

The silent H in Honest

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When I met Carl ten years ago in Oslo, he was still studying and despite preparing for an exhibition with a sought-after commercial gallery in town, Standard (Oslo), he was living off a student loan and an elaborate scheme of free hotel breakfasts.

In fact, he had meticulously planned a routine of breakfast buffet heists, complete with a costume designed to blend into the morning tide of hotel guests. This routine, however, would eventually collapse in spectacular fashion, causing his complete and utter public humiliation. But for now it was working.

It was a week that marked the beginning of something I only later understood – how an artist's greatest performance might not be their work, but the act of passing for someone who belongs.

The first clue that let me in on this routine of his was a neat stack of assorted hotel key cards sitting on a shelf in his living room, next to the foldout sofa I was sleeping on. That summer I was doing my research program with OCA (Office for Contemporary Art Norway) when I stayed at Carl's tiny student apartment. Upon first entering I noticed a distinct fragrance: it was the same summer he'd brought a wheel of traditional Danish cheese, from his hometown of Copenhagen.

But something else in the entryway caught my attention. A narrow shelf with a few oddly specific items: a set of brown suede moccasins, a pair of glasses (seemingly non-prescription) and the Norwegian business newspaper *DN*. Only later did I understand what those items on the shelf really meant.

At the time it seemed off to me that he'd be interested in business – he carried the kind of mental drift you often see in artists, especially painters. When I asked him about his art, for example, his eyes would sort of glaze over, as if the train of thought behind them had quietly derailed.

It's easy to get caught up in your own thoughts – we all do it. But painters, oil painters in particular, are perhaps experts in this field. As devout seclusionists, they hunker down in a room for days, weeks, months, years. With nothing to exorcise their lingering mental projections but the oil paints that demand a slow and malleable road to reprieve.

That week, Carl told me to meet him for coffee outside The Thief, a high-end waterfront hotel. The name itself was fitting. Once you enter through the glass gates, you're greeted by more glass. Dark glossy surfaces, marble, and high ceilings cascade the sounds and reflections of anyone in there.

It reminded me of the lobby of one of the big banks in Frankfurt, my former hometown — transparent architecture, the kind my Berlin friend Byung-Chul Han likens to panopticon prisons. But this lobby felt more like a diorama — a theatre where guests, often unaware, play the role of people-in-waiting. A daydreaming lull that was about to erupt into a drama.

Just as I parked my city bike, the glass doors flew open. Out came flying a man — literally tossed through the air like an open purse. His outfit scattered on the pavement: a broken pair of glasses, a windswept newspaper (*DN*), and one brown suede moccasin (the other still attached). The flying man was Carl, and in the doorway stood a large, bearded man in a hotel uniform, yelling something in Norwegian while pointing his brick-like hand with a column of a finger down at him.

I could feel the peering white side-eyes of the people next to us, staring from the street café. The second-hand embarrassment rolled over me like a paralyzing wave. Still, I leapt down and grabbed his arm to lift him out of the image of a distraught medieval fool rolling around in the lower corner of a Bruegel painting.

“Florian!” he exclaimed, his eyes drooping.

He let out a pained whimper as he pulled himself up, subtended by his broken props on the pavement — hoist by his own petard.

As we walked off, I turned to cast a last, apologetic glance at the hotel guard, and I saw something that, to this day, has never left my mind’s eye. Behind him stood a woman, staring at Carl through her narrow glasses with a sort of piercing, unreadable expression.

On our way home, I asked him what happened, but he didn’t want to talk about it. He was mortified. Both of us were exhausted after that. I went off to write on my thesis, but I felt stuck all day. The writing was on my mind even as I lay in bed in the evening. That night, my dreams were vivid.

The letters would mingle and dance like physical figures with their own personalities: slanted, slouched, cursive, confident, bold. But I felt something else. The smell from the cheese was creeping into my dream, like a Sartre-esque nausea pulsating from the hard, curved letters themselves. It woke me up. In the flickering darkness, I could hear Carl sleep-talking in the other room, and I realized that’s where the dancing letters in my dream had come from.

A name kept rolling off his lips like spit bubbles.

B... Barbara.

The following day, I asked him what had happened at The Thief. He just looked at me with those droopy eyes again and shook his head. We agreed to go out that Friday to blow off some steam and forget about the whole thing.

When the day came, we went to the east part of town, to a shady karaoke bar, *Bør og Børsen*. After loosening the hard contours of our polite personas by drinking tequila shots and singing at the top of our lungs for two hours, he finally opened up about that morning at The Thief.

He first explained to me his routine in detail. He'd hover discretely across the hotel lobby to the restroom and wet his hair. Then, seemingly freshly showered, he would walk from the elevators with the other guests coming down for breakfast. Along with the newspaper, he'd casually hold the defunct key card in his hand, visible, as he walked into the breakfast lounge- eye-nodding at the receptionist in passing.

Then he had a plan for what to do in the unlikely case he was asked to identify himself: he was meeting *Barbara*. As fate would have it that day, Barbara was indeed on the list – but when asked to spell it, he was off by one silent letter, prompting the security to call her in to verify him. The rest of that interaction was still seared into my mind's eye.

When I asked him why the name *Barbara*, he gave me a ramblingly neurotic and granular account of how this name, this idea, formed in his mind. But after all, where do ideas come from if not from an unconscious synaptic convergence: mental tracks, lines (stripes, if you will) that intersect and overlap to spark new neural pathways.

Barbara, being a cross-culturally common name – originally from Greek but widely used in Western, Slavic, and Hebrew cultures, and even as a unisex name in certain African and Arabic countries – allowed for a greater hit ratio, should the hotel search their bookings.

The original Greek meaning of the name also made it fatefully ironic: **stranger**.

But moreover, it was a name easily associated with a specific generation – a person who's been around long enough to see the compounding of their cultural capital. Perhaps a city-dwelling, middle-aged gallerist, critic, curator, director – someone from a higher substrate of the academic cultural class – the kind of person he had a frightful love-hate relationship with, he explained.

The kind of person who, in his own professional nightmare, would see through his facade, rip the costume off, and reveal his art practice for what he feared it really was: unqualified, irrelevant, hermetic, privileged, navel-gazing masturbation (*not an exact quote, but in spirit, if not in letter*).

By using the name for his charade, he thought he could somehow reclaim power over this mental projection – which is all it really was.

Until that day. When Barbara, flesh incarnate, tore off his mask and cast his mentally projecting ego to the (very real) stone curb.

All of it unravelled by a single missing letter in a name.

Which is not nothing. After all, a name is like a compact zip file, containing the identity, personality, and vibe of an individual, encrypted into a single sweet jingle. A name is the outline of a whole personhood – encapsulated so it can be delivered like a pill from mouth to ear.

Carl went on with his life, as we all do. But he never again used names not his own. Something in him had shifted, not dramatically, but like the invisible realignment of tectonic plates. A subtle withdrawal from the performance.

And I've often wondered since, if that's what we all fear most: not being found out by others, but by the idea of others we carry inside us. The internal audience. The imagined Barbara.

A single letter undone him, yes. But more truthfully, it revealed him. Like the silent "h" in "honest" – there, but never voiced. Only noticed when it's missing.