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Does meaning merely seem

S G Collins

"We have this weird faith," Lydia tells her professor as they race for the Number 1 tram, "that words and ideas really do mean something. But what if that's just a dream? Is meaning really there, behind these different sets of pinholes we look at it through? Or is it just an accident of our having something to talk about?"

Her professor checks his watch. If they get to Lelylaan station by 06:55, they'll make the nonstop train to Leiden. They'll sit apart on the train for twenty-five minutes, then Lydia will make an aimless detour through that quaint city, grab a coffee somewhere, and get to class one minute late. Then nobody will suspect she was fucking his brains out last night.

Three people are waiting at the tram shelter before them. A thirtyish Surinamese man whose oversized red windbreaker bears the logo of a cleaning service. A pretty teenage Moroccan girl in a stylish purple headscarf. And seated alone on the perforated metal bench, a thin, middle-aged, strung-out looking blonde with long hair piled to a Buddha point atop her head. She is quietly weeping.

"I'm not sure what you mean," the professor smiles.

Lydia leans against him for a moment, deliberately making him uncomfortable here in the middle of Leidseplein. But nobody's watching. The square is about nightlife, and now it's scarcely dawn. The cafe umbrellas are folded, the wicker chairs stacked and chained. The men in orange coveralls are working across the way, one sweeping, the other patiently leading the nozzle of a giant rolling rubbish-vacuum machine from one trashcan to the next, like some kind of urban elephant trainer.

"Well for example," Lydia goes on, "the Sanskrit word 'satya' means 'love' and 'truth' at the same time, right, which are distinct concepts to me. And the Dutch 'bedrijf' means business, but 'drijven' means 'to float'. So maybe the Dutch idea of business lies near the idea of floating. See, concepts cluster differently in different tongues. To me it's like constellations. Orion looks like Orion because I'm seeing it from this point in the universe. Seen from another angle, those stars, those ideas, form a whole nother pattern."

A sudden bang behind them: someone has knocked an empty beer keg off a truck parked in front of Cafe Reynders. The sky fills with pigeons. The weeping woman sobs now, lifts her face enough to show streams of mascara on pale cheeks. Lydia looks at her for a moment, wondering what happened out here during the night, while she was busy with other things.

"I think I get you," says her professor. "I could really use a coffee."

"But see the difference is, I mean, we know the stars are there, in a certain pattern. Is meaning really there? Or does it merely seem? That's the burning question. Shit it's raining again. Can we take this one?"

He looks up from wiping his glasses with his tie, and shakes his head. "The five doesn't go to Lelylaan."

Tram 5 rolls in and two people get on, leaving Lydia and her professor alone with the crying woman. The rain has driven them in under the shelter, so they are standing right beside her. Lydia wonders if that's a bloodstain on the woman's jacket, or did she just spill a bit of satay sauce from her late night frites from Febo. And Jesus what's with the hairdo?

"So that's your burning question," says the man whose dick she had in her mouth a few hours ago. "To me it's frankly not so burning. Of course, meaning is not merely epiphenomenal, it's a parasite using us as a host to propagate itself."

He smiles again, like it's all in a day's work for him.

The pointy-headed blonde woman behind him erupts in a long, undulant, very soft wailing — and leans forward as if to inspect her moist red Converse All Stars. The rain suddenly sweeps in even harder, hammering against the plexi. The Number 1 tram appears rounding the turn from Leidsestraat. Lydia wants to spit.

"Of course you'd say that, you're from Leiden. But what the fuck do you mean?" And follows him into the tram.

"*Twee keer twee zones graag*," he says, kinda cheery, and the conductor lady stamps his strip-ticket twice without a word. Lydia puts away her own ticket. She's riding on his terms now.

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