

An excerpt from *A Theft* by Saul Bellow.

Clara Velde, to begin with what was conspicuous about her, had short blond hair, fashionably cut, growing upon a head unusually big. In a person of an inert character a head of such size might have seemed a deformity; in Clara, because she had so much personal force, it came across as ruggedly handsome. She needed that head; a mind like hers demanded space. She was big-boned; her shoulders were not broad but high. Her blue eyes, exceptionally large, grew prominent when she brooded. The nose was small -- ancestrally a North Sea nose. The mouth was very good but stretched extremely wide when she grinned, when she wept. Her forehead was powerful. When she came to the threshold of middle age, the lines of her naive charm deepened; they would be permanent now. Really, everything about her was conspicuous, not only the size and shape of her head. She must have decided long ago that for the likes of her there could be no cover-up; she couldn't divert energy into disguises. So there she was, a rawboned American woman. She had very good legs -- who knows what you would have seen if pioneer women had worn shorter skirts. She bought her clothes in the best shops and was knowledgeable about cosmetics. Nevertheless the backcountry look never left her. She came from the sticks; there could be no mistake about that. Her people? Indiana and Illinois farmers and small-town businessmen who were very religious. Clara was brought up on the Bible: prayers at breakfast, grace at every meal, psalms learned by heart, the Gospels, chapter and verse -- old-time religion. Her father owned small department stores in southern Indiana. The children were sent to good schools. Clara had studied Greek at Bloomington and Elizabethan-Jacobean literature at Wellesley. A disappointing love affair in Cambridge led to a suicide attempt. The family decided not to bring her back to Indiana. When she threatened to swallow more sleeping pills they allowed her to attend Columbia University, and she lived in New York under close supervision -- the regimen organized by her parents. She, however, found ways to do exactly as she pleased. She feared hellfire but she did it just the same.

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