

I woke up early to catch people kissing.

Cruel Contents--that was the name of my sketchbook, as it always had been. It just seemed right for the pages within, covered with the black fragmentary smudges of my drawings. My father would call them scrawls or doodles, but my mother recognized them instantly as not simply an observation of form and volume but of character and personal depth. Typically I would watch people for hours, analyzing their each and every mannerism. What were they like when they talked to their significant other as opposed to the barista at the coffee shop? How did their face change when they caught a whiff of society's rotten underbelly? Their bodies told me more than could ever fill all the libraries in all the world. It was a secret language that only I could speak, understand, and translate. As it always had been, so it always would be.

The kids at school couldn't possibly fathom it. They were moving too fast, whipping about like a windsock during a tornado. Any which way their head turned that was the way their tiny torsos followed, no thought or method to it. I couldn't draw them; not because I couldn't focus on them but because their observation took all of three seconds.

One: gender. For whatever reason, kids our age divide everything into a stick figure with legs or a stick figure wearing a dress. It was one or the other and the specific traits, personalities, games, and activities therein could not spill over no matter what. For instance, on more than one occasion I have watched a girl be ejected from a ragtag soccer match because the rest of the team realized she was, in fact, a girl. Before the discovery they had passed her the ball enough times to pull ahead of the other team. Afterwards they lost dismally. Who do you think they blamed?

Two: class. This could mean what grade you were in, whose classroom you were in, or what classroom your best friend was in. That was a barrier which was impossible to be breached, except in the extenuating circumstances of field trips. It was social suicide to fraternize with "the enemy" during school hours. How this came to be is beyond even my powers of observation, mostly because it's been going on for what seems like eternity. For all they know it's always been this way. It's all that ever will be. I think that's sad.

Three:

This one I have trouble with. There's not just one word for it, more like a phrase or two that can be put to good use here. There's something behind the eyes, not unlike the soul the poets like to blather about so much, that some kids have and some don't. Naturally the ones who bluster to and fro, breaking things willy nilly have this odd bestial quality to the whites of their eyes, as if you're in a staring contest with a particularly stupid cow. They get all milky and unfocused too easily. It makes me wonder whether they have any brain function at all. The sports teams, especially, suffer from cow-eye. You ask one simple question that doesn't involve kicking or hitting or throwing and they blank out so hard you'd think you'd hit a secret switch, like turning on a machine. Or a robot. Robotics! That's what it is.

Three: robotics. Do they or don't they think for themselves? Have they ever made a decision for themselves, uninfluenced by their peers? If a robot is programmed to hammer until its arm falls off, that's what it will do. If a child is taught that in order to fit in, he or she must rise in the societal hierarchy or be squashed in the ensuing stampede for attention and fame, that child will do whatever it takes to avoid metaphorical death. It takes a child to realize this kind of cutthroat action even crosses the minds of such benevolent youngsters. If I brought my findings to the attention of anyone over the age of fifteen I would get laughed all the way to the nuthouse.

No one takes a kid seriously, and I seriously doubt they ever will. As Kurt Vonnegut might say, "So it goes."

My parents don't know this, but I stole their copy of *Slaughterhouse Five* from the bookshelf some weeks ago, burned through it in a day or two. It's really riveting stuff. I often find myself daydreaming about what it would be like if the school got firebombed. What precautions would the staff and faculty take? Would they have any in place at all? If not, what would death feel like?

These are not things a ten year old should be thinking about, but I can't help it. My mind's a runaway train that fell off the tracks a long, long time ago and it has no intention of stopping anytime soon. I'm not sick, like some of the kids think. I'm perfectly healthy, other than the fact that there's a constant humming in the base of my skull which urges me forward into knowledge. Some nights I don't sleep, just wander aimlessly around the neighborhood, learning by doing. Trial by fire, as it were.

My sketchbook helped a little with the clutter in my brain. When I tried to speak my thoughts aloud they all jumbled together in a halting, jittery pattern that no one could understand, but my drawings were as fluid as could be, legible and precise variations on real life. I likened them to musical compositions, a formatting of thought into permanent, concrete reality. My parents, on the other hand, liked to shove them at the therapists and bawl--pleading with me to explain why I was drawing such grotesque caricatures of family, friends, passersby. How was I supposed to tell them that's how I saw those people, what they really were instead of a hollow, false projection?

The day the end started was a beautiful one. We lived on the bay then, as we always had. I assumed, as children so often do, that we would always stay there. Being grown on fresh breezes and hazy organic sunsets had formed me in the way a potter would a bowl of clay. The impression I had all my childhood was that everyone grew up the way I did, skipping rocks after dinner and being woken by the cautious arms of the sun. Sadness was a concept that barely ever crossed my mind, much less dominated it like my brethren in the cities neighboring our little hamlet. Anxiety was brought on by wondering whether or not the waves would lap against the shore here or further down the pebbly coastline, not whether people liked me or if I was doing what I was "supposed" to. When you live by the water, somehow all worries just wane with the ebbing tide.

Blue skies towered above us as we sprinted down towards the water. Our breath was catching in our chests in great heaving bursts, and the sickly sweet smell of children's sweat tangled amid the smooth bellows of wind coming off the bay. One of us toppled into the crystal waters, shattering the glass surface. I forget who it was; maybe Pascal, or Helena. Either way, they were the ones who started the game, splashing and throwing hunks of soaked sand at each other. It was summer, early June, and the waters were temperate leaning towards chilled--our parents would have a fit if they knew where we were. But of course, back then, it was out after breakfast and back in before dinner. Fending for ourselves made life so much fuller. There was everything to explore, mistakes to be made, nothing to distract us from the richness that existence had to offer. We sated our childish hunger for never-ending joy by filling our pockets with rocks and kicking down weeds and feeling the edge of the bay tickle our feet.

Water was still cleansing back then. Wind still smelled sweet on a hot day. Clouds still roved their vast, heavenly racetrack. Life was still normal.

So, like I said, the day was beautiful. Not the conventional kind, though, not after a while. The blue skies turned grayish and plump with rain, eventually spilling their guts onto us without so much as a crack of lightning as warning. I always liked freak rainstorms, they seemed spontaneous and earthly, like they were originally planned to be. Weathermen were brought in so people wouldn't get wet when they didn't want to, but I think that takes the spice out of life entirely. There's nothing more human than walking on the shore of an apparently endless body of water, carelessly kicking stones this way and that, when out of nowhere you are drenched by a downpour God himself picked out for you.

You understand me, don't you? Even if you couldn't put into words the feelings you've had about the terror you've felt thinking about the inevitability of your death or the miracle of your consciousness, you find solace in the words I'm putting down, right? It's all making sense somehow, though you thought nothing like this would ever come along. This is what life is, at its most basic, most primal. Connection across time and space and dimension.

Hold out your hands, as if you were holding a baseball, about to pitch the last out of the game. Imagine the roar of the crowd, pulsating against your eardrums. For just a moment you pause and feel your blood rushing throughout your body, feel your heart hammering against your ribcage. Muscles tensed, you look at the ball in your hands and realize it's a machine. Cold, lifeless steel tempered in such a way that if you dropped it, it would never stop rolling away. There is a sudden innate urge to hurl it from you, let someone else carry its burden, but your hands are frozen to it. As the baseball field falls away from beneath you, the purpose of this strange sphere becomes all too obvious.

They told us it wasn't a weapon. Simply a means to an end. One for each family across the country, mass produced right here in America with care that went unrivaled in our offshore sweatshops. Delivered anonymously and secretively. A button was inlaid on the top of the thing, barely visible unless you looked for it with intent to press it. And God forbid you pressed it.

News stations from all over the amber waves of grain reported on the family that prematurely poked that tantalizing little node. Across the fruited plain the story was told and retold: a minute amount of some kind of nerve gas crept from the sphere, and the family of six was dead. Mother, father, four kids killed by something no larger than a baseball. Cue the castle thunder, the whinnying of horses, the crying of children.

Why would the government issue something like this? They must have known that someone would be stupid or curious enough to test it out, fully aware of the consequences. Did they know something the general public did not?

“As a point of fact, clarification is needed on the subject of the machines.”

The President looked haggard. Congress had pushed the bill for the machines through without his permission. He was not on board with this whatsoever. “Pushing the button on the top of the machine will release a chemical known as cyclosarin. This is an extremely potent and deadly toxin that leads to death in minutes. It is not painful, but it is permanent. The reason for the distribution of these machines is confidential at this time. Thank you for your time, America.”

Conspiracy theories ran rampant for months after the State of the Union address. Aliens were coming to annihilate us. World War Three was impending and much worse than we could imagine. North Korea teamed up with Iran and Russia and all three superpowers had launched their nuclear weapons in a joint effort to eradicate the Western threat. None seemed as likely as the most outlandish of them all: that the government was attempting crowd control.

That I believed from the first. It was simpler than invasion. It was more cost-effective than war, and less time consuming. And it didn't lead to panic like a military coup might. At least, not as widespread panic. When the death machine was in your own home, that was typically where the fear was contained.

My parents wanted to throw it out the second they saw it. It came in an unmarked package, small and unassuming. I thought it was my birthday present from my grandparents, foolishly. My childlike innocence showed through for a brief moment, and I resented myself for it. I could tell the cow-eye was rising in me unbidden. Banishing it would be tough, especially now that my parents stopped working to figure out what to do with this device.

It was strange having them home, even stranger being home at this time of day. Usually I'd be at school, but my teacher's husband pressed the button while she slept so class was cancelled. Seeing them panicked and hasty, my mother throwing food together with the furtive, scared movements of a vole going into hibernation, my father pacing unceasingly from the kitchen to the liquor cabinet.

A thought occurred.

"Could I have some?" I asked, gently touching the tip of his elbow. It was wrinkled and dry, like the rest of him.

He recoiled, then reconsidered. "What's your poison?" he replied.

"Mark." My mother's voice was stern, an unwelcome tone to her jovial throat. "He's ten years old."

"And," Dad countered, "faced with the inevitable sooner than he should be. Give the kid a break, he might not see tomorrow."

He poured me a whiskey, swirling the sepia-tinted liquid lazily.

"You're not thinking of pushing the button," Mom said. It wasn't a question.

"Of course I'm thinking about it, Diane. They sent it to us for a reason. I don't know what that might be, but it's gotta be big enough that they'd give us an out."

I took a tentative sip of the brown liquor. Fully unprepared for its horrific burning sensation, I dropped the glass on the floor, where it broke. The thin, oaky flavor of the whiskey exploded into the air. I drank it in readily, relishing the scent over the taste.

"Goddammit," Dad muttered. He gathered the pieces and sat, defeated, in his leather chair. Miraculously the glass wasn't totally destroyed; four large chunks remained of the sturdy material. Sniffing, my father rearranged them into the normal shape. He stared at it for a moment, then let them collapse onto his lap.

"Do it again," I urged. "Do it different."

His eyes were penetrating, but not harsh. He was a soft man when he needed to be, hard in all other aspects, but never cruel. I didn't have a drawing of him in the sketchbook.

Flipping the largest piece, my father reassembled the broken glass. He slid smooth edges against jagged peaks, valleys paired with summits unreachable. When he was done, it wasn't a glass anymore. It was a crown.

After lunch (cold cuts and stale bread, I opted for the end pieces no one else would eat), Mom made Dad clean up the spilled whiskey and prepared herself a gin and tonic. Together they drank in the living room while I watched cartoons, as if everything were normal. The device was in their bedroom, thrown at the back of the closet, hidden behind Mom's shoe collection. How did I know this? I found it. I was holding it.

I pressed the button while they watched.

Everything moved slowly; Dad kept a firm grip on the glass as he got up to run at me while Mom stood and dropped hers in disbelief. They were both so stereotypical about it, knocking the little metal baseball out of my hand and hugging me tightly. If we were going to die we were going to do it as a family. Or maybe they thought they could shield me from the dangerous chemical by covering me with their bodies. Neither of these things gave me any comfort, any false notions of hope. I pressed it for a reason, and that reason was simple.

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