

Kane's First Post

Kane started this birthday in a way that he had not started any before it. He didn't get to his annual tradition of sitting down and writing an entry in a journal, which he only ever did on his birthday, his yearly attempt at making a record of his preoccupations, desires, fears that coursed through his mind at whatever age he happened to be exiting as well as of his musings on what lie ahead at whatever age he happened to be entering. He didn't even get to his usual morning routine of making himself a strong cup of coffee and enjoying the liquid's welcoming warmth amidst the cold fog as he walked through the nearby park lined with trees, before anyone else was up and about, so that he could tread on an earth that might as well be uninhabited, immersed in solitude.

Other priorities arose on this particular birthday. A number of days before the occasion, Kane had overheard people at the local coffee shop in conversation over how ever delightful it all was, seeing the photos of each other's grandchildren on one of the latest social media platforms (SnapGram or InstaChat, he couldn't remember which). That afternoon, Kane decided it was high time he threw himself into the digital fray. He had no grandchildren, of course, but he wouldn't have minded a glimpse into what his sister and her children were up to. It had been so long since he was together with them. The boys must be all grown by now.

He hurried home and sat down in front of his old box of a machine that barely passed for a computer. Kane gave it a couple of whacks, the only way he knew to turn it on. Nothing happened. He disappeared behind the desk, wrestling with a tangle of cords that threatened to ensnare him, cursing all the while. As he emerged from below and lifted his skull, he bumped it against the desk, an incident that never failed to occur when he was back there and that always

seemed to temporarily short-circuit Kane's neurological wiring as it caused him to stand straight up, open his eyes wide, and remain motionless for a minute. Once Kane came to, he whacked the computer again, and with what sounded like gears reluctantly beginning to rotate and clicking into place, the machine initiated the arduous process of turning itself on. He always relished this moment, the interlude between off and on, as the inanimate stirs and struggles forth into the animate and as the blinking light thickens to a steady green. He savored it by laying his head against the apparatus and pressing his ear up against its contours, hoping to gain some insight into the mystical process of its inner workings.

Now he could log into the site for the first time, but as he attempted to do so, a message popped up on his screen, which he proceeded to read aloud, a regular practice of his to make his den feel more inhabited. The language sounded strange to him, almost foreign, causing him to sound out each word as though he were parsing a code.

“Wel-come to t-he larg-est com-mun-i-ty in the en-tire-ty and the hi-stor-y of Moth-er Ear-th!” He looked up, puzzled. *Mother Earth?* Squinting, he read further. “Hel-p us hel-p you fi-nd you-r frie-nds and get con-nect-ed to the-m.” *Connected?* He paused again. “P-lease a-dd a pho-to to your acc-ount so oth-ers can i-den-ti-fy you.” *Identify? Photo?* He hadn't anticipated that he would need a picture of himself, yet he felt inclined to oblige the site due to its simple, polite language.

No one was around to take a photo of him, but he rummaged through some drawers anyway, fumbling miscellaneous papers of old scribblings around, finding his point-and-shoot camera that he had been given as a gift and had only used once, when he went with his sister and the boys to Europe on his birthday many years ago. Those same photos must still be on it, he imagined. He attempted to turn it on but the only thing that happened was that the icon of a

battery with a slash through it flashed on the display. Kane cursed the device. In the same drawer where he found the camera, he reached in, and after a while of moving his hand around, he pulled out a cord that dangled from his hand. He plugged it into the camera, but in one final act of obstinacy, the device took what felt like the better part of an hour before it had enough of a charge to turn on.

When the camera was ready, he pushed the button that looked like the play button on his old VCR. Then there they all were, standing before the Coliseum, Laura with her arms around the boys, he off to the side, and some out-of-focus passerby who had stepped into the frame at the instant the shutter opened, a blur of a stranger's image, hovering over them. He compelled his focus away from the spectral aura and back onto Laura and the boys as he tried to recall what it actually felt like to live the moment recorded within the tiny, luminescent screen. But his memory was no match for time, which had placed too great a distance between then and now. Too many things had happened to look upon the figures in the image with anything more than a vague familiarity as when one walks by someone in the street and has some sense that they met somewhere before, some time ago.

When the display automatically turned off after a few minutes, he picked himself up and went over to the mirror in his bathroom, camera in hand. It'd be rather clever, he thought, if he photographed the mirror and captured his image reflected back to the lens. He had no idea if there were any guidelines for this *account photo*—was he not supposed to smile like in a passport photo? He tensed his lower jaw, giving his features that rigor mortis-like expression common to all identification documents.

Staring straight ahead, he looked at the reflection of his eyes in the mirror. No new wrinkles on his face, a face he felt more estranged from with each passing year, nor any other

signs of aging. The paunch that was his abdomen had not grown any bigger, the bald head that was his hair had not grown any barer. And yet, somehow, he looked older. His eyes looked older. How bright they once were. Maybe it was that fluorescent lighting which everyone looks ashen under, or maybe it was just how he felt on that day. If one happens to feel older at a particular time, one will appear older, he reassured himself. He concluded that he mustn't have slept well last night. He'll get his energy back in a day or two, and then this unfamiliar feeling of a new depth to age will surely lift.

Remembering what he was doing, he snapped the photo—and then just in case that stern expression wasn't required, he stuck his tongue out, which was the hallmark of photos of him as a kid in his parents' family albums and which always caused his mother to first sigh but then laugh. “Not such a crank, are you?” he said to his reflection, smiling.

He spent the next hour fiddling with the hookup to his camera, transferring the photo to his computer, and uploading it to his account. When he couldn't find any rules about the photo, he decided to play it safe, opting for the one with the stern look for his profile. “Best to test the waters first,” he muttered and then thought to himself with the caution of a frontiersman who has stumbled upon some encampment: Get a lay of the land first and then present yourself accordingly.

He filled out the personal details in his account, making sure to add his phone number in case someone felt like calling him. The site then addressed Kane, asking him to type in the name of a friend to connect with. He thought of his sister. “It's only right that I should connect to her first,” he announced to his screen, believing that the order somehow mattered. With his hand that recently began to curl, just as his mother's hands had done in her later years, he typed her name using only his right index finger and searched. A small rectangular image of his sister's face

appeared, showing her smiling. So the rules of the *account photo* were less stringent than he had feared. Still proud of himself for the self-restraint he had shown in selecting the less adventurous photo, he planned to go back and switch it later.

Kane moved the cursor over a button to add his sister as a friend, but when he clicked, the site asked him, "Are y-ou su-re y-ou wa-nt to be frie-nds wi-th th-is per-son?"

He was slightly taken aback by the site second-guessing his choice of friends and considered giving the computer a shove but thought better of it. "Yes, of course, I'm sure," Kane said with exasperation. Once the friendship was finalized, the site had already begun to get a sense of who Kane was. It calculated a list of friend suggestions, presenting the name and picture of the first suggestion for his approval. Kane drew his face close to the screen, nearly pushing his nose up against it. In the picture, there was an elderly man, a similar age as Kane, seated in a wheelchair. "Joseph Farwell," Kane read the name. "Joe? Joe is that you? I found you, you old rascal! I hardly recognized you. It's your old friend, Kane," he said with his nose now fully pressed up against the screen. "Can you hear me in there, Joe?" A laugh that began deep within his bowels erupted from him at his own joke. "Oh Joe, it's been a while. My how it looks like the years have gotten the better of you," he said as he stopped laughing. He again confirmed that he would like to be friends, and the site proceeded to the next suggestion. He read the name, "Charlie Prior," another friend of his from childhood. He couldn't help but be impressed by the connections he had made already, feeling that the site was reminding him of a side of himself that he had long forgotten. "Two for two, Kane. Not bad for an old crank!" he commended himself.

The next image that appeared was of a woman, a similar age as Kane yet with a more vibrant appearance, embracing the man next to her, unequivocally happy. Kane didn't have to

read the name to recognize her. He knew instantly from her eyes. He leaned back as far as he could, away from the screen, lowering his head. He sat there for a while without moving, yet it felt like the earth moved around him. When he did stir in his chair, he could barely look at the screen, at that photo, to decline the connection. He stood and went into the kitchen. He fixed himself a drink, returned to the living room, and lay down on the couch. Those eyes, exactly the same as he remembered. He could still see how they used to look at him. It was like he was back there then, and, lost in reverie, he sipped from his drink, drifting off.

With the light outside beginning to fade, he awoke in the early evening to the harsh glow of the screen, shading the room with that blue electronic hue. He lay there, trying to keep himself from remembering as he gazed helplessly into the blank screen.

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The following day, skipping his morning coffee, Kane made his way through the remainder of the list of suggested friends. But now he averted his eyes whenever a new image of a person popped up onto his screen, having been conditioned by the shock of the last one. He feared that some unwanted visitor from his past state of affairs would again intrude upon the present. He clicked through as fast as he could manage to get on with the process. As the suggestions ran out, he said to the screen, "Well that's done, and I'm glad it's over."

Before completing the setup of his account, he needed a break. Nearly three weeks of the New Year had already passed, and with his birthday now only a day away, he thought he should prepare a little by reading through some of his old entries that he wrote on past occasions of this day. He opened the same drawer where he kept his camera, and underneath a random assortment of scraps that he pushed aside, a black journal nestled at the bottom was revealed. The dust

sloughed off by picking up this journal caused him to sneeze, which induced in him the sensation of diving headfirst into an ocean wave.

Opening the cover, he read through a table of contents he created, each year beginning with when he first began to keep this journal at the age of 34 marked out with the corresponding page number and a few notes about the content therein. *January 21, 1987 — Rome w/ sis. Her gift to repair a broken heart. To begin again. Goodbye to youth.* Kane held his finger in place and looked out the window. He then turned to the entry and read it out to his den.

“39 today. Hard to believe I would ever be 39. Standing on the precipice of the body’s inexorable decline. How good it has been to me up to this point! Perhaps still on like this for many years hence. Such robustness, such vitality... such virility! Ha!” Kane paused and joined in with the laughter transcribed in his journal and then continued to read. “That’s the cause of all this. That damned itch. Sound in body yet so enfeebled in mind. Enough!” Kane looked up for a while before making his eyes return to the page.

“Just said goodnight to Laura and the boys—my nephews—still getting used to that word. *Neph-ew*. So kind of her to invite me along. The Eternal City, they call it. To walk along the ruins to try to escape the ruins of my marriage back home. The symbolism is too heavy-handed for my taste. Nothing like the remains of an ancient empire to remind one that one’s own life is in a shambles. Still, the thought was nice. I wouldn’t have offered—in fact, I didn’t offer—her any sort of escape when more or less the same befell her. But she had the boys. Kept her from just taking off on a whim like me. We all become victims at some point in time. Does it really matter so much if it’s by our own hand or another’s? The end result is the same anyway. Again, enough.

“What must it be like for my nephews wandering around the streets of Rome? At every corner, the world laying itself out before them, time indefinite unravelling itself around them. How sharply these impressions must be branded onto their young brains, with no great tragedy yet imprinted on them, saturated with sensation that will lie in wait in some undisclosed neuron—who knows why this one rather than another—whose sole purpose will be to fire at some distant point in time to unlock the experience recorded within so that it can be lived through once more. What fond memories await these boys in some late evening in the future.” Kane paused again and looked out the window.

“Spent the morning reading past entries. How foolish I sounded. Writing as though I had it all figured out, as though everything was going according to plan, as though I had something to say, whatever that means. Included a brief description of what it was like to lie in bed next to her: ‘Found peace at last. Curled together in bed on a winter’s night. A haven from this world that I thought I always inhabited alone.’” Kane took a long pause and returned to these lines and read them out a second time to his den.

He then snapped the journal shut and covered it back up with the mess of papers, slamming the drawer. He turned to his computer so as not to dwell on what he had read and logged into his newly created account. The welcome page put his mind at ease as he became lost in the swirl of postings from his connections. His eyes glazed over as he scrolled through this reel of content without end. New combinations of words and images kept appearing the further down he looked. As far as he could tell, there was no bottom to it all. When evening set in, he had not yet managed to turn on any lights that the only things visible in his den were the screen and his eyes, which were bathed in that blue electronic hue whose specific tint revealed the extension of nerves and branched veins that pulsed through the globular organs. If someone had

stumbled upon the scene, they would've been aghast to see what looked like two enucleated orbs floating before an illumined rectangle in the midst of some unworldly séance to channel an ethereal realm.

Kane moved back, breaking the screen's spell on him, turning toward the darkness of his unlit room, forgoing dinner and instead going straight to bed. He undressed until he was completely naked, lying down belly up in his bed with his hands under the pillow. He looked at the ceiling, hoping for some dream to keep him company through the long, cold night ahead.

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The next morning, the morning of his birthday, Kane awoke, dreading the thought of having to return to his journal and write a new entry. He attempted to justify giving up the habit. Yet Kane couldn't reason away the obligation he felt to the precedent set by his past self. He entered his den, resigned to write in his journal, and saw that his computer had been left on all night. Looking at the screen, he noticed that something was different—an interruption to that placidity of what already become for him that comforting blue hue. A circle of ruby broke forth from the corner of the screen that, while small in circumference, shocked Kane into full attention with its brilliance, whereupon the task that he had braced himself to complete flew from his mind. His pupils dilated so that they could gather as much visual information about this glittering rouge dot as humanly possible. He stood there in a sort of daze, feeling like he was spinning, levitating even. He began to move the cursor to the dot's position in the top-right corner, a sweeping digital expanse from the cursor's current coordinates that appeared to grow ever wider.

Before Kane even fully lifted his finger from clicking on it, the dot flew off back into the screen, and just as fast as it departed, a box raced forward from some hidden area. The box appeared unnecessarily imposing and dull, demanding attention in a way that was as

uninteresting as the dot was captivating. He moved his head around to try to see behind the box and to get one last glimpse of the dot that was in all likelihood still racing off away from him. "Damned box!" he yelled at the screen. He figured out a way to click and hold the box so that he could move it around, but the dot was nowhere to be seen.

Only then did he start to take notice of the contents of the box. "Y-ou h-av-e n-ew not-if-i-cat-ions," Kane read that strange sounding language of the website. "We a-t Comp-any Head-quart-ers wou-ld l-ike t-o wi-sh y-ou a ve-ry hap-py birth-day." The blandness of the message did little to comfort Kane who was still reeling from the dot's departure. But he read on. "Y-ou ha-ve eigh-t n-ew birth-day mess-ages fro-m you-r fri-ends." *Friends?* Kane looked at the bottom of his screen and saw where the messages began.

The first read, "Have a happy birthday. Hope it's a good one."

"Ah Ben, always a bit dry but you do get the point across," Kane spoke back to the screen.

"Happy Birthday!!!!!" read the next.

"Yeesh, what a wallop of enthusiasm. Thanks, Charlie," Kane responded.

The message from Joe read, "Happiest of days my old friend."

At this point, his quick retorts began to fail him as he stopped replying to and instead just silently read the messages that had come in. His fascination with the dot began to wane as he wondered how he could've ever been so quickly taken by such an insubstantial, flighty creature.

"Kane, I really hope you have a good birthday. You deserve it."

"Hope you're well. Enjoy your birthday."

"Happy birthday, you old crank (jk about that last bit!)"

"I'm not a crank," Kane couldn't help but respond to his screen.

“hbd”

Huh? Kane shrugged. Must be a glitch in the system, he determined.

“Dear Kane, Wish I could be there to celebrate your birthday with you. What fond memories I have of celebrating you on this day in years past. Remember Rome? I wish this one to be as good as that. Your sister, Laura.”

At that, the final message, Kane relaxed in his seat, having been caught off guard by these virtual visitations that he had no expectation of receiving. They touched him more than he wanted to let on and made him think that just maybe he wasn't alone on his birthday. He reread them straight through a second time without pausing or interjecting.

Emboldened by the affection shown him, he was determined to overcome any diffidence and uncertainty about the intricate norms governing behavior online and to respond to his friends in turn. His heightened state caused him to opt for a mode of response that he normally would've never considered. He figured a video message would be the most effective means of expressing his gratitude. This way he could thank all of them at once rather than individually, and who knows, maybe even one or two of them would later strike up a video chat with him. He imagined Joe's face appearing on his screen, and, instinctually, he blurted out “you old rascal!” So he took a moment to compose himself, readjusted the monitor to find, if not the most flattering angle, then at least the least offensive one and hit the button titled “Post a video.”

Kane cleared his throat, which he instantly recognized he should've done before starting to record. “That's okay,” he said aloud to himself. “I can go back and edit this video later. Start again.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to have your attention please”—but Kane knew he wasn’t striking the right tone. Looking straight into the eyes of his recorded image in the small window on the screen, he said, “You sound like a high school principal! Be natural, Kane. Start over.”

“Friends, as you so graciously reminded me, I’m celebrating the dreadful occasion of adding yet another year to my age today. I was hoping to forget about the whole affair but your messages made that impossible. Thank you for that. So now that you force me to reckon with my rapidly approaching mortality, I have to face the very real prospect that, with whatever circumstance and fate that conspire to pull us away across the far reaches of the continent, we may never again have the pleasure of sharing in each other’s company.” With the fear that he had overstepped and pushed this line of thought a little too far, Kane paused, unleashing a series of verbal self-flagellations.

“Lighten it up. This isn’t your funeral. People won’t want to tune in for this.” He paused and said in a softer tone, “You’ve always driven people away. Of all times now, cut it out.” He collected himself and said, “Begin again, Kane.”

“Friends, what I’m trying to express to you is this: on an occasion, such as the one that I today find myself in, time is marked, made visible in a way that it is not most any other day. Whereas its intervals normally flow along in some unperceived, perpetual procession, today I feel that I finally have a grasp of time. My own humble lifespan appears no more than a trifle.”

He broke off his soliloquy and thought to himself: Better but lower the register. You’ll engender more befuddlement than affection at this rate.

Kane zeroed in on the dark square of his monitor’s camera. “Let me put it like this, my own insignificance awakens me to”—as Kane continued he slowed his speech to a crawl—“the sign-if-i-cance that you all ha-ve gi-ven to me.”

Satisfied with the sentiment he had landed on, Kane only then took note of some text within the corner of the video window. That's when he saw the phrase *live broadcast* faintly but unmistakably scrolled across the screen. What had he done. How unhinged he must look to everyone, how isolated. No wonder he's all by himself, they must be thinking. What they must be thinking. If only no one saw. But how would he ever know. They'd all be too polite. *What broadcast? What ever do you mean? Of course, you aren't an old crank who is going to die alone!*

Kane stood up and went out the front door, not bothering to close it behind him or even to stop the broadcast, which captured his exit. The camera had the fortuitous position of showing him walking away, framed by his open door. As he went into the distance, he grew smaller and smaller until, like an archaic television shutting off, he was reduced down to a pixelated spot right in the center of the screen. When he was too far for his camera to capture his image, it nonetheless continued to transmit a live video of nothing but his empty den to anyone out there who cared enough to look at Kane's post.

He had neglected to grab his coat and the freezing air began to rip heat from his exposed skin. But he didn't go back. Heading in the direction of the nearby park, he had no recourse from the cold but to keep walking. He reached the place that signaled the start of what had been his usual morning routine. He plodded along the perimeter where the grass ended, passing right alongside the line of trees that marked the edge.

If only he could see below, into the depths of the soil that held the network of interlocking roots, each in its own measured way and all in continual unison transporting the nutrients necessary to bear up the branched life forms. To Kane, as he passed by, they appeared as static edifices rather than dynamic organisms warmly enclosed inside by their coats of bark.

He kept walking without seeing that their roots stretched not only downward but outward, to the roots of neighboring trees, forming a collaborative enterprise, engaged in the exchange of resources and in the sharing of secrets that may as well have been light years away from Kane. He continued on without hearing the inner hum of the taproots as they transported nourishment upward to distant regions of branches that they would never come into contact with, despite having all originated from the same specks of germs. He quickened his pace to ward off the cold without sensing the vastness of the timescales of these arboreal creatures that have been around long before Kane trod above and will be around long after he has departed. As different as he appeared from them and they from him, he could not begin to fathom as he walked on that the distinctions were superficial in nature, that the rhythm of the lifeblood through his vasculature kept time with the tubular threadings that throbbed through the earth below. In some silent, solemn act of penance, Kane had completed several circuits around the park with no sign of stopping, trying to do everything in his power to forget, and, meanwhile, the ground below teemed with the most mysterious of processes that would've forgiven Kane his past transgressions as well as his present idiosyncrasies, that desired to be divulged but was destined to remain concealed.