

A Poem About Cyclops

A short story

By

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He was short with dark eyebrows, flattened nose, and large lips, and, although he had not spoken in eleven years, he always wrote to himself that he looked like the Cyclops. Mill managed a British style haberdashery where buttons, thread, ribbons, lace, silver and glass, and hats were sold. He wore suits in the old style with rounded collars and vests that were mostly brown or tan. The shop was located rather nicely in the city--amid four popular clothing stores whose merchandise sought complement with his.

Gentlemen entered Mill's place with little knowledge of haberdashery. "Don't you sell men's clothes?" one asked.

"Different haberdasheries exist," Mill wrote on a piece of paper. "I sell wares and notions. Like in Britain."

The perplexed customers browsed buttons for courtesy's sake. Many of them tried on a hat or two, while Mill scribbled the difference between the English and the American stores. Mill assumed that he operated a true establishment, true to Britain, if a bit odd to the disappointed businessman who was always coming in for suits and shirts.

His daughter lived with him in an efficiency in a small, nameless metropolis--one of those towns that had just become a city but always felt like a town. On Fridays, he picked up Rachel from her day school, and she was proud of him because he dressed well. Rachel was in her eleventh year of studies and very bright. She had the eyes of her dead mother, the admirable body of a woman, and was plain but still pretty. She was tolerant of her father's silence.

Very few men even entered the store until Rachel gave her father an idea to sell silk handkerchiefs embroidered with satin initials. Mill hired a much older man who wore tan corduroy pants and flower print shirts to cut and sew the new items. They put Mill's shop on the map. The newspaper wrote about them. Rachel saw her college savings increase.

He refused to sell ties and trousers, making his living mostly with the handkerchiefs that he now helped to design. The regular septuagenarian women purchased the buttons and ribbons. Glassware never sold. Silverware started to go in late May and early June in time for weddings. Tourists bought hats.

Each morning, he had trouble waking. When he managed to sit up in his double bed, his eyes burned. He had to be roused by his daughter. Her face looked more and more like his wife's. Her porcelain hands too. Sometimes he hoped she would be his wife. But she was always Rachel. She rose early and dressed herself, shook him; ate her toast and eggs and coffee, shook him; read or did her lessons,

shook him. After her fifth shake, he acknowledged the morning, sighed, and nodded to her. She kissed his salty forehead. "I'm glad to be awake and able to see you," she said.

On a sheet of notepaper he wrote, "Ho hum. The old Cyclops opens his eye."

"Come on," she said. "Up."

She hugged his head to her chest. For her only, he slid his legs over the sheets and set his feet on the cold floor. He scratched his knees.

Thank you for Rachel, he thought. Thank you.

He needed to speak to somebody. He missed Hope. If his wife were gone, why did he feel closer to her by the minute? Another man could run the shop if he left. Rachel didn't need him. Her day school and living expenses were paid. Why stay? To continue life with the loss of love was only death in the end.

In the middle of the store, fifteen mannequins stood like frozen people shopping. He had just ordered them. The men with short, parted, wooden, brown hair were not yet clothed. The time was for ties and shirts. And suits. They would revive--he was certain--the demand for handkerchiefs that had faded in popularity.

All day he dressed them. Their smooth arms were painted a glossy tan. Their blank faces and blue eyes gave him peace. By evening, around nine o'clock, he had suited them all.

In the next few weeks, Rachel met a man and did not return home

some nights. Mill didn't fall asleep. He wouldn't be able to wake without her, so his eye(s) stayed open, staring, waiting.

How much time had passed, he did not know. Each day was the same in its familiarity. But his eye(s) burned. The pressure of tears packed his forehead. Now his head itched. The desire to speak dried his throat. Although his muteness had attracted sympathy and business from men in the city, it created silence as a noise so splitting that without Rachel he sometimes found himself covering his ears from a racket that was not there.

His lack of sleep in her absence caused him to lose ten pounds. His neck ached, his nose ran, and he could never eat enough to satisfy his body's constant awake state.

Soon, he stopped going to the shop.

One delirious night in bed, sweat was drenching his brow and neck and lips and feet. Was his body crying? No, he knew that the moisture soaking the hair on his chest was only sweat. Not tears like he imagined.

She shook him awake. "How long have you been sleeping here? Answer me with fingers."

He held up five, then two more with the other hand.

Have you not eaten for a week, she thought? Surely he's eaten, she said to herself. She found some soup in the kitchen, opened the can, and began to warm it.

"I'm making you some chicken noodle," she yelled into the other room.

In the cupboard she found some wheat crackers. When the soup was warm she poured it from the pan into a bowl, set it on a saucer, lined the crackers around like a fan, and brought them to her father.

"He's going to be my husband," she announced, but she dropped the soup and it spilled from the bowl. She stepped on crackers as they crunched into crumbs. Yellow broth puddled on the smooth concrete. Noodles and gray meat splashed all over the floor. He had an index finger in each eye, pressing the pain back with his fingertips, and she yanked them out and told him to stop. She caressed his slick hair. She stooped to clean the mess with a towel from a nearby chair as her heart beat faster.

Vance was her husband-to-be. He would manage the haberdashery while Rachel stayed with Mill. She fed her father morning to night. She made sure that he rose before eight a.m. and went to the bathroom and drank lots of juice, tomato and apple. One eye stayed half-closed a month after he had nearly pushed it out of its socket. She arranged to finish her school lessons at home and to see Vance outside every evening for thirty minutes--after her father fell to sleep.

Rachel began college downtown.

Vance soon managed the haberdashery full-time.

They married.

On a cool Saturday morning, Mill rose on his own, lifted the window, stared downward.

He caught the glance of Hope, his wife.

He was stepping in and through this dream.

No sound came out of his mouth.

He ran through his apartment, out the door, down the hall, down the stairs, by the doorman.

The flat above the haberdashery was dust, pink insulation, filigrees of cobweb, dirt dauber nests, old Victrolas, Underwood typewriters, and mannequins with no arms or legs or heads. It was like an attic but more of a lonely room. Mill ate his lunches here with Hope every afternoon when they first met.

"Hullo," Hope would whisper up to him.

When Mill heard her during that nice time, he opened his window, held out an arm, and curled his finger upward. Sometimes a puppet was on his hand. He flung the green felt dog and watched it descend, yelling, "Catch me, I don't FELT so good."

Hope had one hour for lunch. They typed notes back and forth on the typewriters, ate turkey sandwiches from the Deli in their brown bean bag chairs.

"Hello Hope," one note said. "Many thanks for coming up today."

"I'm glad you invited me."

"Are you fragile?" Mill wrote.

Hope was a secretary for the president of the college where Rachel now went.

"Work is boring," Hope typed.

"I repeat: are you fragile?"

"Tomorrow, I am making steak sandwiches."

"The day after today, we will go away for a while," he said in typing.

She looked at him. "No more pecking on keys?"

"I speak sometimes," his note said.

"Sometimes we will need to speak," she typed.

"Do we just forget about paper then?" he typed.

"I would like your voice," she typed.

"No more paper?" he said, speaking again. "No more typing?"

"Yes, Mill," she said, "I am fragile."

On the drive to the ocean, Mill said he wanted to know about her. He didn't ask to marry her, he didn't touch her, nor did he pay her the ceaseless, fawning attention of desperate men. He did not, Hope thought, need to act the gentleman, for he was one.

He loved the underside color of a conch shell like a pink frog's smooth belly and he had a theory that every color in any bathroom in anyone's home was a color from a shell on a beach.

"What a strange idea," Hope mullied. She scooted closer to Mill and kissed him. They spoke their minds, exactly what was in them.

"Fresh melon give-a me gas," Mill said.

"Thank you, Mill."

"And from my rear the smelly stuff pass."

"Again, thank you."

"It was the enchilada melon."

"Gracias."

"What I'm saying is that the melon moves fast."

Twenty-four came. They had twins, a girl, Rachel, and, a boy, Edward. When Edward was three, he grabbed a child's handful of jellybeans and stuffed them in his mouth. It was a warm morning. He inhaled one, coughed once, and died, which is when they started calling death the Big Sugar DADDY.

"I want to die eating candy too," Hope said.

"Choking on caramel cremes!" Mill said.

They laughed. Most of the time you do nothing, that is, you are the same, then occasionally you laugh and some days you cry. You cry because you haven't eaten enough and people don't like you. And you laugh because you win or are complimented or are making love. Mill and Hope decided to laugh when they thought of Edward and to make jokes about the Big Sugar DADDY. It was Hope's purpose to keep DEATH silly from the time it happened.

After hours had passed in the park, after Edward coughed and died in an instant, he wasn't noticed until Hope and Mill had stopped throwing the frisbee. Mill reacted like a worried man in the movies. He shook his child and asked why. Hope began to laugh at him. Her eyes filled with water, because she laughed so hard.

"This will never be a sad day," she said, and reached for her child. "It's not supposed to be."

On his birthday the next year, they had drinks and a good laugh.

But tears gather.

"The emotions are this grade school kid who you beat up all through elementary school, but one day he's a wealthy businessman and he steals your wife, job, and house."

They raised their wine glasses. Hope toasted her husband's wit and wisdom.

"To our dead boy." She was drunk. "May he rest in jelly beans."

Often, though, she threw her glass at Mill and began to blame him. He slapped her and she kicked his shins. They had been toasting Edward's death and laughing with Big Sugar DADDY since he had died. Rachel became shy and drew pictures with a lot of red in them, especially in the dining room, where the laughter of maniacs usually occurred, nightly. She opened the door one evening, upon which a drunk Mill called her, "The jelly bean who lived!"

Rachel was six and shut the door.

That passed.

"I have yellow teeth," Mill said. "I don't like them. I can't smile right."

"People don't look at your teeth," Hope said.

"I'm afraid to smile," he said. He fake smiled three times quickly.

She puckered her lips and sucked in a squeaking noise.

Mill stared at his teeth every morning. He brushed them hard, sloshed witch hazel through them. Whenever he nearly laughed, his top

lip covered his upper bridge, halting the smile. He also worried over the part in his hair and pores on his nose. Did his wife really love him wholly despite his physical features?

"When I see you," she said, "I see a feeling. Sometimes when you burp or forget to flush the toilet, I find myself doting on it, but mostly I see a feeling. You are a feeling."

"I'm not a person?" he said, staring at the warts on his neck.

"No. Thank goodness. You are my little Cyclops. All mine."

He pulled his bottom lip down to the gum and wished for white teeth.

Mill did not know time. He remembered Rachel in the kitchen yesterday and Vance reciting clothing market trends last week. He had thoughts of Hope, of his dead twin son Edward, but they were fading and confused. . . . Every morning he wanted to rip his pupils from his sockets and feel the pain that would never be as fierce as the gush from behind them.

Rachel did not need him.

No one did.

Hope did?

His excuse to stay was no longer there.

One morning he knelt to the floor and banged his head again and again, cracking his skull on the floor.

It was coming out. . . .

"She was kissing my ear," he told the insurance, "then there were cows coming through the windshield."

"That's a lie," his insurance friend said.

"And she died smiling. All those cows in the road. We had a second to look at each other and I think we both wanted to die together, right then. 'It'll be fun' is what our eyes said. We were going fast and all the cows in the road and we didn't want to stop. Then a cow's hoof came through the window and went through her heart. I saw the whole thing."

"Why'd you bang your head on the asphalt then?"

"For love, I banged my head."

"Mill, I know what happened. It's a creative story about the cows and all, but you and I know what really happened."

Coming home, Mill was silent and remained so for eleven years.

Rachel found him on the floor, his forehead bruised and bloody. He had been banging his head for Hope again. She and Vance lifted him to his bed. She went to the kitchen, prepared a washcloth of ice cubes, returned, sat on the bed, and placed it on his livid bruises.

Vance paced the room.

They waited for Mill to speak to them.

"Talk to us, Mill," Vance begged. "It helps to get it out."

Rachel motioned shh with her index finger.

Vance ignored her. He was a brutish man. He rolled his tongue around in his mouth arrogantly, but he was a good businessman and kind to Rachel.

"You need to snap out of it. We need to talk. Your business will always stay on its feet but I need to move on. I have people in mind to replace me. I just need your approval to leave. Rachel's afraid to say anything about it. I need a nod or *something* that it's okay. If it's not, then nod no, but at least communicate with us. We want to move--hell, you can come with us, but I have chances at other places. *Talk to us Mill.*"

A blast of light and his thoughts turned into comic book words. A curse on Vance, he thought. Let the cows stampede his wife. Let the jelly beans swim in *his* lungs. The words were coming. He couldn't stop them.

More Vance talk: "I have a thought, Mill. I can set up a manager at the shop, send you a monthly check, maybe rent the upstairs flat to whoever's working the place. You haven't set foot in the door in years. *Years.* Why don't you talk? Why do let your daughter feel sorry for you? I have about this much [thumb and forefinger squeezed together] sympathy for you."

Mill propped himself against the back of the bed, interested.

"Rachel and I want to have children and to raise them outside the city. We'll be close by and visit a lot." He paused. "We just need to get a move-on."

It was coming out, rising up, the glass in him filling fast. After twelve or so years, Mill's lips parted, his tongue rolled through his mouth (mockingly of Vance), and words formed in his cerebellum, synapsed to his stomach and rose like incense upward to

his esophagus under his epiglottis over the tongue where his taste buds spoke: "Vance, do you have original thoughts?"

Vance tilted his head to the side, not expecting to hear him talk.

Mill's next words were to Rachel: "Is he funny, daughter? Doughnut marry him if not funny man."

It was hard to speak. The words felt of putty coming from his mouth.

Rachel opened her mouth in awe.

"Where is Hope?" Mill said.

"Mill . . ." Vance said.

"Find the cow whose hoof came in the window and killed her."

"No cow killed your wife," Vance said. "You killed her, Mill. No cow's hoof came through the car window. You ran over her, it was an accident, yes, but you did it."

Mill rose. How did he know? Not only did Rachel not need him, she had betrayed his secret to Vance! The tightness in his milky white calves burned. His neck cracked. His head was tender, his feet sore, and his lungs needed medicine. He shuffled around, side to side, shadowboxed. He imagined Hope's palms held up for him to punch.

In a sudden instant, he lunged at Vance.

Mill elbowed the boy's teeth. The haberdasher began to cry and hit him with his fist.

The next things are like this:

Vance swings back.

Mill cries for the made-up cows, the accident.

He elbows the boy's mouth again.

His eyes are liquid with tears and blood and bile.

Crack the boy's skull.

Rachel hits her father's jaw with her fist.

Hope? he prays to himself.

The hitting stops. Vance begins to kick him in his kidneys.

Rachel does not stop him.

Mill feels his kidneys burst. He feels his breath dying (lungs need medicine).

His tears are dry ice and warm cologne and urine and new well water.

Vance fades.

Rachel falls to her knees.

Now Hope appears, forgiving him, begging for him.

"It was an accident," Mill says to her. "I didn't see you standing there."

"Mill?"

"Hope?"

"You won't die yet," she replies.

"I won't?"

"No," she says.

"I won't be near you?" he pleads.

"Mill, I am gone."

"You are gone?"

"Mill," Vance says, "are you hurt? I am so sorry. What have I done to you?"

"Hope?"

"Father," Rachel pleads.

"She is gone," he tells them.

She is fragile, he thinks.

I am fragile, he hears.

He feels bruised but alive. He shakes Vance's hand. He is helped from the floor by his daughter and her husband.

He dresses himself in front of them.

He goes to the store.

In the attic he shoots himself between the eye(s), the Cyclops after all, wearing a smile at the thought of no more responsibility to anyone but Hope. But then he looks down at his finger that he has used as a gun and knows he will be alive some more. The finger is no gun, indeed.