

SEVERAL
PERCEPTIONS

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By *Angela Carter*

Fiction

Shadow Dance

The Magic Toyshop

Several Perceptions

Heroes and Villains

Love

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

The Passion of New Eve

Black Venus's Tale

Nights at the Circus

Wise Children

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Non-fiction

The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History

Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings

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MODERN CLASSICS
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Angela Carter

Angela Carter (1940–1992) was born in Eastbourne and brought up in south Yorkshire. One of Britain's most original and disturbing writers, she read English at Bristol University and wrote her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, in 1965. *The Magic Toyshop* won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1969 and *Several Perceptions* won the Somerset Maugham Prize in 1968. More novels followed and in 1974 her translation of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault was published, and in the early nineties she edited the *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (2 vols). Her journalism appeared in almost every major publication; a collection of the best of these were published by Virago in *Nothing Sacred* (1982). She also wrote poetry and a film script together with Neil Jordan of her story 'The Company of Wolves'. Her last novel, *Wise Children*, was published to widespread acclaim in 1991. Angela Carter's death at age fifty-one in February 1992 'robbed the English literary scene of one of its most vivacious and compelling voices' (*Independent*).

'The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.'

David Hume

I

Joseph was very poor at this time as he was giving all his money to beggars. One day, walking across the Down, he recognized an old man whom he knew who stood beneath a tree beside the Obelisk. This old man was small and slight. His snuff-encrusted, once brown, now buff, napless, styleless, ageless overcoat was straight and narrow as the path of righteousness. The tugged-down brim of his cap jutted like caves protecting the eroded sandcastle of his face from the furious elements that might otherwise wash it away completely. Grave-clothes small-clothes flapped around his legs like small, brown dogs, clearing his ankles by enough inches to reveal a purplish stretch of plucked fowl skin atop his old-fashioned boots, which were secured by several turns of string. All was gilded with visionary sunset light and the little old man appeared irradiated and just dropped from heaven. He was playing an imaginary fiddle as Joseph had seen him do before. Raptly he serenaded the tree, which dropped leaves on his head from time to time as if tossing contemptuous pennies. Beneath his feet, moist autumn grass blandly gleamed.

Joseph went up and stood beside him but the old man, only able to see invisible music, never noticed the young one. The

veins on his hand stood out in whorled ropes as it flourished an imaginary bow. His other hand performed the fingering, his knotted fingers quivered like the wings of a humming bird, which flutter four thousand times a minute. He hummed a tune and beat out time with his left foot. It was hard to believe no fiddle existed. Old Sunny.

The pupils of Sunny's wet, round, hazel eyes were distinctly rimmed with grey and there was always a peevish redness about them, as if he were angry at being so old. He descended on the public houses like an ancient mariner questing a pliant wedding guest; his albatross was his great age and fascinating experiences as professional musician and man of the world, Sunny Bannister, a song, a smile, a melody, troubadour of mirth; Joseph had seen the old bills and programmes he always carried around with him folded up in his wallet. But he lied all the time; it was hard to tell where the lies ended and the truth began, or whether or not the press cuttings belonged to another person and old Sunny was not old Sunny at all but only pretending.

Three small children played near by with a rubber ball. They wore cheerful jerseys of blue and yellow wool and their sweet, shrill voices fizzed and sputtered like sherbet. Sunny once told Joseph how, when he was a child, all the nippers used to dance like Little Tich, stuffing the toes of their socks with paper to imitate Little Tich's long, pointy shoes. Now he was old and the children ignored him but he was still not much taller than a child of ten or eleven. Joseph stood close enough to him to catch a whiff of wintergreen; Sunny smelled of wintergreen by day but by night richly overlaid it with glucose stout. Joseph watched the old man's hands until he felt almost about to enter Sunny's dimension and would soon begin to hear the tune and see the fiddle grow in the air; Joseph was very tired and in a curiously disembodied state of mind, now and then glimpsing

immense cracks in the structure of the real world. He rarely had a full night's sleep, since he was tormented with dreams.

This was one of his dreams. It was spring and he was walking in a formal garden. Tulips and children's heads were arranged like apples on a shelf in a store, in neat rows. The tulips swayed and the children smiled with red mouths. Innocent sunlight shone on everything. Along came a man in heavy boots and trampled down the flowerbed, both tulips and children; juicy stalks and fragile bones went snap. Blood and sap spurted on all sides. Joseph flung himself on the man and tried to choke him or gouge out his eyes but his hands made no impression for his body was, in the dream, insubstantial as smoke. When the last child's head was irrevocably smashed, the murderer turned his face to Joseph and Joseph realized he was looking at his own face. Then he woke up and broke his mirror so it would never tell the truth again, if it had ever told the truth before.

Joseph's eyes blurred with the poignancy of the light; everything starrily shone. He was on his way home from an extra spell of duty on the ward, his nostrils still full of mixed smells of excrement and Dettol, the textures of death still masking his hands. He leaned against the Obelisk, which was modest in size as Obelisks go, a memorial to a hero of the Nile shot beneath hotter suns. The Obelisk cast a touching small shadow across the grass, where shed leaves already rustled. The café on the corner twenty yards beyond the Down roasted its own coffee; this delicious, expensive, middle-class perfume curled seductively around Joseph like the memory of the girl Charlotte, with whom he associated it. It was not a scent he was accustomed to. In Brazil, home of much of the world's coffee, engines sometimes burned coffee beans for fuel rather than wood or coal when there was a coffee glut, another fascinating fact; Joseph ceaselessly grubbed out facts such as these if they might help to shore up the crumbling dome of the world.

The sun fell warm as gloves upon his slender, elegant hands which, an hour before, washed the last stains of mortality off a poor, dead old man and laid him out; although Joseph was working as a hospital orderly he retained a certain illegitimate intellectual status and could still construct a truth table, an elementary procedure in the study of logic. Nevertheless, he could not now remember whether Charlotte left him because he had failed all his examinations or if he had not bothered to attend any of the examinations anyway. He used to go into the library and feel like Goering to see so many books; he even set light to several, amongst them *Mansfield Park* and the Gospel according to St John, to both of which he had taken a particular hate. 'This is the time of the barbarians,' said Joseph, a typical barbarian, kneeling on the floor of the alcove where the dictionaries were kept and burning books with matches, applying the flame and watching with fierce joy as each page trembled and blackened; then he chalked upon a near-by wall the following slogan: SUPPORT YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSASSIN and went home to screw Charlotte.

Charlotte studied English literature; she composed endless essays concerning Jane Austen's moral universe whilst Joseph sat with a fey grin on his face contemplating new bizarre and ingenious methods of sexual intercourse, his only creative activity during this period of University life. Joseph had the chance of a fine education but threw it away; he had free choice on the self-service counter and voluntarily selected shit, old men dying, pus and, worse of all, most dreaded of encounters, the sweet, blue gangrene. None of which featured in Jane Austen's moral universe nor could be stylized as a truth table, alas. He toiled under a gangrene sky. 'The trivial round, the common task, would furnish all we ought to ask.' Every minute of the lonely nights was filled with dreams of fires quenched with blood and

bloody beaks of birds of prey and bombs blossoming like roses with bloody petals over the Mekong Delta.

Joseph dreamed he was a child walking home from the Wolf Cubs down an ordinary street of privet hedges and clean milk bottles put out for the night under a fat, white moon but soon he realized a maniac with a knife was following him. The pace of the dream quickened; the child who was himself scurried and panted, quaking with terror, but the pursuer was relentless as the clock and gained on him; in and out of the shadows they went, in and out of moonlight. The blade of the knife flashed and Joseph saw the maniac's face was his own, himself. Mad for sanctuary, Joseph the child burst through a front gate and beat his fists on the nearest door. Which was immediately opened by himself again, smiling a long, narrow, wolfish smile as cruel as the knife he, also, carried.

Joseph was always surprised, in dreams as in the mirror before he broke it, to see his wary, sallow, ill-looking ferociously private face; was the mirror deceiving him or was he, in fact, dreaming about some other person and not himself at all, some comparative stranger from whom he had rented this secret face out of the Jacobean drama, Flaminco or De Flores, ambiguous villains. Yet his actual physical self, his flesh and bone, often seemed to him no more than an arbitrary piece of theorizing, a random collection of impulses hurtling through a void. Or else eyes without a face, eyes with behind them only a screaming tangle of raw nerves. Or (in certain ferocious moods of self-disgust) a big, fat, soft, stupid, paper Valentine heart squeezing out a soggy tear at the sorrows of the world.

He was often as sad, hopeless and full of baffled murderous thoughts as some animal in a very small cage. Once he went to the zoo and identified strongly with the badger. 'This animal bites'; who would have thought it, he was so furry. The badger

was beautiful, wild and innocent but had apparently gone out of its mind for it ran ceaselessly round and round its tiny wire enclosure making small desperate whimpering noises from time to time. Joseph squatted in front of its cage for three hours watching it anxiously but in all this time the badger never took a rest. Round and round and round.

At last a keeper came up to Joseph and told him they were locking the zoo for the night. Joseph, unaware of the passing of time, explained: 'I'm watching the badger,' thinking perhaps the keeper might let him stay a while longer. 'Why is that?' asked the keeper. Round and round and round ran the badger, whining. 'To see if it disappears up its own asshole!' cried Joseph, stung to white-hot fury by the keeper's insensitivity. On the other hand, he felt no sympathy for the smug gorillas, at the best of times nothing but self-satisfied exhibitionists, nor the big cats who rotted fatly in their pens at ease as if in love with captivity. The black panther, for instance, had given away so much of its self-respect it now resembled nothing so much as an overstuffed sofa badly upholstered in rusty plush. But the badger continued to whicker: 'No surrender!' and after all these years still searched for a way out although Joseph could no longer go and see him as things with the keeper went from bad to worse. He could not remember how it happened but an ugly scuffle occurred and now Joseph was not allowed in the zoo at all.

However, 'while there's life, there's hope'; Joseph was still keeping up appearances, still clean and shaven, still tidily if shabbily dressed. He was twenty-two years old and lived with a white cat, a handsome and prolific she. Once a year, at Christmas, he hitch-hiked home to make the gestures of affection although he went in fear and trembling; he could not remember when his parents' house first began to menace him.

His father was a newsagent and tobacconist who worked hard

all his life. His mother was just an ordinary housewife who worked hard all her life. At home he sat in an uneasy chair urging the plaster ducks to try and fly across the wall. There was a tooled leather *TV Times* cover and a brass Dutch girl concealing fire-irons in the hollow of her back. These things seemed wholly threatening; the leather cover was a ravenous mouth smacking brown lips and the Dutch girl must use her little brushes and shovels as cruel weapons since there was no other use for them; the room was heated by electricity. His bewildered father surveyed a son who was hardly there at all and said from time to time: 'But we've always done the best for you, I can't understand it,' while his mother, with the odour of roasting turkey caught in the springes of her hair, remonstrated: 'Don't go on at the boy, Father, after all, it's Christmas.' Would the sizzling bird flutter out of the oven if it could, even if its heart were gone, replaced by forcemeat, nor any head left, either. Maybe it would, if he furtively opened the oven door and muttered: '*Sauve qui peut.*'

But Joseph knew it was too late to save himself from shipwreck, though, so far, from day to day he managed to survive, hanging on to daily images of pain and fear at the hospital for some kind of daily bread. His own acts of patience and gentleness with the old men in their extremity seemed the only real things he did; cleaning the dying and laying out the dead were acts of profound innocence and even love and all the diabolical horseplay, the filth and indignity surrounding death also seemed a black kind of innocence. And there were moments of sweet peace, as on the Down, leaning against the warm stone, watching the aged musician caught in the solid honey afternoon light like a fly in an amber of eternity. The granite surface of the Obelisk stood out in golden grains like rare bark of gold where it caught the sunlight and the children laughed and played. Oblivious to everything outside the rectilinear parallelogram of

his overcoat, Sunny played sweet inaudible tunes in extra-dimensional opera houses and Albert Halls of the imagination.

*Such, such were the joys
When we all, girls and boys,
In our youth time were seen
On the Echoing Green.*

Joseph was so tired he closed his eyes for a moment and might have gone to sleep like Napoleon standing up but immediately there arose a terrible storm and clamour of shouting and abuse, Sunny's cracked old voice swearing horribly and calling down terrible vengeance upon the little children; the shell of calm which had contained them all was shockingly broken.

The children's ball must have hit Sunny. It was already too late to tell whether this had happened accidentally or on purpose but, however it occurred, it knocked off his rarely-doffed cap, and a huge dog, sprung up from nowhere, had seized the cap between its teeth. It ran round and round Sunny in circles, wagging its tail; it had the best of intentions and wanted to organize a game of some kind, perhaps. It was a tall, brindled, square, broad-shouldered dog built like a fur tank, about half the whole size of Sunny, with big cocked ears like the paper tricorns in which Joseph's father served two ounces of sweets. Sunny, rudely jolted from a dream of music, lunged after the dog with forlorn cries but the dog always escaped. The imaginary fiddle was dropped, broken or lost. The absent cap revealed a thick mop of iron-grey hair on Sunny's head; Joseph was surprised as he had guessed Sunny to be existentially bald beneath it. The three children abandoned their ball and leapt about in glee, shouting.

Joseph stepped forward to rescue the cap but the dog loved fun and, unwilling to stop, turned tail and fled at a great rate, still

clenching its teeth in the cap, and Sunny stumbled after, swearing, and the children went off dancing round them. So away they went and Joseph, left alone, faced with a simple moral situation, dodged it, as he knew, to his shame, he would.

He knew very well he was not going to follow the travelling circus, snatch back old Sunny's cap and return it to him; he was not going to perform this simple act of comfort for an old man because a miserable anger filled him with weary boredom. An empathetic little wind, chilly with winter, ruffled the grass and pulled down some handfuls of leaves. He shivered in his threadbare coat. He wanted to vanish, sleep, fade. Braving dreams, down into the black rabbit hole or hole of Calcutta of sleep; yet, in the cold wind, he knew he would not survive much longer, the current took him nearer and nearer to rocks with teeth like sharks. So he left the green edge of the Down and went home.

It was a once-handsome, now decayed district with a few relics of former affluence (such as the coffee shop, a suave place) but now mostly given over to old people who had come down in the world, who lived in basements and ground floor backs, and students and beatniks who nested in attics.

All the old people seemed to be out taking the air this afternoon. Everywhere Joseph looked, he saw old people with sticks and bulging veins in their legs and skulls from which the flesh of their faces hung in tattered webs; they advanced slowly as if this might be their very last walk. A man with a metal hook instead of a hand passed by and then a hunchbacked woman.

Many of the shops were boarded up, to let, or sold second-hand clothes, or had become betting shops but, nevertheless, this street had once been the shopping promenade of a famous spa and still swooped in a sinuous neo-classic arc from the Down. Plaster mouldings of urns and garlands decorated upper storeys of rusticated stone and rosy brick where tufts of weeds and grass

sprouted from every cranny and broken windows were roughly patched with cardboard, if at all. The pavements were spattered green and white with droppings of fat pigeons who strutted among the maimed and old as smugly as if the district had not seen the last of its good times long ago.

Up this vista came a striking couple, mysterious Beverley Kyte and the plump Rosie, giggling in soft, geisha voices and tinkling the bells of the bicycles on which they rode. Beverley Kyte was always called Kay by his friends; he possessed a deceptive appearance of extreme youth and was scarcely any taller than Old Sunny. He wore Levi jeans and jacket weathered to the beautiful blue of very old and often handled five pound notes. On his head he wore a khaki forage cap and golden ear-rings glinted in his ears. The rest of his outfit comprised: a flannel shirt, lacking a collar, probably bought at or stolen from a jumble sale then dyed a cheerful orange in the communal spaghetti saucepan; green round wire-rimmed sunglasses; dirty white plimsolls; and a blue enamel St Christopher medallion round his neck, together with a doorkey on a piece of string and an iron cross. Somehow he gave the appearance of being in costume, like a little Superhero, maybe Mini Man or Mighty Moppet biking off to a meeting of Teen Titans.

Joseph knew the name of his companion because she often wore a teeshirt with the name ROSIE stencilled unevenly on it in black; today she wore a teeshirt printed with the legend: CANADIAN NECKING TEAM. She also wore jeans and a broad-brimmed hat of battered black felt. She was small with apple cheeks, long black curls and a dreamy expression. She and Kay swerved about in the roadway, tinkling and giggling; motorists hooted and shook their fists. Kay was starting a moustache, there was a vague sepia shadow on his upper lip.

Kay had this peculiarity, he always looked entirely content.

This often seemed to Joseph a personal affront, especially when he saw him unexpectedly. He never spoke to Kay; even in the old days when Joseph was more extrovert and went to parties, the sight of Kay and his little retinue of friends and hangers-on laughing and smiling together was enough to plunge him in gloom and he would think with distress of the habits of kytes, fierce birds of prey. He had never attended any of the Dionysiac revels Kay held in the shabby mansion where he lived, a great Georgian palace friable with worm and rot.

This house was the mausoleum Kay's dying mother had created for herself, full of tatty splendours. A footlights favourite of the 1930s, the world she knew was shot down in flames in 1940, although her husband, Mr Kyte the fighter pilot, was not himself shot down until 1945. There was some money somewhere, some investments, a pension. A veteran of numerous forlorn hopes such as art school and the catering trade, Kay was now content to live at ease among theatrical relics, sell a little pot from time to time and keep open house for friends who came and went like ships that pass in the night.

Meanwhile, Mrs Kyte died a little further, a few more inches, each year, swimming so deeply in drugs she did not know one year from another; but Kay always looked as happy as Larry and dressed up in fancy rags and rode around on a silver-painted bicycle accompanied by his fat, compliant bird. The sweet tintinnabulation of bicycle bells shimmered into the golden haze of distance, it was like the sound of happiness. Joseph, in shreds of darkness, bowing his head beneath many of the troubles of the world, thought of wounds opening like rosy mouths.

And there was nothing to do but walk down this street of hard, menacing angularities and brutal forms. He passed fresh carcasses in butcher's windows and displays of knives. When he came to the fishmonger's shop, he remembered there was no