

The Clay Head Benediction

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I used to put on those earmuffs when I would meditate, the big heavy plastic ones, like the ones that people use at shooting ranges. As far as I am concerned, sensory deprivation is key to a proper meditation practice. I don't go for the whole lotus position thing, or any of that other stuff, incense, candles, prayer beads, anything like that. I meditate lying down. That way I can hear the voices. There is probably a rationalist explanation for all of it, the voices. Most logically, it is my brain, devising little entertainments for itself as I fall asleep. That is the whole deal with the lotus position by the way, to keep from falling asleep. Normally the voices are conversations...banal ones about shopping, or gossip about people I don't know. It is kind of like in the early days of cordless phones when the phone would be on the wrong channel, and you would hear little snippets of your neighbor's conversations. When I was young, my parents moved into a house where the phone would ring without cause at all times of the day. We would pick it up, and no one would be there. Two hundred miles away, there was probably some fool putting on his shooting earmuffs and dialing in, messing around in places where he had no business, and playing with things he did not understand.

For any normal rational person who understands that homeopathy is a fraud, and auras and the spirit world are all bullshit invented underachieving vegetarian baby boomers, this all seems incredibly stupid. I get that. It is stupid, but it is true. In fact, this whole thing is true. There is a whole body of literature, or more accurately writing, about people traveling around and seeing things in meditative states. In fact, if one were to spend a little time on the internet forums reading about meditation, he would find that the newbie questions about strange sights and experiences are pretty common.

There is also this other thing, the machine elves. On the psychedelic drug DMT, a whole bunch of users report seeing the same thing, beings of light with the same message... "Create". Amazonian shamans have been ingesting DMT in the form of Ayahuasca for millennia, and for them, it provides insight into the cosmos and the nature of consciousness, and all those other things that hippies like to talk about. Celebrities and dreamers in the West take it too, but like anything, you can only start where you begin. A shaman, who has a full time relationship with the nature of life to begin with, probably goes a lot farther than some guy with a backpack padding around city in overpriced sandals. I don't know. That is not really my type of thing. I would however, like to note that it is incredibly odd, that there exists a drug that makes unrelated users the world over "see" tiny people bearing a message...And that, my friend, is a bona fide mystery.

There are lots of mysteries, and modern people hate the hell out of mysteries. Fundamentally, that is what distinguishes modern people from the ancients. After their basic needs were satisfied, early people sought to find things that they did not understand. They did not really want the answer; they wanted to find what they could not answer. That is why their answers suck, and why it is so easy to dismiss primitive answers as illogical superstition. For example, do you believe, that a guy could build a boat that could accommodate two of every single animal on the entire earth, every one, and a whole bunch of food, and survive for forty days without the snakes eating the mice, and lion eating the guy, the two elephants didn't get sea sick? There is a little display next to the elephant exhibit at the zoo that shows what one adult African elephant eats in a day, the food for two African elephants for one day wouldn't fit in the back of a full

sized pickup truck. See? Bad answer. But if the motivation of our early ancestors was to create more questions than they answered, it is a wonderful answer. One of early mans' greatest impulses was to do something illogical for someone else to figure out. Particularly, because those who were able to accomplish the greatest mysteries were held in the highest esteem. I'm certain that Moses was a competent navigator, but if you ask the average person, they will probably mention the thing about the Red Sea.

The existence of the illogical is foundational to the progress of humanity. Reason does not create, it retroactively explains the mechanics of what was already created, or fulfills the promise of imagination. Alone, reason is only a tool. Anyway, the point is, that I am part of a proud tradition that includes the Pharaohs and Moses, and unsurprisingly, lots of penniless men shuffling around on the cuffs of their pants in cities across the country, but like all of them, I have a message, and it is this: Your ancestors didn't invent Santa Claus because it was fun to trick kids. They did it because at one point, it was necessary to open a tiny window of possibility in the mind. And in a rare person, that window would grow into a door, and then into a tunnel. Because, there is also a war... two or three types of war, really. I'll probably get into it more later, but suffice to say now, that each side has allies that don't even have the window cracked, and each side has leaders who have the tunnel wide open. And each side is so thick with double agents and spies that sometimes the leaders can't recognize each other and a whole bunch of leaders are probably spies to, and you're also part of it too, or at least you fill in carrying water to the front. In the Age of Aquarius, comrade, everyone carries water somewhere. But don't worry; this isn't some crazy story about lizard people or the secret bunker under the Denver airport. It is something else entirely.

First I should tell you this. One day, when I was mediating as usual, I fell into a kind of lucid sleep. But the sleep only lasted a few seconds, and when I woke up, I was standing in the hallway of someone's house, not some weird symbolic hallway, but a genuine normal hallway...one leading from the garage to the kitchen. There were cabinets on the sides of the hallway, and a couple of small unexamined paintings, and a low counter with keys on top of it and a handful of forgotten bills. The light in the hallway was off, but I could see clearly into the kitchen where a tall attractive woman of the anxious idle sort that is common in the nicer suburbs was talking on the telephone. She was really animated, and I just stood there for a few minutes, frozen... watching her. Her back was towards me, and then, she spun around, still chattering into the phone, and looked directly at me. I froze, but she didn't seem to acknowledge my presence, and continued to chatter at the telephone. Then, I waited a few more seconds and walked into the kitchen. I stood there for a moment, and for a second time she looked directly at me, but did not acknowledge me, so I realized that she must have thought that I was someone there to work on the house. So, I walked out of the kitchen and into a nicely appointed television room.

In that room, was a chubby teenage boy reclining on a beige overstuffed couch. His eyes were glued to the television. I greeted him, but he didn't respond. So I repeated myself again, this time a little bit louder. He still didn't say anything or look at me, so I walked over and positioned myself in front of him. Again, he did not acknowledge me, or even seem disturbed that I was blocking his view of the television. Then, very slowly, it occurred to me that he couldn't see me. I walked closer to him, and waved my hand in front of his face. Nothing. Then I shouted. ...Still nothing. No response from him. A rush of excitement coursed through

me. I was invisible. Actually invisible. In a space where I had never been... and I could explore with total freedom.

So, I walked through the house. It was huge, and new, and beautiful, tastefully decorated without a book in sight, except for the giant ones stacked on the coffee table in the main living room. Then I followed a wide staircase upstairs to the second floor. I glanced in each room, and in one of the larger bedrooms, sat a very old woman in a chair gazing idly out one of the windows. She was thin and frail with an uncomfortable expression on her face. I walked into the room, and again tested to see if I was visible. I got very close to the woman, and looked into her face. Her eyes had the vacant confused look associated with some kind of dementia, and I realized that even if she could see me, she was probably unlikely to be able to tell anybody. So, I decided to test my powers a little bit... very gently, I reached out and touched her arm. It was dry, and slightly cold, but she did not respond. So, then I put my whole hand on her arm, and very gently allowed myself to lightly grip onto her. I could feel the slight involuntary muscle response from underneath her skin, but still her face showed no recognition at all. Then I kneeled in front of her and gazed into her eyes. Her eyes remained focused somewhere far off in the distance. I could smell her breath now, stale. I suddenly felt very sad for her alone and forgotten in this room gazing into nothing... visited by ghost she couldn't see. So I very squeezed her arm, willing a tiny portion of compassion into the shell of her person, but as I did that, her eyes started to focus, and a look of total unrestrained terror came over her face. Her arm jerked away from me, and she sucked a huge breath of air in, and then, I was back in my bedroom. I ripped off my earmuffs, and stood up, and that was it. Some actually majorly unusual happened, and that is my best tale of the paranormal, and oddly enough, in it, I'm the ghost.

There is a guy who hangs around outside my apartment who asks me for a rolling paper every time I walk by. As far as I can gather that is some sort of code that he has drugs to sell, but you'd figure he would catch on by now that I'm not a potential customer. Other than the lone drug dealer, it is a pretty nice building. Mostly students. I am too old to live here, but I work for the company. At least in the summer I do, I rent apartments in the building and a bunch of others. It is not bad, it is easy work, and mostly it is just a lot of hours through the summer. I'm sure it gives my mother anxiety that I am taking so long to getting around to doing something that fills the minds of others with my successes, but I'm pretty content... for the most part anyway. The rest of the year, I hang around the library and read. Lately, I've been reading the *Captive Mind* by Czeslaw Milosz. The only copy the library has is really old, and they won't let anybody take it out. I have been interested in that lately, Communism. Not really communism in that I actively support it or anything political for that matter, but in these holistic thought models. Communism really took the *Every Question Answered* mode of thought pretty far. It also has the same basic problem as fundamentalist religious belief does... a pre-supposition of the outcome. It's almost as if nobody expected there to be complicated personal questions in between the beginning and the Promised Land.

When I get to the library, Ben is already waiting at my favorite table. Disheveled, Sephardic, and overweight from the psychiatric drugs, Ben has recently decided that I am some sort of prophet. Remember the cracks in my contentedness that I just alluded to? Well, here is one of them.

"You're here early, Ben" I say

“I had to go to a meeting this morning” He says, as he loudly snaps open the can of Mountain Dew clutched between his meaty hands.

I look at Ben’s filthy shirt, a too snug Brooks Brothers oxford probably gifted to him by a loving grandmother before his life took an unexpected turn. The lowest button had popped off, and is revealing the hairy recesses of his enormous navel. “Pitching a big deal to the CEO?” I ask.

“What?” Says Ben, as he stares back at me with his wide watery eyes.

“It was a joke...” I say, watching my tone “I’m sorry, Ben”

I am a little scared of him, once when the librarian reprimanded him about his soft drink, he threw the can across the room, and the police had to be called. Actually, they probably didn’t have to be called, but they were called. It was big mess. Ben cried, and the police were actually pretty understanding to both parties, but either way, Ben was banned from the library for almost a month. He spent the month hanging around by the food trucks next to CMU, where he tried in vain to talk to the students, but mostly they ignored him, and some were outright rude. By the time he came back to the library at the end of the month, it was obvious that the alterations in his routine had hurt him. After that, I tried to talk to him more, but he still scares me. He is big and unpredictable, but also about as lonely as me, so we talk.

Ben looks at his hands for a few seconds, and then digs into his pockets. He hands me something in wrapped in a cloth.

“It stopped working” He says

I already know what is in the cloth bundle. It is a little head made out of Fimo clay. I made it for him.

“I don’t think it had any special powers, Ben. It was just a little token”

“Oh that’s not true, Luke. It was amazing. As soon as you gave it to me, he went away. First he was everywhere. I even saw him in the toilet once, but then this” He picks up the little clay head “you gave me this, and he went away. For weeks”

“Well, if he did go away. It wasn’t the head that did it, it was you. Maybe it just helped you change the way you were thinking.”

Ben starts to shake his head “no, no. Not true. No way. I was outside my place smoking a cigarette, and he walked right up to me. He took the smoke from my mouth, and spun it around. Stuck the cherry right in my lip. Look, look at it”

There is a little mark on Ben’s lip that looks like a cold sore

“Maybe you just made a mistake, Ben. Maybe you just flipped the smoke around backward by accident” I say.

“No. no fucking way. I didn’t burn myself. You need to fix it again. Can you? Put some power back into it” he says, pushing the small head towards me again

“Ben, I just made it for you as a present. You might be confused, man. I really didn’t do anything to make this magic.” I hold the clay head in my hand, it is cold and feels a little damp “It is just something I made for you...because we are friends”

Ben hangs his head for a moment, and then takes a long drink from his can. “He knew about you”

“Who did? The head?” I ask

“No, not the goddamn head. Him. You know who I mean” Ben says, raising his voice.

I read once that tone of voice is key when you are talking to people who are seriously disturbed, so I try to be as calm as possible. “Ben, I’m sorry, man. I will definitely make you another head. I will do it as soon as I get a chance”

Ben nods slowly.

“What did he say, Ben?” I ask, after a few second of silence.

“He said that you’re a ghost, Luke”

“Buddy, I’m not a ghost. I can talk to anyone here. Everyone here can see me” I hold up the head “I made this for you. This real, physical thing. I am definitely not a ghost”

Ben shakes his head, and looks at his hands. “I know you’re not a ghost.”

I put the clay head into my pocket, “I actually have an appointment myself.” I say

“But you just got here”

“I know, but I totally forgot I have something else I was supposed to do today”

“What is it? What do you have to do?” Ben asks

“I told somebody that I would meet them at their work to sign a lease renewal”

“Where do they work?”

“The museum”

“Can I go, too?” He asks

“I don’t know, man. Maybe not today. I will make you a new clay head though, I promise. Can you meet me here tomorrow?”

“I guess”

“Ok, same time. I will have a new one for you. “

I rush out of the library and straight up the road to the museum. They are close, actually attached, and that is one of the many good things about Pittsburgh. There are lots of good things about Pittsburgh, but don’t move here. Or else they will be all be ruined by being crowded and expensive. I don’t really have an appointment. Even if I did, I would never in the winter. I am a seasonal employee. I make all of my money between April and September, after that, if the company needs anything, it is never a rush.

The museum is almost like a church to me. I go there to wander and to collect my thoughts. At least I used to, but now there is a girl there on Mondays. She is fantastic, dark hair, too much makeup, angry and compact behind one of those carts that have additional enrichment projects for children. For the past two months, I have been going to see her there every week. I used to just go and walk around with my headphones on and absorb the atmosphere, or occasionally make some small talk with the guards, but lately I have been experimenting with various forms of engagements to see if I can get her attention.

For a couple of weeks I sketched, which I quite competent at, as long as I am not drawing from life. My real strength lies in improvisation. Then, it occurred to me that it might be a bit strange if I am sitting in front of some of Monet's water lilies and drawing a picture of a person being kidnapped by a UFO, so I left my sketch book at home. Then for a couple of other weeks I brought something that I was reading. I try to read important books, not because I am some intellectual elitist, but because it saves me quite a bit of time in searching out what to read. If it won a major award, I will read it. I respect the opinions of critics who have awards to hand out. Plus, it gives me a measure of authority when I discuss things with the type of casual intellectuals who feel like reading the New York Times is the educational equivalent of touching saints' relics. Everyone is always seeking low effort holiness. Any decent really smart person knows that they are mostly pretty stupid.

So, I would sit in the galleries and read, but I think the guards got wise to my real objective because they would tease me, and suggest that I take my outside reading to the library, or at least move to a seat where I would have a better view of the girl at the art cart. My latest trick is to take notes about the art. I think that might be the best strategy because I have noticed her starting to look at me a little bit. For some reason, even after spending the last eight weeks trying to catch her eye, once she started to look at me, and am finding myself to be petrified to look back. I have been thinking about it though, the next time she looks at me, I am going to look back. Maybe I will even say something. I have been thinking about something clever, I have gone over a few options, even something about the art. She is younger than me. I'm a bit of a late bloomer. A lot of things I thought of to say contained the word "lovely" for some reason, and I realize that that makes me sound really old and strange, so I have decided to play it by ear. Either way, if she looks at me, I am saying something.

The inside of the gallery is calm and cool as it always is. In my haste with Ben at the library, I forgot to return home to get my prop, but that is ok. I walk around for a while, and then decide to sit in the only chair that affords me a slight view of the girl at the cart. It is in front of Alex Katz's Lake Time which as Alex Katz goes, is a lump of garbage, but his really good portraits aren't in cities like mine anyway, or if they are, they are in some rich guy's house. I sit there for a while, I start to feel a bit awkward, so I pretend that I am writing something. The girl is probably too far away from me to notice that I don't have a pen and paper anyway, but I have to abruptly stop when I notice that she has escaped the safety of her cart and is walking directly towards me. In an instant, she is standing in front of me, and I make a futile effort to disguise my imaginary pen and pad in my pocket and look casual.

She is even prettier in person. With her inches from me, I can't think of anything to say, at all, but she seizes the opportunity.

"Can I ask you a question?" She says

I try to smile, concealing my anxiety "Of course"

"What the fuck is your problem?"

"I...I don't have a problem"

"So, it is just a coincidence that you lurk around here every week and stare at me? Let me see the picture you were just drawing..."

"Oh, I wasn't drawing a picture. I was taking notes." I say

“Let me see your notes, then” She says extending her paint splattered hand

“I have already put them in my pocket”

“..And you can’t get things out of your pocket once you put them in there?”

“No, that’s not it. I just don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to because you are pervert who comes and sits here every week and draws pictures of me”

“I wasn’t drawing a picture of you”

“Then, prove it” she says, folding her arms across her chest.

So I dig into my pockets, and since there is no paper there, I withdraw the only logical distraction available, the small clay head that had once belonged to Ben

“You are half right. I am here to see you” I say holding out the clay head. “I have been working up the courage to talk to you. I’m sorry I was so strange, but I actually made this for you. I think you are quite lovely”

“Oh, sure. Well, for the future, handing someone a tiny head, is not the best way to apologize for being strange”

I look down at the clay head in my hand. The green Fimo is shiny on one side from being rubbed like a magic talisman by Ben, and the face, which was crude to begin with, looks particularly distorted in the gallery lighting.

“Well, it isn’t supposed to be you” I say and smile

“That’s good” she says, still looking down at the clay head in my palm.

“Look, this was a mess. “ I say “I can’t actually imagine how this whole thing could have gone worse. It’s just, that I think you are really pretty...and you know, when you see somebody, that you think might like you, or maybe be like you, you kind of imagine ways that your first conversation would go.” I put the clay head back into my pocket. “This wasn’t it. Like, super wasn’t it. I’ll go, but I didn’t want to scare you, I was just working up the courage to talk to you” Then, I stand up and start to walk away.

“You’re just going to keep the head then?” She says

“Oh no, I just thought you didn’t want it”

I rush back over and hand it to her, but I don’t make eye contact.

So then I needed to make another head for Ben. It wasn’t the only one, there are lots and lots. The heads are my other preoccupation. I make them all of the time. Lately, the best ones have been really detailed. I brought some of my hair home from the barber and made hair and eyebrows for the last few. Then I hide them. In the woods in the park mostly, but also behind books in the library, and if I travel somewhere I will bring a few. I left a really good one in the Canadian National Gallery. I still wonder if anyone had the guts to notice it didn’t belong. Someday, I will retire to them like Aureliano Buendía and his little golden fish, but in the meantime, I will need to get more clay.

There is a store in between my apartment and the museum that has Fimo, but they don’t always have all of the colors. The store that has most of the colors is on the South Side, and I just sold

my car. I do that every year, sell the car. A couple of years ago, I made friends with a mechanic who has a car dealers license and he takes my money to one of the wholesale auctions and picks me up something decent every spring. Then, at the end of the rental season, I sell it again. It has been a great arrangement, really. I save on insurance, parking, maintenance all that stuff; except for now because I need to get to the South Side and I have no car. I could take the bus, but I never really bothered to learn how the routes work, so I decide to walk.

I try not to think about the girl from the museum as I do. That whole thing was mortifying, and worse still, I didn't even bother to ask for her name or try to recover when I gave her the clay head. Even worse, is that particular head is in an extremely primitive variation on what I am capable of. It was a rough draft. That is why I gave it to Ben. The good ones, the ones with the eyes that I bought from the taxidermy supply company, are the ones that I want to be found, not give away. I hope that the people who find the heads, keep them though, or maybe that they decide to put something else that they made in its place. I have a recurring fantasy that that I will place a lotus flower garland around the Mr. Rodgers statue that is near the stadiums. Then, a reporter for the newspaper will happen by, and that person will take a picture, and somebody will see the picture, and that person will do some research about Mr. Rodgers and Lotus flowers. Perhaps then that same person will be another person to realize that Mr. Rodgers is a bodhisattva and she will figure out her own way of getting that message across to people without beating them over the head with it.

I read this short story about some kids, who find a porno magazine by a baseball field, and it leads one of the finders to discover the truth about his sexual identity, and then later he becomes somebody who throws a pornography magazine out of a window by a baseball field. I am quite sure that the author figured that he was making some important statement about the nature of identity, but this kind of thing is a pile of horseshit. I'm not waging a moral war, but life can't be about throwing porno magazines out of windows. ...the whole thing is just so goddamn unimaginative.

At the art supply store they have a bunch of different colors of Fimo, but they don't have the exact one that I used to make the head for Ben. I will just have to convince him that a different colored one is just as good. I never tried to convince him that that original one had magic powers or anything, he actually did that on his own, but now he is committed, and I guess I am too. Maybe I will make a better one for the girl at the museum. I will think of way to explain that what I had was a rough draft that I was carrying with me to see if I could imagine giving it to her, and then I'll hand her a much better one. Maybe I could just come clean entirely, and tell her the whole story. That I am trying to spill a little magic into the world and unseat Disney as the builder of the world of wonder. He's another one too, Robertson Davies; World of Wonders would have been much better if the damn magician wasn't a pervert. She might not listen though. I could ask Donald to look into it. He's a guard at the museum, and the only other person over thirty that lives in my building. I will have to figure out a way to get him to come up to my place though, because every time I knock on his door he tells me that I am interrupting his "two beer time" or else he pretends like he has a female guest. I don't believe that though because I have never seen anyone other than him go into his place. He still goes out every Friday night. He calls the jitney to pick him up. I could try talking to him while he is waiting for the jitney, but he normally doesn't like to talk to me then either. He just stands out there with rings on every one of his narrow fingers reeking of Bay Rum aftershave and holding his cigarettes like he is about to throw a dart.

I have a big picnic table that serves as my work surface in my apartment. On it, I have all of my tools to make the heads: the scraping things that the dentist uses for your teeth, various repurposed spoons and forks, empty soup cans filled with plastic eyes and a few baggies of my hair. I lay out the new Fimo and mold it around for a while. I make a few faces using only my fingers until I settle on one that will be good enough for Ben. Then, I play around trying to make one good enough for the girl at the museum, but I still can't decide on what she would like. So I decide to bake the head that I made for Ben. I prefer to bake more than one at a time because I hate the smell, and I have to open the window while I do it, and it is already starting to get cold. But I put the head in the oven anyway, and sit and wait. I consider sitting outside and waiting for Donald to get home, so I can talk to him about the girl, but he would probably be upset if I catch him off guard, so instead I try to devise ways of running into him by accident. Then, it occurs to me that I might be able to catch him like a fish if I use the right bait.

About ten years ago, I bought a really fantastic stereo. It is a Sony, with oversized KLH speakers. Turned up, the sound could easily fill a good sized dance floor. I put the speakers into my open window, and search through my music collection to see if I can find something that Donald might like. I have a compilation CD called "The Best of Doo Wop", and I cue the track up to The Flamingos I Only Have Eyes for You and put it on repeat. Then I turn it up until it is easily audible from the street, and I sit and wait. After the sixth replaying, the kid in the next apartment starts to bang on the wall, which is unusual because they know that I work for the company, and am pretty generous about ignoring their loud parties and the constant smell of pot smoke that seeps out from under their door. It is only twenty after five though, and there is no chance that they are sleeping, and I am not violating the building's quiet hours policy, so I don't turn the music down, I just sit and wait, and watch the street for Donald. When I see him turn onto the street, I turn the music up a little bit louder. He is limping a bit, and carrying an old gym bag, which presumably contains his guard uniform. I watch him walk to see if the music is inspiring any change in his movements, maybe a little skip or a wiggle to acknowledge the unexpected serenade. But he doesn't change at all; he just walks on in his little limping way furiously puffing on his long cigarette. Then, he walks into the building without even checking his mailbox.

After a few minutes, I decide to turn up the music a little louder to see if maybe he might decide to come up to my apartment to complement me on my taste, but he doesn't. Finally, I walk down and see him. In the hallway, I notice that my music is equally loud outside of my apartment as it was inside, and even two floors down, in front of Donald's door, it is still pretty loud. I knock, but there is no answer, so I knock again. I wait another minute and knock a little louder. After about thirty seconds, I hear a rustling from inside of the apartment, and then the door bursts open. Donald stands looking at me without saying anything. Then, finally, he says, "What's wrong, Luke"

I smile. "Am I interrupting your two beer time?"

"No, you are interrupting my take a shit time. What do you need?" He asks, closing the door a bit, so that I can't get a full view of his apartment.

"I...I was wondering if you liked the music"

"Is that you?"

"Yep"

“Well, go turn it off, it’s too loud.”

“It’s a great song” I say

“Not again and again it ain’t. People are trying to res’. Its dinner time”

“People eat dinner at different times” I say

“Not me. I eat after work. Now, go ahead and turn off the music.” He says, and starts to close his door a bit more. I stick out my foot and catch it before it can close all of the way.

“Donald, wait, there is actually something I wanted to ask you.”

He opens the door a bit wider and waits

“Do you know that girl from the museum, the one with the art cart?”

“The short one?”

“I guess. She is a little short, maybe. Anyway, do you know her?”

“No”

“Oh, come on, Donald. You know her. All the ladies love Donald. ...you must know her”

I smile, but he doesn't smile back.

“I like a slim woman”

“She’s not fat.” I say, feeling a little offended.

“For me she is. To each his own” He says and starts to close the door again

“Well, if you do talk to her, could you tell her you know me?”

“Look... females like a man that is clean, who works, who takes care of his self. Look at you, man. You’re up there playing the same song over and over again with some kind of shit on your hands”

“Its clay” I say

“What is?”

“The shit on my hands”

“It looks like shit no matter what it is. Now, go on and turn that song off, it's about to be my two beer time” The door starts to swing close again

“At least tell her that I asked about her” I say, to the sound of the lock turning

Back in my apartment, I let the song play through a few more times before turning it all of the way off. I figure it would be best to do that rather than let Donald feel like he could order me around in my own place. He is wrong too. I am clean. At times even obsessively so, and the things in my apartment, though few, are of good quality, and in nice condition. The truth is, I have some familiarity with what “females” want. And in my earlier life, I had gained quite a bit of intimate familiarity with a number of different women. That is back when I used to drink a whole lot...but I stopped all that. I didn’t get sober, as the expression goes. I didn’t go into some room with a bunch of other people and admit my powerlessness or anything like that. I just came to the conclusion that alcohol was the gasoline that fueled a vehicle that was driven by

someone not entirely me, so I stopped; no pomp and circumstance necessary. On the other hand, I was never that enthusiastic about it anyway, booze and drugs and all that other stuff were the ideological equivalent of a neck tattoo to me, a way of pledging allegiance to a lifestyle that didn't involve the soul crushing bondage of conforming to a room full of desks and florescent lighting. I thought then, and still think, that there is no more shameful form of intellectual prostitution than giving ones talents up to a life of forms and meaningless arguments and insincere commitments to things that a person can't possibly be passionate about.

To really be great at selling toilets, you have to love toilets and the toilet industry, to the point that you accidentally find yourself lapsing into toilet related discussions when the conversation gets stale. I hate toilets and everything like that. There are certainly a lot of good people working hard at a lot of different things, but the stock broker, the toilet salesman, that is a strange niche to carve in a person's soul.

Donald is wrong about that, too. I work. I help people find homes. I might not do it all year, but that is my choice. I am not asking anybody for anything that I haven't worked for. I might not make a lot, but I make enough to survive, and that is fine with me. Plus, to anybody who ever rents anything from me, I never present myself as anything other than a respectable, responsible member of society. This is all I really have to offer... a pleasant exterior and a confirmation of biases. If an eagle builds a nest over a salmon hatchery, that eagle is considered a pretty smart eagle, if a person finds the path of least resistance, he is lazy and undirected, and that, my friend is exhibit A in the case against our society.

When I take the clay head out of the oven, it looks good. A lot better than the first one I made, so to occupy my time, I decide to give it the full course of embellishments. I dig through my supplies and find a matching pair of brown eyes with a large pupil that I think were originally designed for use in bird mounts, and using some epoxy, position them in the empty sockets. The effect is a slightly disturbing, but I try to offset that by sketching some eyebrows on with a permanent marker. The marker doesn't really give the eyebrows the effect I am looking for so, I decide to take the long route, and actually do the eyebrows the proper way, with a piece at a time, with individual pieces of a hair. After that is finished, the bald head looks unusual, so I set about piecing on hair in the scalp as well. The whole process of the head and eyebrows takes about seven hours, and it is already past midnight when I am done, so I decide to make eyelashes also. Eyelashes are tricky because they need to stick directly out, but not look really bristly. The whole thing with the eyelashes takes another two hours owing to an unfortunate slip with the glue, and the delicate cleanup involved, but when everything is done, I am satisfied with the result.

By the time I'm finished it is so late, that I start to worry that if I do fall asleep, I will miss my meeting with Ben, so I use the time that I have left to construct a carrying case for him. I had scrounged a bit of hard foam from one of those packing containers that computers come in. I cut out a little cube of the Styrofoam, and then cut a sliver off of the top for a lid, and from the larger piece, I dig out a depression that fits the head snugly. Then, I cover the entire box in fabric, and to hold it closed, I tie a piece of ribbon around it.

It is five in the morning by the time everything is done, so with nothing to do for the next four hours, I make myself some beans and a glass of milk, and then I put the present for Ben into my backpack and go out for a walk. The morning is cold and my joints have started to ache from the lack of sleep. There is almost nobody out, but as I get closer to where the colleges are, I pass a

few runners. I also see an older woman putting paper plates of dry cat food out behind the dumpsters of the noodle restaurant, but otherwise I am alone. I kill time for a while and think. Then I start to focus on my breathing as I walk. The action clears my head like it always has, and with the sensory stimuli, I feel safe that I won't lapse into some kind of interspatial travel. After a while, I buy a cup of coffee, and walk over to the library to wait for it to open.

When I get to the library, Coats is already there sitting on one of the picnic benches. He is a tall, older black man, and from what I heard, he is also an ex-convict. He is at the library nearly every day, normally in one of the wing chairs in the basement reading room holding with a thick hardback book. He almost never talks to anyone. He just sits there and reads with his long legs crossed in his neatly creased jeans. Ben told me that Coats is homeless, but he has a brother that lets him keep his clothes at his place and use his shower, which would probably explain why he is always at the library. Coats knows who I am, but he never talks to me, but since I have time to kill, I walk over and sit down with him. I say hello, but he doesn't respond, so I just sit there for a while and drink my coffee. After that, I decide to take the out the little box with the head in it and check to see if it stayed secure while I was walking. Coats watches me, and then he says "What'cho got there?"

"It's a present for my friend, Ben" I say

"The crazy fat guy?"

"He's not that crazy"

"He crazy enough. He your boyfriend?" Coats says, not looking at me, and resting his elbows on his knees

"No. He's my friend"

"Nothing wrong with it if he is.... That's your business"

"Well he's not" I say

"You got a present for 'eem"

I untie the box and open it up. I take out the clay head, and show it to Coats. He looks calmly at the head, and then at me.

"That's you?"

"No, it's not supposed to be anybody. It's just a little head, I made it"

"Man, I know it's not supposed to be you. I meant is that you, leaving them heads?" He asks, still looking at me, but scooting further over on the bench.

"Oh you found one? Behind the Neruda?" I ask

"Yeah, Neruda. What is that? Some Voodoo shit?"

"No, No, It's not Voodoo. It is supposed to put a little magic into the world"

"Magic? That sound like some Voodoo shit to me" He starts to get more animated, so I put the head back into its case and put the case into my backpack

“No, I mean, like a sense of wonder. Of possibility” I say, explaining myself rapidly, trying to calm Coats down.

“Don’t be hiding little heads in there, man. “ He says even louder as he stands up.

“I’m sorry. Honestly, I didn’t mean anything by it. I really didn’t. I’ll take the one back that I put that in there”

“I threw that shit away”

“You threw it away. It took me a long time to make that!” I say

“I’ll throw that one away, too, if I find it.” He says

“I’m not going to hide this one. It is for my friend”

“You just be fuckin him up worse, givin him some weird shit like that” Coats says

Coats turns around and started to walk away, but I follow him. He is a few paces in front of me when I say, “Hey Coats, I didn’t know you liked Pablo Neruda?”

He spins on his heel and walks toward me. When he is six inches from me, he puts his index finger in the center of my chest and says. “Man, fuck you. And keep my name out your mouth. You don’t know me.” Then he walks up the library steps and stands waiting by the front door.

I go back to the bench and try not to look at him. I wonder if he really does like Neruda. I don’t. I retain the right to discount someone entirely if they are an apologist for authoritarian governments. On the other hand, I would also like to think that Stalin couldn’t survive the age of the internet, but what I really understand about history could fit in a thimble. Nobody really gets anything they didn’t live through. Either way, one thing that hanging around the library has taught me, is that if you want to find somebody who has put real independent effort the literary heavyweights, you should seek out some felons. Or least the ex-cons that spend their unemployable hours at the library. They certainly aren’t in the majority. The majority are people checking out Dan Brown audio books for their road trip to Cape May, then the students, then the deranged with nowhere else to go, and then the felons, and then everyone else.

When the doors finally open, I wait a few minutes for Coats to go in and find his book, and settle into the wing chair, and then I go inside. I find the copy of the Captive Mind that I have been reading and sit down at one of the wide wood tables in the Mezzanine where Ben can find me. I read for a while, but I find that I am getting distracted, so I close my eyes for a few minutes. A little while later, I am awoken by a guard.

“I would have let you sleep, but it is starting to get busy and people might complain” he says

“What time is it?”

The guard rubs his fat index finger across his eye and then pushes back his shirt sleeve to look at his watch.

“Almost one” He says.

“One?”

“Yeah, the college kids are starting to come in. You can stay, but you have to stay awake”

“Did you see Ben?” I ask

“Your Buddy?”

“Yeah, the big guy? Have you seen him?”

“Yeah, earlier I did. He was drinking a Coke back in the stacks. He got all pissy when I talked to him about it, too”

“When was that?” I ask

“Oh, I’d bet at least a couple of hours ago. Haven’t seen him since I talked to him”

I look down at the book. I had drooled a bit on one of the pages, so I quickly closed it, to conceal it from the guard, but he had already noticed

“Tell ‘em that you ain’t going to charge extra for drooling on the book” He says, and then he laughs loudly and walks away.

I looked down where the book had been and noticed the call slip where Ben had written me a note with one of those dull little half pencils. It says, “Didn’t want to wake you. You seemed so peaceful. Be here tomorrow?”

I read the note over a couple of times, and then decided to check my bag. The head was still there in its little foam case. After that, I return my book, and leave the library.

I have never been to Ben’s apartment before, but I know where it is. He has invited me a bunch of times, but I never accepted because he always asked at a weird moment, and he never really expressed any kind of plan about what we might do when I got there. But, since I was left with pretty much nothing to do, I decide to visit him. His place is not in the best neighborhood, but seeing as I am wearing the same clothes that I had worn for the past two days, and had just slept for four hours sitting at a table in a public building, I figure that I will emit enough of an unsound vibe that nobody would bother me. Plus, it is the middle of the day. When I reach the tall narrow building of subsidized studios where Ben lives, there is a skinny man with a patchy white beard sitting on the low cinderblock wall next to the front door. He is smoking one of those narrow cigars that looks like a cigarette, and he has two huge green bottles of mouthwash in plastic bags on the ground in front of him. I push the buzzer for Ben’s apartment and wait. There is no answer, so I push the button again. The man on the cinder block wall turns and looks at me,

“Who you lookin for?” He says, clearing his throat

“Ben. Big guy. Dark hair. He’s usually got a brown shopping bag with him” I say

“The crazy guy?”

“Yeah, but he’s not really that crazy”

“Oh. He’s crazy all right. I live right below him, He screams the whole night sometimes. What are you? A case worker?”

“No, I’m his friend”

“He isn’t exactly the friend type” The man says. He takes a long draw from his thin cigar

“Besides, he’s not here. He’s been gone all day. I can tell because his radio and TV are off. He is never in there without both of them on at the same time.”

“Can you give him a message for me?” I ask

“No”

“No?”

“No. Just because you talk to him, don’t mean I have to”

“Looks like you are planning on having some pretty fresh breath, huh?” I say, gesturing to the bag with the two huge bottles of mouthwash.

“Liquor store is a long walk from here” He says

“Not that long” I say

“It is if you are carrying a couple of bags.”

“You could get one of those little carts, or at least a backpack or something”

“I ain’t got no backpack, and I’m sure as fuck not stealing a shopping cart. This is just fine” He says as he reaches his foot out and taps the side of the bag with a filthy sneaker.

So, I take the present for Ben, and my notebook out of my backpack, and give the bag to the man.

“Here” I say

“What the fuck is this?”

“A backpack”

“I don’t need a fuckin backpack”

“I think you do. You are drinking mouthwash.”

“Backpack ain’t gonna keep me from drinking mouthwash” he says

“It’s got a better chance to keep you from drinking mouthwash than nothing does. Just take it”

He reaches out a hand and takes the backpack, and immediately sets it on the ground next to his plastic bag.

“What’s the difference?” He says

“The difference is that mouthwash is for cleaning your teeth. Plus, you might want to celebrate something. Then maybe you’ll drink something other than mouthwash”

“What am I gonna celebrate?” He asks, not looking at me

“How about your new backpack... That is something to celebrate”

“Drug store opens before the liquor store” he says

“Well, then use the backpack to carry the bottles of mouthwash from the drug store”

“If I walk into the drug store with a backpack, they will think I’m gonna steal something”

“I’m surprised they would think that about a person with such great dental hygiene” I say

“What?”

“Nothing. It was a bad joke. Anyway, enjoy the backpack. Please tell Ben that someone came by looking for him ok?”

“I told you. No.” The man says

Then, I tell him goodbye, but he doesn't say anything, so I leave and start walking home. On the way, a sad looking prostitute wearing shorts and a thick winter coat tries to make a joke about the box with Ben's clay head in it, and it somehow being an engagement ring for her. I laugh but try to walk by her as quickly as possible. She probably doesn't remember, but last year, I tried to give her ten dollars when she propositioned me on the street. When she finally understood that I was just offering the money without an expectation of any services, she got in a really animated argument with me where she claimed I was a cop, and nothing I said could persuade her that randomly giving money to a prostitute would be an extraordinary misuse of police funds. In the end, she crumpled the ten dollar bill into a ball and threw it at me, but I walked away without picking it up.

When I get back to my apartment, I am met with a horrible smell like maybe a mouse died behind one of the walls. The maintenance guys have been using poison again, so it would stand to reason that that is the likely culprit. Either way, I am too tired to check and I fall into bed, and in a few minutes am totally asleep. At midnight, I am woken from an incredibly bizarre dream where I am in some sort of large animal pen, and my job is to occupy the lions while Coats is in a business meeting. I try to fall back to sleep, but I can't. So, I decide to try to look around for the source of the horrible smell. I check behind the radiator, but there is nothing there but a clump of dust. Then, I look behind the refrigerator and stove, and in all of the cabinets. I end up cleaning quite a bit in the process, but I still don't find the mouse. So I take everything out of all of my drawers, and everything out of my closet, but there is no mouse. So then I move the bed. Underneath my bed, is a huge cache of magazines that I had picked up from outside of the used bookstore. They were throwing them away, so I took all of them. It was six boxes, and it took me that many trips to get them home since I had already sold my car. But I have never taken the opportunity to read any of them, so I decide to throw them all away. I take each box out to the dumpster, but when I get back from the last trip, I can still smell the decay. So I throw more things away, but still the smell persists.

Then, as I am emptying my normal trash can, I find the source of the smell. Underneath the can liner, there is the body of a tiny dead mouse. Somehow, it had managed to get itself between the bag and the can, and had died at the bottom. For some reason, the dead mouse made me incredibly depressed. It had probably died of dehydration, or starvation, or fear, but whatever the case, it was a horrible way to die: In the bottom of an inescapable can. Looking at its tiny body, and its soft grey fur, I feel bad about throwing it into the dumpsters. I consider finding a place for a proper burial, but the only peaceful patches of grass are in the park, and at this time of night, I would probably be arrested as a weirdo if I was caught burying a mouse. Then, I remember the cats that the old lady was feeding behind the noodle shop. One of the cats would probably like to eat the mouse, so I wrap it in a paper towel and put it into the refrigerator.

Then, I try to sleep for a while, but I can't. At 5:30 I get up, and have another glass of milk and an apple and take a shower. Then I take a long time shaving. William Burroughs said that shaving was one of the things that kept him sane, and I am inclined to agree. Feeling tired but fresh, I collect my things, the head for Ben, and the little mouse in the paper towel, into one of those cloth grocery bags and start walking towards the noodle shop. When I get there, the paper plates from yesterday are empty of their cat food, and the woman has not been there to replenish it yet. I crouch down a little and try to make a noise to call the cats. I had a dog when I was a kid, not a cat, so I don't really have a good idea of what it takes to call a cat, but I make that little

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