

# LOOKING DOWN ON ME

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The first thing I remember is the taste of vomit. Always. This is my life story, the title of every chapter, that taste. If I believed in god I would thank him for leaving it at that. A quick dip, a few words—the treatment of Christ by John. I would thank him for sparing me the fate of Noah's people or of Pharaoh.

In my earliest memory I've half fallen from my red plastic chair. My throat burns sour, my arm is splattered and warm, my hand is clenched like a thousand year old mummy's around a fork. A fat black spider dances impaled on the tines. I can still feel the tickle of its pinprick feet on my tongue.

I'd call that my prologue. The first proper chapter of my life began in school. To be perfectly accurate, I'd been in school three years by then. Mom home-schooled me until she concluded that I didn't have a social disorder, I was just anxious about meeting other kids. What she called anxiety I call terror that locks every muscle but the sphincter. See, my sister had been next to me when that spider brought my Once Upon A Time to an end. Like I said I threw up on my arm, but a few stray drops splashed onto her face, and changed it for good. From then on she had only one look for me. It was a look so disgusted, so betrayed, it couldn't be contained by just one face—it spread to her friends, to my friends, to our cousins. It spread to people who didn't even know about the incident. I started to see it on kids I'd never met, mothers in the park, old men forever shuffling through the grocery store. The day I realized it was spreading from me, not my sister, I hid in the attic and cried until I fell asleep. When I woke up a policeman was carrying me down the ladder. He said something that dad laughed at but mom didn't. It made her think I was retreating from the world, not the world from me.

I don't recall much of grades three through seven, only that my stomach hurt most of the time. I clenched it as often as I could. I wouldn't let it happen again. I couldn't. The look faded from the faces of my friends and classmates, but I knew it was only waiting. I saw through their skin, through

the earthworm roots of whatever holds skin to bone, to the cruel sickle-edged curves beneath. It helped to think of myself as a lion. They were rot-breathed hyenas waiting for my moment of weakness, teasing a safe distance with their stupid trot. It helped to think they were the cowards.

If I believed in him, I would thank god for killing two birds with one stone. I hit puberty the summer dad got a job in the city and we moved. Ten minutes into the first day of grade eight in a new school doll-faced Kelsey in the first row smiled at me. My stomach imploded. It couldn't have gone worse. I jumped up to run out, but the clatter of my chair got everyone's attention and it was already in my mouth, ballooning my cheeks. Then I felt another heave, another bouquet of septic bubbles flowering up from the gutter. They scoured their way out my nose, which hurt so bad it made me cough and scream. 'Have a little breakfast,' mom had said. 'Come on, just something light. How can they not like you? Everyone always wants to be friends with the new boy.' That was the last time I ever listened to my mother. At the desks in front of me Gary and the boy they called Pill screamed and cried like horror movie girls, their faces and hair splashed with gristly liquid omelet in an orange juice and stomach acid sauce. I'd have rather the rest of the class screamed too. But they just stared, skinny ankles caught in a crack of adult sobriety somewhere between laughter and sympathy barf. Mrs. Barry cried a little, though her tears ran down my sister's face.

Needless to say, I didn't have a girlfriend until college. I won't tell that story in detail. At least it wasn't only disastrous for me. I was too desperate by that age to understand what she meant by 'It's not the right time.' I don't know why she let me get her down to just panties. Maybe she didn't, I don't remember it too clearly. That was the last perfect moment. I was almost a child again—blissful, single-minded, unaware, close as a cotton layer to the crushing mystery of sex. I wouldn't have thought there was enough blood powering my stomach to get even a drop of bile to the back of my tongue. But then that smell. She must have been crying, already coerced and probably forced, knowing I'd uncover her leaked shame drying into a brown paste, smelling of caked toenails scratching caked bellybuttons.

The one thought that held me back from suicide was that it can't get worse. What could be worse than vomiting a nice sushi dinner into the naked lap of the first person you'd felt close to in years, whom a judge would say you were raping at the time? It would have to include murder, cold-blooded

first-degree fingerprint-bruises-on-a-child's-throat murder. This is the thought that kept me alive.

The periods of narration between these explosive chapter titles are, thanks if I believed in him, boring. Not unremarkable, but not remarkable by comparison. After the titles come years slouching through seasons of self-exile, a body going from frail child to elderly twenty-something, pale and wilted from a diet ascetically meted to avoid so much as a hint of revolt. There is the chronically shallow sleep. There is the PhD in masturbation, inspired by the stomach-numbing and therefore rapturous effect of watching porno. There are the notebooks full of poems coded in tiny pen mazes, or mazes coded in poems. There is the militant hygiene. There is a whole summer lost to sampling a generous array of drugs, both prescribed and recreational—they all failed the test, which was to let my stomach go calm or forgotten under the influence. And there are the faces receding from sight: dad's heart attack and last dumb hour behind frosted hospital glass, mom too soon out of the city and into another man's house, and, one by one, the faces on the street so marred by my sister's look that they bled out into anonymity, the paper spaces between printed words.

Homelessness was inevitable, of course. By the end I'd actually been putting The Better Part of a Fine Arts Degree on my resume. In the sixty days before I could be legally, forcibly evicted, I dismantled every appliance and piece of furniture I had, scraped the paint off every wall and sanded down every feature. Make it worse and it can't get worse. I withdrew my small savings and buried it in a can by an underpass so it'd be safe while I served a short sentence for resisting the officers who would be called to remove me from the premises. When they came and took me I chanted what I'm sure some monk's ghost was feeding me. It was a prayer, holiest and highest, to the starless center of the universe, spiraling at the speed of light out of a recluse Buddhist soul sinking just a bit faster toward enlightenment.

I don't remember throwing up that time, when or where, but the sun is always with the dawn, veiled by clouds or not. The taste was there when I woke up. In one hand I clenched my money can, in the other a bottle. One part whiskey, two parts cigarette ashes and butts, five parts piss. Pants around my knees and the bottle on my penis like a calf suckling at its mother's teat.

'This is the lowest,' I told myself, smiling, war-drum hangover miraculously eased by the revelation. 'I

can get no lower, it can get no worse. There is nowhere left to go but up.'

It took a full week to reach the brink of starvation. Turns out it's not clearly marked like the brink of a high-rise. It's a slow fall, like Alice's down the rabbit hole. I don't believe in god, but I believe in hell because that's what it felt like. I begged and scrounged hoping to back-pedal into normal hunger pangs, but I'd gone too far. The only relief I could find was temporary. I quit begging and found a quiet place to wallow—an alley between a condemned warehouse and some kind of treatment plant cramped between the dock and the expressway. I didn't stay in the warehouse because it wouldn't have been the lowest. It wasn't hard to make do in the alley, anyway, what with all the discarded pallets to burn. I even learned to cook over an oil-drum fire. Usually a soup of lake water and fast food leftovers tossed off the expressway or the service road, but sometimes I got lucky and caught a rat or an alley cat. I ate like a king the week I found a snack machine in the stripped warehouse offices.

I'd just settled in to the long aching brink when I woke one morning retching. I didn't know what it meant. I hid all day in the deepest recess I could find, but whether I believed in it or not I couldn't hide from fate. That night a handful of leather shadows came down the alley carrying a rolled up carpet with cowboy boots hanging out one end. They almost didn't see me. They heaved the carpet into the never-emptied dumpster. One of them lit up a cigarette and saw me in the flicker of light. He'd strolled away from the dumpster and stood almost right over me.

'Holy shit,' he shouted.

The others laughed. 'What, you never seen a bum?' they said. 'I thought you fags loved 'em.'

I thought they would beat me to death. I was so convinced that I almost brought up rat a la sweet n' sour sauce on their polished shoes. I managed only to piss myself.

A few days later they came back, just after dawn, dragging a guy in dress pants and an undershirt and a pillowcase over his head. They threw him down next to the dumpster and kicked him until he stopped squirming and shouting through the sock in his mouth. Then they stood over him and took

turns speaking in Italian or maybe Portuguese, hands clasped, heads bowed, the rage of the beating replaced by almost cartoon solemnity. When the second man finished his speech he strolled deeper into the alley. He surveyed it as if he meant to buy it, eyes settling for minutes at a time on the dumpster, the stacked pallets, the garbage bags piled like sagging black fruit. He surveyed the fire-drum, my cardboard bed, me, the carpet they'd brought the first night, unrolled now and smoothed up against the wall behind me. He looked at the dumpster and back to me, raised an eyebrow. I watched the ground. He walked past me and continued his survey. I wondered if he'd notice. He did. I heard him whisper, 'What the,' then make a noise like a grunt birthing a scream. The others came running. They all echoed his disgust. Two of the three threw up on the pile of bags. The other dragged me up against the wall and pressed his forearm to my throat. He kept shouting. Questions I think. My stomach was too cramped for me to pay much attention. The others stood arguing over the milk crate I used as a cupboard, slapping each other's arms and pointing, hands like spades throwing dirt over what they saw. Dad never showed me how to use my fishing knife, mom never taught me to de-bone a breast. Since all I had to carve with were tin can lids and pieces of glass it wasn't hard for them to figure out where all that meat came from.

They cursed me and spat at my feet but stayed well out of reach. After a long, furrowed silence they went back to the body in the bloody pillowcase. They talked over it in quick whispers. Finally one of them spat at the body then at me, shrugged, and went back to their big old Cutlass.

They kept coming back. Not on any sort of schedule, so I had to make it last. Sometimes they came a few times a week, sometimes not for a month. I'd be curled up and moaning, the world empty except for the brink and me, unable to keep down the last morsels, weeks old and dried out, with maggots for stuffing and a stink that was like breathing knives—and then there they'd be, dripping out of evening headlights like sweet black honey. I never got used to it, though. Even when it was all I had. I never threw it up, but I never got used to it. Even cooked, it hurts to eat. It hurts to chew. It hurts to swallow. It hurts to digest. It gouges the heart to shit human remains. Whatever humanity was left in you gets shit out with them. There's only one thing that hurts worse, and that's starving.

Although I kept busy—reading old newspapers, scavenging condiment packets, building a shelter out of abandoned furniture—the goons quickly became my favorite entertainment. I imagined

everything they did. I imagined where they bought their new Rolexes. I invented the life of the tailor who made the suits they started wearing. I walked their little brothers to school and joked with their parents at big family dinners. I painted their girlfriends with savage strokes. Olive skin, leopard-print corsets, maybe a black eye. I painted until my brush was bloody. When an original goon was replaced I imagined him in the position he went on to. I learned the names of the new guys. They talked more to each other and to me. I don't think they understood my part in what they were doing. They probably didn't even know I had a part. The old guys wouldn't have told them, because that would imply they condoned it, and even in their moral labyrinth that would amount to blasphemy. So to the new guys I was just a novelty. I was like a kid's first glimpse at porn, something that made them both giddy and gravely curious. One week they'd joke with me, the next they'd hold a knife under my jaw to make me cramp up and piss in fear. It wasn't just bodies they brought anymore, either. They'd bring a guy with a moustache and a Manager nametag just to threaten him and then let him go. They'd bring their buddies to smoke a joint at lunch. They'd bring girls to get a look at me, then take them into the warehouse where they knew I could watch through a hole in the side door. They brought me Happy Meals.

Once, one of them showed up alone and irreparably drunk. He made me take him in my mouth. They all knew I scrubbed an hour a day by the dock, even in winter. Hell, they were the ones who brought me the soap and toothpaste. But he could never have imagined how unclean my mouth really was. It didn't take much. That texture in my mouth, god. Mushroom or soggy foam, and the sting of body salt. The first eager bump against the back of my throat was enough to turn my stomach. I don't think it marked a new chapter in my life. More like a brief interlude. The one time I actually didn't mind puking.

He beat me, of course. Off and on for almost an hour. All I really remember is laughing. I couldn't believe how serious a person could be while shouting, 'Faggot hobo, you fucking puked on my dick.' I told him I bled on it too. Later I spat a tooth at it, still hanging out of his fly and flopping against his damp stinking pant-leg. I've never laughed so hard. 'You fucking puked on my dick,' he said, looking like my sister with a pencil-thin beard.

I never saw him again. Maybe he moved up in the organization, maybe he tried to quit and they

brought him to me in a dozen trash bags. I wouldn't have recognized him. They always beat the faces to a pulp. At some point they started removing their teeth, I guess so the bodies couldn't be identified. I imagined them doing that, too. They were my brothers in carrying out the unthinkable. I imagined the pangs of guilt's ghost that must have shot and forked through their stomachs. I imagined sitting with my back against a car door, foot against a garage wall, dragging a paring knife through a man's gums. Mostly they did it after they'd killed the guy, since it's easier. But if what he'd done was extra-unforgivable they'd carve a guy's teeth out while he was still alive.

One night I woke up to the sound of a girl crying. She was crouched against the wall opposite my shelter. There wasn't much light, just a dirty copper sheen from the expressway and the city. In one hand she held a pair of stilettos. The other hand was in constant motion, wiping her eyes, brushing bleached-straw hair away from her face, hiking a bra strap fallen out from under her tank-top. I couldn't help but sit up. She heard me, glanced over, glanced away. Her face was wrinkled up, but it was hers. She'd looked right at me and hadn't been infected by my sister's disgust. I couldn't breathe for a minute. I shuddered, involuntarily soaked my pants. She didn't seem to notice the smell. She noticed the general stench, sure—it inflected her sobbing with coughs and a couple dry heaves—but no newcomer could have picked my particular stench out of the alley's lineup.

The girl muttered one half of a conversation, garbled by a running nose and a lot of words I didn't know. Once she looked over again and said, 'You know? I bet you get it too. Yeah, you know.' Now and then she forced a laugh, and she looked at me too when she did. Not scornfully, but full of need. Ready to offer me pity on a silver platter so that I could offer it back. I couldn't move, only watch.

A few minutes later a black Lincoln turned off the service road. Its breath was guttural, pistons chewing gravel. It sniffed its way to the mouth of the alley. In the glare of headlights all I could see of the man who got out was his long coat and graying hair. The girl was still crouched around her knees. The man came and spoke to her in one language or another, smooth quiet voice. He offered her his hand. He wore nice driving gloves.

'Where are my guys?' I thought. That's how it's supposed to happen: they show up in the nick of time and I am triumphant among them. I would save her.

He wore a Rolex. He crouched and tried to help her up. His shoes gleamed with light from I don't know where. Then he smacked her and before she fell over he'd grabbed her by the throat and dragged her up against the wall. He hit her again. She looked away, eyes shut as if it meant he couldn't see her. He raised his hand, cursed, I think, and instead of hitting her again he turned her face to the bricks and lifted her skirt. My crotch ached. I had nothing left. I rubbed it anyway. I took it out. I grabbed a bottle and smashed him on the ear. She turned and cried or gasped but I held her there, fumbling with myself, shivering and trying to spill but I had nothing left, finally into her. They made the same noise, she and he, surprised and bleeding. Then he was on me. I clamped around her body and mine found something to spill. He pulled us all down. I held her still and rolled us onto him before he could get up. I was out of her and trying to get back in, he was struggling in his coat, she was wailing like a broken animal and kicking and punching us both. The pockets of her skirt came off in my hands, burned denim lines into my palms. She ran and I shouted, and laughed, and everything between. He was cursing in whatever language and struggling in his coat. I stayed on him, gripping, pushing. We struggled in his coat and the gun he was trying to pull went off. The alley cracked and broke apart, every brick slapped against every other brick, every subplot stench dissolved into almost-sweet smoke. He stood over me. Or maybe it was her finally come back to me, my sister, looking down on me as my throat filled and The End ran out the side of my smile.