

Lucky Dribbler

It was by far the largest of all the ones I had seen painted around Bakersfield. On the left, the thinker. The well-known silhouette. On the right, another. I might have mistaken it for a facsimile of the left image, especially in the impoverished lighting. I approached its frame. The image I already knew surfaced. A man, propping up his head with his hands, sunken body, collapsed forward into itself, like another black hole. A man who had given up, who wished to escape his own form. It was as if he were praying in reverse. Winged demons perched on his scalp would have fit perfectly. I felt the weight of his head in his clasped fingers, the weight of his thoughts, like a 10-pound bean bag bandaged to his nape. You felt it. His shortness of breath, his resignation, his body unnecessarily and pointlessly drilling itself three feet under. Yes, this second silhouette also contained feet, legs and hips, but they might as well have been buried beneath silt. On my way to meet the leader, this double image also held a personal significance—make a choice, and do it now. Thinker or depressive.

What was the difference? In a physical sense, nothing much. Just a slight raising of the spine, more neck muscle, the head held a bit higher, the flabby wrist unsupportive of any chiseled chin. But there was more. The thinker embodied the potential to spring to action. In the depressive, that potential was lost; he was on the verge of collapsing, tipping into his own shallow grave.

But the juxtaposition was good. It was always juxtaposition with these people. If it were simply showing another person ravaged by the Depression Pandemic, I would've walked away and never looked back. I might have even spit on the pointless image first. No, what it really showed was how easily achievable change really is. An adjustment of posture, attitude, thought, position. Like the third note of a triad, shifting a half-step from minor to major. The parallel images were brothers, twins, born a complete package, contained wholly in each of us.

“You like our latest action?” came a voice from behind.

I looked back and was pushed into a gathering crowd. We rounded the corner. There he was. Widely regarded as a ferocious speck, the leader spoke from under his flat cap in non-negotiable squeaks. “So, you wanna join.” The syllables tumbled out so quickly and unnaturally my mind was forced to reconstruct his original question. Without waiting for a response he said, “Stand over there.” We did as we were told. His beady pupils released us.

I could almost taste the must. The wind groaned against the warehouse. A woman stood beside the leader, her long boots like a dark tree trunk. She was respectfully quiet, but did nothing to diminish her height, making the man beside her even smaller. Before them sat a long, pocked and scarred wooden table; its wounds couldn't even hide from the two orphan light bulbs hung from the gaping ceiling. A translucent plastic pitcher filled with coffee and an eight-ounce mug sat atop the table. This all would have seemed almost normal if it weren't for the intermittent screams of those dragged away.

The line of initiates snaked to the table, myself among them. We knew the consequences of not passing. I practiced, and was able to pass alone, but would I be successful in such an assembly of eager and terrified initiates? I knew I was right for the job, right for the West End Boys. I had dreams, signs even, confirming my decision. But could I impress this mouse with the proud sideburns? I *had* to pass. I shivered at the thought of failing, and quickly jettisoned the idea. My mind reeled while momentarily imagining the gruesome fates of both the dribblers and the splashers who moments earlier had stood before me.

I heard my own gulp. The two hanging light bulbs, like tentacles from some amputated beast, competed for her body, marking her here and there with their Exacto light, dissecting her form into shards—a butcher's diagram, each serrated triangle and trapezoid a variously priced cut. I made eye contact with her just as she stepped into the light, her eyes leaving their dusky rings behind.

“Next.”

Just like the others I stepped behind the table.

“Pour.”

I inhaled deeply, held my breath and exhaled. My hands shook. One shot. I raised the container, tilting it into the eight-ounce mug. It all went in, except...my heart stopped as a stream rushed down the container's side and pooled onto the table below. I should have been more deliberate. I really should have been more deliberate. Cool air suddenly brushed my forehead, trailing a bead of sweat.

“You dribbled.” She stabbed me with her glance.

“I'm terribly sorry. I was just nervous. That's all. Really.”

“He's done.”

“Wait. Wait, please. You must believe me. I *used* to be a dribbler, I admit it. But that's the old me. I'm a new man, really, I was just nervous. You must understand.”

“You know the test. And you know the consequences,” she concluded. A thin man in trench coat materialized from the shadows—a civilized beast. His half-shaven head, sandpaper beard and multiple piercings did nothing to alleviate my fear as I considered what he might be capable of. He took hold of my upper arm like a wet vice, tugging me back into his shadowy lair. I looked to the mouse for clemency.

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My eyes adjusted to the dark. I felt the tightness. Even my breathing was labored. There were no streetlights here. We marched, band of thieves, to the rendezvous at the intersection of Mohawk and California. I knew the place. Next to the Stockdale Tower, the Petroleum Club, where the wealthy “Liar's Club” came to dine and brag. I recalled the “Bot World” sign, displaying an image of the earth

in the pincered grip of a bot. I felt the squeeze in my chest. So much had happened so quickly—medical breakthroughs like the ability to regrow lost limbs, the widespread use of artificial kidneys. Politically and socially we were in teetering flux; change had become more than a hope.

We fell into character before reaching the van, where they handed out standard safety vests, reflecting whatever street light they could catch. A flock of birds approached, hovering and redirecting together, shimmering in the moonlight, like an angry cloud. No, of course, not birds. Drones, nearly as intuitive as a flock of birds—it was hard to tell the difference with the naked eye. The turns were just a dash sharper. It was true that bots imitated nature.

“Don't worry, Jeffrey. You made it this far,” she said. She wasn't wearing a vest; maybe there weren't enough to go around. Dressed in black, with her dark hair momentarily tamed into ponytail, her eyes shone like a set of taillight reflectors.

“Do I look like I'm worried?”

“Yes. Stay cool. They don't have any reason to think we aren't legit. Don't give them one.”

“Right. Nothing out of the ordinary. Sarah, isn't it? Let me ask you—do you wear eyeshadow or are your eyes just naturally that weird and gloomy?”

“Get back to work.”

“I should add your eyes are actually very charming.”

“Don't fuck around.”

“How about a drink after this?”

I may have seen a passing smile.

The drone flock continued to shift overhead—Great Eye in the sky like a B-movie spider—until they became again just another flock of birds, not flying north or south, but a routine beat over the Bakersfield skyline. From the van, they passed us twenty-four inch paint rollers. The mouse was in there. I saw his pinhead eyes under the cap, mouthing orders so fast, I could almost see whiskers

pulsating from his cheeks, blurring his ferocious sideburns.

At two o'clock we stopped traffic from coming through, set up cones and lines, then spread out our stencils on the intersection's pavement. We had other groups in Bakersfield that night, about ten, spread around the city. Our group of approximately fifteen worked as traffic came and went. We all knew the risk, but we were in it together—a false sense of security. I felt like I almost belonged. We rolled the wedding white paint over and into the colossal stencils, which shone like a half-wrapped patient under the three-quarter moon and streetlamps. With every paint-meets-pavement slurp, my heart grew.

Car lights approached. The vehicle stopped. The driver leaned out. “What kind of work is this?”

Sarah took the lead. “Routine.” She stepped back and motioned for him to continue.

“Oh yeah? Looks like you're making some kinda picture.”

“Well, that's the job. Like everybody else trying to make a buck here, we do what we're told.”

“Is this for an arts festival or what?”

“Sorry, we're not allowed to give details. They say if you check the Net tomorrow you should be able to find more information.”

The car inched down the street, caressed by hovering lamps. Just as I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, its brake lights glared. Sarah looked down the street, then shuttled to the van to speak with Captain Mouse, who exited under his oversized duffer cap, like a lampshade. I smelled skunk before the van closed again. He walked to the parked vehicle. I couldn't hear from that distance, but I saw their excited movements. The driver gesticulated just as enthusiastically as the mouse. His hands fluttered close to mouse's narrow face. It was not a question of if, only of when. I rolled paint, my ears perked for an explosion.

We carefully removed the stencils. The naturally-reflective white sparkled in the night. Two

easily-recognizable images were left behind at the intersection opposite one another.

“Wheeeeeeiirrr. Wheeeeeeiirrr. Wheeeeeeiirrr.” The sirens were hacksaws and carved the night. Mouse scurried into the van with about half of the group. It became clear that there would be no room for the rest of us. For the first time Sarah and I locked eyes. It was a look that established a play date for our souls, broken only artificially by her closing the van’s barn doors. I saw empathy in those reflector-eyes—maybe even an apology. *All you need is love* rushed to mind. If this was true, then how to begin? In that moment, dear reader, I was convinced it starts with exactly this kind of eye contact. Was this the way to save the world?

We should have moved faster. I guess most of us had expected to fit into the van. At least they took our safety vests. We walked quickly down the sidewalk. A police cruiser spun around the corner and blinded us with its headlights. A policeman stepped out, weapon drawn.

“What have we got here? Huh? Nothing? No words of defense? You just got lost out here? Just wandering around at three in the morning?”

Another cruiser arrived.

“We were out for a walk,” I said.

“I suppose you don't know anything about that image up there on the street either. It's actually pretty good,” he said, half to us and half to the new officer, as he holstered his gun, in order to speak into his handheld. “We found the perps. Yup, got ‘em for vandalism.” He re-holstered his device. He placed his right hand on his pistol.

“Wheeeeeeiirrr. Wheeeeeeiirrr. Wheeeeeeiirrr.”

“*Slowly, very slowly*, place your hands above your heads and spread your legs. I cannot emphasize enough that under no circumstances should you make any sudden movements. Is that clear?”

We assented, generally. I thought of running. The cop seemed to sense it, and stared me down.

“Don't even think about it, son. I would much rather today not be your last, and I'm pretty sure you'd prefer the same.” I lowered my eyes and tried to catch my labored breath. But I couldn't kick the thought. I could catapult over the small wall to my right, then escape behind some trees, running until I was safe.

“I want you all to know that, contrary to what you may believe, vandalism is indeed a crime and very much punishable in the glorious state of California. Now I can't tell you what your punishment will be, but I can tell you that most likely, from my oh twenty-something years of experience, you will serve some time in a prison. If you make it through tonight.”

Hums of streetlamps, clicks and pops from their vehicles and handhelds, and even a cricket chirp filled that void.

“Now I just want that to sink in. Ask yourselves, was it worth it?”

I don't know how the others felt, but I saw my future in that moment spiral down the drain of my life's army-green shithole, forever to be lost because of some ill-guided attempt to better society. Still I'd prefer state prison to the punishment Captain Mouse and his West End Boys would be eager to divvy out. They already had shown mercy in accepting me into their gang; I wouldn't be so lucky again. I had my backbone, but I didn't know for how long. At least I was alive.

The streetlights coiled around newly parking police vehicles, collecting like metal shards under a magnet. They stepped out of their vehicles. White and male, all ostensibly stemming from the same stiff-necked and grim lineage. Multiple eyes fell upon us. My arms and wrists ached atop my head.

“What should be done with these boys?”

“Crack. 10-32. 10-32,” came over the intercom.

“10-4,” was the response. Some of the officers returned to their vehicles.

“Take care of ‘em quick, and let's go,” was the call from a waiting car.

“You boys. Did you do this? Tell me the truth now.” The officer's index finger rested too close

to the trigger.

I thought of running again. I wasn't sure I would make it, but it was now or never.

Someone in our group spoke. A thin newbie with a pony tail. “Officer, I can honestly say we had nothing to do with it.”

“So, what should we do with you? Just let you go?” I heard the hum of nearby machinery. I watched his pudgy finger oscillate over the trigger.

“Today you can count yourselves lucky. Go home, and don't you dare do any of this shit again. Next time, I come after you personally.”

I heard multiple gulps, and then a series of mumbled thank yous. Lucky, a damn lucky dribbler am I. The police cars practiced their Doppler humming as they drove away. The sirens penetrated deep into the night, like spotless forks into chocolate mousse, diminishing in the distant Bakersfield streets. I found myself alone, as if the last at a cafeteria table. Alone, except for the images we had painted—

I had never seen anything like it. John Lennon and Yoko Ono in an office. They sat across from one another in separate cubicles, backs to each other, facing separate screens, wearing computer input headbands. John's long hair was greasy, tucked sheepishly behind his ears; he looked like just another stressed, ill-postured hippie. Yoko looked frustrated and annoyed. They stared mostly ahead. There was one exception. The wet white of their eyes fixed their unpainted irises in just the correct off-kilter positions. They each possessed one of these plaintive eyes—each searching for each other across that office corridor. Somehow the artist had nailed it. The rest of the image was nearly irrelevant. The screens in front of them were white and empty. The whole scene could have been purgatory, or even Hades.

Beneath the images of the broken lovers giant letters spelled, “ALL YOU NEED IS FEAR.”