

Jody Azzouni: So I show one of my friends this story after I've written it. (This is in the summer of 1982.) This friend is a sophisticated reader. He's someone who's introduced *me* to Witold Gombrowicz's work, and to Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*. This is pretty good stuff. He's grown up in a household of serious readers of serious fiction. (Not like the household *I* grew up in.) But after he's read my story, he says to me: "If I didn't know you, I'd think you were kind of weird and someone to avoid." "Um," I say, "it's a piece of fiction. Remember?" He looks at me. I look at him. "I called it a short story," I add, "I wasn't leading you on. Not even a little bit." "The sock thing," he says to me, "that sock thing sounds real. People don't make up things like that sock thing."

They don't? Well, I guess it's time for a confession. I did once drop a sock by accident into the toilet bowl—and pretty much as the narrator describes *his* sock-dunking episode. And the water was clean. *Shoot*, I said (or something like that). And then I took that sock *and put it in the hamper*. (Um, you saw this coming, right?) What was annoying was that I had to put the unsoiled sock in the hamper too. Because, after all, they're in this together: they're *socks*. Forever friends.

Socks. A model for us all.

In high school, my English class was once assigned the task of trying to write a story on the spot, during the class. (This is in my sophomore year.) I'd been reading a lot of Dostoevsky by that point, in particular, his *Notes from Underground*, and so I begin the story somewhat like this: *I hate to write; I hate communication. Communication means you have to talk to people. I hate people*. Something like that. (Pretty derivative, I can say now—but then I guess I thought I was exploring new territory.) The teacher is walking about the classroom looking over our shoulders as we write. She gets to me, and starts to read what I've written. I'm expecting praise. "Well don't do the assignment if you don't want to!" she says suddenly, loudly, and with real defensive irritation. I'm totally confused, of course. "But, but, but, that's not me," I say, pointing at the piece of paper I've been writing on. I'm hoping, I guess, that she'll recognize the evident differences between me and a piece of paper (at least after I point them out). "That's the narrator. You know, the narrator talking. I'm writing a *story*, here. Like you asked us to." "Well that's pretty weird," she says, "I never heard of anything like that"; and she walks off. Weird? I'm thinking. Isn't that what you do in *fiction*? Make it up? Make up the narrators? Their personalities? And so on?

So I play it cautious (for once). After all, *grades* are on the line. I tear up what I've written, and I start something else. "Once upon a time," my new story begins, "two men and a rabbit walk into a bar"

There's a charitable way, however, to read my old friend's reaction. He's asking: What's the point of entry to this story? Why did *you* want to write it? What are *you* up to in writing a story like this?

1982 was a very long time ago; in a number of very real ways I am not that person (any longer). But I think I know what I was up to as far as this story is concerned. It's this (and I still believe this): We're not very visible to ourselves, and others aren't very visible to us. We use standard strategies to interpret ourselves and one another, and these work most of the time: Why has

someone gone into a Starbucks and gotten on line? They want to procure a Starbucks product (probably coffee). Why is someone chatting up someone else of the opposite sex at a café or a bar or whatever? Well, under a wide range of circumstances we know both why someone else might do it and why we're doing it (if we are).

We can happily think of ourselves as transparent to ourselves (our motives, our drives, what we want, or don't know if we want, what we're attracted to, and why, not attracted to, etc.—what our actions at the moment we're doing them *mean*) as long as what we're doing is pretty straightforward, pretty much *not* out of the ordinary. And most of us are lucky enough to do—for all of our lives—pretty much what's not out of the ordinary. We live lives that don't challenge our easy interpretation of ourselves—of who we are. It's the few unlucky ones who are in trouble: whose internal psychological machinery causes them to wander off the straight and narrow path of behavior (and also off the straight and narrow path of self-interpretation). *What am I doing? And why?* people like that find themselves asking. And it's not at all easy to supply an interpretation. The old tools don't work; the behavior and thoughts don't seem add up. Some of these people go through their entire lives not understanding why they do what they keep doing. Not understanding themselves *isn't* particularly special to them. What's special is that their wayward behavior is constantly forcing them to be constantly aware that they're not transparent to themselves.

Is it really such a surprise that our minds—our personalities—everything that makes up our psyches, as it were, can be largely invisible to us? Many of us are such complicated machines; and we tell such simple-minded stories about ourselves. By the way, I'm not making a deep skeptical claim here about “hermeneutics” or anything like that. I'm not saying it's intrinsically impossible to figure ourselves out, or to figure other people out. I'm just saying: *It's often really hard. Harder than you think.* Find someone a little complicated (yourself, if you are) and try it some time. Try to tell a story about what the person is up to that explains *all the pieces*. (Not just some of the pieces. Not just some of the obvious pieces.) By the way, I have to stress this: some people *are* obvious—both to themselves and to others. You can relax around people like that. You always know what's coming. And so do they.

Anyway, that's what I think I was up to. Of course (ha ha) this is an interpretation of what I was doing while I was writing this story. I don't remember *thinking* this. And my notes from the time I composed the story don't say this either. (They are pieces of lines and images that later were incorporated into the story—sometimes greatly changed.) I don't usually write down things like: So here's my motivation for writing a story like this. None of my notes for any of my stories describe my motivations in such general ways. Notes like that wouldn't be valuable for writing a *story*. Nevertheless, am I right about the 1982 me? At least in this respect? I think I am.

You can go home again (and so what?)

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Hold me, please. I didn't go to work again today. Don't sigh like that. I'll try again tomorrow. I have sick days coming to me anyway. I woke up again nauseous. I couldn't tell you; you were sleeping so peacefully. (How do you do that? Are you really so happy when you're asleep?) No, don't answer. Just hold my hands—they're cold. I fantasized about being a writer again today. (That's bad, you know?) I thought of a beginning for a short story: "I had the kind of depression which made me want to find a Dempster Dumpster to crawl into in order to commiserate with whatever was in it," but that really doesn't fit the story I was fantasizing I wrote. It fits my mood this morning, although I would never want to commiserate with anything: I'm too selfish. Hold me tighter. So I went into the bathroom and as I usually do (you know this, right?) I took my socks and underwear with me and put them on the towel rack. After my shower, I draped the socks and underwear on my shoulder so I could pull the towel from the towel rack without disturbing them. Then I remembered to take the soap from the tub and put it back over the sink—as you always ask me to do! But I dropped it, and leaning down to pick it up, one of my socks fell off my shoulder. I picked the sock up and flipped it onto my shoulder where, instead of landing peacefully, it bounces like a diver on a board and then flips twice concluding with a resounding slurp in the toilet. (The toilet was clean; I mean there was only water in it.) I slipped into the present tense: isn't that stupid? I'm here with you, not there in the bathroom. So I wore the sock anyway. Yeah. I think I was trying to degrade myself somehow. I

threw it back in there to make sure it was good and wet, and then put it on. It made me uncomfortable because it rubbed against my shoe. And you know, it was really cold today. But I'll tell you about that shortly. Please don't be angry with me: just hold me tighter. No, I don't remember breakfast. You still hadn't awakened. Yes, I know that I got up early again; I'm not attacking you; I never attack you do I? No, if you're hurt because of what I do to myself, that doesn't count. So anyway, I decided to go to my old neighborhood. You know, where I lived until I was ten. I'd been wandering the streets until a little after noon when I decided this. My foot was frozen and I would be able to warm it in the subway. Now promise me you won't be angry with me. I took the subway. There's nothing wrong with *that*—wait a minute! So the IRT was kind of empty, but there was this gorgeous girl sitting somewhat across from me. Don't pull away please! I'll kill myself. I have to tell you this. I fell in love with her. Well, you know what I mean. Please hold both my hands. So I kept trying to attract her attention. (But this is New York, you know?) I couldn't and started to think it was because of the sock. Well of course it wasn't because of the sock, but I'm trying to describe my emotions (or something in me, whatever it is). So I tried to look down at my foot without attracting too much attention; you know, looking for stains on the shoe. I'm sorry this is so weird. So I moved over to her, smiling at her as I did so, but she didn't seem to notice (but no one ever seems to notice anything until they do something about it). So what do I talk about, I wondered. The weather? I giggled out loud at that thought. Yes, *out loud*. And then I put my hand on her knee. Her knee! And massaged it a little. I'm really sorry. I really am. Don't pull away please and don't moan. And don't curse. Don't frown either. So she leaps up (what do you expect, right?)—oh I switched tense again—she leaped up furiously and said “Do that again and I'll kick you where you'll remember it.” Yeah I know it serves me right. That's not the point. Look I understand her position, I do! I can understand what

it's like to be molested by a creep in the subway, and I've always been careful not to upset anyone for that reason. I wanted to demonstrate to her that I understand—understood—that I was a creep, that it was all right for her to be angry (some women feel guilty about expressing their anger when this sort of thing happens, you know?) But what could I do? Now all this didn't cross my consciously, but it's what I had in mind if you know what I mean. So I smiled (stupidly, I guess) and took off my glasses and smashed them under my foot—the one with the wet sock. I don't think she got the idea (I'm not sure what the idea was). She stared at me a moment and then went to another car. I don't remember her expression—I couldn't see it. I spent some time hoping she would come back with a cop. I didn't look at the other passengers; I couldn't see them either. I'm sorry. Hug me. So then I started to fantasize that I was writing a story. (I really don't understand why I do this—I don't even like *reading*.) The story—this is going to be hard to reconstruct—is about this guy. How would it begin? Oh: “It was morning and like every morning, he had to get up. He had been having nightmares about small toes.” Toes! Not toads. I don't know what it means; I only thought it up. So he is very timid and weak. And he is scared of pigeons. I spent a lot of time imagining him wincing every time a pigeon flies near him. Or covering his head and running in public when he sees a pigeon on a building. And the pigeons know! I mean they get a kick out of going near him and hissing ominously when he is on a park bench. It's not often that an animal can get back at people; you can't blame them. So anyway one day he notices—I guess it's for real; I don't think he is imagining it—that some of the pigeons have artificial limbs. I mean it! Some of them have little mechanical legs. Others have mechanical wings—one is dragging along what looks like a tiny kidney machine on wheels. It's all very weird. I don't think I worked any more of the story out on the train; I'm not sure. I got off at my stop; a cop had never come. So the neighborhood hasn't changed that much. (But it

should have! It's been over twenty years. I feel cheated.) I can't take this. Hold me tighter. So I went to my old playground. It was still there except that they put rubber padding under the swings and the slides. Childhood was *dangerous* when I was a boy. We were *prepared* for the real world. My sock had never dried (I think it actually froze while I was out walking around) and the cold made my foot hurt. (You know, that kind of cold soreness.) And I wanted to look at the children playing and the mothers watching (the mothers were my age or thereabouts, right? Do you think we should have a child? Maybe after I get well). But I couldn't see! This is really stupid. I would have to move up very close to see their expressions and I was afraid that everyone would think I was a pervert. I am a pervert! I have no more grip on my past than a voyeur has on his neighbor's sex life. I wanted to go on the swings, but I was sure all the mothers were watching me very carefully. (I don't know this; I couldn't see.) So I sat there shivering and fantasizing. I went over in my mind again about the man and the pigeons with their various artificial parts. He started noticing them all over the place. He is outraged by this. Obviously someone is either experimenting on pigeons or there is a very sick sadist out there. He tries to interest the public in this. (I mean, this perfectly timid man has been roused to action.) He goes to the police (who understandably think he's nuts), his Congressman (he actually finds out who his Congressman is!) and other public figures. Oh by the way, I also developed other parts of his character: he is jealous of retarded people (I swear this occurred to me in the playground—you'll see why I say this later) and is uneasy around television sets. Anyway—hold me I'm cold—I got too cold in the playground and finally left—to the great relief of the mothers I imagine—taking a few candy wrappers I found on the ground as souvenirs. I have them in my coat pocket. It would be better if you throw them out for me after I fall asleep. Don't do it now when I can see what you're doing and regret it. So as I think I've told you before (I hope you're not bored) my school

was next to the playground. So I went to the school. I stepped into its corridor (which I didn't really remember) and there were these middle-aged women there whose fuzzy faces glared at me. I tried to explain that I had gone to school there twenty years before and I was interested in seeing the old place again and did they know the names of my old teachers—I mentioned the names. But I felt uncomfortable because I kept squinting at them and they didn't invite me in. They didn't know my teachers either (well, it had been over twenty years, right? The whole thing was silly). So there is just one place left to visit in the old neighborhood, right? My home. Actually, my apartment building. As I limped in its direction I thought about how I would have liked to sit in the classrooms just for old time's sake. But I wouldn't have fit in the chairs I guess—and the other children would have been upset anyway. Hold me. And then the ending of the story came to me. One day he would give up in despair—no one ever believed him; who pays attention to the poor pigeons?—and he goes home, sits in a chair and never gets up again. Family comes to visit him, and some friends (he has a friend or two I guess) and he smiles when they talk to him, but he never speaks and never gets up. Silly ending. I guess I thought of it because of the chairs in the classroom. So I stand in the courtyard of the apartment building for a few minutes. I didn't go in. (What for? Why did I even come here?) So as I'm leaving the courtyard this fellow approaches me—a little balding guy who is retarded. Mildly retarded I suspect. (You can tell that sort of thing by the wrinkles on their faces—they're always in the wrong places.) “What do you want?” he says to me. “Well”—I said something like this; I don't really remember the exact words—“I used to live here when I was a kid, when I was about eight; I just came back to see the old neighborhood—nostalgia.” I wondered if he knew what the word meant. He looked at me a moment and then said “Yes, I remember you. How have you been all these years?” I said that I had been all right and he walked into the building. I was a little bewildered until I realized

that I actually did know who he was. When I was a kid, the superintendent of the building had a retarded son (I remembered my mother complaining about him: he always used to throw garbage onto a patio outside our window and the cats would eat the stuff and get sick there). I started to cry even though I was quite sure he didn't remember me—I've changed a lot since I was eight and besides, he's retarded. As I cried there in the courtyard I did something I didn't understand until later. I knelt down and scratched at the cement. I was trying, I saw later, to dig back to my time, to do a minor archaeological dig into the cement archives in front of me. I hoped, I suppose, to find a fossilized piece of chewing gum with my toothprints in it or at least the imprints of my childhood cries. But such things are too faint for me to find. So I came home instead and told you this story. Do you think we could visit a museum tomorrow?