

Concentration

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In the restroom of a gas station I washed my hands after urinating in one of the toilets. Washing isn't the right word though, as it usually implies that soap is involved. I was not using soap. I wanted to. The dispenser was hanging on the wall, but even if I had been thinking that there was soap in it, I wouldn't have touched it. In a place of worship such as this, where only one of three lights worked and the same could be said of the flushers hidden behind the stalls, I learned to not touch anything that wasn't necessary.

The timer on the faucet ran out and with it, my supply of water. My hands were pretty clean now, some grit in the creases and under the fingernails, but otherwise pretty good. The same couldn't be said for my face or clothes. They were dirty.

The cries from the streets eased in through the gap between the ground and the door, striking the musty porcelain-tiled walls and echoing about the room. They were followed by the hollow thump of teargas canisters being shot and the demonic kitten hiss as they began to spread their fumes. In response, the cries and crying intensified, and would have threatened to break the mirrors in front of me if they hadn't already been broken.

I stared into the shards of the mirror still hanging from their pegs in the wall, trying to find myself under the stoicism I wore so often lately. My eyes poked through, and if I stared hard enough I could see the pupils enlarge and retract. I closed them.

Concentrate. Concentrating. Concentration. My therapist used to do this three-step exercise with me. Try to get me to focus my thoughts and find the answers to all my problems.

She was always talking about finding the answers. Finding the answers inside myself. I never could. I couldn't as I was sitting in that bathroom, either. But no, she said, practice will bring it about in time. She was a sweet lady. I think she's dead now.

The yelling and the screams were fading, moving down the street and out of my life. They'd be back, though. The cops and the rioters had been pushing each other down the street for hours and showed no signs of stopping. In the absence of the noise outside the soft country music designed to help in the defecation process came down from the ceiling. Maybe it had been drowned out. Maybe it had been scared. Or maybe it was waiting for the perfect time to pounce on me. Waiting for everything else to leave so that it could mosey on down and take advantage of my tender flesh. That's insane, I thought. Soft country has never pounced on anybody.

Concentration. Sometimes I just skip to the last step.

In the song, the man expressed his love for his woman being like his broken bottle of beer, spilling its contents onto the floor of the lonely bar where he had taken up residence. Never before had I heard a song that so clearly defined exactly what my life was all about. He was in a bar, I was in a bathroom. He had a broken bottle, I had a broken mirror. His life stinks, and, standing in the run-down bathroom with the broken toilets and tear gas slowly seeping in, I was beginning to stink, as well.

With a high-pitched wailing, the man voiced his final thoughts on his beloved and the money wasted on the bar's carpet, bringing the ballad to a close. I sighed half-heartedly. Music shouldn't end. It should only be replaced by the marching of rebels on the other side of the plastered wall and the guards trying to hold them back. An endless cycle of the guards yelling, the protesters screaming, and the man wailing about a broken bottle. This is all I really needed in my life, moments of anger, loneliness and pain. Moments like the ones that were happening right

outside. I looked at the exit and saw opportunity. I made my decision to enter the street. The only experience you can really get in a bathroom anyway is one of relieving, not living.

I opened the door and the gas, hanging like fog, drifted in, burning my eyes. I didn't blink, though. The water collected and began to run down my face, but I wouldn't allow myself to flinch. Concentrate. Concentrating. Concentration. The pain brought a lump to my throat, trying to get me to vomit. But I turned that lump into a hum. A low hum from deep inside, expressing the sadness I felt for my broken life, just like the man in the bar. Crying, concentrating, and humming, I stepped into the chaotic streets. Moments later, something hits the back of my head.

With my eyes simmering like charcoal briquettes after a suburban barbeque, I woke up in a movie theater, sitting in the back row and staring at the screen. It was showing a couple dancing in all the colors that a black and white film allows, laughing and having a good time. Around the theater there was evidence of mass exodus. Half-finished monster-sized tubs of cola, empty boxes of gelatinous sweets strewn liberally around the aisles, popcorn covering the ground like an October snowfall. The lights were still dimmed. That, coupled with my teargas-soaked eyes, stopped me from noticing the person next to me until she spoke.

“But *this* is the best part,” she continued, as if she'd been talking to me while I was out, and maybe she had. “They're about to kiss for the first time. Well, the first time in this movie, at least.” She chuckled with anticipation for that magical moment.

I tried to make out more than just her silhouette in the dim light, but my eyes' auto-tracking hadn't kicked in yet. “Who are you?” I asked, my voice so raspy that it would get on the nerves of a scratched chalkboard.

She leaned her entire body forward except for her hand, which was left behind to wave in my face and tell me to be quiet. Her dark form rested on the deserted seat in front of her, her face locked on the screen looking not only for the kiss, but every twinge in the actors' faces that led up to it. "See how her dress frays out whenever she spins?" she whispered. "All of the ruffles stretch out as far as they can, then settle back down like they're disappointed their ride is over. It's beautiful."

All I could see was a white thing moving around the screen and sometimes hooking up with a black thing. "Quite," I agreed. I tried to squint in order to see them better. Concentrate. Block out the swing tune and focus the eyes. The two shapes slowed their pace and the music died down. Embracing, the black and white shapes talked about their dancing and their love for each other and other pieces of star-studded shit.

The woman slid to the edge of her seat, poised to pounce as soon the two blobs put their lips to each other. Though I wasn't able to make out the motion, the soundtrack presented a passionate smack and my companion sprang from her position and started cheering, so I figured it had happened. I closed my eyes and shook my head in embarrassment for her sudden act of jubilation, even though there was no one was around and I didn't even know her.

The woman let out a gasp and the soundtrack stopped abruptly, replaced by a flapping sound, not unlike the sound of a filmstrip hitting the projector over and over again, coming from the projector's booth. The sound of the riots from outside took the opportunity to sneak in. I opened my eyes to see the screen displaying only white light and my lady friend standing on her seat, aiming her middle finger towards the front of the theater. She let her arm down with a sigh and jumped from her perch, making a lady-like thump on the adhesive concrete floor. Rested a bit, my eyes were a little clearer and I could start to make out her features. Extremely horizontal

eyes, plain nose, small lips scrunched into a grimace over losing her movie. Had I ever seen her before? Concentrating. Block out the flapping sound and screaming of the riots. Block out the water collecting in my eyes and the sick feeling after waking up from unconsciousness.

Picking up the shards of her broken joy, the woman said, "I guess that's just as well. This way, the kiss lasts forever." She looked over at me and her eyes became mostly vertical, causing her forehead to wrinkle in all the ways a young woman doesn't want it to wrinkle. "Who are you?" she questioned innocently.

"I'm just your friendly neighborhood spider-man," I replied, but I'm not quite sure why. The combination of not knowing where I was, not knowing who I was with, and not knowing why I was there was getting to me. At the time, however, it seemed very witty.

She smiled in the fake way a person does when a bad joke's been told, a slight tightening of the muscles at the edges of the mouth to give maximum appearance for minimum effort. "Alright, Spidey," she said, grabbing my hand, "come dance with me." She jerked me out my seat much too quickly for someone suffering from a tear-gas hangover and dragged me to the open aisle. Her free hand found my back and she pushed me a few steps back. Tightening her grip, she twirled me and dropped me into a low dip. "It's 1936 and we're all happy!" she cheered, and then brought her voice into a song, a lovely little piece made up entirely of the word "la"-you know, the note to follow "so."

I was nauseated to the verge of emptying my stomach, she stepped on my feet every few moves, we tripped over the garbage strewn about and her song left quality to the imagination, but for some reason, it was fun. Suddenly, I was in a tux and top hat, she had a long conservative dress covered in dyed-blue feathers, the aisle became our dance hall, the seats became the throngs of people watching our courtship. The cries from outside cheered us on. In 1936, I

grinned as we twirled up and down the aisles, my shoes tapping on the concrete and her dress shaking loose its blue feathers and letting them float about the theater like the gas hung in the streets.

When the song hit its peak, she dipped me back and the crowd erupted like Kilimanjaro trying to shake off tourists. The door of the theater buckled and swung open, giving the rioters access to surround us, pushing, pulling. I was grabbed from behind and ripped from my dance partner. They forced me into the wall, the impact knocking the wind from my body and my body to the floor. My partner disappeared from my limited sight into the confusion our fans were creating. I tried to stand back up, but I couldn't force my legs to go off their break. Concentration. The screaming blocked out. The destruction blocked out.

I forced the movie theater to return. The cheering fans became disgruntled rioters. They pulsed through the theater like a sonic boom on speed, ripping down the screen and upending the carefully designed seating arrangement. There was a flurry of flying cushions, careening popcorn buckets, and then they were gone, fled to the next building that they felt conflicted with their cause.

I was left laying on the floor, alone in the theater, my body too weak to break away from the stickiness of dried Coca Cola. I don't think I would've stood up anyway. The movie had ended, 1936 had ended, and the dance had ended. Maybe I was only now becoming conscious after the gas. Maybe the woman never existed. Maybe the movie was a figment. Maybe our brief romance was just imaginary. Bringing my eyes together, I found a blue feather lying on a bed of crushed popcorn a few inches from my face. I brought my hand out and clasped it. I had to urinate again.