

Refractions

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Sometimes I follow crowds. Going where they go and keeping my mouth shut. Listening to their chatter, their swelling rages and disappointments, observing the bright splashes and plaids of their shirt and blouse, mingling of button down collar and high couture with an ocean of blue jeans, a democracy of fashion. Inside a crowd I feel safe, everybody seems to be going somewhere, every cat knows his way, I am alone and nobody bothers. It is a trip that costs nothing. It teaches me the need of a society. A social fabric as they say. To be yourself and part of the people at the same juncture. To be on the team but not to have to carry the ball, have your name on the roster but not have to swing the bat. Safety if not love.

I am walking along in search of a social mass. I am strolling in London or Miami or Dallas. On a tomato crate a plump middle-aged gentleman is telling us about the horrors of the nuclear age. His face is veined and purple, he is very sincere. We are all of us no more than twenty-eight minutes from the ground zero of a nuclear missile. They are pointed everywhere, no escape. I like this man, his ardent bulging eyes, soft voice, gesture and stance. His is a truth I cannot accept, live with. I pull away to be with the crowd shuffling around him, I prefer the scenery of the people. I am turning him off and walking on down the pavement. Everywhere the leaves are falling, the crows and squirrels seem indifferent to the dying clomping feet of the populace. I throw seed and nuts to the autumn wind and sink away.

I am out again looking. In front of a Picasso bronze a young woman is talking about the New Age of Woman. She is telling us the day of the male is over. Women are in every sphere of government business industry; in two years we may have a woman in the oval office; the male chauvinist dare no longer rear his ugly face, his rapacious intent, chortled innuendo. The National Sperm Bank of Kansas City, Kansas, has rendered the erection inutile, the penis superflous. The locutor is ablaze with the Tightness of her words, she is searching the throng of her words for an antagonist, her eyes sweep toward and over me, I am still safe. Hands are clapping around me and I join in. She points fiercely into the far corner of the mall but no voice rises to challenge. The woman next to me murmurs that the occupant of the stage is a famous cinema star taking time off from her work to spread the message. It is built into her contract that she can do this anytime the director isn't ready to shoot. She is tall and blonde and speaks the words without a script. I couldn't do this, I'd be in trouble. I imagine she is smiling at me and I find a way to smile back. This tells me something personal can sneak into a group and at the same time you can be safe. I feel good now, I am watching her exit to a sleek dark limousine with flashing blue lights. She

is off to an airport a speech a liaison with Good-bar. I am moving through the coats and dresses, the umbrellas and swinging purses. At the crowd's edge I become lonely again, I hesitate. Should I return to the center of this group or break away to wave after the speeding vehicle. It is already turning into 61st street. I tell myself someday I'll see one of her movies. Everybody around me is talking about Encore L'amour. It is the woman's latest hit, it is playing in sixty cities.

It is another day or another year. I believe it is early fall and I am testing the beaches of South Florida. I am afraid to go in the water, but I will enjoy getting close, letting the moist sand ooze through the sandals and about my toes. I am comfortable in my trench coat and Giants hat. I look up and down the long running beach and observe many folk conducting their vacations. There are license plates from twenty-five states parked just beyond the ropes. I am feeling good, I am a part of the people. I'm a citizen. The breakers are crashing out beyond us but I am safe here with only the tiny fingers of water sucking at my toes.

Gradually I hear a great noise in the background. It is coming this way, it is a parade, a band of marchers. They are shouting skyward, they are chanting, I begin to pick out individual faces and torsos, the rhythm of their pace and musculature. I guess there are two hundred of them. My eyes pick up the banners the slogans, I am beginning to wonder if a war could break out here. The bodies are coming at me in tight rhythm, very orderly it seems. The participants wear suits and ties or neat dresses and heels, all of them seem to be in need of glasses. I wonder about the absence of blue jeans or upper body nudity. The wide canvas banners are only half a block away now, I can see very plainly the lettering DOWN... DOWN...DOWN, I can hear the roar-DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN...the shoes and boots slapping smartly on the damp pavement... the remaining words are beginning to peek around the bobbing determined heads...the canvas tightens against the breeze... DOWN ... DOWN... DOWN ...WITH ... WITH ... FORNICAT ... ION ... FORNI ... CA ... TIONL. FORNICATION... the voices are upon me... DOWN WITH ... DOWN WITH FORNICATORS ... GOD'S WRATH ON ... ALL FORNI-CA-TORS ... DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN uh... I am directly in their path, I shuffle to the curb and lose myself in the chant, I am breathing heavily, I am conscious of the scarlet tincture of my neck and jowl, I feel the need to pee, to get relief. They are surging past me so close I can reach out and touch the bobbing haberdashery but this is not enough. I stand out, I begin to tremble, I am afraid to look around in case others are watching me. It is too painful, many don't understand a crowd a group a haven. Even six inches of empty space can cut you off from being safe. Either I am in a crowd or I'm not. My knees are melting softening, I could faint. With my eyes I bag to be taken in. The wooden poles of the banners, I would give anything now to take one in my hands. No matter ; the weight, the press of the breeze. I — would carry it high, do my share. It would be like a meaningful sexual experience to me. The thinking of this jars me, my brain has tricked me again...! look around again, the faces are inches away but so far. They are indifferent to everybody outside the magic line. I look at them with admiration, I know who they are now...the Moral Majority, the new power source-...I see the morality in these firm faces, the uplift the knowledge. I am weakening, I am needing to be carried off in this throng of virtue. I need the Moral Majority. I am frozen in my tracks, my sandy tracks, only my ears seem to function — DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN uh DOWN -

I am begging to be taken in, I am ready to lurch forward and hope for the. I am ready to shout out the ugliness of the great god Fornicator, Forn, Fornix...! taste the lewdness the maniacal lust...the rocking sweating flesh...the sin in this...my brain is saying to this mighty phalanx take me in — take me in — take me IN — I am reeling and dropping, I am on my knees... and the

marchers are passing, the last banner sweeps by, the last pair of uncuffed polyester, the last heels...a little man is running into the street, he is pointing into the other block, he is waving a somebody far away or nearby. He is wearing a dark tan and white Bermuda shorts, he is less than five feet tall. He is yelling now, he is very happy with something...my eyes follow him to a second parade a group, a marching organization. They are coming on fast now, they have a chant of their own and it is beginning to reach us, con-nect...CON uh CON uh CON uh...uh... DEMN uh DEMN uh DEMN uh... CONDEMN CONDEMN CONDEMN ...the breeze is filling with the safety of words, I am struggling to my feet and looking listening waiting...MAS-TUR-BATION...MASTUR-BATION...COND-EMN uh MASTURBATION uh MASS-TUH-BAHH-SHUNN... the little man is jumping up and down in his happiness, I see the wisp of saliva floating across his lips, the face crinkling to the breaking point with the enormous smile...he is trying to talk, make sounds, I realize he is retarded – the banners are in full view now, they are proclaiming the identical message to the breeze, the tourists, the masturba-tors of this world – the ranks are closing up fast, they are right in front of me, I am feeling the panic again, the need to belong, to be with the people. The sea of faces might be the same as the other, I look for clues but the clues are all the same. My emptiness is killing me, I study the situation out of absolute necessity, I feel a sudden moistness down my left thigh, I will only be safe inside this crowd. I am searching for an opening, I am juking I am juking right, I am begging for a juju, I step between two fat ladies and am inside the ranks, my toes shins knees taking the knocks...! fall into the pace, I remember the secrets of close-order drill in the Nam days...I am helping support one of the poles...I am part of a people with a mission, I am a voice among voices: Con-demn Mas-tur-ba-tion...Con, Con, Con-

It is later, we are two or three, blocks along our trail, we are moving parallel to the sea, the roaring breakers and the dancing froth, we are like folk, we are going somewhere...! know we have strength too big for the noisy ocean fifty yards away, I believe believe...! am beginning to get myself together, relax, my anxieties are dropping away, I ignore the peering waving hostile bystanders, the solitary tourist and her muttered FUCKYOU...I am on a bigger safer trip...I adjust my stride to the formation and let my brain perk a while. It begins to whisper to me, it is leading me out of the present scene and back into the years, it is showing again that a fellow can live privately inside the method of a crowd, he can be a regular person but delve into many secret feelings, secret memories. I am – happy about this, I am striding along inside a balloon of a sense of purpose and I am beginning to feel my brain take into the years...

I am fourteen years old, a student in the Brickhouse Junior High School in Philly or Montclair or...! am remembering what it is like to be a loner in a school like this, an eighth grader of fourteen without any big interests, any big prospects, a kid taking dull courses in arithmetic, geography, personal hygiene, taking them inside the ugly scarred brick walls of the Brickhouse Jr Hi. I remember the cinders of the playground and the rusted out swing sets, the harsh hanging chains of the basketball stands, my inability ever to work the ball up and over for a lay-up, the coach liking to send the failures on laps around the black field, twist our arms up behind our shoulder blades. The cafeteria food and the slimy showers and latrine...all of these are coming to me now and they're not that bad anymore, I can see them in the past and they say the past is gone, they say it can't really hurt that much after a time. I graduated from the Brickhouse many years ago, I am in fairly good shape most of the time now. It helps me to sift back in my past like this, the thrum and thump of our many marching feet is sealing me off, calming me. These work together.

I am sitting in my desk in Mrs. Wiglaf's general science class, I am taking a test on gases, on hydrogen oxygen sulfuric. On what happens to these when you put with pressures things temperatures. I have never seen these gases, I always believe Wiglaf's words of their vital importance, they are very real this woman says. I am a good student, A's on the tests and the little quizzes usually. This is my trouble, the cause of these pressures on me now. I am a loner but one with the smarts, this is my reputation around the other boys. This is why burly Peter and Paul are using me this afternoon. They are sitting at the desks in front of me, behind me, they have me boxed in, they are making me pass the answers in front of me, behind me, I am so busy I hardly have time to get down the words, the clues. My fingers hurt, my back is smarting, my lower regions need to pass a huge amount of gas into this room, I am very tense, I am not far away from tears. I remember the threats from these two in the lunchroom, the latrine. I can slip the answers to them or they'll get me. They will wait for me after school in the Porter Alley and smash my ass. Peter will ram me from behind, Paul Korcher will work over the upper end of me, he is a head and throat man. When they finish they'll drag me over to show Mary Mae the results. Mary Mae runs with these two, she is tough also. She'll do almost anything. She is the first to let me see her bare ass, the dark thick hair at the bottom of her stomach, she did this because the other two told her I loved her. She laughed at me, she said one look at something I'd never get to touch, she told me to go home and play with myself. She said I was cherry, I was a sissy.

I'm writing as hard and fast as I can. Peter is kicking my shoes under the desk, he needs the next two answers. I am sweating all over, I'm conscious of the lifting stink of my armpits. Mrs. Wiglaf is looking, I remember she is hoping to catch some cheaters, I remember I am guilty, the hard smacks of the principal's paddle, the one with eight holes in the middle, the one that always smells of a boy's bowels. Wiglaf wants to have a boy thrown out of school this afternoon, to make an example. She hates all cheaters, the ones who lend, the ones who copy. A boy like this is a criminal, he is ready for reform school. I look around at the room, the others scribbling at their answers. They are happy, they are safe inside the group of the class of the school. They are working their pencils their minds in a perfect unison. I yearn to join them, to be loved by Mrs. Wiglaf. I need. I remember Mary Mae three desks behind me, I wish she would do something to rescue me, she will not, she is grinding out her own answers just good enough to pass. I remember my father, he will take me up to the attic for a beating if I am if I am caught this time. He will be drinking large portions of a cheap whiskey and he will pull me after him up the steep steps to beat me, to make his day end, add up to something. I am about to cry, I am about to drop the little stubby pencil, the paper on my desk is a blur, a torment, she will be waiting at home for me to walk in the door at 4 pm, she is tall and pretty, she says I must never do wrong, she couldn't stand it if I ever did anything bad. I am letting her down, I am guilty. I am going dizzy, I might fall out of this desk. My mind shows me running pictures of all these people... Wiglaf and Mr. Staroff the principal, the father and the mother — the shiny lips and dark eyes of Mary Mae. All are being followed by Peter and Paul the bullies of Porter Alley, the ones who are after me now in this dusty smelly place. I think of my home, my house, it is dissolving away from me, it is going too fast for me to catch up...I see I am a loner around here, I see I am in a trap, a box...

Mrs Wiglaf is watching me closely now, she is beginning to move in my direction. Like a big red cat she is coming stalking, her eyes seem very red very mad. She stops, she looks over Peter and Paul, the whole section of the room where we sit. My answers are in my right hand and it is halfway through the slit in the back of Peter's desk. It freezes there, it doesn't move forward, backward. I hear the silence, the two bullies have quit breathing, they are waiting for it to happen.

They have been caught before, they can survive, they can do things I can't try, do... Wiglaf is in the aisle now, she is advancing straight toward us, she is not ten feet away...one last time my eye catches her eye, I see a look I've never seen on her before, I believe it is a look of shock at my crime, her disbelief in the inescapable guilt of a teachers pet. My right arm remains forever wedged in the slit of the bully's desk. My back is cracking in pain, the tears of a terrible retribution are falling down my puffy thin cheeks. A tiny but intent stream is making its way down my left leg, I can feel it pass my knee and curl into my sock, my shoe. In a minute I will be yanked out of my desk and exposed to the room, my shame will be known everywhere, the boy who peed in his pants in the eighth grade of the Brickhouse. I am thinking these things, I am sure...

WiglaPs eyes are on me, they are large and glittery...the eyes are staring straight at me through me...a pool of urine is rising up a left shoe...a black sock is turning yellow in the yellow pool of pee...I am looking, waiting for the dooin...something, something...sud-denly it is changing...the horrible eyes are swinging around me, the torso the corset of power is beside and behind me...I am hearing a heavy breath from Peter Riess, he is turning around to look, he is watching something behind me, he is sneering at a sight down (he row between Paul Korcher and Mary Mae. One of his long hairy arms is reaching down and snatching away the little folded answers, his ugly tongue spits out a bubble of saliva toward me. I watch it land on my shirt front. I am too dizzy to care, I still expect to be smacked from the rear...my eyes begin to want to turn with Peter's eyes, my body Begins to swing around, I realize the huge silence suddenly in the room ...everybody is screwing around to look at the rear of the room.

My eye catches the look on the face of the girl sitting across from me. Beverly Wilson's face is telling me something beyond words is happening...! am looking behind me now, I am seeing Mrs. Wiglaf standing beside the new boys desk. She is staring down at something in his pants...Earl Leaton the boy who started at the Brickhouse only a month ago, the boy called Little Earl by the others...he is crouched in the desk with his eyes closed, his mouth is hanging open and quivering — ...he seems ready to fall to the floor, to the dusty spot in front of Mrs. Wiglaf's shoes. She is telling Little Earl something, the words come out in hard cruel whispers, she is putting put her hand to clutch his shoulder, to inform him he is her prisoner, the words come out in hard cruel whispers, she is putting out her hand to touch his shoulder, to inform him he is her prisoner, the words flow from her face that is beet red...from around Paul Korcher's shoulder I can see the stranger bringing up a dirty red handkerchief from his rear pocket...! see him dropping it over his pants, I see he is following the teacher's commands...! believe he is only able now to do what Wiglaf says. Wiglaf steps back and seems to pull the passive figure upward out of the desk...Little Earl is coming up and the truth is there for everybody to see or almost to see, everybody in this room feels it now...he is holding the piece of dirty cloth in front of him but he is not quite covered...his penis is out of his pants his zipper is wide open, the long white flesh is briefly exposed, it is still in a half state of erection...he is trying to cover himself but he is clumsy or slow or his fingers are trying for a last squeeze of pleasure release...Wiglaf is tugging sharply on his shoulder now, she begins to seem rattled...she looks up at the ceiling and barks an order for John Katzer to go for the principal ...from the scarlet face comes another command for the rest of us to turn around and finish the test. The test on the vital gases of the universe. We are too creamed out to withdraw our eyes, we are too scared to disobey...the only thing in the room is the picture of little Earl sagging against Mrs. WiglaPs rigid waiting body. I look one more time, I see there is no paper on this boys desk, I know he was not busy working at the questions, he was jerking off under the desk. All the time he was flunking the test so he could have a climax,

he couldn't wait for later. I look at Paul Korcher, I see him with a new look on his heavy mean face. He is not laughing, he is mad. Suddenly it hits me he is mad at little Earl. Paul Korcher had forgotten me, he wants to get up and smash the new boys head in, he wants to do something violent about this violation of the rules. I sneak a look at Mary Mae, I need to know her reaction, I only see a look I've never noticed before. Maybe she was too close to the action, maybe some of Earl's stuff landed on her. She has turned around, she is placing the palms of her hands over her scarlet face, she is turning off.

There is ten minutes left on the test, ten minutes to sit in this room, to wonder, to put things more or less together. I am putting down another answer, I am unable to know the words my pencil scratches out. I am happy that the two bullies are leaving me alone, they no longer seem to care about what I write down. They watched Mr. Staroff drag little Earl out of the room and they slumped down in their desks, they are playing it cool or something else. I wonder if they intend to flatten the new boy. I feel Earl might not be able to come back to the Brickhouse after this. I decide he should stay away, he should find someplace to go, hide. Someday he can start over. I realize I am feeling something very heavy about this Earl Leaton. He had a feeling in his pants he couldn't stop, control. He came to class the day of the test on gases but he didn't try to pass, he just did what he had to do and didn't care about anyone else being in this room. Maybe I he tried to rub off without anybody knowing but he had to do this to himself. I see how his doing this probably saved me from Wiglaf: she caught Earl but she could've caught me cheating with the two bullies. Even years later I think about this, how the masturbator saved the cheater's skin. I think about Earl's shameful act in this public room, I remember my own guilts, the B I got on the test, the bullies two C's...I begin to feel better about the trip of masturbation, I decide it is a very human part of us, I decide Little Earl was human, Little Earl is a part of me. Gradually my brain clears, circles around into the present...

It is later, we're going along the trail, the esplanade, we are moving parallel to the sea, the roaring breakers. We're very strong, a crowd a group. I am beginning to get myself together, the anxieties are dropping away...I am accepted by these people around me in the ranks, I am telling myself how a fellow can live privately inside the method of a crowd, how he can be a regular guy but delve into secret feelings, secret memories. The chant is going up again, the chant is rising to put down the waves the solitary onlookers the misfits...the power of the chant is in me, I am very pleased to be part of this, I am happy to keep aglow in a secret place the consideration of the act of masturbation. Tomorrow I will be walking along in search of a crowd.

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