

The Third Law of Magic

By Ben Okri

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Thomas Prior

He spent the night making snow. He packed it tightly into balls of different sizes and stored them in the freezer to keep them stable.

For a long time, he had wanted to make something so simple and natural that no one would suspect concerted thinking had gone into it. He wanted the greatest possible concentration of thought along with the greatest possible efficiency in the execution of that thought.

He had come up with many ideas in the past. He would sell dirt. He would be a newspaper vendor, but the newspaper he sold would not exist. He would create one issue of the newspaper, make only 101 copies, and sell them. The stories in the newspaper would be outrageous, improbable, yet perfectly believable. He would insinuate, for example, that human beings were disappearing, and that more aliens existed among us than at any other time in history. The paper's events would make people doubt their reality or the reality of the society in which they lived. He would have an ad for a great dirt sale, giving the impression that people lined up every other week to buy dirt from different parts of the country. He would have another item about a 55-year-old flea, accompanied by a blown-up photograph, giving it a half-familiar, half-grotesque appearance, evoking both the art of William Blake and the largely credible pictures in *National Geographic*. But the more he considered such an elaborate scheme, the more he felt that its very elaborateness disqualified it from the true naturalness that authentic conception, raised to the status of art, must have.

He abandoned such baroque imaginings. He wanted something childlike. This made him think about childhood, about what's missing from it and how the city robs children of wonder. He wanted to be a dealer in wonders. But he wanted the wonders to be so ordinary that their very ordinariness would be inseparable from their power to astonish. He made a long list of the most ordinary things. He had done dirt. But dirt was not in itself wonderful. He had done flotsam, bottles, human hair. He had worked with the topography of body and skin, had imprinted the mythology of his color on paper. He had made his physical existence its own work of art. He had explored basketball and heights, had made art out of the dust of his favorite rough, urban streets. Using the detritus of society, he had explored the limits of the conceptual.

He now wanted something innocent. But the more you looked into that innocence, the more ambiguous and complex it became, until it encompassed everything he had been trying to say for most of his working life. Where was he going to find such a natural and transparent object? The object had to defeat thought while endlessly stimulating it. But the object also had to be at the center of an event that could never be duplicated, that had happened only once—and then vanished—and whose occurrence would be a rumor. He wanted an event that everyone could enter, but that only a few people would experience at the time it happened. So many possibilities to be contained in a single, simple object.

For years now, he had been going to a part of the city where people sold the most unexpected things. He often wandered the market in search of materials that the streets had yielded. He had discovered that the refuse, the mountains of rubbish the city disposed of every day, was his most precious resource. It was more valuable to him than expensive works of art, created with expensive materials and costly assistants.

At the beginning of his wanderings, he was amazed by what people threw away. He had found perfectly functioning computers and television sets, radios and microwaves. He had unearthed paintings and posters from famous exhibitions, brochures from art galleries, papers from law firms, the complete 1922 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and books of every conceivable quality. He had rescued old Ornette Coleman records and an incomplete set of the tales of Chester Himes. He had uncovered maps and diaries and tap-dance shoes; evening dresses and top hats and a new pair of suspenders. He had found these among the garbage, the mess of decomposing vegetables and foul garnishes, the broken eggshells and the drool of yogurt and other mucuslike substances. He had dug out reams of government documentation about plans to restrict immigration, had marveled at the abandoned notes of a private detective and love letters that had been thrown away when that love had irrevocably died.

He had become a specialist in scouring the city's waste. He had a warehouse on the outskirts where he stored all that he found. On some evenings he went around with a large shopping cart stacked with everything he had collected. People always took him for a regular tramp, or for one of the mentally disturbed who ransacked trash cans and pushed their loaded carts around the city all night.

It was in the course of his wanderings that he had discovered this informal market where folks sold the most outlandish things. On his first visit, he was astonished to find a lean, toothless man selling false teeth. Rows of them were laid out on a makeshift table. He had teeth for children and for women. He had a full row of dog and horse teeth. Next to him, another man sold eyepieces. On a table he displayed monocles and strange wire eyeglasses. He even had glass eyes. Some were large, some small, and almost all of them blue. Not far from him, a man sold oddly shaped mangoes from South America alongside huge, bulbous avocados. Behind him someone sold clothes for giants. Next to him, another sold baby shoes.

He watched them and went among them. He bought a glass eye and had a chat with the man who sold false teeth.

"What's your name?"

"Joe."

"How long you been here?"

"Today?"

"No, selling here."

"Couple of months."

"Sell well?"

“We do all right.”

“I’m looking to sell stuff.”

“Yeah, what d’you sell?”

“Dirt.”

“Real dirt?”

“Real dirt.”

“Hey, Nathan. Come over. This guy sells dirt.”

Nathan came over. He was the one who sold baby shoes.

“You sell dirt?”

“Yeah. Where do you find your baby shoes?”

“In the bins. Where do you find your dirt?”

“In the streets.”

“Good one. You don’t have to rob no one for dirt, do you?”

“Guess not.”

“Come sell here,” said Joe, the false-teeth man.

“Yeah?”

“Every other Sunday. You just set yourself up and that’s it. You mind your business, we mind ours.”

“That simple, yeah?”

“That simple.”

“Great. I’ll come by.”

“Can’t wait to see your dirt.”

He went there every other Sunday for the next three months. He never sold anything; he just went to hang out with the oddball traders. He wore a coarse coat with an ascot and beat-up shoes. Half tramp, half jazzman. He could be either, depending on who was looking at him. He got used to the rough humor of the traders and they got used to his sly, elusive ways.

“When you going to start selling dirt?” said the false-teeth man.

“When the weather’s right.”

“There’s a blizzard coming. You better start collecting dirt now or you won’t be able to find it. You know how the city gets covered when it snows.”

“Dirt man here’s got to find the right kind of dirt, yeah?” said baby shoes. “That must be hard.”

The traders laughed. He laughed wryly with them.

“Right kind of dirt is the hardest thing in the world to find. Harder than finding gold.”

“How hard can it be to find the right kind of dirt?” asked baby shoes.

“Takes the right kind of eyes. And that ain’t common.”

“It sure ain’t,” said baby shoes, and they all roared again with laughter.

Two days before the next market day, a thick blanket of snow covered the city, its cars and skyscrapers, its fields and lampposts. At home, he watched the snow coming down. He went for a walk and saw the city under a pall—under a spell—of whiteness. *What if snow were black?* he thought. *Now that would be something.* When snow fell, it would be like night raining down. The houses and the trees and the cars and the roads would be covered in blackness. They’d be singing of a black Christmas. They’d make black snowmen. It would create a different mythology. He mused on this as he wandered the city. The sidewalks were under sheets of snow. *Winter kept us warm.* He watched children in a nearby field throwing snowballs at one another. A fist-size snowball missed its target and whacked him in the chest. The kids were scared by what they’d done and ran off laughing and screaming, imagining that he was after them. He picked up the broken ball of snow and repacked it and took it home with him, still musing. *Covering Earth in forgetful snow.*

At home he made two phone calls. The people who received the calls were puzzled by his instructions. One was to bring a camera to a certain place at a certain time.

“Do not talk to me like you know me. Just take pictures. Be as inconspicuous as possible. Blend in. Don’t be like a goddamn tabloid photographer. You were just going past and you saw something that caught your eye and you took pictures of it and then you moved on.”

“Is that it?” said the photographer.

“Pretty much.”

“What’s it about?”

“You don’t need to know. Better if you don’t know. Just be there.”

And to the other caller he said:

“You free on that day?”

“Yeah, sure. What’s it about?”

“Just show up. Don’t act like you know me. Buy something. Stick around for a bit. Then move on.”

“Up to your stuff again?”

“Something like that.”

“One day you’re going to get into trouble pulling stunts.”

“If life ain’t trouble, what’s the point of it?”

They laughed and he put the phone down. He sat by the window and watched the snow falling. He tried to make out a single flake as it formed, and then he tried to follow the downward trajectory. The flakes were like cataracts falling over the eye. He watched the forms the snow made of the stationary cars. Some of them looked like giant hats in the street. He thought about snow: It’s all in there. All the contradiction’s in there. Is it one thing or another? Is it the sky’s fault that snow is white? The whiteness of the whale. How much should a snowflake cost? If nature were selling snow, how much would we need to spend to decorate the whole city with it, how much for the bridal garment of the cathedral, how much for the mantle on the Statue of Liberty? If a gram of snow were the same price as a gram of gold, how much would it cost us to deck the city in splendor? Gone are the snows of yesteryear. Everyone has a memory of snow. Most enchanting thing in the world. The priceless marvel that falls without a sound. Stilling the city and making silence audible. Not the snowmen that melt and, before they vanish, turn ugly and lumpish; not the curves of snow on church domes and telegraph wires, but maybe the way the heart jumps with delight when you step out in the dark or in the morning into the soft miracle of its revelation as it changes the visible world into an innocent paradise that children love.

Can’t put a price on it. How do you put a price on that compression of the sky? Then it melts and is gone, an evanescent memory, fragile like beauty, leaving its midway state and returning to one of the primal elements. Too precious for art. Put it in an art gallery or a museum, and it makes no sense. Exposes the fraudulence of making and pricing. A little piece of transcendence and ephemerality, all in a little flake, the pollen of winter. What complexity is contained in it—commerce, class, race, design, spirituality, fragility, tenderness, childhood, nature, surprise, wonder. Neither ice nor water; part air, part dream.

Spirit substance. Black kids in the snow. That indefinable happiness in which the history of the brutalization of bodies is dissolved. Snow equalizes the heart. Perhaps the only truly democratic thing in this divided republic. Life, liberty, and the perfection of snow.

He left the window.

“I got my next thing,” he said to his wife, in the bedroom.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“It’s going to happen and no one will see it. Then it will be a rumor. Then there will be these bits of evidence that it took place. Not a single curator, gallery owner, or museum director will be anywhere near it. Only kids and passersby, the poor, the simple, people who don’t look at art and don’t give a fuck what it is. It will be the most democratic show in the country. It will take place under a bridge, near hoboes and dropouts, drug dealers and tramps. No one will know they are looking at it. Because it will be something so simple and ordinary that it will look like everything else, except for a few tiny details. Then it will be over, as if it had never happened.

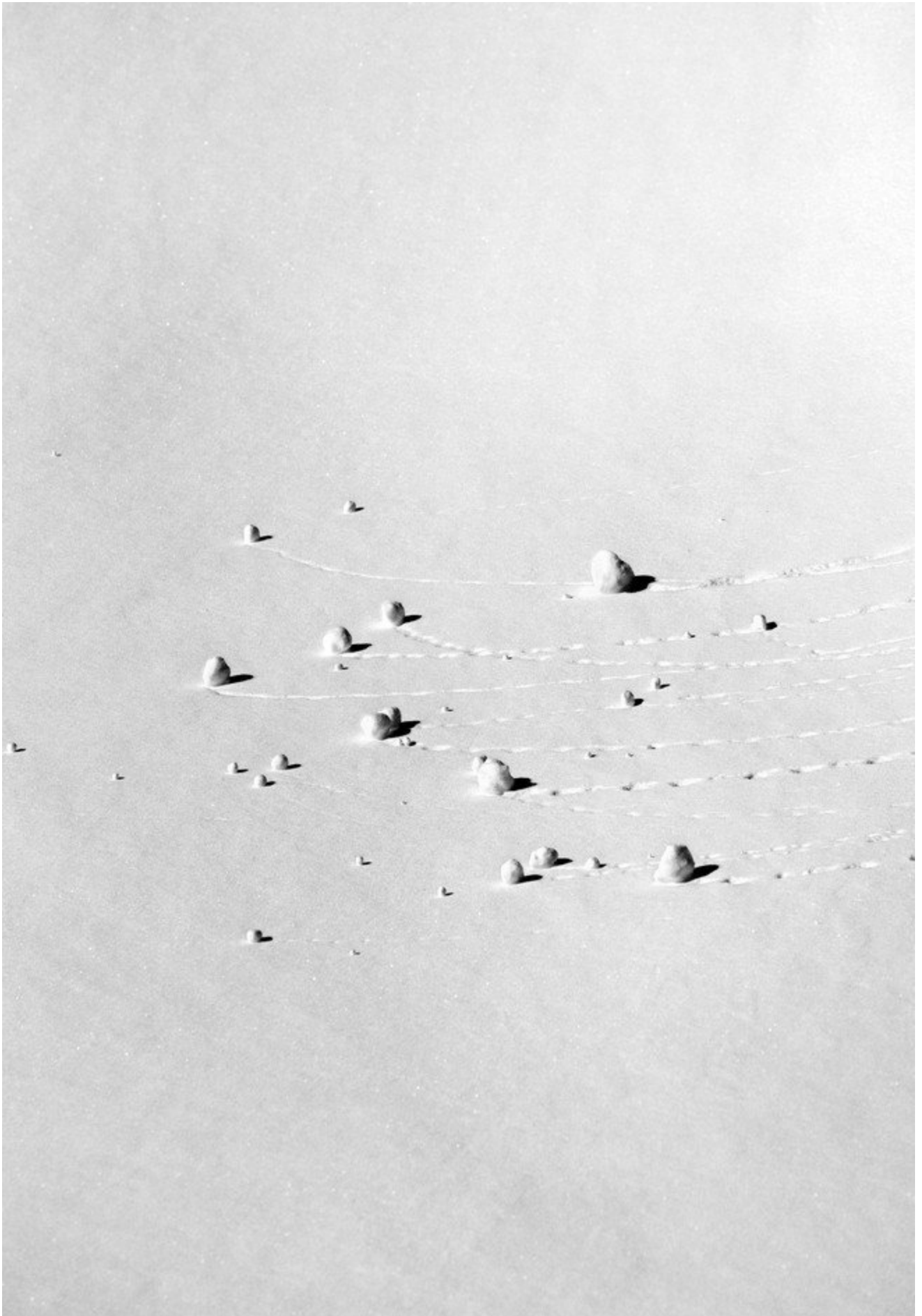
“Afterwards, 20 times more people than were there will claim to have been there. What is nothing will become something, and it will become more something with the passing of years, as the event itself fades into oblivion and becomes either a myth or nothing. The years will pass and everything will become old, but this thing that may or may not have happened will become more real and at the same time more strange.

“I always wanted to do something that will work with the passing of time itself, and I think I’ve found a way. It’s going to be about everything and nothing. It’s going to be about whatever you want it to be about. And yet no one’s going to be able to lay a finger on it. It’ll be like snowflakes, evanescent; and like dreaming, persistent; and like a stone wall, tangible.”

The wife stuck her head out from the bedroom.

“How you going to do all that?”

But he didn’t reply, because he was watching the dance of snowflakes falling onto the black streets.



Days later, on a cold Sunday when the snow had stopped falling, people walking past the market under the bridge saw something they had never seen before. They saw the regular sellers of false teeth and baby shoes and clothes for giants. But they also saw a stall where snowballs were laid out on a Moroccan patterned rug of red and orange and blue. The larger ones were at the top, and in a descending scale of size, the smaller ones were lower down. The smallest ones were quite tiny, the size of a wren's egg, but perfectly white and perfectly round. The snowballs formed their own immaculate pattern against the Moroccan arabesques. At the back of the stall, hovering over the display, was a man in a dark-brown jacket and dark trousers, with a natty ascot and a rimless dark hat. At first glance he looked like a bum. But when you looked at him again, you noticed a certain secret care about his attire. He was talking to the false-teeth trader, and they seemed to be laughing lightly at some joke.

Many people went past and could not entirely compute what they were seeing. Some were not sure that they had seen what they had seen. They doubled back to get another look. Then they scratched their heads. A man with a whiskey bottle came by, saw the display, and stopped.

“You selling these?”

“It's why I'm here.”

“But I could make these myself,” said the man with the whiskey bottle.

“You think?”

The whiskey man stared at the rows of snowballs and blinked as if he were not seeing right and then staggered away. He paused at the false-teeth stall and bought a pair. Then he went off singing something that resembled a sea shanty.

A moment later another man came along, and when he saw the rows of snowballs, he began to laugh.

“Only in America,” he said, between laughs. “You selling these for real?”

“For real.”

“How much?”

The price of the snowballs rose with their size, he was told. The smallest was 50 cents and the largest was \$1.

“A dollar for a snowball?”

“Cheap at the price.”

The man stared at the pristine rows of snowballs and then at the trader and back at the white rows. He sensed a profound incongruity between the whiteness of the snowballs and the haziness of the trader, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

“You some kind of magician or something?”

“Got to be to stay alive, right?”

The prospective client laughed again. He couldn't control his laughter. He found the whole setup funny but couldn't say why. The trader watched him, his back against the wall of the run-down bridge.

“This is just the best jive I ever seen. If I buy one, it gon' disappear or something?”

“You pay your money, you takes your chances,” the trader said.

The man lingered, unable to leave and unable to commit to a purchase.

“You into some kind of scam here and I just can't see what it is. You sold any of these already?”

“I done all right,” came the reply.

While he hung around, a woman wheeling her son in a stroller saw the snowballs and stopped. The man sloped off.

“Can I have a snowball, Mommy?” the boy said.

“It depends on if this gentleman is selling them, honey,” she said to the air generally. But she maneuvered the stroller to the front of the stall and looked at the smiling face of the trader.

“That's a bright boy you got there,” he said, not coming forward, his smile going on ahead.

“They are magic!” the boy said. “I want one. Can I have one, Mommy?”

“Are you selling these snowballs?”

“That's why I'm here.”

“Did you make them yourself?”

“I think God did, but I lined them up.”

“So pretty. Never seen snowballs look so pretty before.”

“Can I have one, Mom?”

The trader came forward. He looked at the kid, who was sitting in his buggy like a little emperor. Then he said: “Which one would you like?”

“A small one. That one,” the boy said, pointing to the lower line of snowballs, to the tiny ones like wrens’ eggs. The man reached down and picked out the snowball indicated, as well as a big one from the top, and gave them to the boy, who breathed out a cry of wonder.

At that moment, a camera clicked.

“They’re real, Mom. They’re real snowballs.”

“How much are those?” the mother asked.

“On the house, ma’am, on the house.”

“Oh, you are a gentleman.”

“I’m sure you’ll do the same thing for my kid.”

The woman, looking at the trader, reddened and was momentarily flustered. She wheeled the stroller around and began to walk away. But then she stopped and came back and stood gazing at the snowballs. The camera clicked again.

“They are just the prettiest things, and the rows of them are just so funny. Made my day, sir. You made my day.”

The trader nodded. Joe, seeing the interest around the snow stall, came over.

“Ma’am, can I interest you in a new set of teeth?”

But the transition from snowballs to false teeth was perhaps a little too bold for her, and she took off into the streets, looking back from time to time at the gleaming rows of snowballs on the patterned rug.

Many people stopped, drawn by the mysterious and orderly form of the snowballs at the stall. Some came to banter, some came to test their wits, some came with cracks about capitalism. Another man saw the perfect rows of whiteness and couldn’t stop laughing. He meant to ask a question about how much they cost, but something about the setup seemed so hilarious to him that he just laughed and laughed and came close to choking. The trader had to come around the stall and pat him on the back ’til he calmed down and wiped the tears of laughter from his cracked, life-beaten face. When he laughed, he showed no upper teeth, and false-teeth man sold him a set at a knockdown price. The man was still laughing in the distance and saying something about always reinventing the dream, brother.

Later, another man showed up. It seemed he was a lawyer from upstate and was in the big city for a conference. He had gone on a stroll and his feet had led him here; he took the snowball display very seriously and began haggling for the price of a middle-size ball. He was thinking of bringing it back home to his son, who he was sure would love it. Only he wanted to know if it would keep.

“Put it in a fridge soon as you get back to your hotel. They’re packed pretty tight so they’ll hold for a while, so long as you’re not planning a trip to the Mojave Desert,” said the snow trader.

The lawyer was very excited by this unusual purchase and took out his wallet.

“I knew you guys were pretty wacky in the city, but this is the wackiest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

And all the while, the camera was clicking. No one really noticed the photographer, because he didn’t look the part. He blended in a short distance away and could be taken for a curious tourist, from the Middle East perhaps, someone overawed by the mesmerizing things the great city had to offer those with an eye for its quotidian oddities.

The lawyer went off, chuckling to himself, with his wrapped-up snowball. He didn’t look back to see that the rows of whiteness on the resplendent rug had almost magically replenished themselves, so that they were again a perfect pattern of serial globes. Young women came by in their winter coats and their mufflers and their impeccable gloves. They couldn’t stop giggling at the cuteness of the row of small snowballs. They looked at the trader shyly, and he asked where they were from and engaged them mildly and carefully, tossing at them the occasional *mot juste*, or a throwaway line with a salty turn of wit, which they didn’t quite catch. They debated among themselves whether the snowballs would make a perfect birthday present for a friend and speculated about his reaction. While they pondered, someone else came by who was surprised to see the seller of snowballs and began to let out a cry of astonishment. The strange, severe look on the trader’s face stopped him in his playfully caustic greeting.

“What’s up, brother?”

“Just go away, or behave like you don’t know me,” whispered the snow seller in a fierce undertone.

“Oh, all right, I get it,” said the newcomer, clearly an acquaintance.

But he didn’t leave, sensing intrigue and a story, sensing that, with his usual good timing and excellent luck, he had stumbled on something, maybe a scoop, maybe just a good old tale to tell the folks. And so he lingered and examined the serial snowball display with the gravity of

a connoisseur, dwelling on each detail. He asked the women, who were still debating, if they had a magnifying glass. They said they didn't and, giggling again, wandered away.

"This ain't a museum," the seller of snow said. "Move on, or I'm closing the stall."

The old friend stood up.

"Okay, keep your stone hair on. I'll push off, but that's dinner you owe me."

"Call you next week."

"Can't wait."

He left, walking in a lopsided way, as if he were conscious of being watched, which he was, by the snowball seller. The old friend made a backward gesture, a half wave, before disappearing round a corner. The snow seller called to Joe.

"You got the time?"

Joe shouted it across.

"You thinking of packing up already?"

"I'll give it another half hour."

"Getting too hot for your snowballs?" Joe said, laughing and rubbing his palms together to warm them.

"Sometimes the wrong people show up."

"Hazards of the trade, my man. The other day my ex-wife turned up. Offered to give her some of these here teeth instead of monthly maintenance. She didn't want 'em."

"Can't say I blame her."

"Put me right off my stride. Knocked the wind out of me, her turning up like that."

"Like you say, hazards of the trade."

"Ain't that right."

A beautiful young woman arrived and stood in front of the snowball stall. With a solemn expression, she studied the glistening rows of snowballs. She seemed mesmerized, lost in a faraway musing. The depth of her absorption made her look even more beautiful. She stood there silently for a long time. The camera clicked discreetly. The seller of snowballs did not interrupt the young lady's musings. With a half smile, he looked away and took his mind off her. *Some things are just perfect if you let them be*, he thought. *Sometimes a moment is the*

ideal image of life. You couldn't improve it if you had a thousand years. The camera worked unobtrusively. The seller of snowballs let his eyes wander over the city's skyline. The rooftops were edged with snow. All of the boundaries were blurred. The snow linked things that seemed separate. It was falling now, flakes in pirouettes, bringing silence. It was time to make the show disappear. *Our revels now are ended.* The real magic begins when things disappear. It begins with erasure, with absence. The snowfall was obliterating the city, anonymizing its uniqueness. But the true enchantment is when from death things begin to return, long after people knew of their existence. You have to get people to know that something once happened, that it once existed, before you can make them know that it can never happen again, that it is lost in time forever. Lost in time, but resurrected in myth, or rumor, or stories.

“Joe,” he said, “it’s been nice knowing you.”

“You make it sound like a valediction.”

“For a man who sells false teeth, you sure got one hell of a vocabulary.”

The young lady smiled, and asked how much the snowballs cost, just as he began dismantling the show.

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