

Pop Pop Pop

John Dewey stood on the dirty floor mat of his small bedroom. He was tying his one and only necktie in front of the mirrored wardrobe. The reflection, partly visible behind a layer of dust and grime on the glass, was of a tall and slender body, and of an unshaven, bony face with vacant gray-blue eyes and thin white lips.

John processed the reflected image. He felt unable to claim ownership of it. The body's exterior and interior, such as it now was, had been treated to a process of shedding and minimizing.

It had been close to two years since John's girlfriend of seven years, Kristen, had died. She had delivered their baby boy, Gabriel, at Metropolitan Nashville General Hospital. Four hours later she had died of internal bleeding, and all within seconds John had found himself frozen and thawed to a sour-smelling lump of cells; and there had been a lament ventriloquized by someone or something let loose, forcing John's tongue to trill and his teeth to grind: cannibalistic trimester! And then, a year later, all rage—the internal lashes and beatings—had disappeared. Despite a modest age of thirty-three, John had turned old and white. His beard was an upturned and snow-capped peak, and his hair, combed to the left, glimmered in tarnished silver.

Then there had been the boy, visible like never before. And John had looked at him with a daring sense of purpose. He had drunk the previously unknown marrow of the boy's bones, and he had felt nothing.

But that, he now thought while standing in front of the mirror, was about to change. He had, it seemed, woken up that very morning to a different reality.

Everything—the humdrum of daily life, its more or less complicated gestures and spiels—felt slightly less in opposition to his distorted frame of mind. Or was it that his distorted frame of mind was shaping itself out, or opening itself up? He didn't know. All he knew was that he was optimistic about the future for the first time in a long time, and it frightened him.

He yanked the tie in place and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The torrid Nashville sun glared through the bedroom's slanted blinds, illuminating the bedroom's two-year-decay: flowers of mold traveled up and down on the wallpaper, and below a miniature sky of dead cells swirling, clothes, candy wrappers, and pieces of broken toys covered a discolored rug; the unmade double bed told the story of loss with the depressed middle of a mattress as a mouth-piece; and on the wall hung a large, framed black and white photograph of John and Kristen, all teeth and beaming eyes, both exuding a youthful exuberance and confidence that colored the edges of the photograph.

John looked at it. He tried on a smile.

“Pop to job?” Gabriel, or Gabe, as Grandmother Dewey called him, stood in the doorway. His two-year-old milky-white body radiated as if lit by nearby floodlights.

It must be a special quality of young children, John thought: to always radiate. The lightness and brightness of becoming, not yet burdened by the intricacies of adolescent and adult pretense—that's the world and the mind of children.

The little boy's blonde hair, impossible to comb, lay in curls upon curls on the slightly crooked head. “Pop-pop to job?!” he repeated, following up the question with an inquisitive gaze the color of emerald. A sudden smile seemed to deflate the urgency of the question, as if any answer or no answer at all was equally acceptable.

John knelt in front of the boy. “Yes,” he said. “Dad is going to work, so why don’t you,” he put the tip of his finger on the boy’s button nose, all the while feeling silly for doing so, “go and get dressed. I’ll soon drop you off at Granny’s.”

The driveway to Grandmother Dewey’s house—a two-storied colonial house with a flower-clad front porch in gentrified East Nashville—was littered with canvases: big and small, finished and unfinished, or entirely empty. Some stood leaning against the old, rusted up 1984 Chrysler that John’s dad had always shunned. Most lay directly on the ground with their faces to the asphalt. John had to park in the street next to the untrimmed hedges. He stepped out and was slapped by the hand of humid summer heat. He loosened the noose of the tie before walking around the car to open the passenger door for the little boy; he unbuckled the boy’s seat belt.

“Angels!” Grandmother Dewey walked toward John and the boy with her arms out. She was wrapped in a loose fitted red summer dress. Her feet were bare and on both her wrists dangled brightly colored wristbands. Her hair was covered by a patterned kerchief tied at the back. A silver lock of hair was stuck in the sweat on her forehead.

“Come here,” she said and grabbed John. The hug made itself known. It smelled of paint and salt, and the pressure and the pulse of it moved from body to body with unchecked fervor. John tried to reciprocate; he felt himself lacking sincerity and stiffening up.

The boy, wide-eyed by the hug, skipped the car-seat and hugged Grandmother Dewey’s leg with unmatched intensity, as if he was trying to squeeze sap out of a tree with his bare arms.

Grandmother Dewey crouched and kissed the boy’s head. “My angel boy,” she said. “You hug like a good ol’ bear.”

John lit a cigarette. The heat and the hug lay over him. He told himself to hold on and be patient. “Soon,” he whispered.

Grandmother Dewey gently unclasped the boy’s arms around her leg and looked at John. “What’d you say?” Her voice was a soft southern twang, and her eyes were hazel searchlights. She twisted her mouth in a lopsided grin. “Darlin’,” she said, “pray tell, what’d you say?”

“Nothing,” John said and puffed the cigarette. “Thinking out loud is all. It’s warm today, isn’t i—”

“No, John. No. Who on God’s green earth cares. It’s always warm this time of year. It’s always warm.” She put her sinewy hand on the nape of the boy’s neck. “Ain’t that right, Gabe? Who cares?”

The boy, not caring about the specifics and mostly unaware of the general, gave voice to a buoyant “Yay!” His curls bounced like springs as he skipped up and down the driveway, smiling and laughing intermittently, accidentally stepping on a canvas.

Grandmother Dewey clapped her hands. “We’re going to have such fun today, Gabe. Such fun! We’ll paint and we’ll have a swim in the pool and we’ll eat cookies.”

While the boy skipped about the driveway, she faced John. “Now,” she said, “I know you’re still hurtin’, and I know it’ll never again be the same, and trust you me when I say I wanted the Lord’s vengeance on that hospital and those doctors, letting her bleed like that!

“Mom, please—”

“No, John. No. I need you to hear this, again, and I need you to know it took time and effort to be okay with not putting blame on anyone for what happened, because it happened, John. Regardless, it happened, and no one is to blame.”

“I know, Mom,” John said. “I do.”

She furrowed her brow. “Good, John. That’s good. So, will you trust me now, then, when I say time’s up for shaping up?” She let go of John’s shoulder and turned toward the boy. He was holding a broken canvas over his head, smiling.

“There’s a deadline to mournin’, John. There’s always a deadline.” She sighed. “When I, no, when we lost your dad to that awful car accident, I knew there to be a deadline. You were still too young to be left alone while I was off grievin’. You needed a parent.” She paused, continued. “This silence and detachment of yours—let it go, please. Show Gabe you care, and know, please do, that he doesn’t know how not to love you—don’t you ever forget that.” She smiled. It came naturally to her.

John acknowledged her flow of words with a nod and a brief, “I know,” and he knew; he was even optimistic about finally opening up to his son. He dragged the smoke into his lungs to feel the burn. He pressed out a white plume from between his lips and looked at the boy.

“I’ll have to go, Mom,” he said. “Lecture starts in half an hour.”

The lecture hall on the bottom floor of Rand Hall at Vanderbilt University was air-conditioned to a chill. The students had left. John was packing his books and notes in a torn leather briefcase. He had had it since the first day of his Ph.D., and now—when only one year remained till he had to turn in a prospectus for a planned dissertation on some drunk and dazed phantasms squatting in dilapidated nooks and crannies of a soaked and salted brain—he still had it. Kristen had called it an attired affectation. “Nobody but hoary professors and avid Wittgenstein-proselytes carries briefcases,” she’d said, teasingly. “You know you look like an anachronism materialized, don’t you: quite uncomfortable in your own skin, either too small or too big for your own shoes,

not really knowing which way to turn.” And John had laughed, knowing it—a semiserious kind of world-weariness—to be somewhat true, and appreciating her for keeping him tethered to the here and now.

While pushing the clips of the briefcase shut, he thought of Wittgenstein—the silk-lined abyss behind the man’s eyes embracing the color, the shape, and the electricity of the world’s unknowableness—and he thought of his students’ disinterested faces, retaining nothing but useless fractions of syllables buried in Wittgenstein’s prescient aphorisms; and he found himself dragged back to the corridor outside the hospital room where Kristen had died: nurses and doctors and janitors shuffling by and stealing glances at him while he was splitting at the seams.

He shivered, picked up the briefcase and stepped out of Rand Hall. The sun slapped him over the face. He walked to the railing separating the stone patio from the recreation area, the sun having bronzed the grass mat. A white marble fountain in the middle of the frayed grass mat spat out milky-white water. A couple of cardinals sat on the edge of the fountain. Other than this there was no one and nothing else around. The city traffic from outside the campus perimeters drifted through in lazy puffs of air, and a far off flagpole held the three-starred Tennessee state flag at half staff.

John stared into the distance, through the limp flag, and lit a cigarette. He rounded the railing and walked to the fountain. The cardinals skipped the scene, their red wings flapping in a flurry of cherry. He sat down facing the fountain, untied his tie and unbuttoned his shirt. He stared at the milky-white water-spruts spat out from small holes in the oval basin at the top of the fountain; he stared at the bottom basin, its water filled with coins, some rusted, a few glimmering. He searched his pocket, found a crumpled five dollar bill, flicked it into the water and leaned in. The ripples on the surface distorted the reflection of his face, snapped him bone by bone. He leaned further in. He jerked back—a series of saturated images of the boy, reeled from the

back of his now crippled head, forced itself on him. He'd expected some kind of release, but not this.

He dropped the cigarette. It ignited a few blades of grass. He rubbed his eyes and closed them shut; he opened them wide, feeling the claws of realization lacerate the blind spot and through the crystalline lens shoot a reel of images: the image of the boy wrapped in studded leather skin; the image of the boy's smile, canker'd lips opening up to a chasm of serrated teeth; and the image of the boy on a soapbox screaming, “mɜ:(r)də(r)-sɔ:s! Mordsås! Mordsoße. Murder-sauce!”

John mumbled, not knowing he was mumbling. He got up and stepped backward, not knowing he was stepping backward, not seeing the flames rapidly feeding itself ravenous.

When the firemen arrived, they found John on his knees on the stone patio outside Rand Hall. In a shrill voice, he repeated, “Not murder-sauce. Never murder-sauce.” His hands were clasped together as if in prayer, and he wagged from side to side. The recreational area was in flames, and as the flames licked the humid blanket of southern summer, there was a sound that—if you listened closely—resembled the popping of corn: pop-pop-pop.