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Richard Goodman

University of New Orleans, rgoodman@uno.edu

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PENELOPE JOINS THE WRITERS' GROUP

Richard Goodman

New York City, 1980

Once in a while on a winter's day or night I'd be given permission to come over to her cold dank loft on Mercer Street. I never knew when. A call would come from her with all the unpredictability and whim of a summons from Howard Hughes. I'd rush like a fireman from my apartment in Greenwich Village to her building in Soho, that cobblestoned industrial part of Manhattan that was home to so many painters and writers. She'd buzz me in, and I'd take the freight elevator—there was no other. It rose slowly, naked between me and the descending wall, stopping with a shudder and jolt. I would push the heavy accordion steel aside and approach her door, my heart in my throat. I'd knock.

"It's open," she'd call from inside.

Those were the days, back in the early 1980s, when lofts were bare vast places, meant only for commercial purposes. They were unheated in the evenings and weekends when there was, presumably, no one there. But often there was someone there: a squatting painter or writer. I pushed open the door and Penelope would be at her desk working. She was usually wearing her long shabby overcoat, still in her nightgown and slippers, like some miserable housewife—the last thing she'd ever be. Housewife, that is. The room was impossibly cold. She wore a knitted cap on her head like some mullah and wool mittens that didn't have tips to the fingers so she could type or write. This gave her a Fagan-like appearance, though I doubt Fagan had skin as soft as a gardenia petal. Her small desk was near a sink with its dull porcelain chipped and streaked with dried paint. She worked there three or four hours at a time.

I said it was cold. Standing there for just a minute or two in my parka I didn't see how she could tolerate it all day. The world of lofts is romantic now, and you can see them, sun-splashed and decorated by illustrious names, in glossy-paged shelter magazines. But I am here to tell you that

in 1980, they were not romantic at all. There was no romance in no heat or in a filthy toilet down the hall, or in large, grimy, paint-covered windows with no caulking, or in battleship gray, uneven floors. It was so cold that after just a few minutes I experienced that unique discomfort one feels from a heatless inside place in winter—weariness and nausea. My feet rebelled against the frigid floor. My eyes began to water. My breath came out in cloudy bursts, like an exhaust pipe in a chilly morning garage.

Yet there she was at her typewriter working hour after hour! Every time I walked into her loft—the loft was borrowed, by the way, from a friend who was out of town and who had plans to turn it into a habitable place—I thought: *look* at her, look at Penelope. Look at her resolve. *She's a writer*. I don't have what she has. I couldn't write under those conditions for more than a day or two. I'd flee. My heart sank, because I knew I was a poser, a sham writer, a writer-from-a-kit. You could send away for the kind of writer I was in the mail.

"Hello," I'd say, "how are you?" Or something as banal as the floor I was standing on. I would raise one foot slightly for a moment, put it down, and then raise the other to keep them from the penetrating cold. In the center of the loft was a mattress on the floor. No box spring, no bed frame, no headboard. There is little as dispiriting as sleeping on a naked mattress when you're well over thirty. But Penelope didn't seem to care. On the mattress was stacked a large mound of blankets and coats and Lord knows what else. She threw anything on there she could find to provide warmth. It reminded me of a large party in someone's home. You arrive and are told to put your coat in the bedroom, and you throw yours onto a mound so considerable it slides off to the side. That's the only way Penelope could keep warm when she slept—by crawling under this cloth heap.

Those lynx eyes of Penelope's would turn and focus on me. When I looked at her eyes, I always thought of Anna Akhmatova's line, "Your lynx-eyes, Asia, / spy on my discontent." I'll never forget the first time we all saw her, the writers, when she walked into Sandy's place. That was where our writer's group was meeting that week. It was fall then. We had been meeting faithfully for two years. The group was strong. It had become something apart from the four of it. It had its own life, and we

were protective of it.

It was Sandy, of course, who brought Penelope. He had only told us that she was a good writer, someone who might possibly join the group. I don't even recall where he'd met her. She stood there beside him in her vintage silky dress that clung to her thighs, with her long, prematurely gray-brown hair. Part of it flowed over one cheek. As Sandy introduced her, those lynx eyes of hers swept around the room, pausing at each person, x-raying each soul. I felt defenseless after she looked at me, as if she'd discovered my secret hiding place.

"This is Penelope," Sandy said. All of us, in our good PTA voices, welcomed her. That's when we heard her feral baritone for the first time.

"Hi, I'm Penelope," she said, repeating the name Sandy had uttered as if to say, "I'll be the one to tell you who I am."

All of us—Alexandra, Dan, Connie, and I—just looked at her.

Who was she? Where had she come from? What was she doing in New York? What kind of writer was she? I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She delved out information about herself parsimoniously, though I did hear when she spoke the minor chords of a Southern accent. I couldn't place it. No wonder: Eventually she told us she was from Oklahoma. We asked her what she was working on.

"I don't know what it is," she said.

"Is it fiction?" one of us asked.

"What isn't?" Penelope said.

"Well," said Alexandra, who wrote journalism, "is it a novel?"

Penelope looked at her, and then she said, "It's too early to talk about these things."

A few of us nodded stupidly like we were junior executives agreeing with the head of a Hollywood studio. We were changing already.

Penelope didn't stay very long. She knew the reason for the visit: to inspect her, to see if she was admissible. We had a de facto vote to have her in the group, but the truth is she was in as soon as she walked into the room. Even though we were protective about what we had created and nurtured, selective about letting someone new join our group, how could we reject a lynx-eyed oracle? So yes, she joined and started coming that next week. In short order, she took command of the group, or at

least of the aesthetic standards of the group—even if we didn't know it. Especially after we heard her read her work for the first time. It was like swimming in glory, listening to her words. After Penelope, our horizons broadened. We thought of writing, of what was good or not, differently. To a great extent, her standards became ours. Sometimes this confused us—or at least it confused *me*. She might speak disdainfully of a writer, a well known writer, and I would wonder: Why isn't that writer any good? I had always thought he—or she—was. If I pursued this with Penelope, she would only look at me.

The thing is, though, we saw this as something wonderful. If you're trying to be the best writer you can be, you want to be judged by the highest standards. You want that incorruptible person to respond to your writing, because if she says it's good, then you can believe it.

As I say, this all happened in the early 1980s. New York then—well, it's all gone now, at least the New York I knew and loved. Back then you could afford to live there as a young man or woman—even in storied Greenwich Village or in the East Village or in Soho. You could live cheaply and well. You could find like-minded souls and be nourished, take root, grow. The City hadn't started acting like a Westchester country club yet. There was no membership selection committee. So you didn't have much money? So what? The city had a side entrance, a stage door entrance, for writers and painters and choreographers and composers and anyone else with a hot, restless dream.

God, we were earnest and sincere—pure, I guess you could say. Now, nearly thirty years later, I walk down the street and see replicas of myself and those four other men and women—just the clothes are a little different, but that's all—and I envy them so. Yes, envy! And why not? Here they are, about to embark, about to feast on everything New York has to offer them, to be nourished and encouraged by like-minded hearts and minds.

So Penelope started coming to the Writers' Group. Everyone one of us, in one way or another, was affected by her. She made the women jealous and uneasy, and she disturbed the men to their seismic cores. When she came into the room where we were meeting that week, I could see the women shuffle in their seats every so slightly deferentially. The men stopped talking. But all of us, regardless of gender, became in some man-

ner changed.

Penelope never said much about the writing. I can see her now, sitting in a chair, her slender legs crossed, their form draped by her vintage silk dress in sensual folds, like a Bernini statue. Her lynx eyes, remarkable even through those executive secretary glasses, occasionally surveyed the room. Once in a while she would take a short note on a pad balanced on her knee. Each of us would note that, trying to pretend we hadn't noticed, but also desperate to know what she'd written. Penelope never volunteered to say anything. She had to be asked. Usually Connie would react to the writing first. Then Sandy, perhaps. Then me. Alexandra. Then Dan. Someone, finally, would turn to Penelope and, with studied offhandedness, say,

"So, what do you think, Penelope?"

"I don't have anything to say," she would say.

"Nothing?"

"No."

Was this good? Or was it bad? This of course would drive us all to distraction—I'm sure the writer more than anyone else.

"Really?" Alexandra pressed.

Penelope would look at her. "I'll say something if I have something to say."

"Well, I..."

"Look, I'm here to be serious, not to toss out bon bons to make everyone happy." This she actually said once

"Well, I don't think *I'm* tossing out bon-bons," Alexandra said. Alexandra was emotionally sensitive to the touch, retracting, like a sea anemone, to what she perceived as the slightest insult.

Penelope stared at her.

"Well, I'm *not!*" Alexandra said, unable to stand the heat of Penelope's glare.

Now, what was ironic was that Penelope hardly ever read anything herself. Yes, she did read something at the start, and it did wow us, but the piece wasn't that long. After that we were left yearning.

I fell in—what? Love? Lust? *Obsession* is probably more apt. I fell in obsession with Penelope. I couldn't separate my awe for her from my desire

for her. I fell for her. Fell hard. I started waiting for her after the writers group was through—just like a schoolboy waiting to carry a girl’s books home after class. And with just as much hand-wringing hope. Sometimes she would let me walk with her, sometimes she wouldn’t. I would ask her out for dinner, but she was always cautious, like a deer feeding in an open field.

“I don’t want your money,” she would say.

“It’s not like I’m buying you a mink coat,” I’d say. “It’s just dinner.”

“It always starts small,” she would say.

“Come on, I just happen to make a little money now, that’s all.” I was working as an advertising copywriter then.

She’d look at me coldly. “Well, don’t expect anything from this.”

So, she would grant me an audience from time to time. I never knew when or for how long. It was all up to her.

I remember one cold, wet January morning, I walked west on Prince Street to Dean & Deluca to meet Penelope. Typically, she had called me a few minutes earlier, out of the blue.

“I can meet you now,” she said. That was all.

I, of course, dropped everything. The moist, frigid air penetrated my leather flying jacket, my gloves, my shoes, my hat. The light was wan. In gray, muted light you could take in the details, the intricacies of Soho’s architecture—store windows, the rust shades of brick walls, jagged fire escapes, the streets unfolding. It was all so drinkable.

This was back when Dean & Deluca opened its first gourmet food store on Prince Street. It was so new, so young, that Giorgio Deluca himself would serve you. Small, bespectacled, with dark curly Bacchus hair and black eyes, he was nervously energetic, so determined with his young mission that he seemed hardly able to focus. Giorgio would talk to you in clipped phrases as he grabbed a croissant or *pain au raisin*—“Hey good to see you. Try the Romano cheese. Unbelievable.”—and shoved it into a little bag, darting around his young workers, reaching for something else.

When you walked in, the big door jingled. Just to your right were wicker quivers holding arm-long crusty baguettes, backward leaning. Directly in front of you was the counter, shaped like an upside down tuning fork, behind which workers with optimistic faces circulated, moving

in that frantic choreography of service. In the back of the store were tables where you could sit and drink your coffee, talk, write, or read. I bounded up the two riveted iron steps, opened the door and walked in. I stood on tip toe, stretched my neck to look in the back to see if Penelope was there. She wasn't. I ordered a café au lait and took it with me to a vacant table in back. The wood floors creaked as I made my way there. There was an old skylight above the tables, an ancient facet that poured light onto you as you sat and drank or ate. There were no computers. There were no cell-phones. Only pens and pencils working against paper and people reading or conversing. I had a notebook with me. I pulled it out and imagined I was Hemingway in a Paris café. I had the pen, I had the café au lait. It was easy to convince myself that I was a writer here. I sipped the strong coffee, which was rich with personality, with breeding.

But the people around me were too interesting, too alluring. The smells were too ravishing. There was too much life. Instead of writing, I looked around to see who else was there. Then I felt something. I turned and looked up and there she was. She was standing next to the table, silent. She wore her long Salvation Army men's coat, a fat cable knit scarf wound twice around her neck and a cable knit hat. Her long gray-brown hair streamed from under the cap and flowed onto her coat. She wore, as usual, glasses—old fashioned, the kind secretaries wore when they were still called secretaries. She had put on lipstick. For me? Silly to think that. I couldn't help it, though. My heart raced. She didn't say hello.

"Oh, hi!" I said, a bit flustered that she hadn't said a word.

"Hi."

I stood up. I moved to pull out a chair for her.

"I can sit down by myself," Penelope said. She took the chair from me, and I was left standing there, an absurd tableau vivant, leaning toward her chair. She had limitless ways to make me look foolish, and I seemed to try every one.

"Oh, yes, sure," I said. I sat down.

"Look," she said, "I don't have much time."

"How about some coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"That's right! Well, what about some tea?"

She nodded. I got up and went to the front and fetched her a pot. I put it before her. She took the tea bag out with a clipped gesture as if I'd tried to poison her.

"How's the work going?" I asked her.

"I don't like to talk about it while I'm doing it," she said.

Once again, her feral baritone! She had very little subtlety in her tone, very little modulation—a minimal range. She didn't use the shadings, pitches, timbres, or keys of her voice to help express what she was thinking or feeling. Her speech was pretty much level. She did all her expressing with her razor-blade words.

"Uh, well, OK," I said. "What *can* I ask you about?"

Those wary eyes examined me through glasses. Then she glanced at her watch.

"Don't tell me you have to go already?" I said.

"Soon."

Still, with all her stone cold incivility, I loved looking at her. Those lips! Those eyes, darting about the room even as I spoke to her, as if she were searching for some prey to devour. That streamy hair.

"Well, what did you think of Danny's piece?" I asked. Danny had read a piece about going home to visit his parents in Malaysia at the last group meeting.

"Not much," she said. She took two beats. "Oh, there were a few places that were all right."

"I sort of liked it," I said.

"Well," she said evenly, "that's the problem."

"What? What do you mean?"

"What if I said that about your writing? That I sort of liked it."

"Hmm."

She reached into her old leather bag she carried and pulled out a paperback. "There's something I want to give you." She pushed it across the table to me. I picked it up. It was *The Beet Queen* by Louise Erdrich. It had obviously been read, perhaps by more than one person.

"You should read this," Penelope said.

"Oh great, thanks, I will."

She got up to go. She hadn't even taken off her coat. She'd only taken

CHAUTAUQUA

one sip of her tea.

“You’re going?” I looked up at her.

“Thanks for the tea,” she said. Then she turned and walked away.

I watched her open the store door and walk out. I wondered where she was going. To write? To meet someone else? I stayed there in Dean & Deluca for twenty minutes or so, restoring myself with the power of the place.

I finished my coffee, got up and went outside. I drank in Prince Street. I took a deep breath.

I walked back toward my apartment. I waited for her call.