

Nothingness and Being
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From *crazyhorse*

When I began to treat imperceptibility that syndrome's very existence was controversial; and to this day the aetiology of sub-sensible presentation remains obscure. (Is it somatic or psychological? Is inaudibility, for example, a mere cry for help?) But the Journal of Epistemological Deficit, founded through my efforts, has earned the field grudging respect; and its quadrennially awarded Medal (of which I am a 3-time recipient) has raised public awareness of a simple fact: The perceptoses touch us all.

My mother, for example, suffered from sporadic invisibility—in certain configurations, depending on the ambient light and on her mood. I never found that strange. Why would I? Childhood establishes the norms of existence. When my mother changed her attitude, psychological or postural, to emerge from a state of nonapparence, when she transformed my field of view by filling it—that was a fact, not a wonder. What Dad made of those comings and goings I never thought to ask; and the window of opportunity for doing so would be small.

I took it for granted that my friends' moms also flickered in and out of sight but—perhaps out of modesty—did so only in private. EpDef research has since documented great variability in symptoms: some of my patients achieve visibility only when unobserved or only south of the Mason-Dixon line; one is intangible to everyone except young women conducting public opinion polls.

Individuals who present sub-sensibly in one dimension often develop super-sensible compensations in others. (I have an inaudible patient, for example, who is hyperodorate to a dangerous degree. We experience him as intensely as a bloodhound would a kielbasa chef.) My mother, I recall, was especially vivid to the touch, a belief that can no longer be verified. But the uncertainty of her apparence, not its variable intensity, is what

complicated my relations with women.

Which began with Olive, as I will call her. Other boys called her Olive Oyl and joked predictably: you can't see her when she's sideways; calomine lotion might make her little bumps go away; etc. I could hardly fail to fall in love.

That event can be dated precisely. I was traversing the sexual hygiene stacks of the local library, head cocked sideways, looking for misshelved books (something I did on an unofficial and volunteer basis). Olive was browsing and (as I now understand) oriented at her angle of invisibility. Had she not been braced against a shelf our collision would have knocked her down. The unexpected blow left me stunned—and electrified: she was highly tangible that day. When Olive turned and blossomed indignantly into view I was transfixed.

At that age boys were always “bumping into” girls, though no one I knew staged accidents with Olive. (Quel mistake!) To maintain self-respect she pretended that manhandling was a constant nuisance. Olive's true complaint, however, was not her real enough flat-chestedness but pubescent imperceptibility, a peculiarly unstable condition. She was sometimes invisible (especially from the side), sometimes inaudible, and so on. Her presence flirted with one's senses.

Unstable imperceptibles display a delicious plasticity in hypersensible compensation. When the sight or sound of Olive grew faint, her touch or taste might red-line. That possibility kept all my senses on alert and allowed me to discover in myself a degree of synesthesia—the ability, for example, to see a sound or feel a color—by which I filled in the valleys of sensation without leveling her shifting hypersensible peaks.

Olive was thrilling in the dark. All spring we held hands in the library's gloomy sub-basement. One summer evening I procured a key to the weight room of the boys' gym and there we lost our virginities. I remain convinced

that Olive was with me at the time.¹

It couldn't last. Olive "filled out" in the conventional way and proved, after all, to be a conventional girl, in the market for like-minded boys. Her browsing in the sexual hygiene stacks no doubt yielded large dividends. Me she forgot, and I can't blame her: I have subsequently been diagnosed with chronic unmemorability, a temporal epistemological deficit. Younger men will have to pioneer a treatment for that. This physician could not heal himself without another journal, another learned society, another medal he lacks the time and vigor to establish.

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As hinted earlier, I am an orphan. My parents disappeared when I was 7, which is how the relevant authorities put things: Mommy and Daddy "disappeared." Sorry about that.

The word, of course, held no terrors. Nonappearance carried no implication of absence, let alone bereavement. To be was not to be perceived, even if a second-grader could not have described his world quite so felicitously.

By grade five, however, I had become uneasy. My parents' prolonged absence could no longer be equated with one of those languorous afternoons when they locked the bedroom door and, as I imagined, disappeared together. (I assumed that my father must have been as discreet as the neighbor ladies. I felt even then that there was something bold and original and slightly scandalous about my mother's readiness to evanesce in public.) "I know they disappeared," I would ask, "but where are they?"

Not until high school would I grasp what made me different. Many other parents were absent, but none had disappeared (so far as anyone

¹Contemporary documentation can be found in my recently published Diaries, vol. 6, pp. 612 ff. Members of the Society for Epistemological Deficit may purchase these well-made volumes at a substantial discount.

was saying). The educational authorities felt no need to provide support groups for opaque children of invisibles. I was on my own. I needed a story better than the one I had and hinted that my parents were in the Witness Protection Program. I shut bullies up by asking how they knew that their parents were not in the Witness Protection Program, how they knew that the people they took to be their parents weren't actually mine.

But I secretly wondered if there hadn't been something wrong with Mom and feared it had been passed on to me. I became obsessed with the nightmarish possibility that I might become invisible in a partial, checkerboard fashion—pixillated, like something censored on broadcast TV. My classroom performance suffered from furtive shirt unbuttonings (or worse) to check that all my parts were there.

Olive's gift opened me to the world of nanosensation but offered lavish reassurance that I myself was perceptibly extant. Thus were planted the seeds of my life's work and its harvest of irony: Olive saved me and damned me at the same time. She confirmed my connoisseurship of hyper- and hypo-perception, the natural grain of my erotic constitution, yet at the same time revealed my unwanted power to effect ambiguous "cures," to release perceptotics from their unnatural states of profound desirability.

Dread calamity! I never meant to "cure" Olive. How had I done it? We now know the mechanism: not unlike psychoanalytic transference, in which the doctor becomes his patient's disease.

Olive began to see less of me and less in me—and got, in return, what she wanted most: to fill out and to be perceived. I refused to acknowledge my forebodings, to admit that I was losing her, up to the very threshold of our final assignation. Would Olive be posed, as usual, at her angle of invisibility, ready to turn and blossom when I threw open the door to the boys' gym? She was indeed displayed just so—but was visible, in all her glory, as was Mr. Modesto, the wrestling coach, in all of his. Olive had been cured. What was left for me but to repeat that bitter triumph?

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Bat Man was the turning point of my scientific career. His course of treatment was a failure, but that has been true of many therapeutic breakthroughs. My achievement was to prove that a Bat Man could exist.

I had been drifting for several years, pursuing opportunities in the carry-out catering and delivery field. I had never stopped searching for the next Olive, and the next and the next, doomed repeatedly to reenact the tragedy of a cure that kills—and through that misery began, willy nilly, a therapeutic revolution.

In the now famous living/consulting room above the kitchen of Asia Express, I finally accepted my fate and undertook the arduous task of putting the treatment on a scientific basis. Those were wilderness years, my scholarly investigations repeatedly and absurdly interrupted by bicycle trips to remote corners of a city thronged with undertippers.

My methodological researches would remain unpublished until the founding of the JEpDef. I explored the possibility of a talking cure—problematic, of course, for inaudibles. I procured scientific instruments—magnetometers, cloud chamber, tube tester, pressure gauges, Jugs gun—to observe my subjects in extrasensory dimensions. I performed the now celebrated series of rat and monkey experiments² which demonstrated that perceptosis is a phenomenon uniquely and essentially human. If “What you see is what you get” what you’ve got is not a man.

Equally profound, and much more unsettling, was my discovery that treatment of the perceptoses cannot separate the scientific from the erotic. Scientific/erotic coupling, a scandalously underexplored subject, has consequences for many fields of enquiry and is fundamental to those that negotiate the crossroads where psyche and soma meet. My tragic failure

²This choice of experimental subjects was constrained by my employer’s menu, but the results have repeatedly been confirmed by studies based on alternative cuisines (JEpDef, *passim*).

with the Bat Man testifies to that fact.

He was a decent tipper, as I learned from regular deliveries to a certain Kingston Road address, an attic room three flights up. An envelope would be waiting on the welcome mat—exact change, tip separate. I'd leave a stack of paper cartons with the distinctive AE logo, knock, and call "Asia Express" as I left, careful to be gone before he opened the door. This arrangement was not unusual. I had many reclusive customers and all appreciated my discretion.

A few months after establishing this routine, I returned from a brief seaside holiday to discover, lying on the floor, an overlooked fax from Kingston Road. I hurried the overdue order to the third floor landing and, stooping to make the swap, noticed that the door was ajar. As I straightened, something flapped past my head and began to swoop about the stairwell—a bat that had been hanging from the doorjamb. I staggered back, startled, and bumped the door open. Then I felt what can only be called an intuition of activity, a flurry of nameless happening, that didn't end until the bat dove back into the dark apartment. I shut the door, knocked, shouted, and retreated down the stairs.

I thought no more about this unpleasant incident until my holiday snaps came back from the drug store. They were peculiarly fogged with smudges and tendrils that drew attention to what they blotted out. It is my nature to ask Why—as it is my nature to shelve books in their proper places. I devised an experiment.

I returned to Ocean City and retook all my photos (in a less leisurely fashion than the original 3-day weekend permitted). Submemorability helped, allowing me to persuade coarsely macrosensate cocktail waitresses to re-pose without arousing suspicion. I then retraced the journey home, including the disturbing delivery I'd made to Kingston Road with undeveloped film still in my pocket. This time, however, the prints turned out to be beauties, which filled a gap in my scrapbook but left the puzzle

unresolved. My investigation seemed to have reached a dead end.

The turning point was the Bat Dream (as Historians of Science have come to call it): Olive is posed like the Statue of Liberty. She stands on a mountain peak, revolving slowly, disappearing each time she swings through her angle of invisibility. My parents walk in the misty plain below, hand in hand. They, too, disappear and reappear, not always in sync. Bats are everywhere, swooping and wheeling.

This dream recurred oppressively—until the night I sprang awake and observed out loud that, “Bats don’t bump into things.” I had the hypothesis I needed—that the Kingston Road customer (“Bat Man” was a coinage of the popular press) might be an actual instance of a theoretical ideal: a pan-perceptotic, unable even to register on the human sensorium, and therefore lacking human/empirical existence. To a bat, on the other hand, he might still be somebody.³

The fogged film could now be explained by a compensatory increase in extrasensory emissions—in this case, I was able to show, gamma radiation.⁴ The chain of reasoning presented itself as a completed whole, so clear and certain that verification seemed almost beside the point. I rushed a selection of appetizers to Kingston Road, first extracting the contents of the complimentary fortune cookie with special flexible forceps and replacing it with a message of my own: “Are you my mother?”

It was a hunch. The as yet unnamed subject was a dead ringer for either parent.

I left my offering, knocked, and withdrew. An hour later I was back. An envelope lay on the mat—a nice gesture, as he was hardly obliged to pay for the unsolicited delivery. Beside it, as I’d hoped, was a fortune

³I affirm my right to say “he” even though it remains controversial whether gender can be meaningfully assigned to someone lacking human/empirical existence.

⁴I conducted our initial interviews behind an improvised screen of lead-lined menus. We have since learned that serious gamma flux occurs only in a moment of stress, such as a threat to his bats, making ordinary intercourse with the Bat Man quite safe.

cookie, which I packed in a special padded case and rushed back to my laboratory/bathroom and its world class library of prints. Since no two fortune cookies are exactly alike, the match (despite a few chips in the edge) was dispositive: this was the cookie I'd left for him. My forceps slipped out the message with great care.

It said, in a childish hand, "No."

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That cookie now resides in a climate-controlled cabinet in the Museum of Epistemological Deficit. It has the disappointing shopworn look of most scientific artifacts. Beside it lie the yellowing slip with Bat Man's first fortune (displayed beneath a magnifying glass) and the forceps I left for him on my next visit.

I did not regard his "No" as negative: I took it for an answer. It was, for many sessions, Bat Man's only answer. I learned, one cookie at a time, that he was not my father, not a woman, not currently in a relationship, not pleased with his landlord (low thermostat settings), unhappy with his LDL/HDL ratio. We call this the phase of Denial.

The advance beyond simple No/No cookies is a delicate clinical moment. (See my Fifth Presidential address to the Soc. Ep. Def., reprinted as the whole of JEpDef vol. 5, no. 1.) By an adroit sequence of fortunes I maneuvered Bat Man into not merely denying that he was female, but asserting that he was male. How, I asked, did he know that? He was attracted to women. How did he know that he was not a lesbian? At that point, the Bat Man ceased communication. He wouldn't touch his cookies.

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Standard therapeutic protocols forbid pursuing him, so I busied myself with other cases. Patience was rewarded when, not three weeks later, an order arrived from Kingston Road.

We were soon communicating via a wider range of edible media, such as decorated cakes; and these larger canvasses allowed us to cover more ground in each session. One constant of our long association was the delicacy, ceremony, and restraint with which Bat Man surrounded this activity, which he called “affectating”—that is, affecting the exterior world by offering it some perceptible product, such as an information-rich cake. I would deliver my questions and comments, retire (so that he could affectate in private), and return for his replies. Whether his response did involve Hollywood-style special effects—tubes of frosting sailing through the air, etc.—I never knew. Permitting me to see that, I think, would have felt to Bat Man like showing himself naked.

The next major step was to install remote sensing devices throughout Bat Man’s apartment. (He had considerable mechanical facility and did the work himself.) Readings soon disclosed that Bat Man periodically exuded insect-attracting pheromones, and thereby provided nurture and nourishment for his bats. I suggested that this made him, essentially, a breast. He recoiled from the suggestion and the word “breast” promptly disappeared from his vocabulary. He would say “ventral amplitudes,” “hyperboloids of revolution,” “frontosities,” “them there”—or, when agitated, might press into service any plural noun. (And when I say “say,” note that we never established reliable communication in any nonedible medium.) He ultimately accepted my interpretation but reasserted emphatically that he was a bat man. And he wanted a girlfriend.

Many have leapt to the conclusion that Bat Man lacked a sensory apparatus—in particular, a sensual apparatus—of his own, but that is an error akin to the childish fancy that we can hide by putting our hands over our eyes. Bat Man’s senses were normal—20/25 eyesight, for exam-

ple, with slight astigmatism in the left. His perceptosis entailed only an absence of self-perceptions.

Bat Man's expressed desire for a girlfriend was largely bravado, a blustering defense against the possibility of unwanted self-knowledge. (He was, it seemed clear, a latent perceptible.) I feared that a relationship would be premature and cautioned against it. He became insistent.

And I became greedy. I was eager to publish—something Bat Man did not yet need to know—and felt that great scientific interest would attach to erotic encounters that could be documented only by advanced instrumentation. (I confess indifference to the possibility that he might flux his partner with bursts of gamma ray emissions.) And I was curious to see the reaction of the bats.

I procured application forms from several dating services and on them Bat Man eagerly detailed his requirements in a potential mate. I encouraged this attention to an aspect of life our discussions had so far avoided. Unfortunately, the personal data these forms requested bespoke blatant anthropocultural biases: height and weight, for example, but not spectrum. And there was little hope that his video interview would be impressive.

I suggested a different erotic strategy: the acquisition of celebrity, using my well-regarded cable access program as the launching pad. Bat Man loved the idea. Our first interview set the pattern for a follow-up personal appearance tour (if language can be stretched that far). I sat before the camera in my captain's chair. Beside me was a large box with a hinged lid and an opening like a mail slot cut into its front face. I could raise the lid to allow inspection of the "empty" interior, in which Bat Man crouched. Once the lid was shut he conversed with my small but loyal studio audience by exchanging foodstuffs through the slot.

This looked like a magic act—and one saucy minx, a receptionist for the cable franchise, applied in well-filled spandex for the role of decorative assistant. I insisted, however, that the element of illusion in my "act" was

itself deceptive, and offered a modest monetary reward to anyone who could prove me wrong. (This spin inspired several PhD theses and elicited overtures from the hiring committees of second-tier departments of literary theory.)

From that point on the story is well known. Moved, I believe, not merely by the cash but by the basic human desire to know, audiences attempted more and more elaborate proofs. They hobbled me with ingenious combinations of blindfolds, handcuffs, straightjackets—and even hobbles. (Were you watching over me, my Olive, in those fraught moments?) They forced me, while thus bound, to smoke cigarettes, drink water, recite the alphabet backwards, and so forth, but conversation through the mail slot proceeded unimpaired.

The Nonexistent Man became a popular sensation. My web page abstract of the case, “Nothingness and Being,” registered a record number of hits.

These successes galled Bat Man, since he himself remained a nonentity. Strictly speaking he wasn’t even “Bat Man” yet. Where was his piece of the celebrity pie? The crisis came infamously to a head during cable access pledge week. A slutty starlet, appearing at the local summer theater in a sex farce, had volunteered to emcee. She bound and gagged me, egged on by cackling innuendoes from the pledge week host. She then pouted a pretense of interest and signaled readiness to converse by inclining toward the Nonexistent Man her musky frontosities. Out of the mail slot came a burrito with a sexual suggestion so foul that security guards removed me from the studio. The box was impounded and warehoused in a green room pending resolution of First Amendment novelties raised by the issue of edible speech.

But the starlet was not finished. She bribed a janitor for the green room key, smuggled in a suitcase full of pop tarts, and embarked on an orgy of snacks and obscene conversation. She and the box were soon shackled up in

a downtown hotel, a tryst that became public when her weight ballooned beyond possibility of disguise. Bat Man was made. “Nothingness and Being,” previously unable to find a home in any peer-reviewed journal, was hot.

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JEpDef predicted and then chronicled the emergence of nanophilia, the brief fashionable craze for perceptotic lovers (the fainter the better). Pan-perceptotics like Bat Man—“Pan”s for short—became the ideal and sent a cultural message that encouraged tragic attempts at radical plastic surgery. Thus were my deepest longings co-opted and defiled. I blamed Bat Man and ordered him to abandon his glamorous new life, to cooperate, to become well. It was an absurd demand and a breach of therapeutic practice. He broke off treatment once again and this time was not expected back.

His subsequent decline is a matter of public record and a stain on my conscience. Bat Man had been unprepared for celebrity, for the shock of seeing himself, if only in the gaze of others. He sank into the underworld of insubstance abuse, passed mechanically from one chubby starlet to another.

Nanophily projects onto the world a comforting childish fantasy of invulnerability: I can’t touch/smell/... you, so you can’t touch/smell/... me. Naively materialist Americans thought it a benign affliction, that what you don’t know can’t hurt you. Then a schoolgirl from Roswell, New Mexico alleged molestation and impregnation by a Pan or Pans unknown. Claiming to have been unaware of the outrage as it occurred, she based her charges on “recovered sensation.”

Bat Man, the most conspicuous imperceptible, was smeared by association. His endorsements dried up and sales of his action figures plummeted.

He was launched on the familiar trajectory from celebrity to celebrity pariah.

My rise, on the other hand, was steady—early tenure at Asia Express, an endowed chair, a coterie of graduate students eager to make my deliveries. Yet I ached with guilt. My unprofessional demands had provoked Bat Man to break off treatment at a critical moment and now more than ever it was important that someone of substance should believe in him. I vowed to reestablish contact, even if we could never again be on the old footing. I retrieved our original, breakthrough, cookie from my safe deposit box (the Museum was far in the future), left it empty on his door step, and returned an hour later, thrilled to note a corner of yellowish paper peeking through the slit. With trembling forceps I extracted the slim rectangle. It said, “Yes.”

I personally resumed deliveries to Kingston Road. Bat Man now limited his communications to cookies, finding new depths in the austerity of the medium. His fortunes from that dry season are serene, as if the scandals, and the hate food they provoked, did not exist:

“Taste no evil, touch no evil, smell no evil.”

“Have your cake.”

“A wise child knows.”

The messages became steadily more spare: a single word (nouns and verbs at first, dwindling to prepositions); a punctuation mark; a phrase penciled in and scrupulously erased; a blank slip subtly crinkled and then resmoothed. Silence was accumulating, and with it forebodings I refused to acknowledge. Could someone never actually apparent disappear?

On *The Day the Cookies Stopped* (as my so-titled memoir relates) the mat was empty and the apartment door unlocked. I entered for the first and last time. The Geiger counter stayed silent as I examined a profusion of tiny rooms, all empty but for one windowless square (virtually a closet) that I at first overlooked. A fortune cookie lay on its otherwise bare floor.

On my way to Kingston Road I had taken the usual security precautions by dispersing graduate students as decoys; but dogged paparazzi photographed my stoop to retrieve that valedictory pastry. As Bat Man's legal troubles were ongoing, civil litigants promptly subpoenaed both the photo and its subjects. I countered with an assertion of doctor/snack privilege—and prevailed, though months would elapse before the courts gave me access to the fortune. By then Bat Man's track was cold. Was this voluble farewell message, bursting with a full-sized haiku, meant to mock? Or meant to hold out hope? “Your absent parents / Seen from distant hills are much like me. / Is that so?”

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Could I have cured Bat Man? I assumed his case would be an easy one: there was nothing (at least, nothing dear to me) that the cure would have to kill. Now that our science has become more self-aware, we understand that disinterest was precisely the problem. We know that a perceptec-tomist must Take a Hostage. (JEpDef tote bags and apparel embroidered with this therapeutic insight have achieved iconic status.)

But anger compromised my scientific judgment. Bat Man had exposed my fragile delight in the nanoerotic to a public that embraced and degraded it to pathological nanophilia. And he had been more than usually resistant to treatment, for his celebrity and the indulgence of his appetites could persist only so long as therapy failed: his being was being unperceived. Yet I must admit that I profited gladly from Bat Man's degradation, which put perceptology and its founder on the scientific map.

And it brought back Olive for a curtain call. Now an affluent and well-groomed suburban matron, she suffered from perceptitis, a common sequel to juvenile imperceptibility that causes others' perceptions of its host to become enflamed.

When Olive crossed the threshold of my living/consulting room her audibility was ablaze. The knock on my door, the click of high heels, the rustle of stockings as, taking a seat, she crossed her legs and a tight (and now that I think of it quite unmatronly) dress slid up her thighs—all these were distorted and harsh, an exquisite torture, since I recognized them instantly and could recall them in forms pure, sweet, and fierce.

I administered the textbook treatment—which, rendering Olive temporarily sub-audible, fanned long-banked embers of visual and tactile intensity that took me back to the library stacks, back to the weight room of the high school gym. I'm ashamed to say that I violated ethical protocols requiring the presence of at least two oppositely sexed health professionals during any epistemic adjustment; but I wanted her perceptions all to myself.

My little malpractice was harmless. We maintained the fiction that Olive did not know me—that I was a dispassionate authority eager only to dampen her effect upon the world. That I hated myself for doing so was not, of course, alluded to. And if her ignorance was not a pretense? Once again I bow before the mystery of unmemorability and of what, if anything, its compensations could be.

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Despite peer review and lavish footnotes, my case histories have, in certain quarters, been greeted with disbelief—incredulity that would be suspended had I arrived from a South American jungle with my ancestors' bones in a sack around my waist, had I presented as a nomad from regions where the sky rains flower petals, mothers weep mighty rivers, wise men remember the future, and no one can predict the past. But I'm only a scientist with troubled sleep.

The Bat Dream has returned, in disturbing variations. It's the one chance I get to see my parents—although, from a distance, I can't be certain how many people walk upon the plain, let alone who they are. Everyone has aged. Olive has grown handsome, a mature beauty in a short tight dress. The bats, which frequently collide, are bewildered by the waning of their skills.

I don't know what these dreams want to tell me. I have no known problems. I have a lengthy list of publications in the journals I edit and numberless medals from the Society for Epistemological Deficit (awards named, ironically, after me). I hold the General Tso Chair at a distinguished catering facility. Grateful patients testify to the virtuosity with which I practice my tragic science. Fading celebrities seek my advice.

There have of course been losses. There will always be things we are not meant to have, or to keep. But the main thing is that I am, I believe, all here.