

Poster Man

An old man in our town goes around putting up posters on the cinderblock walls for events that do not exist. The authorities are aware of this. But there are so many posters on the walls anyway with no way to distinguish which are his, and they very well can't go to every promised happening to verify their authenticity. So every morning, he ambles along the side of the streets with a varicolored roll of cardboard posters tucked under one arm, his gait bringing to mind a gaudy duckling, glueing one poster after another.

In any case, nobody bothers to take them down, as some of them are quite nice to look at. They are nothing surprising, bits and pieces from things we have already seen somewhere or another. But that didn't mean that they couldn't still be almost beautiful, if a tad derivative. Everyone has their favorites. Mine is for a house of mirrors at a nonexistent 612 Barlow Street, a deep maroon poster with a young blonde girl in a pleated blue dress, surrounded by a kaleidoscopic throng of clean, silver mirrors mischievously bearing her distorted image. It has the look of the old-timey artwork for those bombastic circuses from the past century.

And so the posters stay. Years ago, my wife at the time and I were once thrilled at the prospect of seeing an opera, after months of dreary country life brought upon us by my new job. My wife more so than I. "Jeremy, I'm *so* looking forward to this," she had said again and again, basking in the warm promise of that black and white playbill all afternoon. That evening we had mazed through the little alleyways and hidden corners in anticipation of a sweet, redeeming aria for well over an hour before we realized our town did not have an opera house.

It is doubtful he even knows the geography of the town. Visitors often unknowingly ask him directions to some place because of his affable, diminutive presence, to which he always replies, “You’re almost there! Go straight for three blocks and turn right at the corner.” The doomed visitor would happily thank him for lessening the remaining toil of the journey, often with a hearty handshake and sometimes with a hug if they were particularly tired from the roaming. Our man would then quickly waddle away to a different quarter, not looking back.

There is a new policeman in our town. Straight out of the academy, he has set himself on solving our uncrackable case. He’s stationed men at every other street corner, although they have no intention of arresting the man, and the policeman himself has spent his days questioning the residents for any information on the offender. All he’s found is that there had been rumors that the man used to be part of a starving artist’s circle before the gentrification, though the rest of its members had found their vocations in doing either the art or the starving exclusively and were no longer around to be questioned. The old man seemed to enjoy the attention at first, putting up each poster with a flourish and a grin to the closest officer. Then he became wary. Now I can tell he is thoroughly scared by all this. One look at him, and off he scampers fifty feet in the opposite direction before putting up the next poster.

Frustrated with the progress of his colleagues, the policeman has now taken it in his own hands to nab the old man.

He catches him turning the corner. Resistance is feeble and short. The policeman holds him by the shoulders and barks at him to answer. It takes the policeman a while to realize that the shock of his presence has rendered the man dumb. The policeman lets go with an empty

expression, as if his own revolver had been pulled from its holster and cracked between his eyes. The old man dawdles away and does not look back.

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There is no longer the old man in our town. A few years after his run-in with the policeman – also no longer in our town – his house went to the state. By then I had been made a full member of the town council. I volunteered to be part of the committee that searched his place, where we found heaps of shredded canvas blotted with hesitant lines and feeble shapes. They were all unfinished, grotesque in their spotty vacuity. A certain heartache had swelled up in me, like a sneeze, then abated before I could fully discern it.

Sometimes, eating alone in my house, I think about that visit the old man's home. The other committee members were busying themselves with hauling out the remains of the old man's possessions, but I felt obliged to honor the last showing of our former resident. I walked around what was essentially one large, dilapidated room, sifting through the pieces of canvas. I noticed among them the figure of a girl in a blueish dress, juxtaposed against a brown lumpy object that had been painted over many times in different forms; her eyes deep and lips lost and parted, as if wanting to utter some unfound meaning.