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Phenomenological Disbelief

Jean-Paul Sartre called it “nausea.” He wrote an entire book about it, with that title, about the strange, otherworldly sensation of being suddenly and entirely immersed in the strangeness of one’s own existence. With pinpricks of absolute clarity disrupting his life, Sartre’s protagonist Antoine Roquentin becomes disoriented and even bodily sickened by the awareness of himself in the infinite universe of separate consciousness surrounding him. Physically, spiritually, mentally, any other *-ally*, he is a foreigner in a familiar place, struck by the oddness of being alive and being conscious that he is alive. He is alien. He is a stranger, in a not so strange land.

Although the concepts of existentialism and, before that, phenomenology, had been developed and discussed for years, decades, quarter- and half-centuries by the greatest of philosophers, in my own teenage consciousness, none of that existed. Or rather, in a less solipsistic admittance, I was a child and just didn’t have the vocabulary.

Despite not coming from a religious family, Grandma signed me up for confirmation classes one summer. When pressed as to why it was necessary for me to attend the classes and the culminating ceremony at the end of the summer, Grandma said something along the lines of “all the other kids your age are doing it.” All the other kids my age were doing drugs and having sex, I pointed out. Grandma told me to shut up.

My teenage years as a whole were their own sort of Sartrean nausea; each day opened up a hormonal chaos in which I might be happy, or sad, or furious about something that bitch Katy said in homeroom, or a tumultuous combination of all three. My mind was rooted in the dirt of my own existence, in the surprise of having been born while, in just as much likelihood, I could have not been born. The

statistics, the likelihood of becoming a conscious being made my head reel in the loveliest of ways. Lying in bed with my headphones blaring, I pondered the origins of my own Being and praised myself for being so, like, deep.

As a physical extension, sex presented endless opportunities into exploring bodily sensations and the phenomenological experiences of covert moments with boys: the stringent stench of body odor and too much AXE, the bitter and fuzzy tingle that semen left on my gums, the exciting pain of being finger-fucked in the backseat of a car. Every moment yielded up new fruits of experience. And while Sartre himself, grossed out by anything goopy or sticky or viscous, couldn't have enjoyed sex much, I'm sure he'd approve of the *experience* of it and of pushing the boundaries of my own self in relation to the arbitrary rules of society. Fuck the bourgeoisie, man.

After spending a lazy afternoon making out with my boyfriend in his basement, he drove me to confirmation class. The evening was crisp and breezy, despite being at the height of summer in the Midwest. The corn was knee-high in July.

"It's gonna storm," I told him when he pulled up in front of the church. "Make sure to roll up your windows when you get home."

"You should just skip," he said. His scab-red pickup rumbled when he put it into park. I felt the vibrations in the warm, wet space between my legs. I pressed my thighs together and welcomed the throb.

"I can't. Grandma would find out and be pissed," I said. I reached over and touched his arm. He shook me off. His mouth was a tight frown. Sweat plastered his long hair to his forehead in stringy clumps. I wanted to run my tongue over his skin, in the slopes and divots of his skull. I wanted the taste of the sea in my mouth, the gritty and unashamed tang of salt. An impulse of the young, I reached out and tried to run my fingertips over his slick, shining forehead.

"Don't touch my hair," he snapped, batting my hand away. "You'll get it all greasy."

"It's already greasy, moron."

I hopped out of his truck and slammed the door as hard as I could, hoping that the force would rock him in his seat.

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In *American Beauty*, the incomprehensible yet fleeting wonder we may sometimes feel at the world is depicted in a scene where two teenage lovers are sitting in front of a television; they're watching a home movie featuring a plastic bag blowing around in the wind, swirling up and around and down again amongst an inconsequential cyclone of dry leaves. Ricky's eyes well with tears and he says, "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it, and my heart is just going to cave in." And Jane looks at Ricky and her own heart swells near to bursting and her body's cells soar up and around one another in an electric storm. And that's when she knows she loves him.

I didn't have this vocabulary either as a teenager in that confirmation class; I hadn't seen the movie yet, didn't know to make this reference. It would have been much easier to explain if I had had other people's words and experiences to roll around in my mouth. Instead, that evening, when I tried to convey to the pastor and my classmates the idea of being just shocked and stunned at life, at the fact that one day I existed and that one day I'll cease to exist, and that the universe is just so big that there's no way any of us can even begin to comprehend it, I stumbled, inarticulate.

"You mean that you're amazed that God made the world and everything in it, including you," the pastor said. She might have meant it as a question, but it didn't sound like it; it sounded like she was trying to fill my words with sand and lead.

"No, that's not what I mean at all," I said. I shook my head. I was flustered at my inability to describe this strange and sublime feeling that would sometimes overtake me in the most unexpected moments, where everything felt so unfamiliar and exciting and new, where the colors were brighter and the smells stronger with everything so clear and lovely. And that God, in the traditional sense at least, had absolutely nothing to do with this human awe and wonder.

I stumbled on a bit longer before petering off. When I let my voice trail into silence, one of my classmates looked over at me, smirking, her eyebrows pushed high up on her forehead as if she'd never heard anything as ridiculous in her entire life. I felt so stupid and so small. I sat in self-imposed quietude the rest of the night and most of the evenings after that, only breaking my vow of taciturnity to ask pointed questions to the pastor in a childish effort to shake her belief in God. She didn't understand me, and I didn't understand her either.

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To Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, consciousness and, as a consequence, self-consciousness, is a sickness that is unique to man, a sickness that exhausts and consumes the soul without warning.

Disregarding those sorts of mundane moments that just *appear* incredibly profound when one is high or sleep deprived, I've only had a handful of sublime experiences that have stuck with me. This handful I return to every so often to remind myself that life is terrifying and wonderful.

When I was a kid, I'd go to summer day camp at the park. Grandma signed me up every year. I remember the park as magnificent and green and damn near infinite, the open field ringed with woods and a cool, shallow stream. But when I drive past it now on my way home to visit, it seems ordinary, just a park, flooded muddy in the spring and fall. Perhaps everything is shinier in a child's eyes; I can never really know for sure.

Grandma dropped me off one day. I stepped onto the bridge to cross the creek that meandered its way along the edge of the park. I made the mistake of pausing and leaning over the rail to stare straight down at the water. It had rained the night before, and the water was running fast over the glittering sand, carrying twigs and leaves and frittering tadpoles along with the tiny current. My gaze was swept up in this shining motion; I couldn't look away. The creek bed brimmed with fat, ripe jewels.

“What are you doing?” my best friend asked. I didn’t look up; just pointed down at the water rushing down and under the bridge. I was wordless, but I knew that when she tilted her head over the rail and looked down at that golden world, she’d feel what I felt, and she’d know, and we’d know it together.

“I don’t know what you’re looking at.”

Frustrated, I pointed again. “Look,” I said. “The water looks pretty.”

She didn’t bother looking again. “It’s just a dirty creek,” she told me. She laughed.

When I pulled my eyes from the stream, I looked her full in the face. The summer sun had brought out her freckles. Her cheeks were dappled with fire.

I looked hurt, I know I did. I was hurt that she couldn’t understand, couldn’t *see* how amazing the creek looked. She couldn’t feel that strange, quiet fascination when she looked down at the water swirling cold and fast beneath our feet.

“You’re weird,” she told me. She turned around and capered off, leaving me to stand by myself on the bridge, eyes turned perpetually to the water.

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Woody Allen did this bit that goes something like this: “I took a test in existentialism. I left all the answers blank and got 100.” While the joke’s a good chuckler, I don’t think it fully embraces the spirit of existentialism, at least not the strain of existentialism I’m drawn to, the strain of existentialism that is preoccupied with human experience, the freedom and responsibility to *Be* as fiercely as one can.

There’s an indistinct line that wriggles between consciously *Being* and trying too hard to *Be*. The day after I had that near-religious experience staring into the creek, I tried to replicate the sensation. I resumed my place on the bridge and leaned over the water. What I had felt so strongly the day before wasn’t there. I didn’t feel like I was part of the world around me, not *really* part, while the day before I had felt every atom in my body vibrating with the excitement of being alive and being attached to celestial dust. Yesterday I was

bewildered and breathless with the exhilaration of living life so blatantly. But when I looked at the water, it was dull and bland, just a dirty creek.

I paced around the park looking at everything I could, looking *hard* and trying to catch just a glimpse of what I had felt when everything seemed so sparkling and sublime. I snatched up a pile of leaves from the ground. Sitting down at a rotting picnic table, I spread them out in front of me. One by one, I touched them. I ran my dirty little fingers up their stems and over their delicate veins winding yellow through the green cellulose. The feeling wouldn't come, and I was embarrassed with myself. I swept the leaves off the table with my hand and let them fall back to the earth. I ground them into the dirt with the heel of my sandal. My big toe, bare, smiled up at me, smudged gritty black.

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Sartre's Roquentin quipped in his diary, "Three o'clock is always too late or too early for anything you want to do." When I remember the confirmation ceremony, I like to pretend that it happened at this purgatorial hour that separates afternoon from evening, an hour where there's nothing interesting going on. But I know perfectly well that it was a Sunday morning.

My peers and I met with the pastor fifteen minutes before service started. She handed us each a custom-made cup, each etched with a Bible quote and cross; we'd be drinking water from these on stage as a sort of reminiscence of being baptized. Salvation: Part II.

The pastor handed me my cup last, and with an apology. "I'm so sorry," she said, "but the company that makes the cups had your name wrong on the order." The name on the cup was *Jon* instead of *Jen*. "But I fixed it for you." Sherry pointed at a little bit of white paper she'd glued through the middle of the *o*, so that far enough away, it looked like a lowercase *e*.

"Will it still count though?" I asked, taking the cup. It was cool and smooth along my fingertips.

"Count?" She tilted her head to the side. With her white hair shaggy around the edges she reminded me of a Maltese.

“You know, will I still go to heaven when I die if I’m confirmed under the wrong name?”

I imagined standing at the Pearly Gates while the angel at the entrance, an intern given the worst job available, flips through an enormous leather-bound book. “You sure your reservation is under *Jen*?” he asks, his halo glinting with perspiration.

Sherry looked at me a long moment, but her kindness won out and she smiled at me.

“I’m sure God will know. No need to worry about that.”

I didn’t feel bad at the time, I didn’t have that sort of nuanced emotion, but I feel bad now, at least a little, for poking fun. My best friend and I would talk for hours on the phone about how stupid we thought religion was and congratulating each other on seeing past all the phoniness. Being children, our arguments were unrefined jabs, such as “So, if God is real, like, why does he let bad things happen?” that of course being a juvenile phrasing of the classic question as to whether God is powerless or, as humans would define it, cruel.

What I failed to piece together back then is that the feelings that I felt, the wonder at life, the beautiful sensation of breathing and seeing and living, was what the pastor interpreted as a religious experience. She perceived these strange slices of marvel as moments in which she felt close to God, knitted in tight to his love. And these people that had gathered to watch us kids mumble prayers and get confirmed used church and gathering in a sanctified place to channel these feelings, these touches of the sublime. And I pray, now, in my own way that they’ll find these moments and clench them close to the pulse in their souls.