

## Blindsided

Just for fun, consider: do you think you'd realize it if you'd gotten a lobotomy? If someone just snuck in, drugged you, *snip snip snip*, and then you, back in your bed, let's call it a day later? Back in your *head*? Or rather, let's not consider. Apologies, apologies.

It is April 23<sup>rd</sup> of the year 2029. I am writing this now so that I might remember. So that I might choose to remember. I am unsure if this is right and may toss everything out later: is a choice you know you will make really a choice at all?

For the last few months, I've not had the patience for thought experiments. Nor can I visualize images in my head anymore, recall memories upon will. This is not to say that I do not have memories. I certainly know things to the extent that anyone knows things. For example, I know that I was born in the year 2004 to two unhappy parents. I know that I used to be a researcher at Princeton. In a past life of sorts. That the pistachio ice cream at Halo Pub is the sublimest I've ever had. That not so long ago, I loved a girl named Kristine. I cannot picture her face, but I could always check my camera roll should I please. I just don't quite see the point of it at present. I also know that I used to have an IQ of 170. And then I removed—no, I won't tell you how I did it, in part because I am afraid to recall the procedure myself. Again, that a choice I am not sure I won't make will not be made. I'm afraid that I might be compelled to try to reverse it, but from where I sit around 140, that seems like a terrible idea. One that I no doubt would have had in the past, but not one that I give much weight these days. But then again, some days the missing seeps like warm soup into my ears, eyes, every crevice—and just when I begin to relax in it, ice cold, all of it. A need stronger than any. Stronger than me.

You might think this all frightening, but at present, it feels quite freeing. My decreased agency dissolves my sense of obligation, most importantly, to myself, because I simply cannot do or think certain things anymore. And in turn, this allows me more agency, or more of the kind I like, anyway. Circular, I know. Which limitedness allows me the option—which I should say, is not much of an option for me at the moment—to exist unfettered by extreme capacity, to, simply put, live beautifully. How's that for recreating inherency?

I don't do much math anymore either, God no, and thank God for it too. Capacity creates obligation, and I was never quite comfortable with that. What *do* I do then? Ah, yes—I sit, I read, I engage with the world. I listen to music. I am fond of flowers. I socialize. I try not to think too hard about life. But I'm getting carried away, I'm afraid—I came here, to the page, to think through *why* I felt the need to write this, and excuse my personality, I just felt the overwhelming need to contextualize. It's hard to understand someone, even if that someone is yourself, without clearly laying out the most basic, inherent facts regarding the situation. Allow me to begin again with where this all begins, then, instead. I shall try—which, I should say, I've gotten much better at of late—to steep myself in the concrete, ward off the abstract, the conscious brain kicking.

Okay. There are tapes. A lot of them. Vlogs of sorts. Recorded by yours truly. I imagine they detail the full process, attempt to preserve prior state so that I may go back to it, maybe. I haven't let myself watch them all, because that's precisely what I am afraid of: that they might lead me back to the old problems. What were the old problems? I think they shall become evident quickly. Once you meet her. Not that my flaws had much to do with her—just that she brought out such intensity in me, that, well, the ugly with it too. I don't know that I have been completely excised of that self, even now. Facts. Facts. Tether.

A few months ago. December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2028. I awoke. There was a to-do list. It reminded me of me. After gulping down two of the prepared meals in the fridge—and there must have been some 30 Tupperware boxes, the kind with the lids that snap down—the tapes were next. I was surprised to find that my fingers knew the password to my computer, even though it was written on an orange note, stuck to the monitor. I found myself wanting to change it, found myself revolted at the old one and that I had come up with such a password, but couldn't think of anything better for the life of me.

I had just woken up and couldn't remember much of anything. I tried to remember. It felt like I was bouncing against my own brain. Like, I would turn my eyes up, unfocus them, try to pull my brain back into that space where everything that has passed exists, and nothing. How can you forget how to remember? So I popped the first tape into the adapter already plugged into my laptop, and ran it. Seeing certainly does feel like believing, and the memories began popping in involuntary. By the time I pulled myself free, I'd already gone through five of the tapes. Writing this, I am reminded of some poem that asserts: the sirens in the *Odyssey* must have sung to Odysseus the *Odyssey*. The most seductive words: the story of our own life. I cannot remember the poem's name. Nor the poet's. In any case, it all got too self-involved, and what with the logical assumption that they would go all the way through to present day and then what good would that do me? and so I shut the laptop, promising to give myself no more of that sweet nectar, and tried to go to.

Now, April. Is it any surprise that I've returned? I wasn't expecting to be able to stay away from the tapes this long, but my fear of relapse has kept me well. I'll admit, too, that I got carried away in the living of life for a moment. Funny how that happens, until it doesn't.

Recently, a seed has snuck in: perhaps the tapes were meant to reorient me? If I am to trust my past, more intelligent self, would he not have tried to guarantee me happiness? I say guarantee loosely, of course; to the extent anyone can guarantee anything. The question then becomes, in part: was I acting optimistically, or overwhelmingly afraid that the whole thing would be a mess in need of fixing? And if optimistic, am I to believe that that me, problems and all, was more capable of constructing this life than I, here and now and in theory unburdened? What might I not know, not understand? There are too many questions and as always, too few answers. I sense that along any path lies a leap of faith. To look at the tapes is to know whether I am wrong, but only after I've chosen so. To remain is to dwell in uncertainty and ignore it, or at least try to—and simply hope that I've leapt correctly. Either trust him or trust me. I am of very little faith, suggesting: neither.

And so okay, what am I to make of the fact that I am back? I am searching for inherency, some form of solidity, I think. I'm not entirely sure why, but perhaps that I may hold on to something. Believe in my choice before making it, where status quo is a choice too. Which is to say that status quo has become insufficient for me. I'm getting the sense that this has happened before—after all, why would someone lobotomize themselves? And frankly, I'm terrified to fully understand my motives, that I might recreate them here. Where would that leave me? But maybe—and here's some potential inherency—this inevitable discontent is what I was fleeing from the start. Is it inevitable though? I can't tell, but it sure feels that way from within it. Then again, the primary quality of the present is that nothing else exists beyond it until...wait...until it does. And then a new present. How did we get here?

But I haven't really anything else to hold, so: context becomes me. So: here's how everything starts, according to April me, according to December me on the tapes. Let us

reconstruct cautiously. Forgive me, in advance. I am loathe to retrace my steps that I might remember exactly what everything looks like, but I somehow remember the details, the essence of everything. And I can write the words even if they evoke nothing more than themselves in my mind, and hopefully that shall be enough. Let us ground ourselves.

There's a river just outside of Princeton, New Jersey that's a bit too small to really call a river. If I were from a state bordering a *real* river, like Mississippi or even Wisconsin, I'd scoff at any Princetonian as soon as they made reference to the Delaware & Raritan "River". I had lived in Princeton for two years before I bothered figure out that it was actually a man-made canal, for what purpose I could not tell you, as it literally runs twenty feet adjacent to the much larger Carnegie Lake. And Delaware—what does Delaware have to do with anything? It took me another few months to realize that the Raritan River, which feeds in from the Atlantic, eventually meets the Delaware River by Trenton. So everything actually does make sense, and you'll have to forgive a Princetonian, for, as we often do, forgetting that Princeton is not the center of New Jersey nor the world. And how silly that we do, given that there's nothing at all in Princeton anyway.

In any case, I didn't intend for this to be a lesson in geography. I've never cared much for it and was even caught—I'm really not sure what I was thinking—asking a classmate for help during an extra credit write-states-into-the-map quiz in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. It turns out that the incentive structures our schools and society create are often much stronger than any natural proclivities one might have, which I suppose any good incentive system should be, but how silly. Which is related to how I ended up at the fine Princeton University, but also beside the point. I am trying, but—when the memories flood, I feel I must hold them somehow.

The point being that the D & R river exists, and that I'd taken up the confusing tendency of calling it the "doctor" river in my head, and that I refer to it as a river simply because the canal purists insist that a long body of water built for water conduit purposes and not boats cannot be declared a true canal. The D & R apparently supplies 100 million gallons of water per day to some one million people in central New Jersey, which is really a lot of water per person if you think about it. And I hope they clean it well somewhere down the line given that I've canoed and spit and peed in it, and that upon its christening the great Governor "Vroom" (is this a real name?) took a dirty, polluting barge along it to the music of 24 rifles and a brass band. Yay! Tchaikovsky too would look down upon New Jersey: his 1812 overture calls for just 1 ("one") battery of cannons.

I'm sorry, I don't ever mean to adopt this cynical, sarcastic voice but sometimes it just happens. Impulses, tones, references flit past the tip of my tongue, uncapturable until: *obscure thought! Unwarranted meanness!* And so on. But all of this is mainly to say that not much happens in Princeton or New Jersey as a whole. I know, too many words, but I've not yet had the time to distill knowledge into nuggetry again and so you (who is presumably I) shall have to bear with me. Though you've likely little choice. Wonderful!

I arrived alone in Princeton in June of 2027. Me: 23 and spritely, if you can believe that. I didn't have a car, of course, so ended up ambling around on a university bikeshare-issued cruiser. The thing was unnaturally heavy to the point that you'd think somebody had just wanted to spend extra money adding all that metal to the frame. It made any downhill exhilarating, but I'd rather not talk about the uphill. At least there was a basket though, and this is how I first met the D & R river—the gravelly trail alongside it was recommended to me as the shortest route to the nearest Trader Joe's, and so bumping wildly, I set out to buy some groceries. Did I mention

that the nearest grocery store was a 30-minute bike ride away? Meaning I had a nice, cool afternoon breeze behind me as I rode down after work, a view of the little river, green reflecting off its surface from all angles, the occasional canoer. And that on the way back, grocery bag threatening to fly out of the basket with every rock I hit, I had to contend with a swarm of fleas all competing for the limited space in my nostrils, eyes, and mouth. Like I said, there's nothing in Princeton, and still, somehow, it's the only relevant thing for miles.

Pause. A pregnant pause.

This is taking too long. There's no way I'll want to read all of this in any future mental state. The tapes—they were already maximalist. Let me try to summarize: what do you need to know? But this is a slippery slope: soon, you will know nothing and be forced to project everything: soon, you will be a minimalist once again. Are we condemned to minimalism? I cringe away from underspecification now, but lobotomy implies a want of it, I think. Perhaps it is that we cannot truly know balance—I, a being of binaries.

Do you think other people would realize if you showed up one day having had such a lobotomy? I realize that I forgot to think of this in all my haste to discover my self and my past, when perhaps I needed to think of it first. Even before: did I consider how my relationships would be affected? Probably, knowing me. But somewhere along the line, I failed. Missed something. I think. Unless this suffering was intended for me, by me?

Well, about halfway to Trader Joe's (as well as halfway back on your way back) you'll run into a creaky boardwalk of sorts. You can't miss it—there's no other way around, and the dirt path meets the boards about two inches too low on both sides, making it a dangerous

endeavor for both you and any groceries you might be protecting. This is where I met the old man, though he wasn't quite old—more just grey. Fishing, stiffly. Which, I'm not sure I'd eat anything from that river, but to each his own.

For the first several months, I biked past and forced a smile, reminded of my father and my grandfather before him. There was something knowing, maybe sad, in the way he looked at me as he nodded back. In this unfamiliar place, he became a thing of comfort. A fixture of the little bridge, colorless despite each season. Now that it's done, I find myself wanting to see him, but I know it's beside the point. And something tells me I will not find him, at least not in the way I left him. And it seems silly to trust my gut when, well, this, but—what else am I to do? At a certain point, I think, we all must collapse back onto our subconsci. Does this comfort or harm?

Anywhom. Grey man. We eventually talked. It must've been the June I lost her, yes, breaking six days into June. 2028. Me, 24 and jaded, pacing the D & R with the force of Kingdom Come. Him, maybe 50 and pain seeping out from the corners of his cheerful demeanor. You can always read hurt from the eyes—I don't know what it is, but Kristine used to tell me that even as I smiled, I seemed sad if she looked long enough.

So: the two of us. Striking similarity. Gave me his tapes. I know what you're thinking. He had done the procedure three times now. Couldn't even figure out his own tapes himself—hence me. I think he thought I'd help him decode his musings and restore himself. Hoped? I don't think “thought” is a fair description. One thing all beings know: any superior is dangerous and potentially unpredictable. Especially when it comes to intelligence. Which is why I know I couldn't have helped him. Despite the only thing intellectually lonely people wish for: someone greater than themselves, that they may be touched—but throw choice into the mix, and what a mess.

Here's the kicker: what I'm coming to now, and what I'm starting to suspect I came to before, is a fundamental desire for companionship. Though more than a desire for presence, it seems to manifest in the negative: a deep fear of feeling *alone* alone, and dear God, pull anything to you that might help kill this dreadful singularity of existence. I should know—I've spent the last few months searching for relatability, someone to hold, and still I come up overwhelmingly blank. I thought the procedure would make me human, but I've only become more distant from everyone else. The amount of context required to reach understanding, galactic—and I don't even wholly know myself either! How—how can I help someone know a me that I don't fully understand?

The man, the man, though. He wanted his intellect back. He saw me hurting. He saw his opportunity. Had I helped him, I don't think I'd be here, alone, again. Which is why all of this is such silliness. His intellect, restored, could have been my escape: finally, an other to interface with! But once I understood the procedure, I became obsessive. It was one possible partner, versus the whole world. I could bring him up, or I could go down myself, become more average, more relatable. Hell, bottom line, it felt like it was either this old dude or a chance with Kristine again, maybe. Is that even a choice? This is why the idea of agency sits poorly with me—in practice, I am already me and must choose accordingly. All it does is allow me to feel badly when things fall out suboptimally. I imagine he saw this risk but, like me, had little other choice. Either gamble on me or continue fishing in that concrete river, pining, wondering, grasping at the past. What might've been lost?

To be clear, the man didn't dumb himself down three times. That would've been dumb. Instead, he did the smart dumb thing. Or rather, the dumb thing that smart people tend to do. The

thing that scares me shitless is not knowing whether I become him, even now. If the path I walk has been tread before, and I just blind to my milieu.

He dropped himself down a bracket or two initially, tried to try life that way, couldn't, dropped down again, found himself repulsive, tried to fix it, and ended up fishing on the D & R with his white plastic bucket and occasional trout. And a nice blue bucket hat, for what it's worth. This, I had largely gathered from his tapes. He wasn't of much use at that point. From what I could tell, he was left with a vague sense that his dissatisfactions had a source, and that he had once been able to point his finger at that source, that he was not a black box. Although for all intents and purposes, he was. By his construction, he recovered that which he was running from: existence without understandability, power without purpose. My ask is much smaller: I am asking to be seen. I am asking to be held.

If you couldn't tell, I've been avoiding her, avoiding myself. Drowning out the question that begs in favor of introspection, retrospection, "fact", whatever label you'd like to assign it. Even now, it is easier to exist within myself—and wasn't that the whole point to begin with? I cannot tell anymore.

In the weeks following the procedure, I feel a few strong wants. I cannot identify their source—they feel like inherency, but I guess that this must mean that they are the old wants. This is scary, but I suppose I must obey—what else do I have to go from? Of them, she looms large. A name, a contented smile, a voice I somehow know will feel like home. She is the 8<sup>th</sup> most recent person that I've texted—still just barely on my screen sans scrolling. It isn't until January

that I muster up the resolve to text her, and she flits about, noncommittal. I finally see her in early February.

We lock eyes as we quicken toward each other on the sidewalk. No, no. Not quite how it happens. I meet her at Junbi. It's a local matcha shop. They have a guava tea, and this appears to be her primary attachment to it. I don't love guava, but I find that I've a strong positive association to the drink anyway. I am there early. I am nervous. I imagine her walking in—in concept, not in 4K UHD video or anything—and cannot help but think of Haruki Murakami and his short story, the one about seeing the 100% perfect girl on some random April morning. I don't think such serendipity exists in life, but I cannot fully convince myself that it might not.

She enters: she looks like real life. She looks just how I remembered her. I know, and you know what I mean. She holds herself a little bit awkwardly, rubbing her elbows as the cold AC washes over her in her too-big sundress. I am being wishful once again—it's February, and she'd be frozen stiff if not for the layers of baggy sweaters that hang over her thin frame. Same essence though, right? Something about her strong, wide jawline reminds me that she is exactly the kind of person to be named Kristine with a "K". Every kiss begins with "K". Bleh.

It takes her a second to locate me. She walks over to my table. There's the initial look of recognition, and suddenly, confusion, fear. For herself, or for me? Am I become too transparent? What has she read off of me? I try to bridge the gap between us with a soft greeting. That appears to be all she needs.

Her face contorts into scream. I look at her in surprise. What does she see that I do not? *How* can she see something that I do not? My face turns to pleading. My arm reaches out to comfort her. She recoils from my touch. I blink, and she's out the door. I blink, and I'm outside

the door. Faces pop in and out. You you you you. My arms grow weary of the reins that steer me. The sidewalk flashes into flesh and dreamscape. When I wake up, I am on a dinky little island and I pull at my face in the mirror. Gentle waves lap at the mountain of Dilaudid beside me. I am once again, unbearably alone. I sew my eyes shut that I may begin to face myself now.

At times, my subconscious is more powerful than even I can comprehend. This terrifies me. As if her frightened face had triggered some strong animalistic instinct, but one affecting my thought process itself—I drop into autopilot. I grasp, I pull people toward me, I try to sleep the loneliness away, the fear of myself that I do not even acknowledge. I acquire hobbies galore, woodcarving, climbing, even yoga. I even twiddle my thumbs and work through some rookie differential equations just to show myself that I can still do it. It is not until the snow rolls back and green begins to return that I miss her again and realize what I have done, become. Or really, what I haven't done.

Perhaps, earlier, I misrepresented the basis for returning to my thoughts. The seed appears to be less that the tapes might be intended to guide me toward goodness—this is a surface-level thought and one that I know I will refuse to verify. Below it, I grapple with my own fallibility, incredibility, which I can no longer deny. That my mind is not even mine at times—what am I to do with that? And I do not know whether this is a result of the procedure or the strength of reaction to she who appears to mean so much to me. And my agency feels like a sham: I have tried to use it, and failed to optimize. Failed to hold any meaningful comfort to myself.

There are many ways I could end this. Few are worth mentioning though, I guess. I have some sense that if I am out of my own control, it might be best to put me down. If I believe that it will never be enough, then I ought to stop it now. Like, a real lobotomy this time, though this evokes an ice pick in my mind and seems more painful and gruesome than I can bear to postulate about. So some other method, perhaps the D & R, and hope that Mr. Grey Man doesn't drag me up at some point, but really, the means is far beside the point. I don't mean to get all morbid. And anyhow, I've begun to think of Kristine again. Not her face frozen in mortal fear, but her smile. Her denim dress. That which makes her impossible for me to let go of: the extreme gentleness she carries around with her, manifest both physically and emotionally.

I reread some of my previous journalings today, from before the procedure. This way of writing had started to feel familiar in an uncanny way, for what I had thought was simply me making logical inroads into my current existence. I realize: I have employed this style before, though usually more explicitly. What I mean to say is that I write toward understanding, in part to solidify my understanding of self, but often toward an other I've believed could carry the whole of it, could care to. I'll cut to the point. I am beginning to feel that Kristine might understand this, at least eventually, that she might humor this hulking complex of junk. That she might try, again. That I might let her. That I may have been writing to that end, even if not consciously.

It occurs to me that this is perhaps what I needed from the start: an understanding of my smallness. I have a logical formulation of inherency: either it's always been enough, or it will never be enough. Where *it* is me, this life, her, anyone, you, each instant—

Which is to say that my existence thus far has been based upon the premise that enoughness does not currently exist, but that through my intentionality and rationality, I might

discover, create some of it somewhere. Though—how could I ever create enough enoughness if I am insufficient to begin with? I think of Kristine though, how she has always been plenty, at least whenever I am able to peel back the layers of my own insecurity and grasping. I have begun to think that enoughness is an invariant condition of existence. And this, this feels like choice. I may or may not believe, and: to my surprise, I find a kernel of something warm within me. I am reminded of Sixo from *Beloved*, another story that could have ended in mortal fear, almost does, and his most memorable line: *She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man.* Where once fear held me, I detect hope, a terrifying but solid hope, nonetheless, take root. That she might understand me, take me, if only I let her. If only I admit my smallness. That I *can*, to begin with. That I am in my hands. I think

I'll send this to her now.

I close my eyes, and go to.

So I *choose* life, even unstable and dependent and full of need. Even if I must subvert my very own self. Or perhaps because I find that I can. This still surprises me. From across the room, her eyes seem to whisper understanding and softness to me, despite how little sense that makes. But she wraps her arms around me, and I find that I cannot care. Her hands cup my cheeks, and I am all smallness and subconscious. Her tongue sounds behind my ear and I melt into breathlessness and it is here that I become: present. Afterward, she lies curled across my chest, one warm palm still holding my cheek as we doze. The dark air of the night is gentle about me.

Moment after moment passes, and I, somehow, content. Stumbling asleep, I can only summon this one Sharon Olds line: *I cannot see beyond it.* I needn't see beyond it, I think.