; he was caught again and his wife knew it. He could hear her settling voluptuously into her nest of blankets and making those queer laryngeal noises which frequently, and particularly in bed, signalled her preliminary dealings with a complicated idea. Presently she was ready.

"I've got something that begins with 'C.' "

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral," he replied, feeling all sorts of a fool, but determined to make short shrift of this nonsense.

"Vegetable," she said promptly.

"Is it in this room?"

"Yes."

"Is it an article of furniture?"

"No."

"Is it on or in any furniture, or is it a part of any of the furniture?"

"No, dear." She was obviously quite pleased with herself and her voice came to him half muffled by the blankets.

"Is it on me?" He thought of the cord of his cotton pyjamas.

"No, dear."

Suddenly he was sure he had it. She was always wearing one or more of her little side combs to bed, forgetting to take them out, the way she often forgot to take off her dressing gown. Once on coming home from a late party she had even worn to bed a small black toque so that awakening the next morning, he had had the shocking impression of seeing a lumpy little man in a black cap sleeping in her bed.

"It's one of your combs," he declared, and at once saw his mistake. His wife giggled.

"Don't be silly. They're made of tortoise shell; they're animal."

He grunted. "How would I know? They might be made of wood pulp or rutabagas or God knows what these days."

He remembered bitterly the night he had staked his all on a silk ribbon, pure animal product of the worm, he had thought, and how his wife in the midst of the subsequent row had thumped downstairs to lug back Volume XX, SARS to SORC of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in order to read him, as if reciting the Doxology, the article on "Silk, Artificial." "Vegetable," she had wound up triumphantly, "it's as vegetable as a cabbage."

Thoroughly aroused now to his danger, he hoisted himself on one elbow and peered carefully about the shadowy room. He would go about this business systematically, relentlessly. He divided the room lengthwise, then crosswise, and taking each of the four quarters in turn tried to eliminate in a series of rapid-fire questions each vegetable item beginning with "C" which, visible or invisible, he knew to be in the room or which—as he grew more desperate—he thought might figure to the highly imaginative and cloudy mind of his wife as being in the room.

At first his method worked quickly, with a bright air of ease and efficiency, like a new toy or an outboard motor, but after sev-

eral minutes it began to show embarrassing pauses and finally sputtered out in random guesses and expostulations. He felt himself floundering, and the room of a sudden appeared very small and bare. Meanwhile, he had learned only that "it" was plural (there were apparently several of "them" distributed with maddening impartiality in every quarter of the room); that they were "not useful, but terribly important in an aesthetic and mechanical way—I mean I don't use them myself, ever"; and that they were very large, "maybe twelve feet long." It was this last simple item of description that finally reduced him to silence, and gave him his first premonition of something terribly wrong. The full enormity of it did not strike him at once; he sensed rather than saw it, his befuddled faculties groping about its large and simple proportions like the hands of a blind man until, abruptly, he sat bolt upright in bed, remembering clearly that the dimensions of the room were only fifteen by eighteen and the beds a modest six and a half by three. Yet there were several, she had said, there were several of these gigantic objects in the room. This way, he felt, lay madness. He made a last despairing gesture in the direction of reason.



"Did you," he said, and was surprised to hear his voice, half suffocated by emotion, come out as a hoarse whisper, "did you say twelve feet?"

The heap of blankets in the next bed stirred slightly and gave out a small murmur. Having by now achieved a thoroughly "cuddly" state of being, she had clearly lost interest in the outcome of

the game and was about to fall irretrievably asleep. He had suffered this peculiar form of humiliation more than once before and at the prospect of again finding himself arguing heatedly, idiotically, with the darkness was seized with violent panic.

"Damn it all," he shouted, "wake up!" He swung his feet to the floor and leaning over her bed began to shake her back and forth. "You wake up and stay awake till we're finished with this business."

Her head appeared, all unexpectedly, halfway down the opposite side of the bed.

"Stop it! Now you stop it, Fred, you're hurting me. Can't you see I was just about asleep?"

"Asleep . . ." The audacity of it fairly choked him. Reaching over, he took a firm grip on the nape of her neck. "Now look here, Susan, did you or didn't you say these things were twelve feet long?"

"What things? . . . Oh those; why of course I said so. You can see for yourself."

"Oh I can, can I?" He exerted a strong uplifting pressure on her neck and brought her struggling into an upright position. "Well then, let's just look at this thing together. Where, in this cubicle, are there several objects twelve feet long that I fail to see?"

She continued to struggle about sturdily. "Let me go, Fred, let me go and I'll tell you. Really I will."

He held her fast. "I don't want you to tell me," he said pleasantly with a fine free sense of contradicting himself. "I simply want to play the game."

"Well I don't, I want to go to sleep. And besides you don't know *how* to play, all you want to do is argue, argue, argue . . . and bully me. Now let me go," she panted, "it's the corners I meant, so there."

"The what? What corners?"

"The corners of the room, you—you big dope. There, there,

there and there." She waved her free arm wildly around the four points of the compass, then feeling his grip loosen, dove quickly under her blankets.

For a moment he was stunned. There was indeed something terribly wrong here. He sensed enormous discrepancies of viewpoint and focus; deranged perspective swinging wildly like searchlights in the night sky; and something even more cosmic, the metaphysical shadows of Mr. Eliot, falling with perpetual frustration between the substance and the reality. He grappled with it stubbornly.

"Nonsense," he declared. "Who ever heard of a corner twelve feet long?"

His wife's head darted savagely out of her burrow. "It goes from the floor to the ceiling, doesn't it?"

Again he sensed a mysterious angle of vision, and shifted quickly to more solid ground.

"Anyhow, a corner's hardly vegetable, it's *mineral*. It's made up of plaster and sand and stuff like that. It's *obviously* mineral." He was angrily aware of an almost pleading note in his voice. But it did him no good, for his wife, it appeared, had thought it all out.

"Oh, but that's different, that's the *outside* corner. I'm talking about the *inside* one, the one made of wall-paper and mouldings and that's just as vegetable as your old plaster is mineral, and besides. . . ."

"Oh, no you don't, Susan, you don't get away with that." Mr. Wrightman felt a last flicker of rage. "That's just about the silliest damn thing you've said all night. Outside corner, inside corner! Where do you think we are anyway, behind the looking-glass? Where I come from a corner's a corner, and it's made of plaster and lathes and incidentally decorated with paper and moulding, and it's mineral . . . or if you want to be really pedantic about it, it's mineral and vegetable and you know it as well as I do. And furthermore. . . ."

"And furthermore," hissed his wife, starting upright from her blankets, "I don't know anything of the kind and I won't be bullied any longer. I know what I meant and I still mean it. And just because you come along and choose to describe a corner as if it were a *wall* and put your own constrictions on it. . . ."

"Constrictions," he shouted, "Oh God, that's wonderful, that's priceless. . . ."

"That's right," her voice soared still higher, "laugh at me, bully me, push me around. That's a nice way to play a game. Just because I won and had to tell you the answer, you have to have your nasty little revenge and sit there and . . . and make fun of me."

She collapsed into her blankets with a wail, and Mr. Wrightman recognizing in the tremulo of her last words a really serious danger signal, rose hastily from the edge of her bed. The finality and the injustice of his defeat were now equally obvious.

"Go 'way," she whimpered, "just go 'way and leave me alone."

He turned and climbing into his own bed, stretched out flat on his back. After a moment he crossed his ankles and having pulled the covers up carefully under his chin, folded his hands on his chest. The posture was really very comforting and seemed at once to ease the pounding of his heart; but behind his closed eyes his mind flickered restlessly with a dim phosphorescent light, illuminating by fits and starts a broken chain of reasoning, a shadowy objection, a magnificent but decapitated rebuttal.

After some time and without his making the slightest effort there emerged with a sweet serene clarity the explanation of it all. It was really very simple. And with understanding came forgiveness: he felt a friendly need to communicate his finding to his wife.

"After all, Susan, if you had been really fair, you would never have chosen a corner in the first place."

"Well . . . why not?" She was still petulant, but ready for reconciliation.

"Because a corner, my dear, is not a proper object."

"What is it then?"

Mr. Wrightman paused, embarrassed. He suddenly realized he hadn't thought it all the way through.

"Well, it's a . . . how shall I put it? It's an arrangement of space. That is, it's not actually an object in and of itself, like a chair or a table, but is made up of two objects—the two walls—coming together at an angle. So you see. . . ."

He was ready to elaborate, no matter how shakily, on this interesting idea, but she began to giggle into her pillows.

"Oh Fred, you're really too funny. Not that it makes any difference and you know I don't care one way or another, but after all, a house, I suppose, is a proper object, and what's a house but a bunch of corners stuck together with walls? And now, for heaven's sake, let's go to sleep. I'm simply exhausted." She stopped giggling and blowing her nose vigorously into a fresh Kleenex, dropped it in the direction of the night table and withdrew with unmistakable finality under her blankets.

For a brief moment he had it in him to rise once more to the attack, to denounce and reduce her prideful irresponsibility, but the impulse was followed at once and quite unexpectedly by a profound purging sense of the frailty of human nature. What reason and order could not subdue charity could at least transcend.

"Yes," he said, "yes, I suppose you're right."

But as he said it, his eyes, wide open now in the darkness and moving almost furtively as if to escape his detection, sought out the far shadowy corner of the room and he had already begun to wonder.