

What started me thinking this thing was a small mushroom cloud rising from the heel of a child's tennis shoe as the shoe scraped the concavity of dirt beneath the belt swing on this playground. There are many occasions while working at a preschool to call to mind the dread misfortunes of the world while watching children play. I suppose being on the playground is like perusing the first line of an actuary tale. Here are the untainted, undead survivors of the birth canal, vaccinated, pampered, diapered: nurtured, bonded or imprinted (depending on which scam you accept) and physically ripe for destruction.

I wonder who one of these tots will be drowned in a boating accident, who'll be decapitated in aged car following the senior prom, who will slip into a carbon monoxide sleep following a financial reversal, and which child shall be known by the suburb in which he will live: "INGLEWOOD MAN KILLS WIFE, SELF."

When I quit drinking last year, I knew I would have to face these thoughts which had haunted my drunken mink like countenances moving in steam.

Lisa is sitting next to me, her shoulders stooped and the sun dancing like barbeque light in her blond hair. She years older than my memory (the missionary's death) and nearly a woman with breasts which I have difficulty in not staring towards and a sadness to her face, which is poetic as it speaks of some dreaded disease in her forties, perhaps dengue fever or farmer's lung. But for now, it is a summer's day and light plays in her hair and on her lips, which are the color of Silly Putty.

She looks at me and I smile my wan, pre-wrinkling thirty-five-year-old smile, which I know brings water into my blue eyes. I confuse her. I seem to perpetually confuse her.

“Should we take them in?” she asks.

“Nah,” I say, “it'll be hotter than hell inside.”

Lisa looks at her gold wristwatch. I smile again at her. She stoops her shoulders. I hope no one murders her.

The hour twixt five and six is spent in a narrow room made from thin partitions installed for a tuition credit for a long-gone carpenter's son. The room is high and the few voices of the remaining students are thin and treble filled as they crayon while Lisa and I sit opposite each other in what was a once sky blue, twelve-inch-high chair, now rendered gummy just like the evening sun burst though cobalt air and cast trapezoids on the walls, the children and us. I suppose in this quiet and weird light with the strange syringe of quiet injected into the normally noisy carcass of the school, one would welcome the elaborate shadowing on Lisa's face. But instead, I purchase a moment of self, one in which to construct a prayer which explains myself not so much to the Lord as to myself as if by asking, He will disinterest himself from my concern so that I might right my intention as I see myself in three dimensions instead of flattened like a reflection in two dreadful directions.

Firstly, why am I thirty-five years old and working in a preschool, a job normally held by teenagers? You know, Lord, but I tire of your ways. I suppose the stinky chemistry of neurosis explains much about me, but why am I here?

Not just the here of "is" but the here of this place? And as always, back to my friend exploding on foreign soil (asphalt anyhow), why? And what of Lisa sitting across from me who is nineteen, almost twenty? Why did you make her frame the way you did, the flesh arrayed on such a lengthy suspension that her walk is a miracle?

She is undoubtedly capable of catching some rising star, say a medical student on his way to Kiwanis Club greatness. Why am I here across from her?

"What are you thinking about?" she asks.

"I was praying."

"You were what?"

"Praying."

"What? You were going to get down on your knees?"

"First, I was going to construct an altar out of Lego Blocks."

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who'd pray."

I shrug.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I pray sometimes, too."

"I'm studying to be a deacon," I say.

"Is that like a janitor or something?" she asks.

"No, I'm not a sextant. A deacon's the lowest order of cleric in the Church."

"What church?"

"The Catholic Church."

"They have priests."

"They have deacons, too."

“What do deacons do?”

“Some of the sacraments, preach an occasional homily and a lot of counseling.”

“What are you going to counsel people on, how to make \$3.50 an hour when you’re forty?”

“Put that down!” she screams at a four-year-old who freezes, his right hand above his head, clinching a Lincoln Log. I jump. The boy retires to a small orange chair. This is getting troublesome. I try to reframe my prayer so that I might see myself, but my eyes fall on Lisa.

“You’re beautiful,” I say.

She looks in either direction and I look also, then she draws her face close to mine.

“You know what?” she whispers, “You’re old.”

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As I turned the brass tumbler in the orange school door, I heard a low rumbling exhaust and turned. Now I see Lisa embraced in the muscular chest of Tony, her fiancé, so she had said a month ago when I was hired and I first saw him outside the school in his white tee shirt. I have little option but to walk past the two of them. I clamber into my twelve-year-old car. I am reminded of my father, who always drove old cars but kept them spotless. He had a compass floating in a ball of fluid, the viscosity of tears, on the dashboard and a whisk broom hanging beneath the radio. The thought of my dead father and Lisa comingle and adrenaline courses through me.

As I ready to back out, feeling my car clunk into reverse, the van passes my car. With my head twisted, Lisa's image grows larger, then smaller, framed by the van's side window.

By the time my car reaches the intersection, I have caught up to them as they wait at a red light. In the passenger's mirror of the van, I see Lisa's face small and briefly staring at me. The light changes and the van bounces merrily across the gutter and towards the other side of the intersection as I slowly turn left onto the cigar smoke blue pavement of the four-lane avenue whose stripes are the color of old jockey shorts. As I pass a nursery, I see a man carrying a potted tree. When I am abstracted in sadness this way, everyone else's form seems so shaped as to merge with the geometry of the earth in perfect harmony. The man places the tree on the gate of a station wagon, and the small business transaction including the man, the station wagon and women seems so real that the cryptic ought to be constructed in cement.

The four-lane avenue bends having passed the nursery and I cross railroad tracks which sever the tenuous connection between the road and my tires, which are as smooth as a hammer handle. The peculiar light of late day imposes a calmness to the valley and makes it greener than it really is.

I think, as I pull into the library parking lot, that I might be able to explain my condition to Lisa which involves the queer fears which started when I was about her age. I might have been twenty. They started while the blood vessel on my right forehead began to tick with my heartbeat. She, like most people, probably believes that for every human act, there is a human cause.

