

“Myopia & Micturition”

I am incredibly thankful for the corrective results received off my recent Lasik procedure, which has restored the clarity of vision I enjoyed as a small child. Unfortunately, the period of recovery afterwards proved a protracted experience, as one post-operative afternoon spent cleaning out the attic (an utterly horrendous morass that my fiancée, God bless her, refuses to set foot in) managed to invite all manner of unforeseen particulates into my still-sensitive corneae. Normally, I am told, the recuperative pause after such surgery lasts just a few days; however, in my case, it extended nearly to a month. Over the course of several subsequent visits to my ophthalmologist, I found myself repeatedly thinking back to some similar vision problems I’d experienced shortly before graduating high school, back when it seemed change was only a semi-constant, rather than (as it appears now) the very mode of being in the world. (At least, that's how I still see it.)

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In the spring of 1997, when I was seventeen—my thoughts singularly focused both on a girl, *and* on ascending the purgatory of Catholic high school for the heavenly realms of higher education—I took a short road trip one Friday evening up to the stomping grounds of my childhood. Heartburgh, North Carolina (its name, I learned in fourth grade social studies class, imparted by homesick Ulster Scots shortly after the American Revolution) was the small (pop: 15,000-ish) town in which I lived out the ages of two to ten. Afterwards, my family slalomed back and forth along the East Coast according to the

whims of my father's latest profession, which ranged from pastoring a Baptist church to supervising the manufacture of bus parts. In 1994, our final move—down from my father's home city of Philadelphia—brought us back to the Charlotte area and not far from the town where I'd spent my elementary school years.

Earlier that day, I'd reported to my after-school job (I silently bagged groceries and even more silently performed janitorial services at a local Harris Teeter) as usual, only to be sent home from lack of shoppers. I was pleased at getting the day off, so a spontaneous, scenic little trek seemed a fitting means to celebrate. I set off around 5PM and began an hour's leisurely drive northward through the rolls and curves of the Piedmont, intermittently puffing on menthol cigarettes that a recently made-legal classmate had purchased for me (all for the price of *just* fifteen dollars). About midway there, my driver's side window space, which I'd opened to aerate my untrusty 1985 Carolina blue Ford Tempo, inadvertently directed a granule of grit into my left eye. It proved terribly irritating, so I pulled over to a convenience store. Within the privacy of its single-user restroom, I discovered the particulate had seemingly embedded itself *into* the contact lens, so no matter how I tried to remove it, either with running water or by clumsy manual rubbing, it remained lodged inside. Forced to choose between severe irritation or legal blindness, I soon resolved to get along with just one functioning eye and unceremoniously flicked the damaged lens onto the floor. I wore the disposable variety and, after all, had any number at home to replace it. Moreover, my other eye was just fine, so I would simply disregard, ignore, and refuse to notice any and all blurry perceptions resulting from this optometric mishap. Before leaving the restroom, I paused to examine in the mirror my hair, which had reached (almost) the length of the 1964 Rolling Stones—almost covering the tops of the ears. It was a matter of utmost pride to me, my hair finally beginning to assert its own identity after the last mandatory crew cut to which my parents had subjected me before last year's family Christmas pictures. I

also picked a bit at my two-month old impression of an adult male's moustache (which was, as told to me many years later by someone I still consider a decent person, a source of great mirth to those behind my back). Lastly, I peed in the sink. An extra-large cup of strong coffee, supplemented by two capsules of (then-legal) ephedrine, completed my most immediate physical needs, and I finally arrived at the 'Burgh's shopping mall, Spruce Hill Square, shortly before sunset.

I winced when I noticed the first markings of unforeseen change upon the main entrance sign: "Spruce Hill" had become "ru ill." I parked my car and went inside, quickly chilled by the mall's air-conditioning and anaerobically squeezed by a grand assemblage of rednecks, hussies, and distantly incestuous couples who had come to see, to be seen, and to celebrate the small freedom of a Friday Night during the school year. Cigarette receptacles (known simply then as "ashtrays") lined the decorative water fountain at the mall's center, so I sat down on one of the benches there and people-watched as I smoked, the mall-bound petrichor of chlorinated fountain mist tickling my nose. Eventually, however, even my quiet presence betrayed me; the local mallrats had begun to notice *I* wasn't local, so their casual glances in my direction became a series of increasingly harder looks directed *at* me. I scanned the grounds for somewhere—*anywhere*—to feel less exposed, and decided upon Camelot Music, six or seven stores down.

An "alternative" rock tune on the store's speakers welcomed me inside. Immediately, I noticed two girls, slightly younger than I, standing in back; they were arguing in volumes well above that of the song that filled the room. Moving a bit deeper inside, I felt compelled to extinguish, using salivated fingers, my half-smoked cigarette (even though smoking was, of course, permitted therein), and replaced it in its pack. One of the girls—a short, chubby, bobcut blonde with braced teeth, wearing a baggy white t-shirt and blue jeans—giggled incredulously as the other—a tall, thin, pale body in black

jeans and a black turtleneck, over which cascaded a headful of nearly waist-length, corkscrew-curly, shiny black hair—explained to her why No Doubt’s latest single “sucked.” Intrigued, I moved closer, pretending to examine the stacks of classical discs while daring several glances out of the corners of my eyes.

After rehearsing mentally several potential conversation openers, I spontaneously issued the prescient observation: “No Doubt *sucks*.” It was the first time I’d spoken the entire day, discounting an oral report in AP Biology on the wonders of cilia. Then I turned and faced them. Though I found neither girl strictly attractive, at the age of seventeen, the very act of conversing face-to-face with a female teenage human creature was imperilling. For poise, I pinched my moustache twice—once under each nostril. The burnt menthol on my fingers seemed to help.

My participation as an observer to their ongoing dispute had gone unnoticed, and they greeted me with fair surprise. I took out my cigarettes, making certain not to select accidentally the half-smoked one, and slowly, methodically, struck up another match. Their eyes widened when I inhaled deeply without coughing. I suddenly felt taller than my six-foot-four self customarily allowed.

“Could we bum a cigarette?” the dark-haired girl asked, with perhaps a hint of flirtation, and without any trace of the surrounding area’s Southern accent.

“A cigarette between the two of you, or one for each of you?” I asked, immediately hearing how bad that sounded. Without waiting for a response, I pulled two sticks fifth-way out from the pack and extended my arm to the girls. The blonde happened to select my partially smoked specimen. She quickly replaced it without seeking a new one, either distrustful of their quality, or else out of shame for daring to smoke—and that *publicly*—while underage.

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Over the course of our ensuing conversation among the discs and tapes, during which Hannah (the dark-haired one) and I smoked two cigarettes *each*, I learned that the two girls were freshmen at East Farmdale High, about twenty miles north of Heartburgh proper—in other words, so far up and out in the sticks that a visit to the Spruce Hill Mall truly was an event. They'd also been “best buds” since kindergarten. Moreover, Hannah's older brother, Ethan, had been a basketball teammate and occasional classmate of mine way back in elementary school. (We met once a week in a remedial class for students who fared poorly in math.) Despite being more than a little curious about Ethan's subsequent development into a young man, I didn't raise the question. I simply paused to enjoy this rarest of moments: a girl—no, *two* of them—talking to me without the slightest betrayal of discomfort or boredom.

Although DeAnne—the blonde—was the straighter man of the two, both girls exhibited a certain carefreeness, a *joie de vivre*, that even the accident of their geography could not diminish. They were genuinely pleasant young ladies who did not hesitate to laugh if a comment or context seemed to call for it. As we talked, a number of thoughts mixed in my mind, the clearest of which was that I wished I'd had a friend similar to DeAnne's Hannah, or Hannah's DeAnne, while growing up. About twenty minutes later—or during the first real lull in our chatter—I suggested the three of us might adjourn to downtown Heartburgh's coffeeshop, The Stanky Feline, just a few miles away from the mall. To my small amazement, the girls agreed.

“I just need to call my dad to let him know because he's supposed to come pick us up at nine when the mall closes,” Hannah said. And with that, the three of us—a girl on either of my sides—strode to the mall's payphones, which were located by the water fountain. Hannah made her call, spoke for a minute out of my earshot, and hung up.

I walked over find out the news. “My dad said you can just drop us off at my aunt’s house when the coffeehouse closes cuz it’s only like five minutes away,” Hannah informed me.

“Aunt Kay! Oh yeah!” DeAnne chirped, lifting the palms of her hands up in the air a few times to 'raise the roof.'

I told Hannah that it was fine by me, if her father was the sort to trust strange guys in malls, and as long as her aunt didn’t mind two caffeinated teenagers sharing her residence overnight. Hannah laughed. “My family’s cool people,” she said. I half-smiled.

We moved toward the mall exit. A few steps into our procession, I sensed a small, giggly commotion behind me—a suspicion verified when I turned around and saw the girls were walking hand-in-hand. Pockets of mall-walkers, seemingly intrigued while simultaneously repulsed, stared and pointed at us. Somewhat startled myself, I asked, bluntly, if they were a “lesbian couple.” In the Heartburgh of 1997, such openness would have been exceedingly brave—even foolhardy.

“Nah, dude,” Hannah said, “we do this just to fuck with people. In China even *adult* women hold hands and it’s not considered gay or anything.”

“We saw all these slides from a missionary couple in China at my church where girls were always holding hands together,” DeAnne appended. My acquaintances' ongoing, willful action made me suddenly aware of my own hands, so I stuffed them into my pockets. Someone queued at the popcorn-and-Icee stand flicked a cigarette butt at us, and it bounced off my sternum. We kept walking, though at a swifter collective pace, and finally stepped out of the mall's conditioned air and into the balmy spring evening. I turned around and, to my great relief, saw no threatening bodies had followed us outside.

The girls unclasped hands once we reached my car. I moved to open the car doors for them, but before I could make my way to the opposite side, they had discovered I'd

accidentally left the doors unlocked and slid unassumingly inside. Hannah sat in front, and DeAnne took the back, on Hannah's side. I got in, started the car, and moved ourselves westward through the 'Burgh's "Old Money" strip, with all its triple-story Colonial Revivals and American Foursquares, to the downtown area.

I began pinching my moustache again and casually raised the topic of Hannah's older brother. Ethan, his sister told me, was as tall as I was—"but bigger"—and had "really long hair, like Eddie Vedder." This intrigued me, because the Ethan I went to elementary school with was a spindly, bespectacled, buzz-cut chap whom I had trouble envisioning as anything other than what I remembered him to be. I suddenly recalled that for our Spring 1989 basketball season, Ethan had scored only one point—a free throw. (*My two points that season had at least come while the clock was running.*)

I slowed down the Tempo as we entered the center of town, a square mile of almost uniformly dark storefronts and red-brick municipal structures, none of which stood higher than four stories. The downtowns of such Piedmont communities tended to close shop by 7 PM on Fridays, then reopen for limited hours on Saturdays (and made certain to cease all activity for The Lord's Days). Streetlamps waywardly lit the narrow side lanes that gridded the main drag to reveal small groups of skateboarders, to the irritation of local law enforcement, practicing their ollies and kickflips.

"Yeah, Ethan's still really smart, except for math. He's thinking about going to Duke, or Wake Forest, or..." Hannah paused, trying to recall where else her brother had applied.

"Hold that thought," I said, just as I pulled into a parking space in front of the coffeeshop. Something slightly extraordinary had caught my eye, and it was here my evening changed face into a visage far less pleasant.

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Despite the dim lighting, I had just spotted a familiar female figure under the awning of The Stanky Feline. She wore baggy JNCO jeans and a Misfits t-shirt, and held by its front truck an Alien Workshop skateboard. My adrenal glands, until this point merely foreplaying, decided now, without my consent, to throw a full-out orgy. I bolted from the car and sprinted, much like an oxidated Tin Man, to the nearest structure that offered shadow and seclusion—my two guests suddenly entrusted to their own common sense about what to do next. (Two decades later, the young folks might say that I had just been “triggered.”)

As geography would have it, I found myself moving in the direction of a small, newly-built Greek Orthodox church. (The Byzantine dome and *suppedaneum* cross atop seemed quite out of place, given the overwhelmingly white-bread spiritual instincts of the town). I darted around the church's far corner and squatted down underneath a nave window. Instinctively, I reached for my cigarettes, but my hand shook so as I fumbled with my shirt pocket that I finally just allowed both arms to drop limp. Then, pressing my back against the wall to sit down, I forced myself to breathe slowly—gradually aware of sweet, cinnamony vapors of incense seeping out of the church—and recounted, for no less than the hundredth time that day, the long-term event chain that now found me cowering underneath a window at a strange church in my old hometown. I'd suspected something like this would happen; I'd impractically invited it upon myself.

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It's baffling now to consider, but back in 1996, the internet was new—an amazingly new, terribly new—phenomenon for *everyone*. Cyberspace's Big Bang had instantiated an entire reality where previously there was none. Around the time of the Olympics, I had been dismissed from my summer job writing parking tickets at the local university (due to a clerical error on the part of my employers, who promised to hire me back the day I turned eighteen). For the remainder of my summer, I spent weekdays exploring

this rapidly expanding universe from one of two internet-linked computers in the university's library. The "alternative rock" radio station in Charlotte hosted, at the time, an online chatroom, from which it took song requests during the lunchtime hour. It was here that I gradually fell in love with one particular chatter. Or rather, I fell for her words and images on my screen. Thanks to the caution and remove of the internet, she was the first *real* girl who had ever given me serious attention and response. The fact that she hailed from my childhood hometown, moreover, seemed *too* perfect. (Yes, all this sounds incredibly cheesy, but for most any non-vegan tolerant of lactose, cheese is a delightful thing. Corn gets a similarly unfair rap, too.)

I would like, even now, to think of this girl as my once-girlfriend, but in truth—the objective reality from which we, as subjects, all too instinctively shirk engagement—she was merely an image, my *ideal* of what the female human creature should be. At the age of seventeen, I held this girl to the same categorical perfection that my ministry-bound classmates at Catholic school held the Mother of God. For example, I had convinced myself (rather easily, in fact) that this girl did not defecate. *Other* girls had such issues, of course (as several of my senses knew regretfully well from cleaning the restrooms at Harris Teeter), and could conceal them with varying degrees of hygienic success—but *this* particular one was somehow conceived without any inheritance of bodily offence. The knowledge of this was, for me, a simple matter of faith. And although, from the standpoint of the law—that sly prophet and guarantor of subjects to break it—certain actions I had taken over the course of early 1997, when riven of context, could have qualified me as a "stalker," I can honestly admit that I never once masturbated to her memory. "X"—as I will simply term her—had, for several Sundays in the latter half of 1996, even managed to pry my body out of the pews of my parents' Baptist church to attend Mass with her (and *her* parents, of course) at Heartburgh's oldest Roman Catholic church. This proved a source of great dissatisfaction to my folks,

who never shirked available opportunities to voice their distrust of both “this internet chit-chat” and Christian ecumenism. I gave no damn: Eve—pre-Fall—was happening to me.

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After thinking through these thoughts, not necessarily in that order, along with some truly unmentionable others, I recalled how I had left two very confused girls back at my car. Summoning dignity I did not possess, I retraced my steps and jaywalked back across the shadow-stricken street, making sure to keep X beyond the periphery of my vision.

“Dude, where the hell did you go?” Hannah asked. Her voice carried genuine concern.

Casually reaching for a cigarette, I told her I had a small bladder and it had hit me all at once. Hannah and DeAnne looked blankly at each other. I shrugged and re-lit the cigarette I'd halfway finished at the mall. It gave me just that bit of push to make it inside. By this point, I couldn't avoid sighting X, who was now sitting on the curb, her legs drawn up and feet propped on the skateboard. She was smiling wryly, evidently enjoying the curious pantomime taking place before her. I knew I would have to say something—*something*—so with an outstretched right arm I gave her a stilted gesture that unintentionally resembled that associated with the Third Reich. Her gimlet-eyes collimated on mine, prompting me to glance downward. “Smoking now?” she commented, and though I wouldn't look to confirm it, she was still smirking. Hannah and DeAnne, thankfully, had already entered the coffeeshop, so I followed their lead and retreated inside.

The Stanky Feline was a dirty, poorly lit place. Weekends tested its capacity for crowds, thanks to the abundance of local under-21s; many of them were students at the nearby Heartburgh High, which X attended as well. I scanned the tables and booths for faces who might be recognizing me and, to my relief, found no obvious ones. We single-

filed to the counter, I in back, and placed our orders—Italian sodas for the girls and a jumbo macchiato with an extra espresso shot for me. From some indistinct location near us, I distinctly overheard someone mutter: “*Ewww...smokers.*” It was the slight pause in-between the words, the unspoken ellipsis, that gave the utterance a highly unwelcomed illocutionary force, so I responded with a long, deliberate drag that I expelled at the clientele nearest us. Just before handing me my drink, the barista (known simply then as a “server”) quietly informed me that smoking was no longer permitted inside.

Ordinarily, such a notice would not have bothered me much, but given the unordinary circumstances of the night, the most sensible reaction seemed for me to open my mouth, place in it the embering ciggie—damned be the pain—and chew until I could swallow it, filter and all, without choking. A small sip of my steaming coffee sufficiently facilitated its journey downward.

“Dude, you just swallowed your cigarette!” Hannah blared, and quite a few heads turned in our direction.

“I made a statement,” I said acidly. An unoccupied table occupied a corner of the shop's side-room, so we sat down there. I thought a moment as I stared out the window. X had disappeared. “Do you know what they call cigarettes in England?” I asked my guests.

Their faces registered the same lack of expression. “Fags,” I said, a bit too loudly, and a few heads again turned in our direction. Unwilling to stop, I added, “So you could say I just had a fag’s butt in my mouth.” My smile was not returned by either of the girls. I gulped my coffee, burning my mouth and throat. Then I burped menthol.

DeAnne finally spoke up. “Where do you go to school?”

Pinching the tender hair under my nose, I explained that, for the next two months, I would continue attending Charlotte's largest Catholic school, after which I would happily graduate and begin college.

"Holy shit, you're Catholic?" said Hannah.

"I'm *not* Catholic," I quickly corrected her. I explained to her that, although my parents were not Catholic, they had—and with great unease, given their Fundamentalist convictions—chosen my current school for its strong college preparatory reputation. That, and the fact that I'd been booted earlier in the year from Charlotte's largest Baptist academy.

"Why'd you get expelled?" DeAnne asked.

That unpleasantry had occurred after I'd openly criticized the administration for their hypocritical handling of a classmate's pregnancy. They'd summarily expelled the girl, no questions answered. And when I—already in a precarious enrolment spot, thanks to an *eventful* previous semester—reminded the principal and vice-principal of the school's Christian obligations, which included its obligation to assist an at-risk, single, teenage mother, I was expelled, too. But I didn't feel like explaining all this, at least not right there and then, so I just told them I'd gotten too many demerits.

Hannah blinked a few times. "Damn, I thought *we* had it bad up *here*." She blinked some more. "You know, you should really try to lighten up, dude. Ethan actually used to act a lot like—"

I didn't wish to hear what was coming and interrupted her with far more self-assurance than I had shown at any point prior that evening. "Hannah, I gotta tell you—your brother was a fucking *loser* back in elementary school. *Nobody* liked him. No kids, no teachers, not even our fucking *pedophile* basketball coach. I tried being his friend, and he was just completely clueless. I could never tell if he was autistic or just some pretentious budding artist."

Even before I'd finished, I knew it was a terrible thing to say. Neither girl averted her stare, so I finally added, much more quietly, "It's good to hear how much he's changed now." Soon, Hannah's lips and chin trembled. DeAnne simply looked away.

I wasn't interested in hearing a response, especially a silent one. I slugged down the remainder of my coffee—still quite hot—and excused myself under the pretense of preferring to smoke in the free-range Heartburgh air. I stepped out onto the sidewalk and scanned my circumference. No one was around, but I still wanted to kick ass. I opened my unlocked driver-side door—I'd been too distracted earlier to bother locking it—and ignited my car, burning its rubber to a velocity well above the downtown twenty-five mile-per-hour limit. Then I realized just how bad I really *did* need to pee. (I hadn't gone since leaving the convenience store that afternoon.)

With this bodily sensation came a senseless idea that, for all its limited context, made unlimited sense to me. I squealed a U-turn and sped past the coffeeshop, headed straight for the stately old Roman Catholic church, about a two minute drive north, that X and her family attended. I reached it in less than a minute. I parked in its back lot—engine running—and hopped out, doing another Tin Man shuffle to the church's front steps. There, I unzipped, pulled out, and asperged its doors with a good ninety-five theses' worth of unholy water. The release was very, *very* good, and continued even as I walked back to my car—until I found its doors were all locked.

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Even now, buffered by some two decades of living on from that particular time, I still have an occasional habit of being in places I don't really need to be while doing things I probably shouldn't do as I encounter persons best left unseen. (Gratefully, my eye surgery has at least obviated the possibility of further contact lens issues.) In fact, just recently, word—or rather, electronic text with an attached selfie—reached me, against my otherwise successful methods of avoidance, that X, her husband, and their child are

all doing fine and dandy. Though I must profess with a note of bitter regret, but also sweet vindication, that she now *looks* like crap.