

Fountain

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In those days I would take the #3 downtown where I spent my afternoons having lunch at one of the little diners or running an occasional errand. Mostly, I just milled around, watching the passersby and forgetting about life. I had no occupation to speak of, and ambition was something that afflicted other people. These were days of beauty and terror.

I caught the bus at Yodman Park – big and empty Yodman Park where ghosts play tennis on faded courts. It was nineteen minutes, three and a half miles from here to my destination, the fountain square in the middle of town. It might not have been the precise geographic center of the city, but it certainly looked that way on the maps. And the bus ride wasn't always exactly nineteen minutes; sometimes it was a little more, but almost never less.

Just up the road from the park, on the right, was the Clinic where I met Maury all those years ago. We were both there for the same reason, enrolled in the same program, and neither of us was much interested in treatment. It took Maury's guidance, however, for me to realize I wasn't sick. On our breaks between sessions he shared his ideas, and he changed everything for me. Sometimes we would go across the street to the small neighborhood branch of the city library where he showed me books that described a world very different from our own. Some of them were difficult, like the old plays and long poems, and Maury had to explain them to me. He complained of the library's scant holdings, but we made do. In truth, I was more interested in Maury's

company and his own stories and thoughts than I was in the words of the long-dead and forgotten.

Maury's tale ends badly, and I think I'd rather leave it for now and come back later. I will say this: though our lives, in many ways, extended along parallel lines, in the years following our stay at the Clinic circumstances forced a cruel barrier between us. It is among my deepest regrets that I could not help him when he needed me most.

During peak hours, the #3 passes Pino Courts every twenty minutes. I lived there for two years. The complex is half a mile west of the Clinic, adjacent to the Aspire! primary school at the southeast corner of Kent and Woodhaven. Harding Creek, which remains dry for most of the year, runs serpentine between the school and the complex. A tall, iron rust-colored fence encloses the courts, with gated entrances at the north side, off of Woodhaven, and the west side, off of Kent. There are twenty-eight buildings: twenty-four residential – which are arranged in U-shaped groups of three – one administrative, a laundry, a maintenance facility, and a childcare center. The residential buildings are a uniform burgundy, nondescript and unadorned, much like a block of barracks. Each unit is a single-room efficiency, outfitted with the minimum essentials.

Bonded by little more than proximity, the residents at Pino nevertheless comprised an ecumenical de facto community, frequently organizing complex-wide games, feasts, sales, and entertainments. I avoided such events as best I could, though I was sometimes coaxed into participation by an elderly neighbor who thought it would do me good to come out and mingle. She would gently admonish me for neglecting what, in her view, amounted to civic duty, reminding me

that a person alone is nothing. Interaction with society, she would say, is what makes us human.

Such contact was always painful and only cemented the will to avoid. Some, I knew, were like me: a knowing glance, a peculiar gait – the odd habit of living a step removed from oneself, scrutinizing every action for the tell that gives away the hand. We didn't dare talk to each other. Instead, we waddled about the complex grounds, hoping our respective paths would never cross. I often lingered at the western fence where I would watch the children in the schoolyard across the creek. I knew I'd never have any of my own, but it pleased me to observe them and imagine what it might be like to lead a very different life. A few years later, however – after the Clinic – I came to regard them differently. The bus would pass through the intersection at Kent and Woodhaven, right around the time school let out, and squinting through the window I saw them there, assembled at the corner with their little backpacks, ridiculous shoes and vacant faces. These were not the beautiful children. They were mass-produced soft machines who demanded provision, consumed and evacuated, and who would, very soon, make more of their own, who would carry on likewise.

West of Kent, Woodhaven becomes Tomo. For the next half-mile or so, on the north side of the road, there are unoccupied and overgrown tree-filled lots sketched with zigzagged trails that lead to nowhere. To the south is another complex, Ferdos Gardens, similar to Pino but without the gated fence. A few times a week I would walk past Ferdos on my way to the corner shop at Tomo and Grave. A boy named Aпти who lived at Ferdos worked at the store, and I suppose we became acquainted. No one took much notice that Aпти didn't go to school and seemed too young to be employed.

I won't call Aпти a friend, but he was perhaps my only regular acquaintance during that time. Every so often, after he finished work, we would go follow the trails in the dark empty lots or hop the fence of the nearby non-traditional school and creep around looking for an unlocked door or window. Once, we found some athletic equipment left carelessly out on the field. We smashed each other with it and fell and laughed and had our fun. Though neither of us had use for it, we stole the gear and unloaded it at my apartment where it sat in the living room for a few months before I threw it all in the dumpster.

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People usually left me alone. Most minded their business. A few, however, didn't, and that's how I came to the Clinic.

Great care had been taken to design the facility so that it didn't much resemble a facility. It sat on a well-maintained lot with closely shorn vibrant green grass, precisely angled hedges, and several enormous old oaks with wide and dense crowns that obscured the sun, even on the brightest summer of days. The reception area had a fireplace, vintage sofas, and fine-wood coffee tables, all awash in the amber hues of antique lamp shades. On the walls there were a number of formally accomplished, but insipid paintings that depicted families at various states of work, rest, and play – at the park, having dinner, tending gardens, and so on.

Clients at the facility were either outpatients who went home after their sessions, or inmates who were held under minimum-security conditions and segregated from the outpatient population. I belonged to the latter camp. So did Maury.

My counselor was an inexpressive bore named Horváth who slouched behind a great mahogany desk and issued gloomy aphorisms

with rote precision as if he'd been saying these things for decades to countless other defective souls. During our first visit he did not ask the uncomfortable questions that would come later, but instead pontificated for an hour and a half about aberration, diseases of spirit, and the bondage of self. Little of it made sense at the time. Before long, however, the barbs snagged in my brain, and I came to believe I was in a depraved state of peril.

I was taking a walk in the Clinic yard. A cool pleasant afternoon, birds alighting on the freshly cut swards to forage for earthworms, larvae, and other prey. I spotted a man sitting alone on a bench under the shade of one of the great oaks. He wasn't reading or napping, but sitting upright, looking ahead with his hands on his legs, palms down. This was Maury, of course, and I remember thinking he was the gentlest person I'd ever seen. The tree sheltered his bare crown from the sun, and his large placid eyes were not fixed on any one thing but trained inward, as if the visible world had been exhausted of useful information.

I moved past him quickly with my eyes on the ground believing he was far too lost in thought to take notice. To my surprise, he spoke just as I walked by and asked me to come sit with him. I knew then that Maury was the first and only person in my life I could trust. Without making small talk or even asking my name, he told me that he'd been reciting passages to himself, which explained his odd countenance. This strange practice, he said, was how he kept his mind sharp, maintained discipline, stayed sane. It was also his way of shielding himself from the devils who set upon him. He related the lines that were in his mind just at the moment I came along. I've long since forgotten the author and the work, but the words are as clear to me now as ever:

Then let his grace, whose youth is flexible,
 And promiseth as much as we can wish,
 Freely enjoy that vain, light-headed earl;
 For riper years will wean him from such toys.

Over the next several months, Maury and I spoke daily. Under his tutelage, I began to understand that the counselor Horváth was aligned with the devils. Further, I learned from Maury how to feign progress in my treatment. He had been there a bit longer than I and knew exactly what to say and how to comport himself.

In addition to our regular library visits, we were allowed supervised monthly trips to the entertainment complex at Tomo and Hylas, about a mile west of the Clinic. The site's amenities included movies, bowling, an arcade and other diversions that Maury and I found simply boring. When permitted, we would instead spend the afternoon at the large Ambyon Creek greenbelt, behind the complex. Like most sites of natural beauty in this part of town, the greenbelt went mostly unused, its extensive trails, pavilions and courts often deserted.

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At the conclusion of six months, I was released from the Clinic. Maury remained under detention. Though he never discussed it openly, I knew that Maury's transgressions were greater than mine. He wouldn't have used that word, *transgression*, but for me it is less upsetting than *crime*, *offense*, *violation*, and the like. Maury had told me his ideas about codes and mores, and our situation in history relative to other times and other places. I often strained to get his meaning, but the net effect was to convince me that I had a place in this world.

After the Clinic, I had nowhere to go. I gravitated further east, where I stayed in some squats until I was finally approved for tenancy at a complex not far from my old home at Pino Courts. During this time, I corresponded regularly with Maury since I was not allowed to visit him at the Clinic. He was eventually transferred to a much larger, higher-security facility in a different part of the country. If there was a specific incident that precipitated the move, he didn't tell me about it. We continued our correspondence for a few months after the transfer until, abruptly, I stopped getting responses from him, and my letters were returned without explanation. Attempts to contact the facility were fruitless; they wouldn't tell me anything about Maury, nor explain why all communication had been blocked. Of course I feared the worst, but held out hope that my dear friend was alive and free from suffering.

Years passed without any word from Maury or news of his fate. I continued, almost daily, to take the #3 into town, to the fountain where, on rare occasions, I would meet and talk to someone. The bus route mapped the basic trajectory of my life: the Clinic, Pino, the store where I met Aпти, and other sites where episodes, both trivial and significant, had been played out. On most days, I was able to block out the associations that might arise when I looked out the window; sometimes, however, the memories returned with violence.

Tomo Drive eventually becomes 15th Street. This occurs about one and a half miles west of Woodhaven and Kent, where Woodhaven becomes Tomo. Here at the edge of downtown, a sudden shift from residential to urban: old and dilapidated houses, tenements, and neighborhood markets give way to the modern architectures and congested arteries of the fiercely growing city. Just west of the Interstate, 15th

crosses over Reeves Creek, the seven-mile watershed that empties into Curmet Lake in the middle of the city. The street-level entryway to the steps that lead down to the creek some twenty feet below is gated now, closed to public access. But one evening some time ago, before they were blocked off, I descended the steps, and in the dark tunnel under 15th was serviced by a woman whose difficulties in life exceeded my own. The experience was joyless and through no fault of hers did not find resolution. It was my first and last contact of such nature.

I would sometimes think that I was bad. Measured against the scale of human integrity, I was found wanting. Maury had trained me to squash such sentiments, but without his words to buttress me now, I was vulnerable to attacks of conscience. My daily routines helped keep me steady, though total negation always loomed somewhere in the hard reflective surfaces of the city buildings, the cracked dry creek bed in the summer, the fatal doorstep of my tiny apartment.

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Ten trees line the perimeter of the small, tri-level square at the northwest corner of 10th and Laocadia. On the top level, three benches form a row along the north side. Four steps down on the second level, there are three sets of iron tables and chairs parallel to the three benches. Along the west side, two more benches.

The fountain occupies the bottom level. It is an undistinguished piece of decorative architecture, wholly innocuous compared to the sublime miracles of engineering and aesthetics that grace the parks and squares of distant foreign cities. The circular basin is about twenty-five feet in diameter; eight nozzles at the center propel the water six or seven feet into the air. There is no elegant sculpture here to caress the

eyes – just the bland spectacle of water reaching toward the sky, then crashing down only to be recirculated through the filtration system, pumped back out then shot upward, again and again.

I would spend my afternoons there and leave around 8 p.m., which was when the fountain was shut off every night. Despite Maury's encouragement, I never developed an interest in reading. The people who came and went were enough to occupy my attention: downtown workers taking lunch, adults with young children, and occasional transients who, like me, had nothing else to do. After sunset, the place became something else. People would still drift through and linger, but they were more unified in their character and intent. Bored thirsty angry broken vessels of muddled drives who would congregate then splinter off in groups of two, three, or four, then return after ten minutes or two or three hours for more of the same. It was a ritual of repetition and an affirmation of nothing. I wasn't one of them.

I didn't always leave at dusk, however. Sometimes I loitered around, suffused with a vague longing. It was one such night, comparatively slow and quiet, that I met Nisi, the boy with a deathly pallor and bony hips whose unyielding face, still not corrupted by hair, repelled all inquiry. He showed me some photos of himself and told me not to ask his real name or where he came from. At first, I paid him. Later, we were able to drop such formalities. Nisi did not replace Maury; he simply filled a space where previously there had been nothing. He was uncomplicated, could barely read or write, and knew little of the world beyond his immediate experience. He had almost nothing to offer, and it was sufficient.

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I finally learned of Maury's fate when I arrived in an institution similar to the one he was transferred to after the Clinic. My suspicions were confirmed; it does not require explanation. Life there was not so bad. I did not encounter the violence that had been visited upon Maury. Much like on the outside, my days were governed by routine, and I suppose it suited me as well as any other environment I had occupied. Soon I began to forget that one day my confinement would end, and I would again have to reckon with the world that in some ways had been less kind to me than this one. Over time, the thought of leaving solidified into a dread that was neither distinct nor terrifying; it simply weighed on me like a burdened mule. As with the Clinic several years earlier, I wasn't quite sure what I would do once I got out of there.

That day came after the completion of almost exactly four years.

The fountain is still there, of course. It is the same as before, the jets stalling at six or seven feet then dropping, treated and filtered for impurities, then forced out again, the same thing all day from sunrise until dusk. The bus route has changed slightly due to construction, adding a few minutes to my walk. It is no trouble at all. I take my old spot on the middle bench on the top level; just watching, nothing to do or anticipate. Perhaps I will stay a minute or two longer, perhaps someone will come. The resilience of the fountain assures me that one day I will find love. □