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Clairvoyant

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CLAIRVOYANT

My name is Clarence Day, and my parents were normal. That's what it says on my traveling van right after it says, in perfect red letters, that I'm 20" high and weigh 39 lbs., THE WORLD'S SMALLEST MAN. It also says I have a high school education. When that got added to the sign, my income went up 17%. My wife did that calculation, she keeps the books. It doesn't say so on the sign, but she's normal too. The loudspeaker tells about her once we've settled in at the fairgrounds and opened up for business. I hear over and over again, maybe eighty times a day, that I have a normal wife and two perfectly normal children. One of them collects the money while the other one hangs around a lot and calls me Dad. We all work together, and we eat well.

You're probably wondering if those two boys are really my children. People want to know that but they never ask. I guess there's just no way to ask that question and feel good about yourself. If someone could figure a nice way to ask, I'd tell the truth. I'm pretty sure they're mine—as sure as any man is. I don't think about it much.

I'm good at my job. The sign says I'm small, and I am. I don't cheat people, even though they think I do. When they see me, I can tell they expected more for their 50 cents. I guess they expect a perfect little man, a tiny mirror of themselves, a little doll. They don't expect the head and trunk of a midget (even though they have to admit I'm a very small midget) with vestigial legs. But that's what they get. I'm not a doll. And nothing is perfect, not even freaks.

To be honest, I don't enjoy my work like I used to. Used to be that I'd hear footsteps on the wooden platform outside my trailer and my stomach would tighten as I waited for the faces to appear at the door—confident, happy faces on their day off, all lit up with the expectation of seeing something they could talk about back home on the front porch with a cool pitcher of lemonade sitting by. That wasn't the part I enjoyed, not that I begrudged it or anything. I liked the next part, the sudden bewilderment when those faces took account that it wasn't just

them seeing me but I was seeing them right back again. They hadn't reckoned on that when they paid their 50 cents, and I could see the sweat come up, see the eyes check for escape routes. I had them then—the world belonged to me in those moments they were recalculating, and I could have sent it spinning out of control. They were mine, and for a split second they almost were me, I was that real to them. But I did nothing, of course. I just watched and enjoyed those moments until they got control of themselves again and said hello, clearing their throats of the fear that had got lodged there. We could chat then, with the touching formality of strangers who have survived a crisis together.

The chat hasn't changed. How do? Think there might be rain coming on? Hope not. Left the windows open back t'home. Ain't rained all month—be just my luck to have it coming in the windows the one day me and the family step out some. Ain't that always the way. Same conversations I've been having all my life, in uncertain weather. Rain and sun mean minor adjustments. Some folks don't put high value on that kind of chat, think nothing's getting said. But from where I sit, it seems like more's being said than any creature can take stock of. People come in there to see me and, no matter how disappointed they are, I expect they remember me a good long while. I expect what they remember, what pulls their coats every now and again, is the questions they didn't ask, that I didn't answer. Same thing I remember about them, all of them, and it's a lot to remember from so much chat, so many unanswered questions.

Could be I'm getting weary from so much remembering. Maybe that's where the salt's gone. Could be time for me to move on, do some other work. It's not always that I've worked the fairgrounds here in upstate Alabama, not by a long shot. It was some thirty years ago that we first settled on the outskirts of Gadsden. Had us an old farmhouse in those days, and a yellow Packard, a clear and shiny yellow that nature never thought of, unless you think people are natural. Every time I looked at that Packard I got hungry for sweets. Gained four pounds the year we got it, four delicious pounds that made me sick and happy. In those days we had a makeshift wagon, a box on wheels is what it was, that we'd hook up to the Packard on work days. Thinking back on it, I guess that box was real paltry. We painted it with at least twenty different shades of yellow, but next to the Packard it was nothing but dull and puny. No

light inside except what came through the door and the chinks in the wood. When folks came in to see me, they were really thrown off balance. Face to face with a freak in a dark box, nothing else to look at and no place to run. Pretty near all the men and women who walked through that door wished they hadn't, wished they could vanish back out into the sunlight in the blink of an eye. But every single one of them stayed for at least a minute or two. It wasn't the money they'd paid that made them do it, it was their pride. It's human pride that's kept me in business all these years, and I'm mighty thankful for it.

Things are different now. You step in the door it's almost like stepping into somebody's living room. There's carpeting, electric lights, a kitchenette. Even upholstered chairs if people want to sit down. Most prefer standing. Still, that old box on wheels had some magic in it. Maybe magic is the price you pay for comfort.

We gave up the farmhouse, too, for a split-level ranch-style, indoor-outdoor carpet, 29" color tv, furniture from Ethan Allen. It's more than comfortable. Funny how most folks just assume we live right here in the trailer, all four of us and not a bed in sight. Nice place you got here, they say, meaning nice home. But usually they ask if I come from around these parts—my accent isn't quite right, although I try—and I say, sure do, have a split-level just southeast of Gadsden. That's all they need to hear.

They also like to ask how long I've been married. I say forever, and they laugh. So I laugh too. But I don't let it stop there like I do with the weather. I go on and tell them that she's the finest woman on the face of the earth, and that's a fact. They look over at her—she's always right there—and I can see her in their eyes, see a normal woman flash up on their eyeballs. Then comes the squint, barely perceptible, while they wonder—wonder what it's like between me and her. Behind those eyes there's a quick parade of snapshots—her and me at the dinner table, in the living room, in the bed. Finest woman on earth, I repeat, and the eyes come back to me. That's when I stop. I don't say that when we lie down together I'm tall.

Being the world's smallest man is my job. It's my work, and we all have to work one way or another. I do my job well, but doing it poorly would be just as much work, probably more.

There were some folks walked through my door just last week, young folks just starting to get the feel of being on their

own. You have to admire the courage it takes to get the feel of that. Whatever else the young ones do or don't have, they've got courage. It's as common as the sparrow, and no less precious. Well, these kids are larking, and they come busting in the door full of fresh air and junk food and high spirit, till the hush settles on them. Four of them there are, and who's going to speak up first? You know they can't take too much of the hush. The guy that's first through the door stops short two steps in, causing a jam-up at his rear, so they're all stuck there together, a single lump of young humanity with eight big eyes. I never speak first.

Hi.

The sweetest sound you can imagine, and we're all grateful. Hi back to you, I say, with the emphasis on *to*. Come on in if you'd like. They separate out into two girls and two boys. The girl that said hi walks right up to me, Young Mr. First doesn't budge, and the other two shuffle in line between them. Where you folks from? I'm from Birmingham, says Hi, and I see myself in her eyes big as life. Bigger. I look down the line, getting smaller and smaller, and I say you sure did pick a nice day to come to the fair. Mr. First has his eyes on my wife already, wondering, and Hi says yeah, it's real nice out there. She's worried now, doesn't want me to think she meant it isn't nice in here, so she asks if I come from around here. You know what I say, about the split-level outside Gadsden. Oh, she says, you don't sound like you're from Alabama. I say, you wouldn't believe all the places I've been in my life, telling her the truth. How'd you end up here? she asks. (My wife speaks up, says the kids are going out for hamburgers. Do I want one? No, I'm not hungry just yet, thank you.) I don't have to answer the question now, but I do. I say it's a good place to work. She wants to know why but doesn't ask, trying to figure it out for herself. Mr. First down there is thinking, what does this dwarf know about work, sitting around on his tiny can all day, talking shit and collecting money? He's thinking about how hard he works, stashing all the goddamn pork loins and margarine and kotex into the goddamn bags for a bunch of old hags who don't even give him a goddamn tip. And here he is spending 50 cents to see a dwarf sit on his can.

He's right, of course. He works hard, too hard. It's a crying shame anyone's got to work as hard as he does, and it's a job to figure what makes them do it. It's not the money like he thinks

it is. Twenty years from now he'll be rolling in money, eating tenderloin and lying down each night with a woman who doesn't tip the grocery sackers. And he'll still be working too hard. I won't be here then, but when he drives past the fairgrounds I'll be bile in his belly. His eyes will narrow in remembrance of the little fucker who sat on his can for a living.

On down the row, the skinny fellow with curly hair—it's brown in here but outside I know it's been golden—is looking at me in the past tense. I'm a story he's telling one Thursday night at Dugan's, story about a city boy venturing up a forlorn stretch of 1-59 to experience the carnival of life among yesterday's people. His friends are enjoying the story, and so am I. He sets it up real good: the sunlight glinting off his Honda Civic in a field of unwashed pick-ups, the arduous journey from the parking lot through rows of pit-bulls and coon hounds that are bought and sold by dangerous characters (he describes them—big bellies, no teeth, huge biceps; oddly cordial, even gracious, but scary as shit, like dams that could burst any minute and ravage everything in their path), the tables piled high with stolen hubcaps and ghetto blasters next to a table with nothing to sell but two rusted kettles and a broken toaster (Westinghouse, 1961). In the midst of it all a preacher, a kid in a J.C. Penney double-knit suit stained with his sweat, yelling about Gawd and Cheesus. Gathered around him are eight slack-jawed farmers in overalls but no shirts, all twice the age of the preacher but awed, respectful, nodding as he tells them—begs them—to bring prayer into their lives and prepare for the coming of the Lorr-r-d—"For I say unto you, my brothers (hunh), that just as you put on your socks in the morning (hunh) before you go to put on your shoes (hunh), you must put on the Lorr-r-d, my brothers (hunh), before you can enter His Kingdom (hunh). The Kingdom awaits you, my brothers (hunh), but you have to dress rightly (hunh). Put on Cheesus every morning, brothers (hunh), and you'll march to Jerusalem (hunh) in Gawd's very own shoes..." (A dramatic pause from our young storyteller here, and a giggle.) Suddenly a small projectile rebounds off the sweaty sleeve of the double-knit suit. In the booth next door a man is throwing chocolate ex-lax into the passing crowd—chocolate ex-lax, for chrissake—and people are down on their knees scooping the stuff up. You can tell the old farmers are tempted but don't want to be rude to the preacher, who's ignoring the ex-lax as best he can. (The crowd at Dugan's

is laughing, but the story could be better, still needs work.) Finally, at the edge of the fairgrounds is this big yellow trailer with a banner on the side that says THE WORLD'S SMALLEST MAN / CLARENCE DAY / 20" HIGH / 39 LBS / NORMAL PARENTS / HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA / ADMISSION 50 CENTS. This voice is squawking on a loudspeaker about this guy's got a normal wife and two perfectly normal kids. I see a blond-headed kid, looks just like my little brother, hanging off the door, asking his dad for lunch money. Vick didn't want to go in, said it was all bullshit hype, but Nancy and I paid our 50 cents and you know Vick, wouldn't be caught missing anything and starts acting like it was his idea in the first place. Pays for both him and Rose and we all go in. (Pause) I don't know what I was expecting, but, man, it was *weird*. (How was it weird?—this story's losing momentum, it isn't going anywhere.) I mean, it's like a normal room in there, little lamps and chairs, curtains on the window. There's a woman standing by the refrigerator, a plain woman, not bad looking, about my height. But right in the middle there's this box-like thing, like a little stage sort of but more like a little barn with one wall missing, and that's where the world's smallest man is, looking right at us, very casual as if...as if this was just an ordinary thing. It's kind of hard to describe but, I mean we were supposed to be looking at him but he was looking at us and just kind of like, well, *waiting*. I mean he was a real disappointment in a way. Vick was right, I guess—he was just a regular midget with no legs. With legs he'd have been normal height, for a midget, so it was like cheating. But it was weird. (*How?*) I mean, we had this perfectly normal conversation, very boring really, but it was a strange experience. I can't describe it.

And finally he stops trying. There's something good here, he thinks, something about the South, about human nature and values, something that will make people laugh in just the right way. But he can't quite get it. It needs more work. He orders a rum and coke, feeling distracted and uneasy, but nobody seems to notice.

I like the storyteller. Next time he'll edit me out and be a big success, but he'll keep knowing I'm there, wondering how to tell it right. Right now, looking down at me in the trailer, he's pleased with his story and the day's outing.

The other girl...well, she's having a hard time dealing with this and would rather not. It's gotten real hot in here all of a

sudden, and there's a musty smell—not a particularly bad smell, but she feels herself breathing it in and doesn't want it inside of her. If she'd known what it was like, she'd have stayed outside. Can't imagine why anyone pays money to be uncomfortable like this. The only right thing to do in here is stare at this poor little man, but out on the street it would be the wrong thing to do. It's impolite to stare at the handicapped, not very pleasant either. She remembers going with her mother to the dime store when she was a kid. A lady was there at the lunch counter eating a hamburger and she had this huge lump on her neck, like a balloon that got stuck to her face from the cheekbone down to the collar bone and the skin had just grown right over it. Her mom was busy fingering through the cosmetics display, and Rose just stared at that lump, hands clenched at her sides, afraid to feel her own face. As the lady chewed her hamburger, the lump didn't move at all—it was solid and still. The whole world narrowed in on that lump and that hamburger. The smell of the hamburger. Rose threw up all over the floor of the dime store and didn't feel right again for days. God must have a reason for doing this to people, maybe so the rest of us could count our blessings that He could have done it to us but didn't. Well, she sure does feel blessed, but it's not right to stare at people who aren't.

My wife is checking Rose out pretty close. Every once in a while we have folks getting sick in here—we've even had a few faint on us—and, believe me, it ruins our day as well as theirs. I'm hoping these kids are out of here before Todd gets back with the burgers, when suddenly Nancy asks, what's it like?

You can tell she's surprised she asked it and spooked now that it's out. She glances at Vick and Rose, who are wishing they didn't know her. Daniel lost the drift somewhere and doesn't know what she's asking. Fact is, she isn't sure either. Well, I'm on the spot now. I could say pretty near anything and it would be true, but what's the best truth for her and me right now? Nothing rises up to say itself like her question did. I have to choose an answer, and I want to do a good job. That's it, of course, so I tell her that it's a job. It's what I do, and I try to do it well. Right away I recognize that I haven't gotten through to her, I've just gotten us both off the spot. The weariness comes on me, and I wish it didn't have to be like this. I wish I could open up her head and put the answer inside, put myself inside, and sleep. And sleep. I think I know what it's like to sleep, but I

can't say I remember doing it myself. I close my eyes sometimes, but I don't see less clearly. Fact is I see more clearly, not just the upholstered chairs and lamps, the wife and kids, but lawns and battlefields, rug salesmen, princesses, outhouses, astrolabes, Walter the Penniless, Jane Fonda, broken scissors and Faberge' eggs. Some folks say they have trouble remembering things, but the real trouble is forgetting. When those four kids said their good-byes last week and filed on out of the trailer, they marched right into the thick of my memories, and they'll stay there forever, rubbing elbows with people they don't even know about. At least not yet. They're still young now, and they think their lives are their own, but they're wrong about that. They're mine, too, and—like it or not—I'm theirs. That's what they got for their 50 cents. What I got was four new voices.