

Margaret Hollingsworth / BEYOND CLOSURE

A girl is sitting on the edge of a bath. She has something in her hand. It might be a knife or it might be a nail file or it might be a comb. She is fully dressed. She wears a white coat-thing that's probably a dress. She has slender legs and no shoes on her long, bony feet. Her hair's straight, shoulder length, the colour of Shreddies. I can't see her face, she's at an angle to the camera and her hair covers her profile, but I know she's beautiful, probably one of those models, very thin with tiny schoolgirl tits that peep up and catch you with your eyes down. You can't actually see her ribs but you can see a sort of shadow like an underdeveloped x-ray where the bones should be. None of what's underneath is in the picture of course.

The room where she's sitting is stark white tile, floor, ceiling, walls. The light seems to be harsh, or maybe it's the lighting. The bath isn't a normal bath — to begin with it's not long enough to sit in, you'd have to pull your knees up under your chin. Then it's tall — the sides would reach up to my armpits, she'd have to hoist herself up to perch on it. It's more a trough than a bathtub. Maybe it's used for sheep dipping or washing off potatoes or something scientific. I know it's a bath because I can make out a tap.

And that's all there is. I keep looking at the magazine, wondering if the photographer put the girl there or if she got there by herself. She doesn't look posed, she's too concentrated. I wonder what she's going to do with the object in her hand. Is she going to fall back into the bathtub and drown? If so, why did the photographer take the picture at that moment, why didn't he rescue her? Women don't

take mysterious photographs of other women, so it must have been a man behind the camera. If I look at it long enough it's more than a picture.

I look at it long enough.

So how much is manipulated, that's what I want to know?

What am I looking at, now, this moment? What lies beyond the frame — there's a shadow in one corner — if it's a door, what lies beyond it? What lives are being lived on the edge of the picture? Would I feel the way I do now, if I knew? The photographer won't let me in. He's a tease. He's selected his moment, and shut me out. I can take it or leave it, but I can't change it by turning the page, or by waiting for the next frame, the moment after "and then" in the story.

I don't care. I don't want in. I'm horny.

Is this all there is?

I want to smash his lens. I want to kill him.

They try to tell you that photography tells it like it is. That's bull. It tells it like the guy who presses the shutter wants it to be, and he never comes out from behind the camera to take the heat. It's a massive fraud. I'm mad because I'm probably the last one to realize that! Grow up Newman, haven't you read your John Berger, your Susan Sontag? Well, no, actually, I couldn't get past page five; (what the hell do they know anyway?).

I pick up the magazine and go to the kitchen to make a ham sandwich. It's white tiled, with a deep sink. There's a knife lying on the counter. Nothing else, just a knife. I rip the picture diagonally, right through her body.

I go out and buy another copy. It's minus five but I don't bother to put my socks on.

I'm in love.

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We're in the middle of a power outage and it's still cold. TV cameras roam the streets capturing personal tragedies and triumphs.

Newman says snap snap, crackle crackle, bug off. Newman hears the ice. Ice is forming a thick rind round his liver. He won't leave the house. There is only now, and now is only cold, a long piercing note of cold, no "and thens," no "to-be-continueds," no themes, no reiterations, no narrative. Only now.

He thinks what it would be like to be his goldfish.

They've been promising electricity for so many days I've lost count, not that I count normally, I just take note of darkness and light and when the food comes. Now I take note of the cold. I don't mind cold. An ancestor of mine survived right through the winter in a pond. As long as there's mud on the bottom there's no misery. Now there's a crust of ice on the top of my bowl and it's spreading down. I hear someone say it could crack the glass. That's worrying. Where would that leave me? Flapping round on the floor, gasping for air, feeling my flesh freeze. Newman wraps a pillow round my bowl. I'm in the dark. I can just see a square of spackled ceiling and the dead light fixture through the ice.

Newman gets the bright idea to put me in the oven. I've never been in an oven before. It's a dark box. He puts me on the top shelf and he puts two candles on the bottom, lights them up and closes the door. It's great — I swim round and round listening to the ice tearing apart above my head. The temperature of the water is rising. And rising. Someone had better come quick or there'll be fish soup for supper. At the last minute when I've got myself into a sort of C shape, Newman grabs the bowl. The light outside the oven is blinding, it must be day. He keeps apologizing to me. He wraps the pillow round the bowl to keep the heat in and the light disappears.

After that he repeats the treatment every day until two voices come and tell him he can't stay in the apartment with no heat. He protests, and the two voices insist, they are cops so he has no choice, I can hear him banging around the apartment, then he bangs out, leaving me where I am as there are no provisions for fish in the temporary shelters. I'm relieved. I settle down on the gravel.

The ice climbs down and down until it cramps my head. Then it's all around me. I lie perfectly still. My gills are not plugged so I can keep breathing very slowly. I imagine myself swimming down a long tunnel with a light at the end. I'm on the ceiling looking down. I can see me swimming. My eyes are filmed over and an angel fish touches my shoulder. I hear the call of an elephant seal.

The problem with people like Newman is that they think animals have imaginations. They think tame birds feel regret when they shit on your head, and cats have a guilty conscience for all the damage they do with their claws. People like Newman remember talking fish from their electronic baby sitters, the cartoons they were made to watch on rented videos. He feeds on stories, he cannot live without "and then" . . . For a fish there is only now and THE END.

If you know nothing there can be no unknown.

Newman and his kind play with us so we'll fit into their frame. They pull us out of the water, let us die slowly on the dock or the deck, yank the hooks out of our mouths and throw us back in as if they were doing us a favour. A fish knows hurt, hurt lives in the single cell of its collective memory, it's a given. Humans must be missing that cell; for humans, pain may manifest in the moment but it's instantly forgotten when it's over, otherwise why do they inflict it on others? People like Newman think that every object, every animal, every plant views the world the way they do. They think the big blank eye on the television is sad. They believe that objects and animals and plants respond to love, as if love weren't something they invented. They believe that time can be broken down and counted and they

think it's possible to capture a moment with a camera as if one moment could be separated from the rest.

When Newman comes back from the shelter the water in my bowl has changed form and I have disappeared. Newman tries to rattle the bowl, snivels once or twice then throws it in the garbage chute, bowl, pillow, ice, the whole shebang, and there, amidst the warm gases given off by decay, the ice thaws while Newman sits and stares at the images on the TV screen. They are showing the horrific aftermath of the big ice storm. Twenty years on, people will look at the pictures and think of this as the time they came together in a real community. A time of love, of forging new links. The fights and the stinks, the broken trees and the fear will be pushed outside the frame; human collective memory works this way — it protects them, allows them to live with pain instead of halting it, it prevents them from progressing.

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Sometimes when Newman listens to the radio he tries to decide how closely the voices match what they are saying. What is behind the information which is directed at him? Who is giving the real message?

Today, Newman is studying the picture of the girl. He has pinned it up over his bed, and he has bought five more copies of the magazine, to be on the safe side. The power is back on. Magic. The voice on the radio is coming from Buenos Aires. It tells him that a few years ago people were being disappeared in Argentina. He senses distrust behind the words, so he turns it off, but the voice continues in his head.

He wonders how you can be disappeared. To disappear. That's active, a matter of personal choice, but to be disappeared puts a wobble in the word, takes away the active, changes it into something scary, someone else's choice. Does a wobbly word carry any freight?

The goldfish was not disappeared, if one were to search in the garbage chute one would find a body, or at least a skeleton. Newman has created a symmetry for the fish, its life has meaning, narrative, a beginning, a middle, above all, an end. It can be safely forgotten. The voice of the man on the radio continues in the silence. It is devious, it invites acts of sabotage or imagination, invites the audience to test their powers of magnification and elimination by simply turning a dial, but whatever the listener does, somewhere in Buenos Aires the man behind the voice continues his premise, propelling through sentences to some kind of conclusion. And the girl? The girl will always be perched on the side of the bath. She has not left and gone to the hairdresser, she is not meeting a friend for a drink, she is not visiting a psychic who will foretell her death.

She is not walking into my arms.

No. There's no moment before or after the one when she sat on the bath. There is no story. The photographer will never come forward; unlike the broadcaster or the writer he won't take responsibility for his work, he's more interested in what's not there than what is. Negative space. What if he airbrushed her out of the picture? He holds the only copy of the negative. But there are prints. I try to stop shivering. Montreal is in the grip of the worst ice storm in recorded history but even ice storms end. The prints must be preserved. She cannot be disappeared. I'll buy up every existing copy of the magazine, I'll demand them from the publisher. I'm in love.

I switch on the radio. It's a different voice now, the voice is talking about a recipe for *poutin*. Curds and gravy and . . . It's all right. I taped the first voice. But what if the first voice was a recording, too? I've taped a recording. What's live? How far back is the real thing? Is it in Argentina?

What does it mean then, to appear? To come into view. To be suddenly there like the angel fish in the goldfish's near death experience? If no one saw the angel fish, if it was all in Newman's imagination did it exist? They say that near-death experiences can

be physiologically explained, something to do with neurons. Everything can be explained except the one remaining question. What is the end of the story? The photographer makes the woman appear. Who makes the *aparacidos* appear in Argentina, (you must have appeared if you disappear)? The mothers? Los Madres de Plaza de Mayo who grieve for their lost children? They are the ones who gave birth, who reared them on ranches, on city side-streets, on beaches in Puerto Madryn where the elephant seals rear up much larger than life and penguins perform, indistinguishable one from one even to another penguin. They are the mothers who took these sons to Teatro Colon for their first glimpse of opera. They are the mothers, who, having gone through the unbearable pain of childbirth forget it, and have more children, for pain has no memory unless it is attached to unexplained absence; pain is dispelled with closure which is why stories must have an end. Without this the hurt from the loss of a child cannot be forgotten. It rears up, like the elephant seals, so large, beyond imagination. Sometimes a photograph will trap this pain, for in a photograph there is no time.

The pictures of the *desaparacidos* sit on the mantles in the homes of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Who can confirm to a grieving woman that her child has been disappeared? If he has been disappeared there is someone behind it, someone who can be blamed. But the someone cannot be identified, the spirits have been airbrushed out and the hurt pricks and burns. The absence is a red hot poker.

I am making a once-only plea to the girl in the picture. Step forward won't you? Step forward, please.

What happens to the tens of thousands, to the millions of fish whose disappearance is never recorded? Where do they go? Why are their bodies not littering the sea, the sewers, the canals, the ponds? The sky over the city is thick with crows but how often do you see a dead bird? They are disappeared — when a crow is shot do the other crows feel the bullet?

The mother looks at the picture on the mantle. It is in a silver frame and the frame sits on a hand crocheted doily. The mother wonders if he was indeed her son — could he be a changeling, is it possible that her real son is alive and well and living the good life in Buenos Aires, or Rio, or Quito? This disappeared one is not her flesh. The picture is of a smiling young man in a soccer jersey. She tries to think what was going on outside the frame. What day was it? What did they have for lunch? Were there any phone calls? She can't think. What was the moment immediately after the picture was taken? Was he about to play a match or had the match been completed, or was it merely a costume? The jersey isn't muddy — what does that mean? Why did the camera capture this moment and not another? A smile and not a frown. Did he ever frown? Who took the picture? Her daughter, her mother, her uncle (note that she thinks of them as *her* relatives, they are already detached from the disappeared one).

Newman follows the trail. He buys a ticket from Montreal to Buenos Aires.

In La Recoleta he wanders up and down the streets of monuments; this is a city for the dead, entered through a Doric portico; unknown to him the body of Evita Peron is resting here, having been discovered, according to the story, embalmed, in the projection room of a small town cinema years after it disappeared. Some citizens of La Recoleta are content with mere headstones, others have large and architecturally elaborate palaces filled with *memento mori*, the last resting places of the rich. The door to one of these structures has been left open. Newman goes inside. It smells of rose water and tomcats. He stares at the casket and feels absence (the casket is lined with lead so the energy of the departed is sealed inside); pictures of the family are displayed on the wall and there is a pair of ballet slippers in a glass case on a shelf; vases of dried flowers contain papery memories of blues and purples and orange. He has a sudden, unspeakable urge to fart, to break open the sarcophagus and feast on the flesh. Take. Eat. For this is my body. Soup.

Outside, each headstone displays the obligatory photograph of the lease holder. Were the subjects aware that this particular moment in their past life would be exposed in perpetuity? Did they give their permission? It doesn't matter. There is no speck of recognition in the pictures' eyes. Nothing invites Newman in.

It has been a long trip to Argentina and while he is there, I remember Rome.

I visited a cemetery in Rome two years ago. No ordinary cemetery this, it consists of four chapels, the last resting place for 4000 Cappucin monks. They must have had a sense of humour, those monks. The chapels are decorated with their bones, great water lilies bloom, their petals made out of scapulars, chandeliers are delicately fashioned from vertebrae, the walls and niches are made of thighs and skulls. The skeleton of a child is glued on one ceiling and there's an inscription *what you are now we used to be what we are now you will be*. The more recent arrivals are posed in their cells, as if caught in some quotidian activity or a shard of religious ritual, their bones peeping though their robes, skulls shrouded with hoods.

The word *macabre* didn't apply, it all looked too ordinary, like some greedily over-decorated parlour. The word *overkill* came to mind and made me laugh. Who thought of this? Who planned it? How did he persuade his confreres to share his wicked commentary on the absence of spirit? These monks were not disappeared, they died natural deaths, in some cases their infirmities are etched on their bones, laid open to the prying eyes of anyone who can afford the price of admission. Gazing at the piles of fingers and ankles was not an affront, I had no sense of sadness or of being a voyeur, merely a sense of pattern, of lack of variety — in death we are like penguins. The planner is daring us to feel affronted, terrified, transfixed. There are new bones among the old, shined to a pearly sheen. They mock us. Mock the notion of the sanctity of the body after the spirit has departed. Something essential has disappeared. There is no piercing moment of intimacy such as the voyeur must feel, locked

outside, yet, by his very presence, transforming the everyday into a core experience.

Each bone spoke to me of the comfort of a single inauspicious moment, the moment of departure — taken out of time, and expanded beyond time. It was so much more eloquent in its utter finality than La Recoleta. It went beyond closure. Unlike the girl on the bath, or the sons of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the Cappucins' moment is unimportant, their departure is of no relevance. They have gone beyond closure.

Until this moment I'd completely forgotten the Cappucins, I had to go to the library to make sure that my recollections were accurate; but I still retained all the details of the Rafaels and the Veroneses in the Vatican, paintings by bold men, artists who left their signatures behind, left self portraits or imprints hidden in painted crowds always in motion, always wanting to yield up new discoveries, shouting "this is me, mine, I am here, take, eat, come back and revisit." Cameras are forbidden in the Vatican. The paintings spill over their frames, they will live on and on.

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Grief. Newman has been working on grief. No longer able to face the ridged and blackened mounds of snow in Montreal he moves three thousand miles to Victoria where the sea never freezes. It's not possible to go any further west without drowning.

I am still in love. Where is the end?

He wonders why we are expected to feel something after someone dies? A high school student is murdered by her classmates in Victoria and immediately the grief counsellors descend, telling everyone what they are supposed to feel, then shielding them from it. Everyone grieves, from grade one up. Kids who've never heard her name, kids she's tormented, kids she's loved, kids who feel guilty for not liking her, friends of friends of friends. TV cameras station

themselves outside the gates of the school to record the grief, to question whoever agrees to be questioned on their views about teenage violence; even people who have never set eyes on her answer the call to come and record her passing with flowers and teddy bears, packs of cards, comic books, video games, and poems.

People come every day. The tributes are piled up to make a cairn. Some onlookers have their pictures taken beside the spot. The day after the murder Newman buys a camera and stands on the opposite side of the street to the school. It's warm, even though it's winter. It's warm compared to Montreal though if he had no recent comparison he'd say it was cold. He records all the comings and goings. No moment will be differentiated from the last. An endless procession of moments as similar as penguins. He records everything around the growing cairn, the schoolyard, the street, the cherry trees, the number ten bus, the yellow school bus, the mothers who comb their offspring off the sidewalk into waiting cars — the safety of metal.

Newman hears everyone talking about violence, but he doubts that anyone knows what it means. Even those who've felt it, or perpetrated it have forgotten the pain. Everyone knows it's wrong. "This is something we'll have to live with for the rest of our lives," her parents tell the TV camera. They tie her photo to the railings above the flowers. They splice all their interviews onto one tape and put it on a shelf next to the videos of her first steps, her tenth birthday party, her piano solo. They tell the press what they have done and Newman reads it in the *Times Colonist* in a break before changing his film. He'll be snapping when the flowers have dried and the teddy bears and games given away to the needy and the photo taken down. He'll stay here and continue to capture the scene until he comes to the end. Maybe he'll inadvertently snap another crime like in that movie *Blow Up*.

He has used up one hundred and two rolls of film when he discovers the timing device on the camera. He crouches down and takes a shot of himself. He continues to pose after the shutter has clicked, feeling the back of his Nikes bite into his heels. Then they move in

on him. When they ask him what he's doing he says "I'm marking time." And when they ask him who he is he invites them to develop the picture. They expect an explanation so he tells them he's protesting. They're bored with protests, they barely suppress a yawn as they ask him what the hell he's against. He says "cruelty to goldfish. Tyranny of trees by ice. *Desaparacidos* who may or may not have been dropped into the sea from government planes. *Evanescence*. All distortions of truth. The impossibility of containing negative space."

Another nut. They ask him to move on, stay away from the school, there have been complaints.

He sits down.

They take him to a cell, take a head shot, give him a number, confiscate his belongings, and file him away in the system. Someone will decide he is not worth their attention, there's no place for people like him, so they'll return his camera and let him back on the street after a night inside to cool his heels; fortunately he has an address, even though it's in Quebec. To be on the safe side they call Montreal and get them to go over his apartment. These young Quebecers, they all come to winter on the Coast, get away from the snow, live on the street, create problems for shop owners. The power is still on in Montreal, the apartment hasn't been looted; inside the searchers find ten stacks of yellowing copies of a magazine. It seems pretty innocuous, one of those colour supplements they stick inside newspapers, nothing unusual. The paper hasn't fared well in the damp and the cold, the pages are stuck together, the ink is beginning to run. There's mildew.

Meanwhile Newman develops his last roll of film. The only picture is of a small, dark man crouching on his heels. He has no socks and his blue padded jacket looks black. Behind him is a girl with long hair the colour of Shreddies. She's not wearing the white coat-thing, but she has the same legs, the same stance. Her arms are open, someone must be running towards her. She occupies the negative space. *There*

is a story after all. He settles down in the doorway of a patisserie on Government Street and sleeps soundly for the first time in weeks.

The next day I eat a hearty breakfast, buy a pack of cigarettes, read the paper, and, finally, since I can't put it off any longer, I check the photograph. The girl is still a presence, but she's aged twenty years, she's put on weight and her hair's short and curly. I know this can't be right, but I'm holding the evidence.

