

Quicker Than The Eye (short story) Ray Bradbury

Quicker Than The Eye

It was at a magic show I saw the man who looked enough like me to be my twin.

My wife and I were seated at a Saturday night performance, it was summer and warm, the audience melting in weather and conviviality. All around I saw married and engaged couples delighted and then alarmed by the comic opera of their lives which was being shown in immense symbol onstage.

A woman was sawed in half. How the husbands in the audience smiled.

A woman in a cabinet vanished. A bearded magician wept for her in despair. Then, at the tip-top of the balcony, she appeared, waving a white-powdered hand, infinitely beautiful, unattainable, far away.

How the wives grinned their cat grins!
"Look at them!" I said to my wife.

A woman floated in midair. .. a goddess born in all men's minds by their own true love. Let not her dainty feet touch earth. Keep her on that invisible pedestal. Watch it! God, don't tell me how it's done, anyone! Ah, look at her float, and dream.

And what was that man who spun plates, globes, stars, torches, his elbows twirling hoops, his nose balancing a blue feather, sweating everything at once! What, I asked myself, but the commuter husband, lover, worker, the quick luncher, juggling hour, Benzedrine, Nembutal, bank balances, and budgets?

Obviously, none of us had come to escape the world outside, but rather to have it tossed back at us in more easily digested forms, brighter, cleaner, quicker, neater; a spectacle both heartening and melancholy.

Who in life has not seen a woman disappear?

There, on the black, plush stage, women, mysteries of talc and rose petal, vanished. Cream alabaster statues, sculptures of summer lily and fresh rain melted to dreams, and the dreams became empty mirrors even as the magician reached hungrily to seize them.

From cabinets and nests of boxes, from flung sea-nets, shattering like porcelain as the conjurer fired his gun, the women vanished. Symbolic, I thought. Why do magicians point pistols at lovely assistants, unless through some secret pact with the male subconscious?

"What?" asked my wife.

"Eh?"

"You were muttering," said my wife.

"Sorry." I searched the program. "Oh! Next comes Miss Quick! The only female pickpocket in the world!"

"That can't be true," said my wife quietly.

I looked to see if she was joking. In the dark, her dim mouth seemed to be smiling, but the quality of that smile was lost to me.

The orchestra hummed like a serene flight of bees.

The curtains parted.

There, with no great fanfare, no swirl of cape, no bow, only the most condescending tilt of her head, and the faintest elevation of her left eyebrow, stood Miss Quick.

I thought it was a dog act, when she snapped her fingers.

"Volunteers. All men!"

"Sit down." My wife pulled at me.

I had risen.

There was a stir. Like so many hounds, a silently baying pack rose and walked (or did they run?) to the snapping of Miss Quick's colorless fingernails.

It was obvious instantly that Miss Quick was the same woman who had been vanishing all evening.

Budget show, I thought; everyone doubles in brass. I don't like her.

"What?" asked my wife.

"Am I talking out loud again?"

But really, Miss Quick provoked me. For she looked as if she had gone backstage, shrugged on a rumpled tweed walking suit, one size too large, gravy-spotted and grass-stained, and then purposely ruffled her hair, painted her lipstick askew, and was on the point of exiting the stage door when someone cried, "You're on!"

So here she was now, in her practical shoes, her nose shiny, her hands in motion but her face immobile, getting it over with .

Feet firmly and resolutely planted, she waited, her hands deep in her lumpy tweed pockets, her mouth cool, as the dumb volunteers dogged it to the stage.

This mixed pack she set right with a few taps, lining them up in a military row.

The audience waited.

"That's all! Act's over! Back to your seats!"

Snap! went her plain fingers.

The men, dismayed, sheepishly peering at each other, ambled off. She let them stumble half down the stairs into darkness, then yawned:

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

Eagerly, they turned.

"Here."

With a smile like the very driest wine, she lazily unwedged a wallet from one of her pockets. She removed another wallet from within her coat. Followed by a third, a fourth, a fifth! Ten wallets in all!

She held them forth, like biscuits, to good beasts. The men blinked. No, those were not their wallets! They had been onstage for only an instant. She had mingled with them only in passing. It was all a joke.

Surely she was offering them brand-new wallets, compliments of the show!

But now the men began feeling themselves, like sculptures finding unseen flaws in old, hastily flung together armatures. Their mouths gaped, their hands grew more frantic, slapping their chest-pockets, digging their pockets.

All the while Miss Quick ignored them to calmly sort their wallets like the morning mail.

It was at this precise moment I noticed the man on the far right end of the line, half on the stage. I lifted my opera glasses. I looked once. I looked twice.

"Well," I said lightly. "There seems to be a man there who somewhat resembles me."

"Oh?" said my wife.

I handed her the glasses, casually. "Far right."

"It's not like you," said my wife. "It's you!"

"Well, almost," I said modestly.

The fellow was nice-looking. It was hardly cricket to look thus upon yourself and pronounce favorable verdicts. Simultaneously, I had grown quite cold. I took back the opera glasses and nodded, fascinated. "Crew cut. Horn-rimmed glasses. Pink complexion. Blue eyes—"

"Your absolute twin!" cried my wife.

And this was true. And it was strange, sitting there, watching myself onstage.

"No, no, no," I kept whispering.

But yet, what my mind refused, my eye accepted. Aren't there two billion people in this world? Yes! All different snowflakes, no two the same! But now here, delivered into my gaze, endangering my ego and my complacency, here was a casting from the same absolutes, the identical mold.

Should I believe, disbelieve, feel proud, or run scared? For here I stood witness to the forgetfulness of God.

"I don't think," said God, "I've made one like this before."
But, I thought, entranced, delighted, alarmed: God errs.
Flashes from old psychology books lit my mind.
Heredity. Environment.
"Smith! Jones! Helstrom!"

Onstage, in bland drill-sergeant tones, Miss Quick called roll and handed back the stolen goods.
You borrow your body from all your forebears, I thought. Heredity.
But isn't the body also an environment?
"Winters!"

Environment, they say, surrounds you. Well, doesn't the body surround, with its lakes, its architectures of bone, its overabundances, or wastelands of soul? Does not what is seen in passing window-mirrors, a face either serene snowfalls or a pitted abyss, the hands like swans or sparrows, the feet anvils or hummingbirds, the body a lumpy wheat-sack or a summer fern, do these not, seen, paint the mind, set the image, shape the brain and psyche like clay? They do!

"Bidwell! Rogers!"
Well, then, trapped in the same environmental flesh, how fared this stranger onstage?
In the old fashion, I wanted to leap to my feet and call, "What o'clock is it?"
And he, like the town crier passing late with my face, might half mournfully reply, "Nine o'clock, and all's well But was all well with him?"

Question: did those horn-rims cover a myopia not only of light but of spirit?
Question: was the slight obesity pressed to his skeleton symbolic of a similar gathering of tissue in his head?
In sum, did his soul go north while mine went south, the same flesh cloaking us but our minds reacting, one winter, one summer?

"My God," I said, half aloud. "Suppose we're absolutely identical!"
"Shh!" said a woman behind me.

I swallowed hard.

Suppose, I thought, he is a chain-smoker, light sleeper, overeater, manic-depressive, glib talker, deep/shallow thinker, flesh fancier...

No one with that body, that face, could be otherwise. Even our names must be similar.

Our names!

"...1...bl . . . er..." .

Miss Quick spoke his!

Someone coughed. I missed it.

Perhaps she'd repeat it. But no, he, my twin, moved forward. Damn! He stumbled! The audience laughed.

I focused my binoculars swiftly.

My twin stood quietly, center stage now, his wallet returned to his fumbling hands.

"Stand straight," I whispered. "Don't slouch."

"Shh!" said my wife.

I squared my own shoulders, secretly.

I never knew I looked that fine, I thought, cramming the glasses to my eyes. Surely my nostrils aren't that thinly made, the true aristocrat. Is my skin that fresh and handsome, my chin that firm?

I blushed, in silence.

After all, if my wife said that was me, accept it! The lamplight of pure intelligence shone softly from every pore of his face.

"The glasses." My wife nudged me.

Reluctantly I gave them up.

She trained the glasses rigidly, not on the man, but now on Miss Quick, who was busy cajoling, flirting, and repicking the pockets of the nearest men. On occasion my wife broke into a series of little satisfied snorts and giggles.

Miss Quick was, indeed, the goddess Shiva.

If I saw two hands, I saw nine. Her hands, an aviary, flew, rustled, tapped, soared, petted, whirled, tickled as Miss Quick, her face blank, swarmed coldly over her victims; touched without touching.

"What's in this pocket? And this? And here?"

She shook their vests, pinched their lapels, jingled their trousers: money rang. She punched them lightly with a vindictive forefinger, ringing totals on cash registers. She unplucked coat buttons with mannish yet fragile motions, gave wallets back, sneaked them away. She thrust them, took them, stole them again, while peeling money to count it behind the men's backs, then snatched their watches while holding their hands.

She trapped a live doctor now!

"Have you a thermometer!?" she asked.

"Yes." He searched. His face panicked. He searched again. The audience cued him with a roar. He glanced over to find:

Miss Quick standing with the thermometer in her mouth, like an unlit smoke. She whipped it out, eyed it.

"Temperature!" she cried. "One hundred ten!"

She closed her eyes and gave an insincere shake of her hips.

The audience roared. And now she assaulted her victims, bullied them, tugged at their shirts, rumpled their hair, asked:

"Where's your tie?"

They clapped their hands to their empty collars.

She plucked their ties from nowhere, tossed them back.

She was a magnet that invisibly drew good-luck charms, saints' medals, Roman coins, theater stubs, handkerchiefs, stickpins, while the audience ran riot, convulsed as these rabbit men stood peeled of all prides and protections.

Hold your hip pocket, she vacuumed your vest. Clutch your vest, she jackpotted your trousers. Blithely bored, firm but evanescent, she convinced you you missed nothing, until she extracted it, with faint loathing, from her own tweeds moments later.

"What's this?!" She held up a letter. "'Dear Helen: Last night with you-'"
A furious blush as the victim tussled with Miss Quick, snatched the letter, stowed it away. But a moment later, the letter was restolen and reread aloud: "'Dear Helen: Last night-'"
So the battle raged. One woman. Ten men.

She kissed one, stole his belt.
Stole another's suspenders.
The women in the audience-whinnied.
Their men, shocked, joined in.

What a magnificent bully, Miss Quick! How she spanked her dear, idiot-grinning, carry-on-somehow men turned boys as she spun them like cigar-store Indians, knocked them with her brontosaur hip, leaned on them like barber-poles, calling each one cute or lovely or handsome.

This night, I thought, is lunatic! All about me, wives, hilarious with contempt, hysterical at being so shabbily revealed in their national pastimes, gagged for air. Their husbands sat stunned, as if a war were over that had not been declared, fought and lost before they could move. Each, nearby, had the terrible look of a man who fears his throat is cut, and that a sneeze would fill the aisle with heads.

Quickly! I thought. Do something!
"You, you onstage, my twin, dodge! Escape!"
And she was coming at him!

"Be firm!" I told my twin. "Strategy! Duck, weave. Zigzag. Don't look where she says. Look where she doesn't say! Go it! now!"
If I shouted this, or merely ground it to powder in my teeth, I don't recall, for all the men froze as Miss Quick seized my twin by the hand.
"Careful!" I whispered.

Too late. His watch was gone. He didn't know it. Your watch is gone! I thought. He doesn't know what time it is! I thought.
Miss Quick stroked his lapel. Back off! I warned myself.

Too late. His forty-dollar pen was gone. He didn't know it. She tweaked his nose. He smiled. Idiot! There went his wallet. Not your nose, fool, your coat!

"Padded?" She pinched his shoulder. He looked at his right arm. No! I cried silently, for now she had the letters out of his left coat pocket. She planted a red kiss on his brow and backed off with everything else he had on him, coins, identification, a package of chocolates which she ate, greedily. Use the sense God gave a cow! I shouted behind my face. Blind! See what she's doing!

She whirled him round, measured him, and said, "This yours?" and returned his tie.

My wife was hysterical. She still held the glasses fixed on every nuance and vibration of loss and deprivation on the poor idiot's face. Her mouth was spoiled with triumph.

My God! I cried in the uproar. Get off the stage! I yelled within, wishing I could really yell it. At least get out while you have some pride!

The laughter had erupted a volcano in the theater, high and rumbling and dark. The dim grotto seemed lit with unhealthy fever, an incandescence. My twin wanted to break off, like one of Pavlov's dogs, too many bells on too many days: no reward, no food. His eyes were glazed with his insane predicament.

Fall! Jump in the pit! Crawl away! I thought.

The orchestra sawed at destiny with violins and Valkyrian trumpets in full flood.

With one last snatch, one last contemptuous wag of her body, Miss Quick grasped my twin's clean white shirt, and yanked it off.

She threw the shirt in the air. As it fell, so did his pants. As his pants fell, unbelted, so did the theater. An avalanche of shock soared to bang the rafters and roll over us in echoes a thundering hilarity.

The curtain fell.

We sat, covered with unseen rubble. Drained of blood, buried in one upheaval after another, degraded and autopsied and, minus eulogy, tossed into a mass grave, we men took a minute to stare at that dropped curtain, behind which hid the pickpocket and her victims, behind which a man quickly hoisted his trousers up his spindly legs.

A burst of applause, a prolonged tide on a dark shore. Miss Quick did not appear to bow. She did not need to. She was standing behind the curtain. I could feel her there, no smile, no expression. Standing, coldly estimating the caliber of the applause, comparing it to the metered remembrances of other nights.

I jumped up in an absolute rage. I had, after all, failed myself. When I should have ducked, I bobbed; when I should have backed off, I ran in. What an ass!

"What a fine show!" said my wife as we milled through the departing audience.

"Fine!" I cried.

"Didn't you like it?"

"All except the pickpocket. Obvious act, overdone, no subtlety," I said, lighting a cigarette.

"She was a whiz!"

"This way." I steered my wife toward the stage door.

"Of course," said my wife blandly, "that man, the one who looks like you, he was a plant. They call them shills, don't they? Paid by the management to pretend to be part of the audience?"

"No man would take money for a spectacle like that," I said. "No, he was just some boob who didn't know how to be careful."

"What are we doing back here?"

Blinking around, we found we were backstage.

Perhaps I wished to stride up to my twin, shouting, "Half-baked ox! Insulter of all men! Play a flute: you dance. Tickle your chin: you jump like a puppet! Jerk!"

The truth was, of course, I must see my twin close-up, confront the traitor and see where his true flesh differed from mine. After all, wouldn't I have done better in his place?!

The backstage was lit in blooms and isolated flushes, now bright, now dark, where the other magicians stood chatting. And there, there was Miss Quick!

And there, smiling, was my twin!

"You did fine, Charlie," said Miss Quick.

My twin's name was Charlie. Stupid name.

Charlie patted Miss Quick's cheek. "You did fine, ma'am!"

God, it was true! A shill, a confederate. Paid what? Five, ten dollars for letting his shirt be torn oft, letting his pants drop with his pride? What a turncoat, traitor!

I stood, glaring.

He glanced up.

Perhaps he saw me.

Perhaps some bit of my rage and impacted sorrow reached him.

He held my gaze for only a moment, his mouth wide, as if he had just seen an old school chum. But, not remembering my name, could not call out, so let the moment pass.

He saw my rage. His face paled. His smile died. He glanced quickly away. He did not look up again, but stood pretending to listen to Miss Quick, who was laughing and talking with the other magicians.

I stared at him and stared again. Sweat oiled his face. My hate melted. My temper cooled. I saw his profile clearly, his chin, eyes, nose, hairline; I memorized it all. Then I heard someone say:

"It was a fine show!"

My wife, moving forward, shook the hand of the pickpocketing beast.

On the street, I said, "Well, I'm satisfied."

"About what?" asked my wife.

"He doesn't look like me at all. Chin's too sharp. Nose is smaller. Lower lip isn't full enough. Too much eyebrow. Onstage, far oft, had me going.

But close up, no, no. It was the crew cut and horn-rims fooled us. Anyone could have horn-rims and a crew cut."

"Yes," my wife agreed, "anyone."

As she climbed into our car, I could not help but admire her long, lovely legs.

Driving off, I thought I glimpsed that familiar face in the passing crowd. The face, however, was watching me. I wasn't sure. Resemblances, I now knew, are superficial.

The face vanished in the crowd.

"I'll never forget," said my wife, "when his pants-fell!" I drove very fast, then drove very slow, all the way home.

The end