

"...two solitary strollers did not for a moment think on coincidence, that unswum stream lingering at a man's elbow with every crowd in every town."

--The Picasso Summer, Ray Bradbury

THE BEHOLDER'S EYE

For thirty-five years he starred Felicia on imagination's stage, heroine of levitating scenes, eye level against an unreeling highway, flitting across a newspaper, a diorama under the shower spray. Producer, director, still wanting to co-star.

He never questioned that she still looked twenty, never updated the script. After each rerun he felt somehow closer to the pastel denouement of boy gets girl.

Vacationing in the mountains, his wife antiquing in the shops, he Sunday afternooned at a small art museum. Pausing to revile cubist crudities, his eyes tripped over a signature. The love of his life had married some guy with that drearily banal name. This one was the show's featured artist. His collection of nudes defaced the north wall.

With a sneer the visitor moved closer to what he pronounced framed absurdities. The lines and brush strokes annoyed him, crashing colors tightened his jaws. A mounted newsclip likened the artist's style to Picasso's, and applauded the painter's postmodern interpretations of his wife. The review included a black and white photo of the couple.

The visitor shook his head, almost muttered aloud: Ugly old woman, no wonder he painted her that way. Worst kind of escapism-- distortion-- alteration-- pretense of alternative glory.

The artist, early for the wine and cheese reception, sidled up to the frown in front of his work. "Tell me what you think of it," he said.

Candidly, formally, the visitor did. The pair conversed briefly as other guests drifted by. To keep it polite, the two men enacted the card swapping ritual. Outside, the visitor saw he'd been talking to the painter himself, shrugged and flicked the card in a bin. Inside, the artist stared at the small printed rectangle in his hand. Can't be but one oddball name like that, he thought. No wonder Feli didn't marry him.