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SHIFT ***

The Capgras Shift

Sam Vaknin

1. The Sinking

My marriage aborted, my private practice stillborn, I packed stale possessions in two flabby suitcases and bade my sterile apartment a tearless goodbye. On the spur of the moment, I had applied a fortnight before to a government post and, to my consternation, had won it handily. I was probably the only applicant.

It was an odd sort of job. The state authorities had just finished submerging 4 towns, 6 cemeteries, and numerous farms under the still, black waters of a new dammed reservoir of drinking water. The process was drawn out and traumatic. Tight-knit communities unraveled, families scattered, businesses ruined. The government undertook to provide the former inhabitants with psychological support: an on-site therapist (that's me), social workers, even a suicide line.

I had to relocate, hence my haphazard departure. I took the bus to the nearest big city and hitchhiked from there. The fare just about amortized my travel allowance for the entire week. I had to trudge in mud the last two or three kilometers only to find myself in a disorienting, nightmarish landscape: isled rooftops and church spires puncturing the abnormally still surface of a giant man-made lake. I waded ashore, amidst discarded furniture and toys and contemplated the buried devastation.

My clinic, I discovered, was a ramshackle barrack, replete with a derelict tiny lawn, strewn with rusting hulks of household goods. I was shown by a surly superintendent into a tiny enclosure: my flat. Crammed into a cubicle were a folding metal bed, military-issue blankets, and a depleted pillow. Still, I slept like a baby and woke up refreshed.

The first thing that struck me was the silence, punctuated by a revving-thrumming engine now and then: not a twitter, not a hum, not a human voice. There was no hot water, so I merely washed my armpits, my face and hands and feet and combed my hair the best I could, which wasn't much by anyone's standards. I was plunged into the maelstrom straightaway. My first patients, an elderly couple, their disintegrating marriage and crumbling health mirrored by the withering of their habitat.

The days passed, consumed by endless processions of juvenile delinquents, losers, the old, the sickly, the orphaned, the unemployed, and the abandoned, the detritus of human settlements now made to vanish at the bottom of a lake. It was a veritable makeshift refugee camp and I found myself immersed in the woes and complaints of misfits who lost their sense of community and means of livelihood and sought meaning in their cruel individual tragedies, but in vain.

On the Tuesday of the second week of what was fast becoming a surrealistic quagmire, I met Isabel. She was the very last in a long list of appointments and I kept praying that she would not keep hers, as many of them were wont to do. But she did and punctually so. I was struck by her regal bearing, her poise, her coiffed hair, and her dazzling but tasteful jewelry. Her equine face and aquiline nose meshed well with just a hint of the oriental slant and cheekbones to render her exotic.

She sat unbidden and watched me intently, benignly ignoring my rhetorical question:

"You are Isabel Kidlington, aren't you?"

Of course she was. Three centuries ago, her family established an eponymous town, now sunken beneath the calm surface of the lake.

Our first meeting ended frostily and unproductively but, in the fullness of time, as she opened up to me, I found myself looking forward to our encounters. I always scheduled her last, so that I could exceed the 45 minutes straightjacket of the classic therapy session. She was the first person in a long time - who am I kidding? the first person ever - who really listened to what I had to say. She rarely spoke, but, when she did, it was with the twin authority of age and wisdom. I guess I grew to love and respect her.

I wasn't sure why Isabel sought my meager services. She possessed enough common sense and fortitude to put to shame any therapist I knew. She never asked for my advice or shared her problems with me. She just made an appearance at the appointed time and sat there, back erect, hands resting in her lap, her best ear forward, the better to capture my whining litany and to commiserate.

One day, though, she entered my crude office and remained standing.

"Isabel," - I enquired - "is everything alright?"

"You know that I have been provided with a residence on Elm Street, now that my family home is underwater."

The "residence" was an imposing mansion, with an enormous driveway, an English, sculpted garden, and a series of working fountains. Isabel rented the place from a British-Canadian mogul of sorts, as she disdainfully informed me a while back.

"It's been invaded by strangers." - She made a dramatic announcement.

I looked at her, not comprehending:

"You mean burglars? Squatters? Who are these strangers? Why don't you call the Police to evict them? It could be dangerous, you know!"

She waved away my concerned pleas impatiently:

"I can't call the police to evict them because they have assumed the bodies of my family members."

When she saw the bafflement in my eyes, she reiterated slowly, as if aiming to get through to a slow-witted, yet cherished, interlocutor:

"These invaders - they look like my husband and my son. But they are not. They are doubles. They are somehow wrong, fake, ersatz, if you know what I mean."

I didn't.

"I love my real relatives but not the current occupants of their corporeal remains. I keep my door locked at night!"

She made it sound like an unprecedented event.

"Isabel, sit down, please." - I said and she did, white-jointed hands clenched and venous. I decided not to confront her illogic but rather to leverage it to expose the absurdity of her assertions.

"Why would these body-snatchers go to all this trouble?"

"Don't be silly!" - She snapped - "Money, of course! They are after my fortune! These look-alikes are planning to murder me and abscond with my considerable fortune. They are all in my will, you see, and they know it! But they can't wait their turn, they are anxious to lay their dirty paws on my checkbook! They are afraid that I will change my mind!"

"You sound like you are referring to your true relatives." - I pointed out.

She recoiled:

"These criminals that took over my family, I want them gone! I want my husband back and my son!"

"Then why don't you simply alter your will and let them know about it? Announce the changes in a family gathering! That way they will lose all interest in you and move on to their next victim! That way, all incentives to murder you will be removed, you see."

She glanced at me dumbfounded:

"That's a wonderful idea, dear! You are so clever, you are so astute when you put your mind to it! Thank you! You can't imagine what a relief it is to strike upon the solution to such an impossible situation!"

She sprang from the creaky armchair and extended her hand to fondle my cheek:

"Thank you, honey. You made me proud."

I felt like a million dollars.

2. The Syndrome

Milton's eyeglasses glinted unsettlingly as he took in my crumpled clothes and unruly hair:

"So, you traveled all night, by yourself, in a hired car, to ask me this? She must mean all the world to you!"

He hasn't changed: cherubic, lecherous, bald, and clad in fading dungarees and Sellotaped, stapled sandals. Milton smelled of coffee grounds and incense.

He laid a hirsute hand on my shoulder and I retreated inadvertently and then apologized. He smiled mischievously:

"You are tired. Let's go to my office. You can refresh yourself there and I will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about the Capgras Syndrome and never dared to ask."

"Capgras Syndrome???"

"Coffee first!" - Milton pronounced and wheeled me forward.

Ensnared in an ancient armchair, steamy libation in hand, I listened intently, absorbing every word that came out of the mouth of arguably the world's greatest expert on delusions.

"It's nothing new." - Said Milton, chewing on an ancient, ashen clay pipe - "It was first described by two French psychiatrists in 1923. Elderly people believe that their relatives have been replaced by malicious, conspiring doubles. They lock themselves in, buy guns, change their wills, complain to the authorities. If not checked with antipsychotic medication, they become violent. Quite a few cases of murder, resisting arrest, that sort of thing."

"What goes wrong with these people?"

Milton shrugged and tapped the empty implement on a much-tortured edge of his desk:

"Lots of speculation around, but nothing definite. Some say it's a problem with face recognition. You heard of prosopagnosia? Patients fail to identify their nearest and dearest, even though they react emotionally when they see them. Capgras is the mirror image, I guess: a failure to react emotionally to familiar faces. But guess is what we have all been doing in the last, oh, eight decades." - He concluded with undisguised disgust.

"I need help with this client, Milton," - I interjected - "and you are not helping me at all."

He chuckled sarcastically:

"How often do I hear it from my patients?"

"She is not paranoid, you know. Her mind is sharp and crystal-clear and balanced."

He nodded wearily:

"That's what confounds us with this syndrome. The patients are 'normal' by any definition of this word that you care to adopt. They are only convinced that family members, friends, even neighbors are being substituted for - and, of course, they are not."

He crouched next to my seat:

"Soon, she will begin to doubt you and then herself. Next time she catches her own reflection in a mirror or a window, she will start to question her own identity. She will insist that she has been replaced by an entity from outer space or something. She is bad news. The literature describes the case of a woman who flew into jealous rages at the sight of her own reflection because she thought it was another woman trying to seduce her husband."

Milton was evidently agitated, the first I have seen him this way. As my teacher and mentor, he kept a stiff upper lip in the face of the most outlandish disorders and the most all-pervasive ignorance. And in the face of our budding, dead end love.

"What do you advise me to do?" - I mumbled almost inaudibly.

"If she refuses anti-psychotic medication, bail out. Commit her. She is a danger both to herself and to others, not the least of whom, to you."

"I can't do that to her." - I protested - "I am the only person she trusts in the whole world. She is so scared, it breaks my heart. And just imagine what the family is going through: she even wants to change her will to disinherit them."

Milton's pained expression deepened:

"Then you are faced with only one alternative: psychodrama. To save her, you must enter her world, as convincingly as you can. Play her game, as it were. Pretend that you believe in her lunatic delusions. Act the part."

3. Dinner

"Will you?" - Enthused Isabel - "That's mighty fine of you! I have arranged for everyone to join me for dinner tomorrow evening. It's a Saturday, so people don't have to go to work the next day."

"How very considerate." - I stammered and Isabel laughed throatily:

"Don't be so distraught. It won't be as awkward as you fear. Sit next to me and watch the show as I expose these fraudsters and frustrate their plans!".

About to exit, she turned around, her wrinkled face suddenly smooth and becalmed:

"I will be expecting you. Be there. You must be present. For your own sake as much as for mine."

And she left the door ajar as she swooshed down the hall and out the building, into the flaking snow.

Isabel never looked more imposing as she sat at the head of the elongated table, attired in a sleeveless white chiffon dress, no hint of make-up on her imperious, commanding face. A beetle-shaped brooch complemented a lavish pearl necklace that emphasized the contours of her truly delicate neck. She was very animated, laughed a lot, and administered light touches of familiarity and affection to her husband and son, who flanked her.

Her spouse, a rubicund mount of a man, face varicose and hairy hands resting on his folded napkin, was clearly still smitten with his wife, paying close and ostentatious attention to her minutest wishes and utterances. His enormous girth twitched and turned towards her, like a plant craving the sun. His deep blue eyes glittered every time she humored him or re-arranged his cutlery.

The son was more reluctant, contemplating his mother with suspicion and his father with an ill-disguised hint of contempt. He was lanky, with a balding pate, and sported a failed attempt at a moustache, inexpertly daubed on his freckled face. He was also myopic and his hands fluttered restlessly throughout the evening. I found him most disagreeable.

There was a third person at the table: a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at everyone through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping an ancient purse ("a gift from mother"), and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view. No one introduced us and she made it a point to avoid me, so I let it go.

The dishes cleared, Isabel came to the painful point:

"Dears," - she declared - "I summoned you today to make an important announcement. As you well know, my previous will and testament left everything to you, the two exclusive loves of my life." - A hiss of withdrawn breaths welcomed the word "previous".

"However, in the last couple of weeks, I have had reason to suspect foul play."

They stared at her, not comprehending.

"I am convinced that you are not who you purport to be. You look like my dearest but you are actually impostors, doubles, hired by the perpetrators of a malicious operation, bent of absconding with my inheritance."

The silence was palpable as her kin, jaws dropped in disbelief, listened to the unfolding speech with growing horror.

"I don't know yet what you have done with my real relatives but, rest assured, I intend to find out. Still, I am being told by one and sundry that I may be wrong or, frankly, that I am off my rocker, as they say."

"Hear, hear!" - Interjected her son and rose from his seat, as though to leave the table.

"Sit down!" - Snapped Isabel and he did, meekly, though clearly resentful.

"I have devised a test. Should you pass it, I will offer you all my most prostrate apologies and hope for your forgiveness. If you fail, his shall be proof of the subterfuge. I am then bent on altering my will to exclude all of you from it and bestow my entire estate on my good companion here." - And she pointed at a mortified me.

They all turned in their chairs and studied the intruder at length. The son's lips moved furiously but he remained inaudible. The husband merely shrugged and reverted to face his tormentor. Only the third guest protested by extending a pinkish tongue in my direction, careful to remain unobserved by her hostess.

"I will ask each one of you three questions." - Proceeded my new benefactor, unperturbed - "You can take as much time as you need to respond to them. Once you have given your answers, there is no going back, no second chance. So, think carefully. Your entire pecuniary future depends on it. These are the terms that I am setting. You are free to leave the room now, if you wish. Of course, by doing so, you will have forfeited your share of my riches." - She sneered unpleasantly. No one made a move.

"I take it then that we are all agreed." - Isabel proceeded and turned toward her husband:

"John, or whoever you are," - He recoiled as if struck with a fist - "what was the color of the curtains in the small hotel where we have consummated our love for the first time?"

"Must I go through this in public, in front of my son and this complete stranger?" - He bellowed, his monstrous frame towering over her. But she remained undaunted and unmoved and finally, he settled back in his creaking chair and resignedly mumbled:

"The room had no curtains. You complained all morning because the sunlight shone straight on your face and wouldn't let you fall asleep."

His visage was transformed by the memory, radiant and gentle now, as he re-lived the moment.

"True. You have clearly done your homework." - She confirmed reluctantly and addressed her son:

"Edward, what did you see in a book that made you cry so violently and inconsolably when you just a toddler?"

"It was an art book. There was a color reproduction of a painting of a group of patricians standing on an elevated porch, glancing over the railing at a scene below them. I can't recall any other detail, but the whole atmosphere was tenebrous and sinister. I was so frightened that I burst into wails. For some reason, you were not there, you were gone!" - And he pouted as he must have done back then when he had felt abandoned and betrayed by his mother.

"Althea, what was I wearing the first time we met, when Edward introduced you to me?"

Althea, the mouse, looked up in surprise:

"You introduced me to Edward, not the other way around!" - She protested - "I met you at the clinic, remember? Lording it over everyone, as usual." - She laughed bitterly and I shot her a warning glance, afraid that she might provoke Isabel into violent action - "Anyways, you were wearing precisely what you have on today, down to the tiniest detail. Even the brooch is the same, if I can tell."

And so it went. All three were able to fend off Isabel's fiendish challenges with accurate responses. Finally, evidently exhausted, she conceded defeat:

"Though my heart informs me differently, my head prevails and I am forced to accept that you are my true family. I hereby offer you the prostrate apologies that I have promised to make before." - She sprang

abruptly from her seat - "And now, I am tired, I must sleep." - She ignored her husband's clumsy attempt to kiss her on the cheek and, not bidding farewell or good night to any of us, she exited the room in an apparent huff.

4. Post-Mortem

"What did you make of what you have just witnessed?"

Isabel snuck into the guest bedroom and settled into an overstuffed armchair at a penumbral corner. She was still wearing the same dress, though her jewelry was gone. I watched her reflection in my makeup mirror, as I was removing the war paint from my face, clad in my two-part, lilac-strewn pajamas. I felt naked and embarrassed and violated.

"They did pretty well." - I hedged my answer, not sure where she might be leading.

"They did rather too well." - She triumphantly proclaimed, her eyes shining.

"What do you mean by that?" - I enquired, my curiosity genuinely awakened.

"Pray, tell me, what was I wearing when we first met?"

I couldn't conjure the image, no matter how hard I tried.

"I am not sure." - I finally admitted defeat

"What was the color of the curtains in your mother's kitchen?"

"White, with machine embroidered strawberries or raspberries or something of the sort."

"What was the first horror movie that you have seen?"

"I can't be expected to remember that!" - I exclaimed.

"Of course you can't, dear. No one can. You'd be lucky to get one response out of three correct, you know." - She agreed - "This is the point I am trying to make. Didn't you find my family's omniscience and total recall a trifle overdone? Didn't you ask yourself for a minute how come they are all blessed with such supreme, marvelous memories?"

She sounded distant and heartbroken as she said:

"I have changed my will, you know. They couldn't fool me with their slick off-the-cuff ready-made know-it-all responses! It's all yours now. Sleep well, my true friend and, henceforth, my only heir!."

She glided over and kissed me on the cheek, once, like a butterfly alighting.

I was woken up by a wet kiss planted on my lips by Isabel's husband.

"What do you think you are doing?" - I hissed and withdrew to the top of the bed - "If you don't leave the room this instant, I will scream!"

He looked hurt and baffled as he slid off the mattress and stretched his monolithic corpulence.

"What's wrong?" - He enquired - "Anything I did to offend you last night? You shouldn't have asked all these questions if you didn't want to hear my answers, you know!"

"Where's Isabel?" - I demanded.

He eyed me queerly and pleaded sadly:

"We are not going to go through all this again, are we, dear?"

"Go through what and I am asking you for the last time: where is Isabel, your wife?"

He sighed and collapsed on the bed, depressing it considerably as he held onto one of the bedposts:

"I will call Dr. Milton. Promise me you won't do anything stupid until he has had the chance to see you."

"I am going to call the police on you. Isabel announces her intention to disinherit you and the next morning she is mysteriously gone. Dead, for all I know!"

"Isabel is alive and well, I give you my word." - Said her husband and, for some reason, I believed him. He sounded sincere.

"Then why can't I see her?"

"You can, once Dr. Milton arrives. Is that too much to ask? He will be here in less than half an hour. Edward already apprised him of the

situation last night."

"Last night?" - I felt confused - "What situation? And who's Dr. Milton?"

He got up and made to leave when I noticed that my makeup compact was gone.

"Where are my things? What have you done with my things?"

"They are in the next room. Dr. Milton will let you have them after he has made sure that they include nothing dangerous."

"Dangerous?" - I exploded - "Am I a prisoner here? I insist to use the phone! I am going to call the police right now!"

"Please, for your own good, don't exit the room." - Said my uninvited visitor - "I have covered the mirrors here and have removed your make up pouch but I can't well take care of all the reflecting surfaces: windows and such."

"Mirrors? What are you going about? You need professional help. I am a therapist. Won't you tell me what the problem is? What have you done to Isabel? Are you afraid to look at yourself in the mirror? Are you terrified of what you might see there? Have you killed her? Are you tormented by guilt?" - It wasn't very professional behavior but I decided that I had nothing to lose by abrogating the therapeutic protocol. Clearly, I was being held hostage by a gang of killers or a murderous cult.

"Isabel." - Said a familiar voice from across the threshold.

"Thank God you have arrived!" - Cried Isabel's husband - "She is having one of her attacks."

Into the chamber came Milton, clay pipe, eternal dungarees and all. He was accompanied by a young woman that looked startlingly familiar. She glanced at me from across the room. She smiled. She appeared to be friendly, so I reciprocated, hesitantly.

Milton said:

"I hope you don't mind that I have asked your therapist to join me. She told me everything about last night. You invited her here as your guest, you remember?"

I didn't remember anything of the sort. Still, I appraised my "therapist" more attentively. She was a mousy, inconsequential thing with an excruciatingly bad sartorial taste. She stared at me through a pair of dead, black, enormous pools that passed for eyes. Her hands were sinewy and contorted and she kept fidgeting, clasping and unclasping my makeup purse, and rearranging a stray curl that kept obscuring her view.

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