

JULIAN OLF

(People Almost Always Smell Good in the Art Museum)

THE SCENE: An evening in a tavern. A man of indeterminate age addresses an unseen acquaintance. There need be no specificity to the scene beyond a chair, a table, and some barroom sound.

Asterisks represent a lapse in time, which in production might be indicated by a brief freeze in action and sound, by a slight change in the lighting, or both. (No black-outs, please, until the end.) Parentheses and italics in the dialogue indicate shifts in focus and tone, respectively.



... She calls herself Arnie. *No, that's someone else. Arnie's from before I knew you.* (Incredible lady.) Arnie's a dancer with goofy eyes. They go all over, make her look a little wild, not pretty but sexy in a rough kind of way. The mouth is out there on its own, like it's trying to get away from the eyes. (White-white skin with very fine blond hairs that make her face look soft, almost furry?) What a smile—half gums, half teeth! But—check it out—this thing about her eyes? She says, each of her eyes sees a different picture . . . *No, listen, check it out.* I go, you mean first one picture, then another? She goes, no—both at the same time. So I go, are they framed—I mean, does something separate the two pictures in your head? She looks at me like I'm nuts . . . *Fuck you—no, listen to me.* So I go, if you have two different pictures in there, there's got to be a space where one ends and the other begins, so they don't fuck each other up. She goes, that may be true for me but not for her. The way she put it, and I'll never forget these words, "It's possible for the several to occupy the same space, with no boundaries." Isn't that incredible? Those words? "*the several . . . ?*" "*occupy . . . ?*" "*boundaries . . . ?*" So I ask her how she's able to dance or, never mind dance, reach for a fork, for Chrissake! And she says, "The hardest thing is to know who I am and where I am. After that, doing anything with my body is fun . . ."—which probably explains why she became a dancer. (And gives such an incredible fuck.) Her dancing?

I don't know, *different*. All her movable parts seem to be doing their own thing—sometimes together but mostly, like her mouth, out there on their own. If it wasn't for the smile, you'd think she was a spaz. The smile keeps it together . . . Don't it make you dizzy when you try to imagine what she must see when she looks out from inside her head? *Yeah, you. I'm asking you! Don't it . . . ?*



You know, I never told anyone this, but sometimes I feel very compact, like I'm wrapped up tight in a rubber-band ball. When that happens, even my voice feels small. *Ever happen to you? Oh . . .* Well, when I feel that way I head straight for the art museum. That's my favorite place to be, a great place to chill. I love the color of the light in the art museum, and the people—people you don't see walking around in the street. Everybody looks *just right*, like they just got out of taxis. And everybody speaks soft and mostly just stands around or moves very slow. *Nice . . .* I usually pick out one or two people and go around with them. I like to watch them look at the art. When they walk away from something, I go up to it and look at it the same way they did. It's amazing what you can see when you do that. Like there was this one dude? An old guy with a very smart blue suit and a bright white shirt with neck skin hanging over the collar? Bushy hair on his fingers, and a tan raincoat over his arm. (Very Black Shoes.) He walked up close to a painting and then leaned way back, with his raincoat arm behind his back? And he moved his face slowly up, towards the ceiling, so he could take in the whole painting through these little gold granny glasses at the end of his nose. It's like, from his gut down he needs to be near the art, but from the tits up he needs to get away from it? I liked that so much I tried it. After I did a lot of paintings like that my back and neck hurt. But I could see something new, something I never noticed before. You see, when you do a painting that way, with your whole body? After a while, you don't see the painting as a picture. Instead, you see how the soft museum light bounces off the paint and the frame. You see dust and lint, tiny squiggles of color, sometimes bumps and points that look like the icing on a cake. You can almost taste it . . . And the sound of shoes on the stone floor and the smell of wax and the deodorant or hair spray of whoever was just there looking at the picture? (People almost always smell good in the art museum.) You know, when there is no one looking, sometimes I feel the painting. Very gently. Just run my fingers over it . . . *Fuck you, man! My hands are clean. I don't hurt anything.* Besides, I don't touch *every* painting . . . There is this one room that has my favorite paintings. The frames are very fancy wood with

gold paint, and the light is just right. I wait sometimes for a long time just to cop a feel of the paintings in that room . . . *Look, Asshole, just try it for yourself before you start getting that way with me. Just try it. You'll see. It's a . . . it's a whole other thing.*

★ ★ ★

You ever wonder what your dog sees? You probably think she sees the same thing you see only lower down, right? Wrong! If you want to see things the way *we* do, you have to see everything that's not you *out there* and everything that is you *in here*. Am I right? Sure! Think about it. Until you can draw a line between where you sit and the whole rest of the game, you're not seeing *things*. You're seeing what your dog sees—which does just fine for her, but it's definitely a whole other thing. *Would you just TRY to think about it? For a minute?* Your dog cannot imagine herself. *What do you mean, "How do I know?"* There's no *out there*, no space between her and her neighborhood. So, what do *you* think she sees when she's running down your block? *Try . . . no, I don't want another beer . . . Listen to me! Yeah, I know, but this is interesting. I believe . . . no, listen, I believe . . . no, Asshole, I've never discussed it with a dog—LISTEN . . .* When a dog's out there trotting down the street, or what we call the street, the things she sees in her head must grow out from inside her gut, and she must feel herself getting small. *Do you follow me?* 'Cause getting closer to something *to her* must mean her size shrinks. Right? *Well, let's just say I'm right . . .* Now, how do you think your dog figures distances, say, when she wants to jump? *Hang on for a minute. You live with a dog and you don't know what's what! "Sit," "stand," "go," "stop"—you give these commands but you don't have a clue what's what . . .* Alright. The way I see it is, jumping means your dog works some muscles to change her size in a way that feels right on her feet when she lands. That's something, ain't it? The way dogs work it out? *Go ahead, get yourself another beer. (Fuckin' A . . .)*

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I never told you, did I, about the time I almost blew it all in my '67 Volkswagen? It was around the same time I met Arnie. I was making deliveries out on Long Island, me and a million commuters putting muchos kilos on the Expressway between Flushing and Levittown—you know the stretch: borrrrrring! Well, one day I invented a little game just for fun. Now picture this. There is nothing interesting to look at on the Expressway between Flushing and Levittown, right? So, I'm riding along nice and easy in the slow lane, and I think to myself— Let's say you notice something out

there, outside the car. After you pass it by, you're going to try to hold on to it in your brain and remember everything about it. It doesn't have to be anything special—could be, say, the cars closest to you, or a telephone pole, or a street lamp and trees . . . anything. And then you keep that thing in there, in your brain, until something new comes along that you just happen to notice. Then you grab hold of *that*, and so on—like taking snapshots. Lucky for me, there was very little traffic on the Expressway in the middle of the afternoon. I remember the first time I tried it—I laughed out loud, it was such a goof. I mean, once I took my “snapshot,” I was actually able to see the tiniest details of what I just saw but was now not looking at? Before I knew it, the most ordinary things—things I passed dozens of times before without noticing them—were interesting! But they were interesting as something already done and over with? Past tense. Like photographs. What was even more fun was the changeover from one snapshot to the next. The way it worked was like this. *You with me . . . ? I asked, are you with me? . . . Then picture this.* The stuff out there in front of me, in the windshield, is moving and blurred. The stuff inside me, in my brain, is sharp . . . a clear picture. *You got that? Alright.* Now, to keep the car on track, I had to grab and fix a pic out front, which bumped the pic inside, sort of like flipping pages in a photo album? Not bad, huh! And then it got even crazier. You see, I found that if I nudged the accelerator a bit, the game got, it got . . . Talk about speeding! Man, those pix were flapping by fast—so fast they were like . . . like a moving picture—or like those animations we had when we used to flip through stacks of cartoon drawings when we were kids? Then something whacko comes down. I begin to experience what is happening as something that has *already happened*? And the stuff inside starts to look like those old color negatives? And suddenly . . . it's like I'm in the back seat of the car which now feels like a huge head, with windshields for eyes, and I'm getting very small and very tight. The shriek of metal scraping against metal snapped me out of my picture show and made it possible for me to get control of the car before I turned *myself* into past tense. But while it lasted—and you're just gonna have to trust me on this—while it lasted that was one helluva thing!



In the world of a fly there's only fly things—and that goes for a whole lot more than flies. Did you hear about that experiment they did on snails? I said, “snails,” *es-car-got*? They went at the belly of a snail with a thin glass rod—tapping it, gently? While they were tapping it slow, say, one or two taps every second, the snail tried to hide. But when they cranked it up to, say, five,

ten taps a second, the snail got confused. He thought the tapping was a solid surface, and he tried to crawl on it? (Probably freaked him out when he found out he wasn't covering much ground. Tsssssss.) Don't that really get you, though? *What do you mean, "What-do-I-mean"?* I mean . . . when you flip a light switch on and off, you see a blinking light, right? But, when the blinks get real fast, like a super strobe, or like the flickering in a neon tube, or even like the light on a movie screen, the dark, the black, is gone and we see . . . just light. *Right? So, you see what I mean? . . . No, listen*—The same goes for sound. Your ear can't catch it, but there's spit and twitching lip muscle cracklin' around in the sweetest trumpet sound. Of course, with fancy equipment you can see and hear the stuff that your eyes and ears can't. But just because you don't have that equipment don't mean that stuff ain't there. No, sir! . . . And I tell you what gets me going. I say to myself, What if there is someone out there who was born with better equipment than what we've got? To him, you and me, we're no different from fuckin' snails trying to work our way up a bouncing glass rod. Stop and think about it. *No, seriously!* Maybe . . . maybe that's what God is . . . someone with the right equipment, someone who can see and hear and feel all the stuff we can't. Thinking about that really gets me goin'. Makes me feel a little sick in the stomach. Like I have to force myself to stop thinking or I'll puke . . . *What? Go ahead—take a leak. Oh, HEY—WE COULD USE SOME MORE POPCORN.* (Why do I even bother . . .)

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I have a niece that was born blind. Her name is Loretta. *No, on my father's side. In Forest Hills.* Once, when she was five, and I was babysitting her? I gave her a piece of clay and asked her to make something with it. She made a cherry. First, she pulled off a tiny piece and rolled it into a pit. Then, she pulled off a little more and wrapped it around the pit. Said that was the "juicy part." Then, she pounded a teensy piece of clay until it was thinner than paper, and she wrapped it around the juicy part. That, she said, was the skin. Then, she handed it all to me and asked me if it didn't look like the best cherry I ever ate. It looked like a ball of shit to me, but I told her she did a good job. (Poor kid.)

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I was never much for math in school. Geometry was OK, because that stuff about circles and squares was something I could hang on to. But algebra. . . ? Turned me around—just about did me in. I remember the first time we

had to work with infinity in an algebra equation? I asked my teacher, How is it possible to divide things by infinity if infinity is a number that goes on forever without end? She goes, Try not to think of infinity that way. Instead, think of it as a symbol of a number that exists, even if we don't know what it is. (. . . "a symbol of a number" . . . people actually say words like that!) I loved looking at the symbol for infinity, the lazy eight? I used to think there was no better way to show something that goes on forever without end than that lazy eight. But when it came to dividing numbers by something that goes on forever without end—or even worse, dividing unknown numbers like "x" or "y," I used to get these bad feelings. Really bad, like things around me were slowly changing size—only I wasn't? And while that was happening, if I closed my eyes I felt everything slip onto its side and skid into black and white bars, like bad reception on one of those old TV sets? It was like the whole world was breathing real slow, getting large . . . then small. And then the bars were there while my eyes were open. But it wasn't like a picture. It stuck to me like something wet, or like an odor that gets tangled up in the hairs of your nose? And it purred, like the deep body-sound of a motor getting louder and softer. It was everywhere, inside and outside . . . And then there was no inside or outside . . . And I had to, I had to . . . lie down. Algebra made me so whacko that the school nurse called my mother and asked her to bring me to a doctor for a medical examination. They put these tiny wires in my scalp and tested me for fits? Said I had a disease called *petit mal*, which means *little bad*. Little bad comes around when you're trying to divide a number by something that goes on forever without end . . . The treatment? No treatment. Just lie down 'til it passes. Besides when I'm doing algebra, I also feel little bad just before I come. *While fucking?* You know how when you fuck, something deep inside seems to get smaller and smaller and tighter and tighter until bango, you let go? Well, just when I get my very tightest and smallest, and I'm holding on for dear life, and I hear myself screaming but the sound is coming from someplace else, and I feel the tightness start to shake, like it's gonna let go all on its own? Well, at that exact second, when everything good and everything bad is on the point of a long hot needle working its way down the middle of my spine—that's when little bad reminds me that there's ways besides algebra to get reamed by a lazy eight . . . Little bad scares me, but I need to know—even though I can't always see it or hear it—that it's there, tucked away in the empty spaces, like . . . like an idea that I forgot a long time ago. *You know what I mean? Well, do you?* (It's hopeless.) . . . Sometimes . . . sometimes I think little bad is where you go when you die. You get there, finally, and for all time. For once you're sized right. You land on both feet, arms out, palms down. And it's quiet. (Maybe that's why people fuck. To cream

themselves . . .) *No, go ahead. Here, do me a favor, will you? On your way back bring me a cold one. And get one for yourself. [Glances at his watch.]* (It's early yet . . . [*laughs*] fuck me . . .) [*Blackout.*]



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