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Writing Sample

Ruel Johnson

Two stories. "The Paternity Test", and "The Last Assassin"

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Ruel JOHNSON

Two stories

The Paternity Test

“One minute, I was impenetrable, nothing could touch me. The next, my heart was somehow beating outside my chest, exposed to the elements.”

- Hank Moody

I was not there when he was born. The records of my articles show that I spent that day touring the Linden-Soesdyke Corridor, visiting resort. I remember clearly the jokes in the bus as we pulled off at dawn from behind Parliament Buildings, the light banter as clichéd as that sounds but there is no more apt description for it, really. There was, for example, the well-worn – though perhaps contextually apt then – joke about Burnham naming everything after himself and family, with the highway to Linden originally being slated to be christened “Viola’s Passage.”

We are halfway up the East Bank Highway just as the sun is rising on the Demerara, and in the places where there are no houses or trees and the road runs close to the river, we can see how the early sunshine speckles it, the alchemy of morninglight making tenuous, flickering coin of the muddy waters.

Throughout the trip the signal on my phone would often drop to zero, and each time it happened I found myself not anxious but relieved, temporarily inoculated against a thousand spectral words, none of which I can recall with any real fidelity now although, til now, I know their theme.

That day – in my recollection of it – plays like a reel, the leisurely vérité of the morning on the bus flashforward cut into a time-lapsed staccato montage of certain sundrenched scenes, now fading to the dim fluorescent-lit fright-film corridor of the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital’s maternity ward, my footsteps echoing towards what fear, what horror but this pale, blind monstrous thing, tiny, swaddled in cloth and cradled in its mother’s arms, my trembling finger desperately yearning, as absolution, the grasp of its diaphanous paw.

His first Christmas, with him not yet a full month old, was spent at a resort on the Pomeroon River – or rather, between the resort itself and the owner’s old coconut plantation main house. I remember taking him for a walk that Boxing Day, a little before dusk.

In my memory of that afternoon, he is swathed in a soft, powder-blue shawl, only his round, pink face showing. The place is hazy and a rich amber amidst the trees, smoke from the huts of the Amerindian workers wafting across the plantation at sunset, drifting out and hanging over the river like mist.

I set out on the walk happy – I am a new father, I am in love, I am a man. I am golden in that twilight, my body retains, radiates, the amber light of the dying sun. The air is a symphony of sounds, insects and people – crickets and brown, naked children – and ever so often, overhead, the richly toned chorus of a flock of parrots heading home.

I do not notice when the mosquito lands on him, barely spotting it against the black dot his mother has made in the middle of his forehead because while it may seem superstitious there is no harm in it, this enormous, predatory bush insect which I only see after it is fully engorged with the blood of my son, defiant of the dot, and in the second it takes for a thumb and forefinger to crush the life out of it, this seed is planted that grows and blooms on the walk back, thriving via this meagre mnemosynthesis, feeding upon the dim memory of the casual conversation at lunch about how often the workers became stricken with malaria, and flashes of the worst nightmare I've ever had, one I dreamt in high-school in which I was being attacked by mosquitoes, monstrous, vampiric things which so drained me, in that dream, that I felt my head lighten and was conscious somehow of slowly dying. For the rest of the evening, I interpret his every cry, cough, sound, the temperature of his skin, which I have no way of measuring except by an untrained and ignorant touch, as febrile.

I have a picture, innocuous in the now half-empty album in my apartment, of me lying in bed with him asleep on my chest, next to us the teddy bear twice his size (named Mr. Bear) given to him by the resort's owner, the mosquito netting fallen down around us, the room filled with the light of a clear morning on the river. It is the morning after that afternoon of terror, and his mother, who is taking the picture, does not know that the smile on my face is not simply because my heart is filled with her, but because also my right hand, holding our son steady, is touching our son's skin which is cool and does not give off any malarial variation in temperature from the afternoon, or the evening, or midnight, or dawn, or just an hour before the picture is taken when I finally fell asleep clutching him to my chest.

It is now Christmas Eve, some five years after that day by the river. Even now, years after that afternoon, there are times when certain intrusions interrupt this *thing* we have between us, my son and I, threaten this reverie – like listening to Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven", for example, or reading Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" or this half-forgotten story by some German writer, Grass or Boll or perhaps someone else. It is what they illustrate, which is at once everything and nothing, which suspends our friendship at the top of staircases or when in the city, walking around in the midst of traffic, the latter being rarely done. It is why an open gateway provides a glimpse of oblivion.

At this very moment, he is lying on the couch in my parents' house – the same home he spent the first year of his life – fallen asleep roughly an hour before midnight during the second screening of his *Madagascar 2* DVD.

The face, pale and pink five years ago, has transformed into the rich, chocolate brown of his mother's skin, his features as if he has chosen the best of what we both had to offer: her eyes, my cheekbones, her mouth, my nose. His body – the torso, the neck, the limbs – constitutes an impossibly lanky, yet ultimately elegant, chimera of us. Beyond a certain point, I tell myself, we were both blameless, that when the first fissures appeared, we had worked equally hard to heal them and, when things got worse, to gather together the pieces of the world that had shattered, shattered, yet somehow still whole, lying here unbroken, indivisible, our child.

I rise slowly, extract myself with caution from the angular tangle of his limbs, sliding, in the same

motion, a plump, plush cushion under his head where my lap has just been. His always enthusiastically pronounced name for the stuff I begin to spray on him is “Mozipellant”, a contraction of “repellent” and its brand name; I always amazed at how much he seems to revel in the smell of this stuff that I find so nauseating.

Scent has the longest memory. The smell of baked things wafting in from the kitchen is as old as my memory itself, from when I was as young as my son is now, and as I make my way from the living room into the kitchen, then, now and the years in between contract, compact themselves into this singularity, this simultaneous space, outside of time, and part of me remains on the couch, mouth watering, both fighting and feigning sleep, and in the kitchen as I put on the mitts they feel larger and heavier than I know they are.

I grasp the oven door and pull it down gently, pulling back slightly as the hot air from the oven rushes out, engulfing my face. The heat possesses a scent in itself, or rather a quality that is more than anything a nullification of scent, of memory. When the hot air is itself tempered by the coldness of the night, I reach in and extract one of the smaller pans.

Our father alone baked the Christmas bread and cakes until my brother, younger by one year, and I were both old enough to handle the oversized, padded kitchen gloves he would use, and stand the heat from the gas oven that had replaced the fireside that it was our task in our prepubescent years to fetch coals from Clarkie’s shop up the street for.

The black-cake of our early youth was dark and sticky and drenched in rum, so sickeningly sweet and inebriating, that enough of it would cause us to slightly swoon and it kept for months after the holidays were over. The black-cake that my brother and I would eventually come to bake was lighter, less damp and less durable, and February would find mould inevitably beginning to spread throughout the last remaining pans, wispy, web-like, graying.

On the night after I turn 29, my son and I are walking the short distance from his mother’s apartment to the gas station where we will engage in the usual negotiation about what he is allowed to get, and what he is allowed to eat right away when he does get it and what he has to save for the tomorrow. He is now more than half my height and were I to stoop as I did the day we took the picture that is now on my desk, he would be as taller than me now as I was taller than him back then stooping.

“When I grow up,” he says, “I want a big big house, Daddy. A big house.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because I could put you and mommy in it. And Grandma, and Grandpa, and Uncle, and my sister...”

“What sister?”

“My sister,” he says, and breaks into this hysterical five-year-old’s laughter, “My baby sister.”

“You don’t have a baby sister,”

“I know, but you have to make one for me

“Ask your Mommy,” I tell him, “If you want a baby sister, ask your mommy.”

When I leave, I go to the house of a young woman who tells me, after we have made love, that she

loves and misses the man to whom she's engaged and in the middle of the night I leave her lying there asleep on the mattress on the floor, and go to the guest room downstairs and sometime a little before dawn, finger-entwined palms cushioning my head on the pillowless single bed, staring up at the ceiling, I finally let an image coalesce in my head, the silhouette of my ex-wife at the darkened bedroom window of her place, looking out.

When the sun finally succeeds in angling its lance of light on to the bed, I find a still shaded corner of the small room, where there is a desk and my notebooks and a pen, and I begin to put down the poem that doesn't feel like a poem at all, that feels like a duty, a ritual, an obligation to pain, written the way one is eventually obliged to bake the cakes of Christmas, essence, metre, flour, repetition, eggs, onomatopoeia, rum, rhyme, sugar, metaphor, water, allusion, stir, action bereft of all the sense of alchemy of first poems, startlingly hardening, the alchemy of cakes...

Nearing Thirty

This is as good as it gets
this lust for death,
not now, of course,
but at an appropriate age,

mid-forties, perhaps
self-induced, mid-career,
mid-flight, a mid-life
Phaeton going out ablaze
in some 300-horsepower
consolation bought with
that McArthur Foundation Grant
that came at last, at least

something better than
some grand curmudgeon
fading upon a throne of laurels

so the lights come on,
and the cameras cue
and the man in the suit says,
Poet, this is your life

to be lived,
there will be no surprises
you know its script

it ends at forty-six,
that weeping woman,
jealously gathering your papers
the former student, protégé,
the third wife

after the second left,
the one who fell in love with your words
but fell out of love with the scent of your sweat

those small children,
subsequent spawn, though none
as beloved as the one
listed simply as “a son
from a previous marriage.”

Last night, a spectre,
I watched them,
Raulene, Aidan
two halves and the whole of my heart,
and wept

and left
along an asphalt Acheron,
the road at Ogle

this is as good as it gets

There have been tears, there has been vehemence, there has been betrayal, there has been pain. At times, there has been something that burned like hatred, but when I examine it now, when I see it clearly, I know that is that unnamable emotion that comes corollary to great fear.

And there is this idea of love that it should begin as this tenuous, fluid thing, which then condenses and congeals, ideally preserving – like amber, like collodion – those whom it covers in stasis. If I could speak to him now, and have him truly understand, I would say, son, every day without your mother is a wound, and so I honestly do not know yet whether the love I feel for you exists in itself, on its own strength, or if it's simply some grand appendage of this thing, this thing that I have felt for her since that first night I took her for a soft drink at the old Arapaima outlet on Main Street – two buildings from where the Sacred Heart Cathedral once stood – the old Arapaima outlet with its worn barrel chairs and the actual stuffed arapaima on the wall, and saw her eyes and knew true joy for the first time in my life.

Fatherhood is this strange gift, an ecstasy comingled with something subtly darker, the quotidian bliss and dread, this inextricable grief existing at the very core of it, the spectre of the sadness of Laocoön, a nebulous, miasmal fear seeping ever outward in some blind, unconscious quest to poison and corrupt the heart.

Our father waited until we were both out of high school before he left for the first time.

The alarm on my phone goes off and I know that it is 6 am. Outside, through the semitransparent frost of the louver panes, the light of dawn is a fluorescent gray, and somewhere in the distance is the anachronistic crowing of a cock.

When you are accustomed to being awake all through the night, the nature and quality of sound, and of light, are things you become acutely interested in. You know, for example, that in a dark bedroom just after midnight, the light is always a light from somewhere else, something which exists in another place for someone else – and yet, yet it is enough to adequately illuminate certain forms, giving them in silhouette and shadow a sort of softness that all it takes is the pressing of a switch to disperse, to harden into the taut, harsh lines of a covering sheet wrapped, like a caul or shroud, impenetrably around a body. You know that the quickening rhythm of cars passing by means the sun is just about to rise above the horizon, the drone fading in and out having slowly replaced the rooster as herald of dawn in the city.

“Our father, who art in heaven...”

Our father died four days before my son’s fourth birthday.

Thus we really lose our sons, not by fang or fever or fire or fall, but subtly, in incremental insurrections of the heart. And what we fear most is this void.

It is now midnight and we are home, at my place, in our bed. I am lying next to him, my face close to his, so close that I can feel his breath, and in the Light from Somewhere Else, I watch him sleeping, his fingers encircling my one finger, and notice that he is now twice the length of Mr. Bear, and I recall a time when he was tiny and pink, and swathed in soft powder-blue, and my beard was much thinner and grayless, and Christmases past of Our Father and Om Shanti and Alhamdulillah, three days spent on the Pomeroon, that suprahistoric golden twilight, anopheles preserved in amber, a montage of certain sun-drenched scenes.

This is as good as it gets.

The Last Assassin

“The purpose of life is to end...”

An old man lies dying in a small concrete house in a not too affluent neighbourhood in Matoury. Both the cancer and the treatment have utterly ravaged him – he was always a thin, wiry man, gaining some weight only in his mid-forties, but now his body is sunken to the point that he cannot look at himself too long before he starts crying.

To say that he was not always like this would be an understatement of sorts. A little over two decades ago he was indeed someone else, a different name, life, language, children, wife, mistress.

Even now, with the hours he has left to live, the image of an angular, Afroed head from that other life haunts his vision, even with his eyes wide open although this may be because the room is so dark.

Perhaps “haunts his vision” may not be the most apt description. For the most part he has made peace with this visage. The first two years were the hardest, when the Head was at its horrific worst. When it first appeared to him, it appeared the way he had imagined that it had died – mangled, disfigured, the right side smashed in towards the centre, the proud Afro matted with blood.

The bits and pieces of brain, as detail, came a little later.

Back then it never said anything to him. It just gave what was, barely discernible through the bloody disfigurement, a glower of hatred and rage, perhaps that incomprehension which is inspired by baseless betrayal as well. It was, to use the most readily available historical example, the look that one can easily imagine Julius Caesar giving to Brutus in his final moments of awareness, before he utters the final words which history or myth has ascribed to him.

Indeed, it may be imagined that what the old man saw in those initial years was the vision that has haunted all assassins of great men throughout history, thus in a way he became all of them. He was Judas, the progenitor or archetype; and Brutus; and Robert Ford; and Bailey; and Oswald.

Back then, he treated the image as what he thought it was, despite its persistence, a dream understandably brought on by the guilt inspired by what was undeniably a terrible thing that he had done. He ignored it as best he could, and with the money he had received he took to drinking excessively, smoking excessively and applying his stammer and earnest handsomeness to the willing young women of Cayenne.

The first one he kept for over a week could not understand the roughness of his touch, his rapes, his humiliation of her, when what drew her to him were the tales of his tenderness in lovemaking and his generosity otherwise. These were rare things to be found together in

one man in this port full of rough seamen whose money came often with a lust that scarred, that broke bones and spirits with the same swiftness and ease.

And how could she? How could she, having drifted into Matoury to escape a poor life in Saúl, searching for a good job or a man with a good job, a provincial girl thrust into the world of whores and sailors, have known that her face was almost a perfect replica of that of the wife of the man that her lover had murdered in a former life?

In the fourth year of his exile, he married her after finding out that she was pregnant for him, although he had never before harboured any such romanticism. She gave birth to a son the same week that his own former wife had given birth to a son, although he was to only learn of this fact six years later when he ran into an old friend in Cayenne.

And, of course, he began his slow and difficult transition to accepting as a reality and speaking to the Head. Even after the destruction of its body, the wraith had retained the righteous belligerence, the blind idealism which had informed its activism and underwrote the facility of its assassination.

“Did it satisfy you?” it sneered once, “Did it give your life a fuller purpose, being an agent of the Machine? Did you never imagine something more, something better? That place was as much as prison to its warders and agents, like yourself, as it was for the people, whose very life force it sapped, it drained. Such a system seeks only to perpetuate itself infinitely.”

The man’s reluctance to engage the Head in those days was interrupted by the intermittent exasperated outburst.

“You did not consider fully,” the man told the wraith once, the first time *he* had initiated a conversation, “the effects of waking a sleeping people.”

Another argument ended with the man’s response, to the Head’s assertion that the Machine was like a “parasite” upon the people, that “Sometimes the parasite becomes the lifeline for the host. Kill it, and in its death throes it will ensure that the host dies too.”

The night the Architect had died, or rather the night that he had heard the Architect had died, the Head appeared to him in its second guise. There was no longer the blood and the brain matter, and it had filled out to the way it was when the owner was alive.

He had come home from steel band practice and had turned on the radio, adjusting the dial with what one would presume from observance to be an over-abundance of caution. The facial tic he had developed, a twitching at the corner of the right eye that was more perceptible than he believed, whenever the red LED indicator showed that he had caught a station was not something that went unnoticed by his wife. The story was brief, an international news report and he sat through it feigning an indifference that also did not go unnoticed by his wife.

That night the wraith said nothing to him, a look on its now complete face that was partially serene and partially sad. In the days after that, he did not buy any newspapers,

and he turned the radio off for the week. For months after that, he was stricken with this overwhelming nausea during the daylight hours, something that passed only when he returned home at night, laid his head down next to his woman, and began his silent conversations with the Head.

Over the years that followed, the Head would try to convince the man to go back, if only to give closure to the affair, but the man gave the Head little by way of remorse or repentance. For the man, it was always difficult talking to the wraith when it was alive, primarily because he always felt smaller in the man's presence. Despite his practical, pragmatic nature, there were times at the odd meeting, or at political rallies, the Agent had found himself electrified and enthralled by the man's speech and the raptor-like look in the eyes of the government man who conducted his weekly debriefing sessions was the only thing that could break him out of that spell.

Now, that awe was gone, and what replaced it was something close to pity and a lack of respect. He had thought the wraith would have understood that the martyrdom of its corporeal self had served to assuage the Architect, preventing the bloody conflict that would have erupted in the wake of any coup, successful or not.

Beginning in October of 1992, the Head grew restless and increasingly vicious, a mood matched by a growing fear and paranoia in the man it haunted – a fear and paranoia that resurrected the embarrassing stammer that he had conquered in his transition to a new life and new language. When a year passed and the new Controllers of the Machine appeared more interested in purging the cogs and gears that offended them than the dispensation of retroactive justice, the Head's viciousness faded to petulance and the man, in his relief, succumbed to his first infidelity in eight years.

Ten years would pass during which age had begun to hang heavy on the man, and he slowly began to cast off, as burdens, some of the very things that he had used to define him in Matoury. He passed on his leadership of the community steel pan band to the enthusiastic young man he had tutored since the second year of his arrival. He withdrew his membership of the community groups and shrimp industry union he had played such a vibrant part in shaping.

In 1996, when he was formally charged with the one death he was ever responsible for, the fear which had gripped him four years earlier did not return, and the uninformed, if ultimately correct, assurance of a close friend that he would not be extradited was enough for him. Even his subdued stammer did not return.

That year, for the first time since he had fled, he made contact via telephone with the children he had abandoned. Four years later, doctors would put a name to the pain that was wracking his upper body, and the illness that had caused him to begin coughing up blood.

He left for France the next year, receiving the treatment that would leave him sick and virtually bed-ridden for the rest of his life. When he had returned, the Head grew cruel in the face of the old man's imminent death. It told him once that it was apt, even poetic, that he should die of cancer, as the Architect did, because what they had both stood for was

carcinogenic, a tumourous evil metastasizing upon the body of the people.

Before he draws his last laboured breath, Cyril Johnson does not seek nor does he find the precise redemption that is expected of him. He has stumbled upon a greater revelation, one in which not only vindication for himself, or Smith, was possible but also a quiet, unheralded heroism.

The old man dies at home at 5 o'clock on an ordinary Thursday afternoon in November. After he expires, the wraith which haunted him remains. It remains because it believes that, according to its understanding of balance in the universe, its counterpart should return so that their debate could continue, maybe even to a resolution.

It does not see that when Smith, as an agent of the Machine, destroyed its former body, he also initiated his own gradual annihilation, a mortification of the soul which preceded by almost 22 years the final mortification of the flesh. It does not see that Cyril Johnson was already essentially as spectral as it was, that Johnson existed within the body of Smith simply because he was trapped within that vessel.

As the years pass, the house in Matoury will be expanded upon, and then ultimately demolished to make way for the cliché of a mall. Unchained from, no longer defined by, its shaping of Johnson's necessarily static perception of itself, it will begin to age. The Afro will whiten, the goatee growing distinguished with flecks of grey but remaining mostly a rich black.

Aging, it will eventually cease its thoughts of revolutions, thoughts which belong really to much younger men, and wish only for the sort of comforting quarrels which old men have with each other. And some day, when the mall is demolished, and the sea perhaps swallows Matoury, it will cease even its silent waiting for Johnson's return.
