

# An Angel of Great and Terrible Light

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## 1 Preamble

The hospital is the closest I have to a sacred space. That common room, where I spent too much of my youth, on the second floor of a rather non-descript psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of the city is my Holy of Holies. I was among others who had attempted suicide—children who had tried to hang themselves, cut their wrists, overdose—but also many who were addicted to what I can only call some hardcore shit. It single-handedly turned me off ever doing anything truly out there; you can only meet so many thirteen-year-olds who look thirty before you develop some serious apprehensions. But more so it made me deeply misanthropic. They were children. They were children. The adults in their lives, the society around them—these had fundamentally failed them. I was young and angry, and in time I came to appreciate that many of those who failed these kids had themselves been failed, but still I could not let go of this abiding sense of injustice. These kids were suffering, dying, and the resources that might have saved them were being pissed away. And on what?

Not all hate is evil. Hatred of injustice especially. But this essay isn't about how the ultra wealthy hoard that which could lift these kids' families out of poverty, pay for their medical bills. Nor is it necessarily about how society stigmatizes severe mental illness, the kind you can't write pretty little books about. We'll leave that for another time when I am in a better mood. Neither is this essay meant as any sort of logical outlining of a philosophical position, nor an exploration of a school of thought. No, this essay is personal. It is irrational. It is about the futility of opening yourself to others, about the reasons why I cannot get myself to tell those I am close with about my most sacred space.

## 2 The Red Right Hand

What others sometimes perceive as a sort of stoic, masculine silence is instead an anxiety-induced paralysis. As a youth, I remember waking one night after a nightmare and shuffling up to my parents' door; they woke and asked what was wrong, and I simply could not speak. There was no voice. I felt as though my throat had collapsed; I was choking. This repeated throughout my childhood; I would be expected to speak and find myself utterly incapable, suffocating. A psychologist would have had a field day picking apart the reasons for my fear had I been able to speak to them, but by the time I got around to attending therapy I had already closed myself off. I had one who thought to play cards with me, to lower my barriers and so coax me into speaking, but he underestimated my willingness to sit in silence, to sidestep his attempts to get me to open up. It wasn't, then, that I was unwilling to discuss anything; I could speak for years on any manner of subjects, but if you asked me about myself, all conversation broke down.

Surely, this had something to do with my being socialized a male. I was told by figures of authority, by role models, to suppress my feelings; to do what had to be done, so long as what had to be done didn't involve seriously confronting one's own emotions; to aim singularly at some material goal; to hoard, to fuck, to win.

But more than that, I had sealed myself off to defend against my greatest fear—one I still have not been able to let go of.

I had met children in the psychiatric hospital who had been abandoned, left to suffer by the adults in their lives, and I internalized a deep fear that by opening myself I would cause my parents, my counsellors, my teachers to realize that I was not worth the trouble, that I was a burden, and they would abandon me as well. And I thought, rightly, that if they did I would quickly kill myself. I could not face myself alone.

In turn, I idealized the notion of unconditional love. If I found someone who would never leave me, I could open myself to them without fear of abandonment. I was not an idiot; I knew that this was not realistic; still, without the ability to open up to others I was nigh incapable of forming meaningful, intimate relationships with those around me, and so I suffered alone, cradling this pretty illusion that I might someday find someone who would do the hard work of prying me open. I meticulously searched for reasons to fall out of love with anyone who got close to me. I told myself that it was immoral to love someone knowing that the closer I got, the more pain my inevitable suicide would cause. I developed an ascetic self-isolation. It was the only way to avoid causing pain to those around me. It was the only way to avoid pain myself. It was good. It was moral. It was right.

All I have ever wanted is to be known. All I have ever wanted is to know another.  
*All I've known of love.*

### 3 Interlude

I have written on politics, on philosophy, and by all accounts it would do me better to hide this part of myself from you, to paint a pristine image, to craft a brand, so that I might persuade you all the better, so that I might tug your strings and leave you none the wiser. You could be lulled by a false image, a beautiful idol. But I want you to know me.

To be born is to break. To live is to descend from the ideal into the real, to let that light dim a little inside us. Each must forget what it is to be everything. And in the end we can look back upon our lives as a long narrowing, a closing of the world around us, the slow cancellation of the future.

We are the flesh of the world. Sinew and tissue. Till birth strips us bare, strips us to the bone. *Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

### 4 The Little Piece of Madeleine

Yesterday, I stared down a long hallway that reminded me of one of the two corridors running the length of my most sacred space. I felt those old, grippy socks against the carpet again. Heard *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* playing on the common-room television. These are not the makings of a literary masterpiece, but they are mine.

The world closed around me at the age of thirteen. Young but no younger than most. Older than those who deserved more. I found myself clothed in this skin, and I hated it. At sixteen, I tried to dance on the end of a noose.

Afterwards, I was driven by police to the general hospital; from there, they moved me—strapped on a gurney, arms bound—to a psychiatric facility down the road. I was rolled into the elevator and joked, to a nurse who had probably heard this a dozen times before, that I felt like Hannibal Lecter, being wheeled around. They drew my blood, asked after my various scars, then deposited me in a room. This time, I did not have a roommate. Once, I knew a boy who hanged himself with these bedsheets. I dwelled on the logistics of this and then slept.

There are, if I had to estimate, several concentric sanctums which compose my Holy of Holies. This is the first, the outermost. I feared for a long time that throwing wide the curtains, pinching out the candles, waving away the incense, and leaving my stories unadorned would take the sanctity out of them, reduce them and me to the mere mundane, the tangible. It would strip the meat off the bone. The fantasy, from my history.

The next day, a nurse charted my vitals, asked a few questions about my mood and health. I ate breakfast in the common room, an already familiar space. I can draw the layout of the building from memory, ignoring a few architectural paradoxes that would arise where my child-mind inflated certain spaces, shrank others. This common room seemed the world to me. The “Comfort Room” I would remember as little more than a broom closet: a mattress set on the floor.

The balcony, which was closed in by a wire mesh, was where I spent the best days, listening to the radio with those I had befriended. I can still remember the feeling of sitting on the exercise mats they used as carpet, listening to the same song over and over again, looking out over the small courtyard which we were allowed to venture down to once a day. It was hemmed in by fences that, in my memory, were taller than the building itself. Occasionally, a stray passerby would walk along outside, and I would wonder whether they had any idea what was going on behind our little fence, up on our balcony, where we sat and talked and made crude jokes about killing ourselves that the nurses did not appreciate.

These experiences broke any last vestiges of religiosity. There isn’t any reason for this. It is arbitrary and idiotic. I can’t believe in any moral arc to the universe. There is no end to history. It just keeps marching on, and the bones of children snap under its boots. You just keep marching on.

That evening, I played cards with a few of the other patients. In the seat beside me, there sat a girl. She was quiet and spindly and kind. She had that smile that young, quiet, spindly girls have. I was quite fond of her. She was a foster child, scared that her adoptive parents would send her back into the system, unable to cope with her repeated suicide attempts. Very quickly, she told me she loved me.

Even then, I understood this for what it was. She did not know me. I was a warm body. But better to receive attention from a warm body than not at all. I was young and stupid, and I didn’t know how to deal with this. I tried to be as kind to her as I could. We talked about this and that. She hugged me, for which the nurses reprimanded us both. She held my hand here and there, and in the dead of night we sat beside the elevator and kept each other company. Before I left, she wrote me a note. I will sit and reread it, now and then.

A few months after I got out, she called me. She asked me if I loved her: not a platonic love, not a sympathetic love, a *love* love. And I couldn’t say yes.

She killed herself shortly afterwards.

I knew I couldn’t blame myself. I knew that there were a million little confounding factors that drive someone to suicide, that in all likelihood I wasn’t the only person she had asked, that she had known me for a matter of weeks, that it would have been wrong

to lie to her, that I was a child. I was a child. But I couldn't let go of this guilt. I couldn't shake this feeling that I had let her die. She had reached out to me—reached out for a confirmation that she was loved, for a sign, for something as small and easy as a *yes*—and what had I given her?

The only ones truly capable of unconditional love are the dead. She became my Beatrice. No matter how far I let myself slip, how much damage I did to myself or those around me—nothing would ever change that she had loved me. I was aware it wasn't real. I was aware that it hadn't been "love." It had been a hope, a plea. But in its emptiness, that "love" was perfect. It did not have any of the faults, the cracks, the burdens of the real. It was pristine, an ideal against which nothing could compare. I enclosed myself, drew the walls narrow around my life. I could never have so perfect a love as the love of the dead. I could never open myself. That "love" and its place—that non-descript psychiatric hospital—became sacred. I placed them on a pedestal, hid them behind a veil, shrouded them in rituals and mantras. I made mysticism of my misery, a religion of suffering. It was good. It was moral. It was right.

So became my Holy of Holies. So became my most sacred space.

## 5 Interlude

It is Christmas, and I have had time amongst family to reflect. *Love is not the origin of my depression. Gender dysphoria is not the origin of my depression.* You are.

You never allowed me to feel comfortable. You meted out praise, tempered it with consistent belittling comments about my intelligence, my body, my personality. I wanted to make you proud, but you treated me like a failed experiment, something that could have been great if not medically stunted, psychologically weak. I was physically afraid of you, though you never struck me. You intimidated me, made threats, reacted violently in ways that made it clear what you could do if ever given a reason. Yet you gave me gifts, and in sparse moments you would say something that would make me believe that you saw me, that you valued me. You would praise my writing, my academic achievements, my kindness. Then in the same breath you would ask me why I hadn't done more. Why wasn't I more? You said my disabilities had made me fundamentally lesser, that I wasn't the same child you had loved, that I had lost something integral to myself. You said I was weak, lazy—that I couldn't receive medical treatment because my pain wasn't real. And when, in spite of you, I did get treatment, you acted as though I was poisoning myself, as though the side-effects of my medication were worse than the illness. You threatened to mount above my door the same noose I had tried to hang myself with. You still don't believe I truly would have killed myself. You don't think I have it in me. Sometimes, I want to prove you wrong.

You said you hated my hair, so I hid it for you. You said my face wasn't masculine enough, so I hid it for you. You rejected the essence of who I am, the woman that I am, so I hid her for you. Is it any surprise that I came to believe I needed to hide myself if I ever wanted to be loved?

But I do love you. I want it to be so simple: I want to be able to hate you. Yet, you came to recognize my illness, to see that I was still your child, still as capable as before. You taught me so much of what I know; you were kind; you were good. You enabled me to see the world. I see myself in you.

So what do I owe you? I have never believed that parents innately deserve love. It has to be earned. But it is less easy, as a child, to determine whether the wounds you have inflicted upon me outweigh the gifts. You made me who I am, and I love and hate

you for it.

When I am attuned to myself, when I am myself—then, I can live with this. I no longer despair at the absurdity. I do not have to wade through the pain of the past; I can leave the world a better place than I found it. But when I am not myself, when I am with you, reflected in you, projected upon—then I hate what you have taken from me.

If you hadn't criticized my self-expression, made me feel like shit about my body, belittled the things that brought me joy, believed me when I was in pain, if I could have gotten help sooner, if I could have felt safe, if I could have found relief from the dissonance between my self and my body, if I could have been *her* since childhood, if I could even be *her* now, if I could look at myself in the mirror and not see my very being as a betrayal of you....

## 6 That's Marriage

We can catalog the thousand little strokes of the knife which have carved us into the people we are. We can blame our families; we can blame our bodies; we can blame the world. And not all blame is misplaced. Not all hate is evil. Hatred of injustice especially. But I have to ask myself what purpose all this serves: I can rage against it all; I can thrash and kick and scream; I can huddle away in my sacred space; I can whisper pretty little mantras to myself; I can pull a veil between me and the world; but in doing so I render myself utterly unseen. I become incapable of being perceived. *All I've known of love, all love. All I've known of love, all love.* All I have ever wanted is to know another. All I have ever wanted is to be known.

There is honesty and there is mythology, and the line between the two is oh-so thin. When I tell you about the hospital, about the girl, how are you to know whether I am baring my soul or pulling up a beautiful veil? How am I to? After one weaves the story so many times, it ceases to seem a fiction.

The act of telling you requires I transmute the memory, the vague sense of having experienced these events, into something palatable, something you can appreciate. Conveying ourselves to another is an alchemical art—*et ignotas animus dimittit in artes*—and that last step, the leap from me to you, is irreversible. Yet, even when I recall these moments, I am turning them over: a subtle, constant transmutation of history. I am trimming that which contributes little to the narrative, grafting where the story may be improved. I am shaping myself. I am sculptor and sculpture. Artist and art. Singer and song.

Still, I must believe the storyteller can convey truth, even if it is not in the event itself. I must believe that when I tell you about the hospital, there is some kernel, some part that you can see which is of me, which is me, immutably. I must believe that I have been seen. There is mythology, but there is still honesty.

I have this one life, and before I knew to cherish it, the world had marred me, molded me in its image. It instilled in me a deep shame, a fear of love, a feeling that I would never be safe, that I would walk my whole life beneath a bright, unbearable gaze, *an angel of great and terrible light*. I want to go back to the moment of my birth, to whisper in her ear. Tell her to live as herself. Tell her that true love is not something to be hidden from. Tell her that for all the pain she will face, she must not draw the veil, must not huddle in her inner sanctum. Suffering cannot become your most sacred space.