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## If You Live Long Enough

BY DONALD L. WEISMANN

THE MAN with the bald head introduced her and she stepped up on the dais in an urn-shaped plastic hat. She smiled and slowly sat herself down behind the huge confessional-like lectern rigged with a pair of microphones, and, as in drowning, disappeared from the view of the very small audience in the large conference room of the Leonardo da Vinci Society at number 10, Lungarno Corsini, Palazzo Corsini, Florence, Italy.

Her voice came out of two Queen Anne-style loudspeakers, one hanging over the lower legs of a painted cherub, the other over a painted garland high on the front wall. She started talking about the camera obscura and gradually worked her way through the pinhole camera. A gifted American photographer whose vita took one whole side of the ten-by-twelve-centimeter invitation, she had, in these later years, taken to scholarship and had been doing research on the daguerreotype.

After she outlined her way into the fifteenth century, decade by decade, she wisely gave credit to Leonardo da Vinci, a reproduction of whose self-portrait hung as a centerpiece among the portraits of the Past Presidents of the Leonardo da Vinci Society. It must have been the present President of the Society who said bravo quietly at the mention of the man who, besides setting forth the principles of the camera obscura, provided Dr. Freud with the excuse for making his celebrated study of psychosexuality—a special kind of Austrian novel laid in the time of the Renaissance in Italy.

In the time it took a spider that looked like a cross between an orb-weaver and a wolf spider to make its way from the portrait of the First President of the Leonardo da Vinci Society, a man named Francisco Gioli, to the Seventh President, Dario Lupi, the woman photographer got up to Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, the French scene painter who invented the daguerreotype. And you find, as the woman

photographer's voice keeps droning behind the lectern, that you never knew that there were only 187 true daguerreotype cameras built and that all of them were manufactured between June 15 and August 15, 1839. And you are further bulked up with information by learning that, as of the present year, there are only 14 of them in existence—the latest to be discovered being owned by a citizen of Florence who was right there that evening in the large conference room of the Leonardo da Vinci Society.

If you live long enough you're bound to find yourself in places and situations that don't give easily to explanation—like the time on that tiny South Pacific island when you were standing there naked and peacefully swabbing your jungle rot with gentian violet and that Japanese infantryman came out of the trees to surrender to you. And like the time near Stamford, Texas, when the dance band stopped playing and the spotlight came on you and they struck up with "Empty Saddles" because they mistook you for some rodeo performer who'd broken his back earlier that year and would never ride again. And that's not to mention all the times you were hauled in as a robbery suspect, and for murder in Blue Earth, Minnesota, just because you're of average height, they say, and have dark eyes.

If you live long enough and remain rather more plain than fancy, you're bound to find yourself in situations that are hard to explain; and sitting there in the vaulted conference room of the Leonardo da Vinci Society while that woman told in infinite detail about the varieties of cabinet work in those 187 daguerreotype cameras, cabinet by cabinet, felt like one of those situations.

But if you grapple with it, you can explain some of it pretty well, even if you can't understand it. The fact of the matter is you were there in the Leonardo da Vinci Society because your son, age nine, did not need a haircut. If he had needed a haircut you would have taken him over to the barber on the via Vittore Emmanuele II where his hair would have been cut and you would have been reading Italian magazines while the woman photographer went on and on without you knowing a thing about it. But your son did not need a haircut and that meant that the time was open for your daughter, age ten, to start her English-saddle riding course in that stable and indoor ring not so far from the railroad station where there's never any parking space. So you drop her off at the stable, and no God-fearing man, as you hear people saying back home, is going to let his ten-year-old daughter come home alone after dark, so it's arranged that you'll be there when she

finishes riding. Besides, you guess she may be a little saddle-sore from posting in that English saddle after all her lounging in a Western type.

Now the via degli Orti Orecellari, where the stable is, is too far from the house to make it seem sensible to return home and then drive back to the stable in the rain, so you decide to do something nearby and be there when your daughter comes out, perhaps saddle-sore. As some kind of result of this, you remember the invitation your cultivated landlady gave you to hear the lecture by the woman photographer and you drive over to the Leonardo da Vinci Society where you think you can park. And after a while, there you are in that conference room, caught like a piece of fully clothed flotsam between the facts that your son's hair didn't need cutting and that the Leonardo da Vinci Society is not so far from a riding stable. When you realize that you let yourself get caught in this circumstantial net, you sense danger in the situation. One of the dangers is that you might begin to take part in whatever is going on—like applauding an outlandish amount at some Wonder-Book-of-Knowledge item the woman photographer coughs up as if from the pit of her own creative self; or standing up and interrupting her by offering a correction of some date or name she'd just used; or worse, perhaps, making an effort to join the Society. Another danger you sense is that you won't get up, courteously feigning a nosebleed, and leave, even if it is raining outside and you've still got over half an hour to wait before the riding lesson is over. Now if you don't leave, and if you don't take part in the thing going on, there is a danger of your showing your exhaustion with it all by doing something like lighting up a cigar and bothering people in the audience by simply looking at them instead of staring at the lectern. And that's exactly what you do, just as naturally and unpremeditatedly as you breathe—you light up a cigar and look at the audience and at those sad portraits of the Past Presidents of the Leonardo da Vinci Society hanging there in rows.

But who would have guessed that, as soon as you get the cigar going well, the President of the Society, the one who said bravo earlier, would rise up and come over to introduce himself and invite you to sit with him in the front row—and apologize profusely in two languages for not recognizing you earlier. This is another of those points at which you should leave, but don't. Instead you say you are sorry, but he is mistaken—that you're not Karl somebody-or-other who covered the Italian campaign for an American magazine back in 1944. But the President is positive you are that other man and that if you

choose to be incognito that's quite all right with him, but wouldn't you sit with him in the front row, anyway? By that time everybody in the audience is looking at the two of you engaged in polite argument, and then the fire in your cigar hits one of those fast-burning places that causes the end to flare up and send out an awful lot of smoke. There seems little to do but follow him to the front row, especially since he's already taken your overcoat under his arm, and sit down there to listen in silence and stare at the lectern.

At five after seven the woman photographer is just getting to Mathew Brady and you realize she's got another seventy years to go before she can talk of her own work. Your daughter should be coming out of the riding stable and wondering where you are, but you wait another five minutes and then tell the President you just must leave. He asks if you've met the woman photographer and you say no, never, and that really you must leave. The President says oh my, and then hisses at the lectern. The woman photographer stops talking and peeks around the side, then stands up and the President pushes you up on the dais where she shakes your hand and smiles the way some people used to look when they were under gas in the dentist's chair. When you start down the aisle she waves and then goes back to Mathew Brady while the President of the Leonardo da Vinci Society catches up with you and walks you clear to the street. He implores you to stay and since there's nothing you can say to make him believe you are just you and not somebody else, you point to your stomach and give a pained expression. This the President appears to know all about, and the final good-bye is said but not without an admonition to remember him to some ex-war correspondent now living in Chicago.

As you hurry toward the stable a cold chill goes through your bones as you think of how many things in history could have been precipitated in situations like the one just ended for you. You wonder what would have been the result if John Huss had been mistaken for one of all those Popes at the Council of Constance, and then chose to act out the role. Or what if Robert Welch of the John Birchers ran into a tent to get out of the rain, there to be mistaken for the Second Coming by the fiery evangelist Billy Saltine—and then chose to continue in the role with all that financial and fanatical backing?

At the point where you begin to think of Barry Goldwater being mistaken for Presidential timber rather than being recognized as a part of the petrified forest, the whole reverie gets too frightening and you're relieved to see your daughter running toward you as soon as

you turn into the via degli Orti Orecellari, not saddle-sore at all. She asks, how was the lecture, Daddy, or wouldn't she understand it? And you say yes, she wouldn't understand it, even if you could explain it, which you figure you could—but just barely.

✿ DONALD WEISMANN is known as an artist and writer. He served as chairman of the departments of art at the Universities of Kentucky and Texas before his appointment as University Professor in the Arts at the University of Texas. His articles and poetry have appeared in *Southwest Art Journal*, *New Republic*, *Texas Quarterly*, *University Review* and *Western Review*. Next year the University of Texas Press will publish his book *Language and Visual Form: a Personal View of the Dual Creative Process*, and Prentice-Hall will publish his text, *Introduction to the Visual Arts*. Last December he was named a member of the National Council of the Arts.