

## Imaginings, Realities, and Stranger Therapy

I guess I would call myself a nomad with a transient home that attracts the miscellaneous misanthropes of the world. We urban nomads of the world often find our unofficial homes invaded by the confused and the lost. These anonymous visitors come bearing broken stories and we misplaced strangers attempt to pick up the pieces.

On a particular day and at a particular time, a girl came in, loudly stomping with knee-high boots. Her brown hair was tangled under her white beanie. Her coat hung loosely from her frame with the waist-tie dragging on the ground. She proceeded to throw her laptop into the fireplace. The computer sparked and crackled in the fire, the plastic and metal warping as it melted. The event caused a quiet wave of commotion that rippled through the room. A few exclamations arose from the patrons, but many blankly stared into the fire or into their drinks, anything to avoid looking at the girl.

When most people are uncomfortable, they tend to look away from the distressing event. In this case, the girl, not her computer, was the event because she began to cry. She was quiet and tried to be discreet, but the sound filled the room. The number of emotional stimuli became overwhelming, and the normally bright environment became suffocating. People shifted in their creaky wooden chairs, and newspapers rustled restlessly, but no one talked nor made a sound, not even a stray cough, scoff, or clearing of the throat. The odd collection of strangers in the room immediately became a unit, all of them searching for a way out, a way to help, or the root of this girl's distress. For some reason we could not place, we came to the consensus that love was the cause of her emotional trauma. We had known nothing about this girl or her background, but somehow her actions told us everything. The way she stood, the way she hurriedly presented

herself, and her outburst all contributed to the story we collective strangers formed of her.

Maria was not thinking clearly. Her mind was a yarn ball of emotions, following the initial string of rage as it morphed through love, nostalgia, passion, and betrayal, twisting wildly throughout. It wasn't the computer's fault. It wasn't really anyone's fault except hers. Her stupidity and her naivety had gotten her to this point. One exhausted heart and ex-fiancé later, she found herself standing in a room full of strangers having just thrown her life into the fire, and she couldn't do anything but cry to herself. She was aware of the atmosphere in the room as it slowly tightened its grip around the strangers' hearts. She knew she was hurting them in the worst way possible by giving them no option and no escape from their situation. No one could leave, being bound by unspoken social ties, so they remained trapped in their discomfort and silence. An employee entered the room and was immediately seized by the sheer discomfort of the situation. She simply noted the sparking pieces of circuitry in the fire pit and promptly left to tell her manager. A cup clanged as someone knocked it over. Maria let the sound echo through her brain. The noise was so pure and soft that it soaked into every fold of her mind. It followed her nerves and traveled down her spine, engulfing her like a wave, wrapping around her ribs, and crashing into her heart. It was wonderful. The ball of yarn that was her brain unraveled with the sound and was left in a heap of scraps at the bottom of her stomach. Breathe, her newly freed brain said.

We watched this girl stand tense, reacting to the sound of a cup clanging. And then, as if someone had switched on a light, she closed her eyes and took a breath that shook her entire body. The attention of the people in the room was drawn in by her breath. The previously unwatchable event had become the main attraction. Again, like a hive mind, we collectively decided that a trial by fire was sometimes the best cure. The innocent and discrete sound of a

clanging cup caused an awakening that is normally reserved for the churches, synagogues, and mosques of the world. The girl's eyes snapped open, and she promptly turned to leave. The manager, arriving a little too late, watched in stunned silence as the girl exited the building and left her burning life in the fire. She found what she needed here: the clanging of a cup to begin her new life.

In a different setting, a girl came in with burn marks on her arm. Her face was calm, but there was an aura of pain about her. A sense of uneasiness followed her actions and attached itself to her person and anyone in the vicinity. The girl wore bright and warm colors, a juxtaposition to her demeanor; it was almost as if she were urging herself to reflect her exterior. The clothes were draped around her gracefully, with every detail of her person expertly crafted to convey a certain image: pants cuffed smartly over ankle boots, a hat artfully tilted to the left, and a small chain connecting the collar of her shirt; an expected aura of hope and beauty that was unfortunately clouded by her true feelings. She bought a drink that was indistinguishable to all but the closest of people and then did something unexpected: she simply sat there, staring into the glass. Often times, silence is the solution. Our collection of strangers attempted to decipher her story. Her marks were intriguing and gave a bleak indication of some part of her past. But a burn is a mysterious thing, and its context, we found, is everything.

Lee stared into her mug of light brown liquid. Her problem was thinking too much. These compulsive thoughts overwhelmed her mind and consumed her, shadowing everything she did. It was devastating. She could feel herself being picked apart by these strangers, their mental scalpels scraping away her carefully crafted exterior to reveal something unkempt and ugly-- secrets only she should know. Her burns were something personal and difficult to explain. He didn't mean to. She knew he would never . . .

Everyone was told a story that wasn't the truth, but compromising lies were always more compelling than the truth. After the burn, life moved on for everyone but her, so she started running. She tried to move constantly to put everything behind her and just progress forward. But the burns came to serve as a constant reminder that life is unfair and schoolchildren are the cruelest kind of human. Whenever she took a moment and sat, she thought of her whole life up to the present: the triumphs, the failures, the loves, and the overwhelming losses. The strangers had now reached her core. She could feel the aura in the room shift as her secrets were laid out on a stark examining table. The room felt fragile, as if made up of threads, and these threads vibrated with the revelations of her past. The atmosphere of the room wound up tighter and tighter until she could practically feel the taut string keeping the room in suspension. Ignoring this uncomfortable feeling, she decided to savor her seconds of silence; it gave her a brief moment to slow down.

The girl ended up staying and staring blankly at nothing for two hours. We found her past to be complex and twisting. The conclusion was reached that she was using our room as a refuge--a brief stop in the rapid slipstream that is life. She would not come back; we had searched too aggressively and discovered too much. With regrets, we watched her leave and slide back into life's current.

In another time and place, three boys came in and claimed a table with four chairs. They looked young, possibly high-school-aged or maybe baby-faced college kids. They all wore what typical boys entering the real world would wear: slim pants and cotton tees in muted earth tones. One of them pulled out a computer, and the other two crowded around the screen. Now our band of strangers were used to this sort of thing: random young people entering in a flurry, engaging in a few hours of animated discussion, and then leaving their place in a mess of beverage stains

and disheveled chairs. But these boys were different. They simply watched the screen with a few stray keyboard clicks. Many of our minds went straight to the illicit. After all, what could be so intriguing to three young boys? But then again, why here? Could they really be so bold? So we searched our consciousness for answers. A particular thought started small, but gradually grew as the screen was revealed: video games. Of course! Their eyes were full of wonder as they gazed at animations, digital characters, and unreal environments. One boy controlled the mouse, another the keyboard, and the third just watched. The way they communicated with each other without words was astounding: a glance to the left, the flick of a thumb, the twitch of a head, the little things.

There are times when people just seem connected. With no prior contact, they just click from the point of initially meeting. They all yearn to spend as much time together as possible, but don't because they're afraid that they're imagining things. How is it possible to work so seamlessly with another totally foreign human being? No one can answer this because fear gets in the way. This phenomenon is rare and often improbable. But sometimes a person gets lucky, and, therefore, these connections are to be treasured.

Martin, Avi, and Mark were excited. Hearts full of hope and anticipation, they entered the room simply to watch a screen. They hadn't seen each other since school started, and they were all looking forward simply to being in each other's presence. They had missed this: the way their actions relayed countless emotions, needs, and desires; entire paragraphs that were said in a gesture or gaze. The particular way they communicated was a mystery even to them. They were afraid to talk about it, for they all possessed a fear of losing each other. And so all their interactions carried a sense of urgency and intense attachment that was universally known but not acknowledged. They all remembered what had happened when, in a drunken moment of

inspiration, they had addressed this odd phenomenon. As they found out, the consequences were damaging. They still thought about him sometimes; his presence was sorely missed.

They had to savor their brief time together and used video games to make their interactions not as odd to the random passersby. This, too, went unsaid. One of them, they had forgotten which, had brought a game to one of their unusual meetings. They all enjoyed staring at a screen, having another thing to do while they carried on conversations in their minds.

After five hours, the three boys left together, but went separate ways. Their backgrounds were still indistinguishable, but it was more so their nature than their pasts that we cared about. It was universally agreed upon that these boys were welcome. They were, in a way, beautiful, for their nature paralleled our own. Hopefully our consensus had reached them because we would gladly have them back. Their kindred souls would find solace here.

In a familiar place and time, a man came in smelling like a bonfire. This one was difficult. His clothes were all dark and heavily layered. Unusually, his aura was overwhelmed by his smell. The smell permeated the room and made total silence impossible. To say the least, it was an unpleasant environment. This man made us uneasy, but unlike with many other visitors, we had no desire to search his past. Our collection of strangers quickly reached a conclusion. Like well-trained soldiers or hostages, we began packing our belongings in tandem and stepped outside the building into the sun. We stared at each other for the first time in a natural light and couldn't help but smile.

We are foolish. We like to think that we're helpful, that we make a difference which gives us some karmic advantage in the universe. But really we're just a collection of stranger therapists, one in the same, making up fantasies or figuring realities of wandering souls who walk into our domain.