

The Trojan War

I sat upright on the boardwalk bench of Paradise Beach Park attempting to meditate. I tried to embrace the afternoon sun but it felt more like it was pressing its thumbs into my eyelids. I was doing my best to 'clear the canvas' as they say. If that is something they say. I'm fairly new to this. I'd inhale and count to six. Hold that breath in for 3 seconds and then exhale for another six. Usually somewhere in between the exhale and the next part I'd find my mind far off the trails and attempt to wrangle it back to center. How could I be so composed one second... so aligned with my potential chi...

... and the next reminiscing about watching 'Troy' with my high school girlfriend and recounting the sex we'd have in front of the floor to ceiling mirrors at her mom's condo. I would think to myself, if Achilles were having sex in front of these mirrors he would become transfixed on himself and lose the plot. Then I'd flex in the mirror pretending I was a warrior in my tent enjoying the coital spoils of victory in battle. I smiled at the shoulder length blonde hair in the mirror and scoured for other similarities. Just a year into a severely tardy puberty, there weren't many.

Ok. Try again. In for six and hold. Did I put on sunscreen? Yes, yes I definitely put on sunscreen. Ok. Again. Exhale... 1, 2, 3... Shit. There it goes again. Quickly I find myself in one of my fantasies of 'would be heroics'. This time I'm saving the dog that belongs to the girl down the beach. In this dream he had run into the water and everyone could see a shark approaching him. I was the only one who acted without thinking. Onlookers would silently agree it was a crazy thing to do. But I jumped into the waves and made it to the pup before it became an appetizer. I returned the wet snack to his beautiful owner and as I did it shook in appreciation, spraying her and I both. We giggled and she thanked me furiously. I shrugged it off humbly.

"It's nothing. I had no choice, really. I... I lost mine last year."

"My God, I'm so sorry. How did..."

"Well...it's easier not to talk about it. Sorry. Still feels like yesterday."

I had never had a dog. Just two cats that died of old age. Perhaps she would learn this as our relationship developed and we peeled back the onion layers of our past and fledgling idiosyncrasies. But for now she believed me and ached with a sympathy rivaled only by her admiration for my bravado, senseless as it was, everyone would agree. Our eyes met and she leaned in closer to me.

"How can I ever repay you?"

"Well, I'm not sure how this would tip the scales, so to speak, but, sorry what was your name?"

"Oh. Helena."

"Well, Helena, as I was saying, I'm not sure this would tip the scales... so to speak, but let me take you for a smoothie?"

She blushed and her lips parting to smile made the sound of brakes squeaking to a halt.

Damn it! This meditation shit is near impossible.

I opened my eyes and looked around to reset. A scraggly character stepped out of the rusted pick-up truck, now panting hot exhaust just a few inches short of the boardwalk steps. He left it running with his door swung open and lit a cigarette as he approached what I had claimed as my serenity perch. The nerve of smoking in the sanctuary of this salty air. He had on big denim shorts and a stained tank top. I averted some forced acknowledgement of each other and closed my eyes. I opened my palms to the sky and dramatically inhaled through puckered lips. 1, 2, 3—

“You doing that meditation thing?”

I opened my eyes and tried to act surprised that there was another human standing in front of me.

“Giving it a whirl.”

I closed my eyes again but it didn't detract him.

“Yeah, man. That shit is legit, huh?”

Could I just keep my eyes closed? 1, 2— No. I couldn't. I opened them but squinted straight ahead. A small wave broke and flicked fizzing water into a million directions. A forced smile was all I had to offer. He had more.

“My brother-in-law did karate. All that Chinese shit, man. Fuck.”

“Well, always good to find discipline in—”

“Yeah, he got pretty far too. Like a green belt or something. Like, far enough where I wouldn't have wanted to fight him, you know? I mean I would if I had to.”

I nodded and looked out at the ocean for an answer as to how long this may go on. Quiet.

“How long you been doing the meditation shit?”

“Quite a while, I guess.”

“Damn. So you a master at that shit, huh.”

Had I ever lasted three whole breaths without drifting into some absurd daydream? I would be honest. I answered humbly,

“Well, they call it ‘practicing’ because it's not something you ever really ‘master’.”

“Yeah, so you can probably like, teleport places, huh? Like to your girl's house and shit. Just show up out of no where in her room? Like, “what up, bitch! Who you talking to?!” Haha. Sorry, didn't mean to call your girl a bitch. I'm just saying, that must be crazy.”

“I don't even have a gir—”

“But could you?”

“What?”

“Disappear and then pop up on someone.”

“Perhaps with no interruptions.”

“My brother-in-law told me all about it. He was really into it. But damn, I didn't get it. Like, just sitting there? Doing nothing? I mean, I tried a few times. But I'd be sitting there with my eyes closed and everything and all I'd see was titties.”

I looked up at him for the first time since our conversation started. Tons of large freckles crowded together to hide his fair skin from the sun. The tooth that cradled his cigarette was a clear brown.

“Yeah, man, he used to say, ‘close your eyes’ and just concentrate on what you see on the back of your

eyelids. And so I'd close my eyes and bam! Just a big old pair of titties. Just right there in my face, ya know? So of course I'd keep staring and then all of a sudden it would just be tons of titties. With no bodies, heads or arms or nothing. All pushed together. So obviously I couldn't look away. But then there were so many titties that they started to look like a bunch of eyeballs. Like a thousand eyeballs just staring at me."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. At that point I'd want to look away."

"That's a lot of eye contact."

"Yeah. But they were still titties too. Kinda. Anyways, like half hour of that shit and I'd have to open my eyes."

"Half hour?"

"Yeah, I mean... I'd have to jack off, you know."

"Oh."

He made quick work of the derm and flicked it onto the boardwalk sending the burning embers into a hundred directions. I contemplated why little saliva filled cancer stubs don't fall into the lexicon of littering. Just off the wood of the boardwalk a trail of menthol butts led to an opened Trojan wrapper where the horse lay torn in two and defeated on its side.

"Probably helps to be at the beach like this."

I took it all in with a big breath. "Paradise."

"Yeah, maybe I'll try it again someday."

"I'm sure your brother could give you some different techniques."

"Brother-in-law."

"Right, sorry."

"Yeah, he's dead."

"Yeah. Oh, shit. I'm sorry."

"He died last year down on a surf trip to Costa Rica. Went to get a beer one night and got locked out of his camp. Tried to jump the fence and some cops saw him so they started yelling in Spanish and he didn't run or nothing but I guess they thought his bottle was a knife or some shit so they shot him."

"God damn."

"Yeah. What a dumb ass, you know. Fucking leaving that camp at night."

"I'm sure he didn't think..."

"Left my sister and their girls behind. For a fucking cervesa?"

He took out another cigarette and lit it. He blew the smoke defiantly into the onshore breeze and chuckled.

"Damn, man. I ain't trying to bring you down."

"Your sister lives in town?"

"Yeah, we all do. My girl and I live just over the bridge."

"Melbourne?"

"Palm Bay. Those little girls are something, man. Take them to dance class after school bout every day so my sister can work."

"Lucky to have you, man."

"They are good too. Watch, man, those girls are going to be famous." He took a slower pull from his cigarette. "I just hope they remember me when they are."

"Well, no one forgets a cool uncle."

"No one forgets a bad one either." He chuckled and little plumes of smoke seem to puff out of his neck glands like they were gills. "I be telling my sister we gotta save up to move them out to LA and get them on one of those talent shows. You been out there? Hell, I'm trying to live beachside in fucking Malibu, baby. Even prettier than this fucking place I bet."

I smiled and we both watched as the biggest set of day rolled in. Each wave broke harder than the last, fracturing the steady surface that had grown calm for our conversation. A little Terrier charged heroically into the surf as two little girls giggled and screamed and kicked at the waves like they were invading soldiers. A girl wearing barely a bathing suit called to the pup to come back to shore.

I looked back to tell him about the 4th of July I'd spent in Malibu last year but he was gone. The pick-up's tires flicked sand in a thousand directions. The rubber moaned as it pivoted on the pavement. Leaving it to cook, now a touch warmer than before.

"Well, shit." I thought. "He didn't even say goodbye."

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