

# River Horse

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

The last time I saw him, he touched my face with his fingers, and I felt the lineaments as fine as the branches of a newborn tree. But on the phone that morning—when we planned our session with Sandrine--I saw the tree was a matter of materials and whatever clouds I had about the situation were best off drifting away to a new continent. Fine with me. I am a professional.

Allan was just the latest of people who came into my horizon to practice my newfound dedication to intimacy. I had learned the idea that one can achieve connection to anyone by staring steadily, without any meaning whatsoever, in the eyes of the other person, consistently, over a period of a few weeks, or even days, and achieve what might be called trust, or in ancient terms, friendship. The gesture was enough: nothing else was needed, neither compatibility of interest, emotional projections from childhood, spiritual leanings, or considerations of profit.

I had perfected this technique which I called “the non-gaze”, in counterdistinction to Lacan and my other predecessors who had inscribed “viewing” with a phallic intent that denoted power. My method was powerlessness: I sought nothing in the eyes of the other, nor did I seek anything whatsoever in general.

My trade was psychoanalysis. Over the years, I have become adept at reading the emotional fibers of the other, and adjusting my own fibers accordingly so as to ease the other’s worry. My basis for treatment was comfort. The seat in my office was low, plush and armless. I figured the world is uncomfortable enough as it is for me to purposefully create anxiety, or destabilize, or have my patient reenact her fears, hatreds, and ambivalences.

My patients often longed for me to respond with weirdnesses of my own; one patient—to break her confidence here---once came in and accused me of being trapped by my own unattractiveness into a spectator role of other people, and she mentioned my tapping foot as a symbol of my anxiety. I knew that I tapped my foot only in her presence, because I felt it relaxed her, as she was a musician, and rhythmic motions I noted, by experiment, caused her mouth to relax in a humming position. I will not say that my psychoanalytic position lacked the power of seduction. Nothing made me feel more comfortable than making my patients feel comfortable; the two of us were enmeshed in a bond so tight it would take a wedge of a razor blade to inch us apart.

It is for this reason that I militated against the bond, and would refuse patients to come to me once it seemed that the bond of comfortable had become safe. I would tell them they were free now to venture forth into the world and reinvest it themselves with the “nongaze”.

In the beginning of my practice, I convinced my patients to be healthier through power of suggestion: forceful gestures, smiles, nods, heartfelt yet silent encouragement. I thought the best I could do for them was to stay awake, vigilant.

It was only in the last year, I decreased my wakeful mode to the restful stance of merely opening my hands on my lap and showing, as in the traditional handshake, I had no arms.

My approach was benign, professional in intent. I had—in all my years of practice--fallen in love with only two of my patients: Sandrine, and Allan, and this all happened yet recently.

Sandrine had the delicate skin of a doe without hair. Her face seemed overexposed, and her forehead so delicate that the tracings of blue veins could be spied in it on a particularly bright spring day, when the air would come through the curtain, and her hands would delicately sit on her knees, her fingers scratching imaginary dust, or going behind her ear to scratch at a bug that was not there. Her blue eyes had a light in them that I had once seen agleam on the ocean, not quite the water, not quite the sky, and when she spoke, I never knew what she would say, which was not the case with my other patients, who said the same things weekly.

I liked once that she came in and spoke about her attraction to the color green. She had taken to surrounding herself with green—scarves, even underwear—and had that morning gone to the forest; at which point, with a graceful sweep of her hand, she reached into her bag and proffered a twig, which still had the

droppings of a bird on it. I kept that twig in water in the office for the next few weeks, to show that I too shared her sensibility, and I never pointed out that for a woman obsessed with green, the twig bore a more than uncanny resemblance to the color black.

Sandrine was agush with emotion, always. Once she had reached over and asked me if she could hold my hand. She explained she had been struck by a dream in which we were sisters, crossing a brook, only to come across a blue hippopotamus that had wandered out from the group, and found himself thick footed amongst us.

In the dream, the hippopotamus had stood between us, its heavy body agleaming in the sun, and we had put our hands on him, and stroked the hairless skin, marvelling at the sensation of blood and muscle just below our fingertips. Hippopotamuses, Sandrine explained, had the thinnest skin of all the mammals, which is why they like to crawl in mud.

This hippopotamus was blueish, as if blood had drained from him; this must have confused him sufficiently to have lost his herd.

We had stayed in the river, Sandrine and I, smiling—she said--as we rested our heads against our friend, keeping ourselves half out of the water, until the sun moved down, and we were left in the silence of the moon.

The hippopotamus had taken its leave, to disappear into the forest---onto the hippo lawn, as it is called—where he would

forage for food to keep his solitude wellnourished. An eddy continued to circle where the hippotamus had stood.

Sandrine told me this dream with her hands in mine: her thin veined hands, her excited white teeth, and the wisps falling over her temples lit up almost albino in the fog of the Paris winter.

I held her hands to protect her in my nongaze, to show that while in the dream we might have lost our hippotamus, he remained between us.

You see my goal as a doctor is to inspire my patients to trust.

Allan came into my life more recently than Sandrine.

It is not that my entire love life consists of my patients: I am married, I have a husband at home who entertains me with his odd statements about things he learns about window glazings in the Netherlands, serial killers in the Pygmy islands, the way nuclear waste has been reconverted into biological warfare by terrorist groups in Iran. He likes to learn things, and he always surprises me with what he learns.

For example, just this morning he said to me: “Did you know that human beings can relate to each other only through four senses at a time; there is no way all five senses can be engaged at once, neurologically, so there is always a connection missing.”

He was shaving an apple at the time, to cut it into shards for my morning breakfast. He knew I liked apples in cereal, so I tolerated his gesture, even though once I ate the shavings all I was conscious of was my gesture of pleasing my husband for his kindness and the apple tasted like nothing to me, if not the blade of his knife.

I practiced the nongaze with my husband daily: I had practiced it when we met two years ago, in a hotel lobby for a conference, where he had remarked that I was beautiful. I had been feeling low that day, given a particularly aggressive week with my musician patient, and his comment, delivered with shining eyes, inspired me to laugh and remember that once upon a time, maybe around adolescence, I had dreamed of attractive encounters in hotel lobbies between strangers, and all the romance that could bring.

I practice the nongaze still with my husband, and we trust each other greatly.

From the first encounter, Allan stared at me aggressively; he sometimes made a motion with his hands that seemed—if they were to continue their arc—would go straight through the imaginary glass barrier between us and swipe at my chest. His fingers were nervous, as was the rest of him, as if his mother had wound him up too tight on his birth and he had never unwound since. A clock with a runaway secondhand.

Allan told me his reason for the therapy was to gain intimacy with women. He felt he had no intimacy with women that was not selfdestructive, citing women who had moved in too soon, women who made too much noise, women who borrowed his CDs and did not return them, women who crowded next to him on the metro, women who cooked for him, slathered creams on his meats, and did the dishes to boot.

With Allan, I had opted for distance, and yet the more his arms flailed, the more his eyes went wild in his head, the more he would jump up to his feet and wind over to the glass pane, and hit it with his fingers saying, “see doctor! see! There it goes! Life I mean, the leaves are unbudding on the trees, and they are turning green, and I sit here year after year, irritated with women. You see, you see, doctor, the tragedy, the pain. This is all sounding maudlin isn’t it?” The more he did this, the more I laughed.

I wasn’t sure if Allan needed to make me laugh, or if I needed to laugh, but I spent the sessions sometimes with my tissue over my mouth, laughing, and Allan once noticed and—just last week, the last week I saw him before what happened with Sandrine--he took the tissue out of my mouth and replaced it with a gentle kiss on my cheek. It had all the lightness of a breeze going quickly through the branches of a sudden day in childhood, when the ants were out.

I had this idea one day to stop playing the nongaze. I thought I had become too Buddha like for myself.

All my decisions in life have been rational.

I decided I had to do something that could not help but cause chaos.

I invited Sandrine and Allan to a session together.

I knew Allan would fall in love with Sandrine---her airy light-boned limbs, her fresh gums, the way her nose quivered and inched forward with her words.

He tried: I saw his body angling nervously towards her, and her own thin legs pick up and retreat into an affected cross.

Sandrine grew silent.

“I mean, I don’t know what we are doing here, doctor,” said Allan. “I mean, how is this going to help me with my problem with women.” He turned to Sandrine. “I mean, why not be open here, I am here for a problem with women, what about you? Let’s not make a pretence of this, you know, I mean we are in a psychiatrist’s office, so you’re here for something too. I mean, problem with your mother? that’s what we have usually, no, unless it’s a problem with your father. Which it could very well be, you look on the thin side, which means a problem with your father, no? I hope I am not being so forward you know, but we are paying the doctor by the hour and I want to do my share by speeding things along, wanting to be helpful, this is all sounding very sick, isn’t it?”

Watching Allan charm Sandrine, I wanted to hug him. There was no use, no chance. Sandrine's light eyes met mine, and I could tell she was saying, "Doctor, I am yours, yours alone."

You see, she was wearing a blue hippopotamus on her green flowing pants outfit: her pants were made of brushed Chinese silk, and her top went to her navel, so I could see her clear skin, and her twist of a bellybutton inch forward like a spring bud, trying to reach the sun.

Allan stood up. He waved his hands like an orchestra conductor. "You see, Sandrine, I beg your pardon, but we're all fucked up, and you too, I mean you are pretty silent here, but who are we kidding, you wouldn't be here, you wouldn't, you wouldn't, if..."

I know saw it: Allan had honed in on her weakness, the weakness I had never seen. I had adored Sandrine so much, I had never seen that weakness—that weakness which made her come to me---I had never known why she was there, except to lighten my office, to bring me the scent of moss that she carried in her light hair, to make the springs of the old aching chair seem light and funky under her delicately boned bottom.

To keep the room alight.

I had not realized how dark it had become over the years with the sweating hands and darkening brows of my patients.

That was not why she was there.

Her face had drawn thin, and in her eyes, I saw a blackened light that seemed to shine directly from the inner vessicles of her heart.

Inside Sandrine was nothing.

That was why she was so light, so airy, so full of a breathiness---inside her she was a dark light, a tunnel so full of itself it was empty.

She said nothing, but stared ahead.

Allan went on, going for his kill. He had killed me too, when he had reached over to kiss the sides of my cheek, establishing on my skin the glow of fertile lawns, that which I never had felt with my husband, not in the metallic light of the hotel lobby, nor in our modern upperclass apartment building, nor in making love with his penis as stiff as a well-handled cutlery knife for apples.

Sandrine's face vanished: her skin was so white, that the blood leaving it, left a vague impression of a nose and sharp points that had been her eyes.

"So Sandrine—that is your name, isn't it?---I mean is it your father or your mother you have problems with? It's got to be one or the other, no? I mean, you look fairly well dressed, attractive—you are quite attractive—I imagine you live by Chatelet no, maybe in a loft. Yes, I see a loft—maybe candles at

night under the stars. You're a romantic, no? Oh I respect that, a woman like you, I mean, I don't know why you are here, with those candles, and that loft. Right? Do I got it right, Sandrine? Maybe some Polish blood there? The blonde hair, that's what makes me think that, you know. The blonde hair."

I said nothing: Sandrine was so still and thin; the sun had tumbled outside the window. Only Allan's dark charging body dominated now. I could not stop him. I did not want to stop him. My abstractness---my love for Sandrine----was too thin; I was too thin. Our mouths were tight; inside me was nothing but the shadows that could not express themselves now that it was dark.

I realized that my nongaze was exactly that, non. Not looking, not seeing. I could do nothing to reach out to Sandrine, as she disappeared in front of me.

"Is the session over doctor?" Allan said. "I mean if it is over, please tell us what has happened. We are going to pay you, you know. I mean, I have my problems, you too perhaps---no disrespect intended---have problems. But I doubt it, actually I doubt it. Doctor, you are a beautiful woman. Has anyone ever told you that? Has Sandrine ever told you that? Hell, I don't know what relationships are. I don't know what your relationship is with Sandrine. Is this for real, doctor? I mean, is this in the books somewhere? This is all pretty weird, I think. I never heard of a session with...with...what is this woman, I mean Sandrine, do you speak?"

Vainly, I realized what had just happened: he had chosen me. The alliance was realigned with me at the center. My eyes gleamed green.

I reached two hands out for Sandrine.

Sandrine dutily took them. Her fingers landed in mine, with no muscle in them; I wondered if I checked her pulse, whether it would be dull too.

Allan had grown larger: he seemed to swell. Perhaps it was his Mediterranean blood that made him seem large and dark, thickening before us, or perhaps it was the shadows, but all I saw now was his thick body, his gaping mouth---that kept speaking and chewing his words---and his feet tapping, waddling, scraping the floor, as if he were some animal sweeping his dung into a pile to attract the females.

"Sandrine," I called, and moved towards her; she flooded into my arms, her head collapsing onto my breast, her blonde hair floating over me, and I felt her sobbing, sobbing, as Allan loomed large between us, and said, "I think it is time that I go eat. Yes, yes, I must go eat. Don't mind me, please, go ahead. Don't mind me."

He left, leaving an impression as large and full as his body. Sandrine and I eased out of the world as a ship floating towards a moon, wordlessly, on a dark and empty channel as thin as her hands.

“Did you see?” she whispered into my ears—her lips thin as violet stems---“Did you see, I wore the dream for you?”

And in my ears, nothing could have been sweeter than the forest smell she brought with me over the seas.

## Homing

It was a strange need he had, to go home to his roots every six months, even though the roots themselves were as dank and moldy as the leaves that rotted under the tree by his kitchen window.

Lawrence lived alone in the woods of Canada. Originally, he was from Michigan, where he grew up with a mother that beat him in his face, upon waking, and a father who shouted out rosaries at dinner time to damn him to an early hell, he said, where the son belonged. For how could the boy belong anywhere but hell, with such a father and mother?

Lawrence had spent his twenties quietly delivering the mail in a town far away from Michigan, in California. At age seventeen he had run away, and stopped as soon as he thought the sun was warm enough to melt down some of the cold memories he had from Michigan snow. Anything cold, he associated with his mother and his father. Ice cubes, he avoided, of course, but even refrigerator interiors, frosty football fields on tv, ice cream bars behind glass in cafeterias, and the steely air conditioner of airports gave him the same effect: to make the inside of his heart hollow out, as if scooped by a massive bulldozer of ice-storms, until all that was left was the sensation of being entirely the dark part of a hole underground, in the nordic parts, of a horrifically white earth.

His first job was as mail carrier in a small town in California, and there he had felt safe. He woke daily with the

pigeons cooing outside his window---he had, by the luck of God, found a charming hungalow in San Jose,--and then he would throw back his bag and take a fresh morning walk down the streets, next to the redwoods, smelling the trees and the morning all together, as if they were one great exclamation of newness.

He liked the simplicity of sensing the darkness of the trees, before the morning began to glimmer upon them, turning the bark golden. Then he liked the trees in full bloom too, almost white at noon. And he liked the immensity of the branches. After work, he could lie by the gnarled roots and close his eyes, and dream of the golden woman who would one day be his wife, and the five little ones who would call him Papa.

Despite the ravaging blows of his mother's fists, he had kept up an image of the family life that kept his mind enlivened while delivering the mail, fantasizing about the Mr. and Mrs. who would receive the pink envelope, the single miss who received the brown package, and, with sympathy, the windowed envelopes under the doors of senior citizens, the ones that lived in houses that all looked alike.

Then the war came---and he went to Canada. There he could not deliver mail. It was a shock for him to be alone without work, and then when he found his work---computer programming from home---he found the solitude both a welcome balm to his spirit--like delivering the mail, he need not converse---and a torture, because the more time he spent indoors, the more frightening the outside became.

The outside became extraordinarily frightening. The faces of people seemed pasty, flat announcements of flatter souls within. The conversations he overheard in the supermarket were loud and absurd, about subjects that mattered as much as flies would do a hot lion in the zoo. The only bearable beings he could see were children, whose grasping fingers and bright eyes reminded him of the dreams he had once had himself, when he had first felt the plastic wonder of the world.

Now he heard that another war was in the making. Coming from his country. He knew his country would drop bombs on all these families, and postmen he had never met would no longer be delivering letters to people who would never again have addresses.

The news reached him with with the effect of a sodden package of mail sinking to the bottom of the ocean. A bit dazzling---for the brilliance of light in the water---and a bit disturbing (all those dead letters)---and ultimately a bit numbing, like the sound of water soggy on water.

He made his plans to go home to visit his parents. His father would be lying in his six-foot long bed, as usual, his whitened arms stuck by his sides, with the red tubes connected to the fingers. His mother would be ministering the soup, whipping the soup round and round with her gnarled hands. He had once admired the rings on her thin fingers, and the way they would scratch at his face. He especially liked the effect of the sapphire ring, and the way it dashed a hole once in his eye, so he had to stay home from school.



It was sad that his mother's hands had become fat and gnarled like that.

Still it was a joy to see his mother and father, twice a year. To enter the strange breed of tension that circulated in their little house, to revisit the bookshelves where all the fantastic books he had read as a child were still shelved, untouched.

And perhaps something exciting would happen---perhaps the plane he flew in would be ripped open by a bomber, and all the letters stuffed in its belly would rip out and tumble, one by one, to the earth, delivering themselves to oblivion.

When it came to delivery, he was an expert. The pigeon, he heard, always came home.