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Three Stories: "Permission," "Consolation," and "Presentation"

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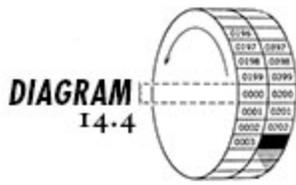


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THREE STORIES

Christopher Merkner

PERMISSION

"Isolated catastrophes are by their very nature," the headmistress said, then pausing, then continuing, her hand on my shoulder and her eyes fixed to something just over my left ear, "at least as we experience them in a human reality." She couldn't finish.

She tried again. "I mean let me share with you analogously: Once upon a time the headmistress was bitten by a dog. It bit her breasts, her quad half off, and she lost two thirds of her jaw. Imagine, just picture this, the headmistress goes around asking everyone to destroy their pets."

Her hand was warm. It rubbed my shoulder in tiny, heavy circles. Very pale, very accomplished, the headmistress, very forceful in exercising her strength over people. "Perhaps *destroyis* too strong." She drew her hand off my shoulder and brought all ten fingers to her lips. She shook her head. "At any rate, the kids have been briefed, the waivers sent, returned, the event administratively approved by the executive committee, no simple procedure, let me just say, so please just arrive early, toss the kids on the bus, stand back and, you know, stand back."

I slept poorly. We arrived late. I knew I would not stand back. I just could not possibly stand back and release my children to that bus. I walked slower and slower. The children howled at, dragged at me. The homes along that street leading to it were lovely, all abandoned by that time of the morning, the easy and employed leaving the lush self-watering gardens behind (Inside one of these houses was my wife, of course, and inside my wife was a welter, inside her welter were our previous years, inside our previous years was our dead son, inside him, we didn't, we just can never know.). But yet I did.

The headmistress, standing by the door with a pitted clipboard, touched me again on the shoulder. "We are defined," she said, "and I think you know this, but we are defined by how successfully we trivialize the function of control in our lives."

I started to speak, and I looked up to see she had a finger in my face.

The kids went up the stairs of the bus without looking back, and I spun and ran a sort of sprinting back to the car so that I might follow their bus and sass two yellow lights and a red to stay behind them and park quickly enough so that I might help our two remaining children descend the steps of that bus. And then we went hand-in-hand-in-hand to the Boy's locker room, where twenty two boys had already come, then fled, a graveyard of bodiless clothing heaps left behind. I walked with my kids through the tiny, crumpled

palls. I kept their hands. I told them to bend down and put each little heap into its own locker and close the locker door. They fussed, of course they fussed, for the shouting and slapping of the children in the pool outside of the locker room wooed and seduced them. They fussed, but they did what I asked. In those years, they still listened to me. They put each pile away, and I snapped my daughter into an unappealing one-piece, and I had to ask my son to swimsuit himself, my hands incapable of doing it.

They imprisoned their own street clothes alongside the clothing of their peers, we turned and faced the tidy room, and then we turned again and walked out together hand-in-hand-in-hand to the earth's curb.

The sound when they go in just breaks the chest wide open.

No one my own age spoke to me anymore.

I just couldn't, so I didn't—I just went in after them.

The water against cotton pants is heavy, the stuff of crippled dreams. I shed the pants after I shed my shoes, my socks. They sunk or drifted away. My daughter surfaced mouth wide, lashing and laughing at me. We held. She said, "What are you doing here?" I blew water. My son came over. I saw his feet beneath the surface kicking hard—and then I saw down there, down below his kicking feet, his brother. I held the kids tight until they pushed me off and swam away and left me there to listen to our dead son with my wife, sitting on her lap down at the bottom, discussing the house together, making plans to move. An apartment, our son said, is probably a better target for your income. I just feel, my wife answered, you should tell me your definition of 'target.' What do we mean when we say, 'target?' It's like a destination, he said to her. A place to go, she said, nodding. A place to go, he agreed.

And then the headmistress was down in there between them, standing between them, gathering my pants and folding them over her forearm. She collected my shoes and fingered them at the heel. She swam past me, and I followed. When I pulled myself up the ladder behind her, she commanded I step into the legs of my wet pants. I did. She yanked them up, buttoned me, and then she tied my shoes. She stood up, faced me. "I have yet again witnessed the strength of death," she said, "and I tell you I am underwhelmed."

"We'd like to have you over to the house for dinner," I answered.

CONSOLATION

We met each Saturday morning, though no one knew, no one needing to know, and we discussed unflinching our dead boys. The boys had not been good boys: the one seldom left the house, played no sport, and the other cruised socially but remained forever untouched, an elitist. And yet my buddy cut his forearms and bled into his toilet before flushing it down and wrapping his arms in his wife's brown

towels and sobbing, and I sometimes went out to the soon-to-be-developed lot behind our home and fed peanut butter toast to a colony of prairie dogs, so that I might catch one.

We consoled one another by not believing these things could occur inside the other's life, a life which had been largely, previously, in step with the pacing of the rest of the world. The forearm cutter did begin to console me less, statistically, because eating animals in the dust of your backyard, he felt, constituted sin far more dramatic than sticking yourself with a blade or something you could remove.

Still, the forearm cutter found it unlikely I would do this, so I invited him to see it himself, the doubter, and he did. He told me he drove to see my behavior for himself. The trip wasn't long, the property not hard to see from an adjacent residential street, and I was out there, alright, on a Tuesday around eleven, crouched. The forearm cutter could not at first see that the small brown things had emerged from against their landscape, and then he suddenly could: perhaps hundreds of them in slow creep and chirping unease, popping up, lowering their chests to the dirt, quavering.

I could have grabbed many of them, if I'd wanted, it appeared, he said, but instead I undertook one of them gently, including the eating, and there was nothing terse, disgusting, or cathartic about any of it. He watched me stand and wipe my hands on my pants. He watched me spit. He watched me vomit, weep, and he watched me pat my hair down, which he felt was the most disturbing thing about it all.

He said he would need to stop meeting me, leaving me to blame myself all I wanted without consolation. The greatest consolation is forward and up, he said to me, and he felt he wanted to take his Saturdays outdoors where he felt the living were most likely to proliferate. We rose from our chairs to stroll deeper into the shopping mall after this break-up, and we went about the mall to secure something for ourselves that we did not require but found amusing—sunglasses, expensive natural stone shapes, and curtains to windows that did not exist. Then we left one another with a handshake.

Of course for a while I still watched him watch the people of Saturdays. He wore long sleeves all through the late spring and by the middle of the summer he wore no shirt at all.

PRESENTATION

He would be moments away from speaking, but he would be brooding because everything was—it still is—literally the only thing he was going to get. And I get it. I know facing the literal to be an impossible prospect.

The offstage was a keeling, aging limestone stairwell that ran in some ways toward the basement of an old schoolhouse, and in other ways the opposite direction,

downhill, toward a building where the students ate, and the library, and the spooling cemented valleys of La Grange. A corrugated metal awning covered us from the drizzle. His campus guide hovered in the doorway below us, waiting for the signal from the event's MC.

"What happened to secrets? That's what I wanted to know. What is so wrong with secrets?"

My son took this remark with wincing, like I'd said something unintelligent for which he had no time. He said, "Small minds love small things."

We had been pretty sure we were out of the woods in terms of major degenerative diseases. Tying shoe strings would still loom, but his innovative footjamming reduced departure times significantly over his previous year's work with footwear security. We had nipped running and bleeding noses. Once, he could not go to the bathroom and inflated like a seal, and I took him to the emergency room in the middle of the night where they gave him a child-scale gentle enema.

It was time: the guide signaled.

I followed everyone down. It was a musty basement, as they all were. A sign above the bathroom read, "The Thinker's Center." Long and dated sofas were populated by students who had tumbled into clusters, some sitting on the laps of others, others side by side in arm locks, fingers laced, and a good number of faculty—I presume they were faculty, though it was a challenge to imagine them standing in front of people seriously working in their wool caps and ripped wool sweaters—had crashed into the sofas beside their students, also. They clapped politely as my son went up, me following.

He has exceptionally soft hands, and they held mine with a firmness I'll squeeze any chance I get.

He wanted to open that night with an anecdote about the time I'd *dragged* him to Target and *castigated, just skewered him, just totally excoriated him*, because he'd asked me to use the store's public bathroom. He would have been about four that year, he clarified with a heavy pause I felt got a little lost on that group of young, bohemian intellectuals. In front of the check-out aisles, he continued, my father, this man here before you, he just rips me for *always disobeying* him and for failing to pee like, I don't know, like some normal person where, like, I guess normal people pee.

He turned to me. "Go ahead," he said, he always says, "Go ahead and defend your fascism."

It's his dream, or my dream of his, and he can do this—or else he will do nothing in my life, something I cannot have—and I began the opening lines to Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*.

The students took notes with force as I quivered through the refrain. Believe me, one of the faculty was thinking, as he began hissing at me, I truly thought I knew hell before this. The man's hissing seemed to startle a student to her wits, and soon they were uniting their discovered contempt of me, and I could feel their heat on my face as I sang. And I couldn't quite finish, and I let my song sputter beneath their hostility.

I stood there then in silence and took the abuse until my son flagged it down—and began afresh with another

anecdote. Once, while I was taking a photograph of a caterpillar on the sidewalk, my daughter, his younger sister, maybe two, walked right past me and stepped squarely on the caterpillar. "She just crushed it," he told them, "and this one"—he pointed at me with a horrible index finger—"this one pushed her down and shouted obscenities at her in front of an entire park of people. He called her *ignorant*."

The pickaxe was produced, and my son handed it to me in silence. The college students and their gritty faculty watched me hack a hole in the ground. I swung away at the flooring. The wavers had already been signed. This was part of the agreement, part of the show. Tile, linoleum, hardwood, cement—no difference—flung and pitched. It went on for a while. My shoulders burned. My back sang. It was amazing, and it captivated throngs of students through those years. No one left early—ever. Destroying flooring might be the most compelling fiction in the world. Ultimately, it would break through, dip deep enough, and my son would step into the shallow hole, lie down at my feet, and I would be asked to walk out of the room and turn off the lights.

"Chicago will be ours," he would say from his hole in the dark, and that was that. The lights came back up, everyone shouted and praised him, and I would wait in the car just off the university's property by myself, until he would eventually return to me.

He would take me out for a frozen yogurt afterward, his treat. He was very proud to take me out, a big deal for him to pay with his cash honorarium. The whole time we ate we pretended the doors were not waiting for us. We pretended we did not have to hug and go our ways. "You weren't bad," he would sometimes say. "It's a symbolic presentation." He would of course go west and I would try to go east. But so often he would just stand there at the threshold. And every time he stood there, I would lift my hand to take his and hold it. It was usually breezy and nice out. He would hold on, I would hold on, and that would be a year we'd made serious progress.

These are little studies of life in [this strange land].