

A Portrait of Innocence

By Katelin Morrison

What if I told you that the moment I was born, I was entirely aware of myself and what was par for the course of my existence? Most people think I am a liar, a looney, and a fantasizer; and that could be true to some degree, but I think it's more than likely that I'm foredoomed. From adolescence, beyond adulthood, and into my senior years an obsession festered in my brain. It intensified with time. It became a necessity for me to comprehend innocence, purity, blissful ignorance. I've fought for the little knowledge I have on the subject, each insight was hard earned and often came at the expense of others. I imagine most people say I'm unreliable, but it's only because they aren't listening to me. Perhaps you'll understand.

November 12: 5 Days

When I was born the first thing that occurred to me, was that I was naked. The sight of myself and the realization that people beheld my exposed form were what made me cry my first tears and echo my first screams. I was ashamed. I described this incident in detail to a man I met on the subway last week. His reaction was wordless, he simply got up and walked away. Can you imagine the thoughts he had about me? I found myself growing restless because he didn't give me the opportunity to finish my story. I don't know why I was so offended this time, nobody ever does. I guess that's why I'm writing to you. I resolved to try again the next day.

November 13: 4 Days

I found myself sitting in the coffee shop on the corner at midday. I watched the door swing open and slam shut, a bell on the knob ringing each time. I diverted my attention to a woman who had come in. She was with a little girl I presume was her daughter. They approached me, sitting at the next table. I was curious as to what drew her and the child near me. There were other chairs,

other tables unoccupied. I looked upon this moment as an opportunity to engage her, this surely must be my signal. “Hello there,” I remarked to the child who hid her face from me. “What’s your name?”

“Come now, tell him your name. He isn’t going to hurt you,” said the mother. But the child just shook her head in embarrassment. “Her name is Iris and I’m Claire.”

“It’s nice to meet you both! My name is Gordon.” I tried my hardest to be jovial. It was only a matter of time before I said something that disturbed them. With this in mind, I would relish every moment between now and then. Perhaps the pair could lead me to some sense of understanding. We chatted about things that were ultimately meaningless. I learned that Claire was a stay at home mom, but she had a dream of opening a small flower shop after Iris had started preschool. Her husband was a computer programmer and they lived in the next neighborhood over. She expounded on her passion to me.

“I’ve always loved flowers. They’re my passion. There is always an arrangement on our kitchen table. You like the way they smell, don’t you Iris?” Iris was only half-listening, she raised her eyes to meet mine, but still refused to speak. “I think what I love the most about flowers is that they’re temporary. Every week or so I get an opportunity to start over. It’s new, fresh art. Flowers interest me because I know they won’t last. They always die, giving me another opportunity to create, to begin again.”

I used this as an opportunity to open discussion to the subject of death, which had always fascinated me. I became aware a year to the date after I was born that I would die. I remember being at my first birthday party. My parent’s sat a small cake in front of me. As they, my aunts, uncles, and grandparents sang to me, I realized. The thought seemed to drift across the plume of smoke from the extinguished candle and into my brain. I looked at each of the faces around me. They would all die too, and much sooner than I would. My mother had 50 years left, my father, 46. I wasn’t so

lucky. I knew I would endure life for another 83 years before my time came. Though I pitied myself, it never occurred to me to be disturbed. I understood that this was a principle of nature. I found the experience morbidly inspiring. “Claire, I hope you don’t mind, but I have a question for you.”

“Of course, go on.” She smiled joyfully. I could almost hold the genuine happiness emanating from the corners of her mouth. It was tangible. She was so unsuspecting.

“When did you realize that *you* would die?”

She paused, giving herself a moment to mull it over. I imagined the thought tossing about in the depths of her mind, like a ship lost at sea. The conception of death was neither as intimate nor as organic to her as it was to me. Finally she spoke, “My aunt had stage breast cancer. She died in the winter before my sixth birthday. My mother and father took us to see her the day before she passed. At that time, she already seemed to be dead. She was pale, exhausted.” Then a small voice whose I had not yet heard came upon me. It mingled softly with the acoustics of the coffee shop, peering over a Duke Ellington melody through a nearby speaker. The voice belonged to Iris.

“Momma...” She seemed suddenly overcome with fear. I realized what I had done and her words reaffirmed my beliefs in the next moment.

“Yes, baby?”

“Are you going to die?” The child had yet to know, to have experienced death. To her, life was everlasting and her curious soul had not entertained the possibility that eventually all she knew would cease to exist. “Is daddy going to die too? And what about me?” A tear welled in the corner of her left eye. When it dropped it was heavy. I imagined it was hot. I had not cried in years, I almost forgot what it looked like to be sad. All the time I was overcome with indifference, apathy. I saw the effect the realization had on the child and it stirred me. Then Claire spoke and broke the swirling pattern of my thoughts.

“Yes, baby. Everything dies in time, but the good news is that my time, your time, and daddy’s time is far off from now.”

“How do you know that?” Iris asked.

Claire paused, her lip curled up under her top teeth. She looked out the front store window, she was searching. “I just do. I promise. No one is going to die anytime soon.” But this answer did not satisfy her. She burst into tears, audibly sobbing. Other people in the coffee shop looked upon us, and I suddenly felt like a monster for having been the cause of the child’s distress. Claire politely excused herself, picked up Iris and went out into the street. I figured after that I would never see them again.

November 14: 2 Days

I spent the last two days indoors. I didn’t go out for fear of agitating someone else. I recorded the experience in this journal. Flipping through the scribbled pages, I recalled numerous other times when incidents like this one occurred. You’ll know, you’ll see the stories. And with each attempt, I felt even more estranged from a portrait of innocence. I did not allow myself to wallow in defeat for long. The following day I went to the park, figuring that I would perhaps come across someone else to broaden my understanding of youth.

November 15: 1 Day

It wasn’t long before a young woman sat down on the bench across from me. She was absolutely lovely; fair-skinned with hair the color of fire and mesmerizing green eyes. Her hands were nimble and her mouth turned up in a delicate smile. I must admit that I was aroused by her. In peaceful oblivion, she sipped a cup of tea. Steam plumed out of the spout of her mug and into the crisp morning air. Her youthfulness intimidated me, especially after noting the liver spots on my own forearms. I imagined that I could’ve married a woman like her if I had not my affliction. Through some light chatter, I discovered that her name was Liza and she was a musician. She had

recently completed her music degree and took to singing jazz charts in small clubs and coffee joints. I was immensely fascinated by her. I then embarked on my quest to vicariously discover what it was like to be normal. “A young woman as beautiful as you are surely has a boyfriend,” I prodded. She laughed it off, but said there was no one. “What do you mean? No one? That’s absurd!”

“It’s true!” she replied. “I’ve never been with a man. I mean, I dated a few guys, but nothing serious ever came of it. I’ve spent the last 22 years on my own. I suspect that someone will turn up eventually. I’m in no hurry.”

It dawned on me that she was probably a virgin. Visceral, savage-like thoughts flooded me. I imagined her disrobing, singing softly to me as if I was the only one who could ever hear her. She must be so supple, so firm and warm. I scolded myself for thinking of her this way and tried my hardest to suppress any unbecoming thoughts. It has been 35 years or more since I’ve had sex. It was so long ago that the notion became sort of a strip of negative photographs faded by sunlight. I couldn’t see. Even when I held them close to my eye, I couldn’t really make out what the images were. I was separated from my corporeal being. Though I was aware of my sexuality from such a young age, I had forgotten what it meant to be aroused.

“Don’t you feel like you’re missing out on something though? Even at my advanced age, I feel the absence of a partner. I never married. I’m a bit of a strange bird,” I chuckled. “And you, so full of life and promise; so young and satisfied with not being in love?”

“Wait Gordon, you mean to tell me you never married? Were you ever in love?” She took my observations and turned them upon me. I was captivated by this. People don’t *ask* about me. I tell them about myself. It’s the necessitation of my being.

“No. I’ve done my fair share of lusting, but I don’t think I’ll ever be in love. Or rather, no one will ever be in love with me.” I dismissed my thoughts, “But it’s no matter, when you’re my age you can’t concern yourself with frivolous things like love. You’re constantly debating whether you’ll

be able to crawl out of bed, where you put your glasses last, and what that awful creaking sound is coming from your joints.”

Then I inhaled her. My God, how sweet she was. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. Her scent floated into my nostrils and rested in my lungs. She was sensational, delicate. I detected subdued floral notes in her perfume. Why couldn’t I control myself? I was deeply embarrassed and satisfied by this perversion. I tucked these senses into the back of my mind. I would probably recall them later when I shamefully pleased myself.

“Don’t be so pessimistic! I’m sure any respectable lady would find herself lucky in your company! And you don’t know how much time you have left.” Her optimism and feigned kindness set me off. Her words made my face boil. Why should she present this naive commentary on my life? Her beauty and her sincerity both touched and enraged me. I presented the latter emotion, not knowing how to experience the other. This must be what innocence looks like, I thought. Maybe it’s naivety.

“You don’t know me, Liza. You don’t know who I am. Or *what* I am. I’m ill. My thoughts are unnatural. There’s something in my head that is off balance.” I ranted the same way I did with my other victims of conversation. I told her about my birth, my understanding of death, how sexuality perverted me from a young age. She had the privilege of not knowing her body, her sex until puberty set upon her. I, on the other hand, never experienced a time when I was unaware. I was destined for hermitude. Allow me to be marooned. She had no right to take from me what was mine, they were my experiences and ideas. It’s my story to tell. At least you understand. I stood to leave and looked upon her face which appeared sullen. I put out the light that was in her eyes a few moments before. Resolved, I headed home.

And now I’m here with you and my thoughts. Tomorrow morning, I’ll go to the kitchen and pour a cup of black coffee. I’ll wait by the phone for 30 minutes, during which no one will call. I’ll write one last sentence, and leave the apartment a walk. A block and a half away from the post

office, I'll fall. I'll hit my head on the sidewalk and crack my skull open. I imagine it could be pretty gruesome, you know how head wounds are. As I lay in a pool of thick blood, a man will turn the corner and see what happened. He'll call for help, but it's going to be too late. By the time they take me to the hospital, I'll be dead.

November 16:

Whoever you are, thank you for understanding.