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Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?

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Abstract

This memoir investigates the roots of my core anxiety, the incessant but impossible ability to achieve perfection. It is framed by my experience getting a second tattoo, which is a line from T.S. Eliot's modernist poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and ties together both my internal struggle and my affinity for physical pain. This memoir draws a line between the past and the present, seeking to find a connection between struggling with anxiety and engaging in self-mutilation as a source of relief.

Keywords

Tattoo, Memoir, Self-destruction

Disciplines

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Comments

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Professor Rhett
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“The ribs are a sensitive area, so give me a heads up if you want a break.”

He swivels around again in his black stool and resumes his ritual preparation. I’m sitting shirtless on a long, cushioned bench (also black), and conscious in this frigid tattoo studio that my nipples are sharp enough to cut diamonds. Planted in a loveseat alongside the wall of this cubicle-like space, my best friend Jason, trying to make sense of this unfamiliar situation, watches him snap on black latex gloves, fetch a small, single well of ink from a cabinet below his desk, and finger out one alcohol pad from a clear jar, all before inserting a hair-thin needle into his mechanical instrument, the sacramental pen that liberates the artist’s troubled mind -- or, to him just a tattoo gun; I’m not sure.

I volunteer to go first in front of Jason so he can become familiar with the process; this is my second time sitting on this same bench, and I am more than a little eager to get started. With his hands burrowed underneath his thighs, Jason asks if I’m at all nervous this time, and I tell him, “Nah, It’s kinda like a release. After a while, you get into this trance and you don’t really want it to end.” I make the universal motion for masturbation and he cracks a smile out of one corner of his mouth, revealing a few clenched teeth that let me know I’m not the only one cold in this moment. Like faulty radio reception, the off-and-on buzzing of other tattooists is heard from over either partition.

¹ This line and all subsequent italicized lines come from T.S. Eliot’s modernist poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

“I’m going to have you lie down and stretch your left arm over your head,” the artist says to me. I follow his instructions and shape my arm in an awkward arc over my ear. In the yearning moments before he plunges the needle into my skin, I realize how uncomfortable, exposed, and uncomfortably exposed I am.

I find Jason’s eye scanning the room and finding logograms of Chinese characters, eclectic figurines of some one or another foreign culture, and framed, hand-drawn designs of tattoos that are probably now somewhere become ornate scars on the shoulder of a well-to-do business man, the abdomen a thriving single mother of two, and the thigh of a mid-20th century American Literature professor. The walls are a deep red that reminds one of Asia. It seems the only colors that exist in this place are red and black.

“I’m going to start with a few lines,” he says, planting his chill hand on my ribs. He whips the insulated cord attached to the gun over his arm and out of the way. I want to know where the end of this thick tether will lead me. “Let me know if the pain gets too bad.”

Let us go then, you and I

“Oh – oh my!” Mrs. Kopp said, reaching down at a heap of satiny fabric between her legs on the floor. “I’m sorry, this is a little embarrassing.” I stood shouldered next to my Mom and watched as she bundled it up and scuttled behind her desk, dropping the garment in some pullout metal drawer. The red makeup on

her cheek was so thick that it looked like a stroke of paint so, good for her, if her face was set aglow in embarrassment from dropping her panties in public, we couldn't tell. My nine year-old mind didn't understand how that sort of thing could happen.

"Well, I'm Mrs. Kopp," she said, extending her hand, "Director of the Gifted Program here at Hatfield."

"Nice to meet you," my mom said. The expression on her face read like something between a sympathetic understanding and feigned pleasantries, prompted by the surprise intimate moment we had just shared.

Did her waistband snap or something?

More than anything, I was confused at how I was accepted into this program to begin with, and who consented on my behalf to accept the invitation. A few months earlier, my Mom had driven me to a large building fitted with commercial grade tile and built with few windows, so the floor radiated a bright, eerie glow underneath the uncontested fluorescent lighting. Here, my Mom relinquished custody of me to a tall, thin administrative looking woman with a clipboard in her hand and a belt around her waist, which was ornamented with the severed heads of children that swung on the end of chains and clanked together when she walked.

Leaving my Mom in the distance, I followed the woman to a secluded room with a packet of paper and a pencil preset on top of a single elementary school desk. It faced nose to nose with her own personal table. She sat and watched, at times sitting with her fingers crossed and at others whirling a mace above her head, as I matched shapes, formulated equations, and determined the author's intention in a

short expository essay on the benefits of deforestation. The lights above buzzed with electricity.

Months after unquestioningly dancing to this strange choreography of tests and exercises, I found myself in yet another mysterious dungeon, this time in my school and under the auspice of Mrs. Kopp, who introduced me to the Gifted Resource Room and had wasted no time dropping her intimates (Perhaps it was just a cheap pair with a remarkable inability to hug the hips?):

“We’ve got fully equipped computers for you all to use, trivia games, a library of books, puzzles, construction pieces, and,” Mrs. Kopp said, gesturing to a terrarium at the far end of her desk, “a few cockroaches. Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches, actually, they’re the largest in the world.” I walked closer towards the class pets and nosed up to the glass like a dog to a window. One of them hissed at me.

She then clawed my shoulder and swiveled me around to meet the rest of my kind, a lot of kids I had only infrequently seen throughout my first few years of school. As if a flame heated the stools beneath their butts, they each leaned in around a long table, hovering over a math game that sat in the center. They feasted over the competition like the cockroaches in the corner that fed on the woolly, decaying oranges placed in their environment. I was to become one of them now. I didn’t quite understand what that meant, but I was intrigued to be a part of this almost secret society.

After school that day, I was overjoyed at finally being granted the opportunity to hash out the underwear caper that so confounded me.

“Underwear?” she said. “That was her slip, it protects the fabric in her skirt. There’s not much holding it up there so it’s easy to fall.”

I could not predict my tortuous journey throughout the remaining years of grade school and even beyond. The Gifted Program taught me at all times to be intellectually hungry, and although I often find myself returning to taste its sweet flavor on my lips, I can’t say that rotten fruit has enough nutritional value for me to survive. But for now, I finally understood Mrs. Kopp’s slip incident.

I am no prophet—and here’s no great matter;

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker

When a tattoo gun draws its lines across the skin, it does not float along its canvas like the delicate horsehairs of a paintbrush. It drags against the firm resistance of the body’s defense, tearing through tightly woven fibers of flesh like a stick through sand.

“I tell people it’s like someone pulling a sharp pen down your skin,” the tattoo artist says. Jason bounces his head with an interested, *Hmm*, after hearing this interesting analogy, but my mind is somewhere else. I begin to think about my first tattoo, hearing Jason go through the same script as I had.

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

On harsh metal benches elevated above the pool, I sat alongside the rest of my swim-suited classmates, some waiting for the teacher to arrive with their arms crossed inside an invisible box and others up and about, shouting, joking, cackling -- capitalizing on their confidence. I had endured sixteen years of my life without learning or having to know how to swim, but now, like an infant, I was figuratively thrown into the water and pressured to float for a grade on my report card. In this cold and shirtless state, the margin for keeping anxieties hidden reduced to near-nakedness. In short, we were exposed.

Looming light fixtures inside the natatorium cast an ugly purple shade over the entire landscape that made everything look like it was outlined in black. It transformed us into awkward, alien creatures; our brown eyebrows now a stark black and our eyelashes prominent dark rings against our pale faces. The light became lighter and the dark even darker.

"Shit, bro," I heard from the kid that sat next to me, pre-swim. He was an ocean dwelling surfer in the middle of Pennsylvania who adopted the California beach culture after riding a few waves on the Jersey shore. "Those are some gnarly slashes on your shoulder, dude, what did you do?" He jolted me out of the dead stare I had adopted to hide my anxiety in front of the water.

"Got real drunk this weekend," I said. "Ran into a hinge on Saturday." It was enough to satisfy his question and maintain my own feigned nonchalance, but it was far from the truth. I had become an expert at this evasive lie, so much so that it became a guiltless reminder, like the constant pain radiating from the deep lines on

my upper-arm, that I had done this all to myself, fulfilling an ineffable desire to feel pain and to temporarily relieve an internal pressure I felt always. The lacerations looked like streaks of rich crimson still shiny and freshly painted in the light.

The swim instructor finally entered and we all stood to leave. I can't remember what our lesson was that day, only the feeling of pulsing heat on my shoulder as I submerged myself in the chlorinated water.

*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

He continues to draw the lines of the design and a sense of inoculating familiarity kindles in my stomach. As the needle strokes again and again over the rolling landscape of my ribs, my eyelids relax and the awkward contortion of my body melts into a state of natural comfort. The room seems brighter now.

"You never told me what it means," Jason says from his seat, hurling me out of this moment. "How does it feel to be painted like a French girl, by the way?" I look at him until my stare becomes long enough to be a suitable response to his last question.

"It's from my favorite poem," I say, "I have always gotten this awesome, indescribable feeling when I read it." This is a lie; I can describe it entirely. The tattoo artist continues scraping away at the design without adding any commentary.

For most of my life, I have silently operated under the belief that by understanding something I could conquer it, that by the power of knowledge I could overcome any impasse. It was only when my emotion declared war on my logic that I realized I was dealing with something beyond this guiding philosophy; something, in fact, caused by this internal logic. I was eating myself from the inside out, striving ever to understand the things that surrounded me, sometimes finding success and sometimes not, but always with unsatisfactory results. It was an existence of constant agitation, anxiety, anguish, bred by an unquenchable desire to meddle in the world's questions to fulfill my own psychological wiring. A build-up of pressure in all cases needs to be released, and destruction is just another form of creation.

"Just a few --" the tattooist squints in closer to his work then back out, "--just a few more touches, and I think you'll be good to go. A little blood is normal – you probably already know."

"Pretty quick," says Jason, hovering out of his seat and craning his neck to see if he can get a view of the near-finished work.

He wipes the residual ink off of the raw flesh and gives me the go-ahead to stand up and look at it in the mirror. I walk up to it and read the reflection of this new inscription in my skin. The lines are sharp, protruding, and squeezing out small droplets of blood, colored just the same as the studio's rich walls. In a few weeks the wounds will heal over and the destruction made to my skin will repair as the design it will remain for the rest of my life. Projected backwards in the mirror, I read it again:

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