

THOMAS JEPPE

## Social Compression

A young man moved to the inner city. Soon after, he sold his car, too big and impractical for this new urban setting. As time went on, he felt the desire to drive again. With the small money he saved, he was able to entertain the idea of buying a car that was once considered a luxury vehicle, but weathered by age and shifting tastes, had become but a relic of prestige. After meeting many sellers, taking hopeful test-drives, he decided on a wide champagne-coloured saloon. On his first day with his new car, he crashed it into a parking meter. Though spending money on repairs put great strain on his daily life, he quickly paid to restore the car to its original state, so the feeling of luxury would not evaporate.

Four men sat down to dinner in a restaurant a long way from their homes, on the opposite side of town, a place they had never been before. They were lead there quite by accident, a carefree afternoon bike ride having taken such unpredictable turns that they found themselves in an unknown neighbourhood with restaurants beginning to shut for the night. They ordered and waited, feeling the tension of the unfamiliar; though this was still their city, people were dressed differently, and the street had the atmosphere of a cowboy town. Four young women passed the restaurant window and stopped, staring at the diners. Pointing out the oldest man at the table, a married father, they mimed for him to join them. He smiled at them, miming his decline in response, but they persisted. Their desperation grew, and

one of the young women came forth as the most fervent. The four men laughed at the four women. The women laughed too, the fervent one miming that her heart was breaking. The women slipped away fruitless, drunk, pleased with themselves. The oldest man told the table that if he had gone with them, it would be as if nothing had happened.

A couple drove into a car park at a regional tourist attraction, a site of great natural beauty. The car park was busy with visitors from many different countries. From the bushes next to the couple's car, a rare animal only found in such an environment emerged. The couple had learnt about this species while growing up, but nobody they knew had ever seen one in the wild. Right away the animal was surrounded by people from all over the world, speaking to each other in many different languages, all expressing awe. The animal retreated as quickly as it had appeared, leaving the international group huddled, kneeling and crouching by a bush.

A woman had just finished her grocery shopping in an up-market part of town. Reaching her car, she loaded her shopping bags, took the driver's seat and reversed out. In the confusion of packing, she had forgotten her purse on the car's roof. Two teenage boys stood by as she turned a corner, the purse sliding across the roof and onto the road. The boys yelled to the car, which continued driving. They picked up the purse, running after her, shouting for her to stop as they went. The woman,

perhaps in fear of the boys, perhaps oblivious to them, drove on until she was beyond their reach. The boys calmed down, walked to a secluded spot, and inspected the purse, finding it full of gold coloured credit cards and a significant amount of cash. As they walked home together, they discussed what to do. They reasoned to themselves that they had tried to return it, but fate had not allowed. They could drop it at a police station, but then what would they have to show for this miraculous event? And what about their friends, who, like themselves, live a cheap, no-frills existence? To return this windfall would be like stealing from all those people that could be helped by it. The boys reached home, placed the purse in a bedside drawer, and pretended it wasn't there as they considered their moral position. A month passed and the purse remained in the drawer. The boys reasoned that, after this amount of time, the woman must have replaced all her necessary cards, and her thoughts of having it returned would surely have perished. Summer had begun. A conclusion was reached: all the money would be spent on beer, as much as the cash could buy. Everyone that the boys knew and liked would be invited to drink it with them on one sunny day. In this way, the guilt would be drunk by each of them, one beer at a time, and this moral condition would soon give way to a happy carelessness. As a final step towards settling their consciences, the boys dropped the purse, stripped of cash but with its voided cards intact and in place, in the gardens outside the local police station.

Three young men who had grown up together were holidaying in another city, sleeping on the floor of a spare room. Two

returned home one night, while the third stayed out. As the two negotiated a path through the room over their mattresses, one step caused a crunch; the sunglasses of the third young man, stowed under his pillow, had been broken to pieces. The two knew how important the sunglasses were; they also saw that they couldn't be fixed. However, the state of the sunglasses seemed lacking, unsatisfactory. They were ruined, but to truly embody the tragedy of their loss, they should be destroyed. The two young men took the sunglasses outside the house, placed them in the groove of the tram tracks, and put themselves to bed. The next day, the third young man returned. He soon noticed his sunglasses missing, and began to search for them. The two stopped him, explaining that the sunglasses were gone. In a grave, bittersweet tone, they told him that the tram tracks would hold the only remaining trace. The gravity of events began to settle over the three. The third young man felt the situation to be cruel, mocking; the two, though apologetic, felt only that it was inevitable.

At the end of a long journey, a couple were one night away from returning home. With nowhere to stay, they sought an affordable hotel. The man was used to living cheaply, and treated the search with great significance; though he appreciated the occasion of a hotel stay, it was in his nature to select carefully, frugally. They settled on one, left their bags in their room and departed for dinner. Having walked just a block, they came across another hotel, the same as their own by all appearances, though slightly cheaper. Grippled by the thought of spending money unnecessarily, the man hurried back to the first hotel. He

approached the manager with the intention of finding some fault with the lodgings that would grant him the right to leave. The shower was filthy; this, he would hang his case on. The man feigned indignation, appalled that a hotel should make him endure such conditions. The manager apologised, and ordered it to be cleaned right away. But the man could not be satisfied. He built up his show of righteous anger until he had almost forgotten the cheaper hotel, and it was as if he was truly personally offended from the beginning. The manager would not allow the man a refund. Defeated, the couple stayed in the first hotel, the emotion of the exchange eclipsing both the economic situation, and the aura of a journey ended.

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These are social situations, reduced in narrative form to their absolute foundation. This reductive structure produces a moral imperative: clarity comes at the cost of detail, and that which remains shapes complex circumstance into discrete reason. But reduction is also expansion. To remove detail is to turn the specific into the general; to make a step towards the universal. In following this line of thinking, it would seem the nebulous prospect of universality may only be reached through total abstraction. Perhaps, in the end, this is nobody's idea of a good time.

