

The History Teacher

The last time he saw his brother, Ty, they were fighting outside a motel in Wichita. Neon green light vacancy sign flickering over their dour faces.

“This place is making me crazy,” was Ty’s only explanation when he left.

He was sixteen at the time; Ty was eighteen. He was throwing on a clean shirt, intending to pick up the only girl he ever loved and to tell her all the things that seemed important at the time, when his brother called in a narcotized panic. He drove over to Wichita with the bumper hanging a quarter way off the rear of his sun-stained Civic.

At that same moment that he looked at his brother’s face under the green light, the only girl he ever loved was sitting cross legged on her bathroom tiles, her mother’s antidepressants resting in a pile like sleeping angels, failing to steady her trembling hand enough to write a coherent suicide note.

After that, all the people in his home town, who moved through their lives like the script was already written for them, started to resemble empty soda bottles.

Nowadays he taught history: the utmost testament to the static past.

The hill which hoisted the high school into the clouds was three miles from the ocean on one side, ten miles from a naval base on the other. Clustered like dead leaves at the bottom, were rows of monotonous military houses, their burnt sienna paint spread across them like a plague. From the other side of town, skyscrapers peered over to their little hill as if they were facing off to see who could get closest to the sky.

He had European History for sophomores, Art History for juniors and seniors. He met a lot of kids when they were sophomores and watched them leave as adults. It felt like he was watching them grow up on a time lapse. He had to look at himself to make sure he hadn't changed too.

It was funny to him that he should teach them about the past while their futures hung before their noses like forbidden fruit. Some of the kids he taught seemed as though they’d been snatched straight from the dusty yearbooks in his mother’s attic and thrown before him like

ghosts. He thought he could see the footsteps before them. He fought the gut sucking urge to warn them.

Of course, there were always the ones who were unlike any he'd ever met before. There was a student, Ben, who he hardly even noticed in his class for the first few weeks of school. He had the kind of face which strangers always found familiar, which became transparent the second he entered a crowd. He'd chosen a desk which was furthest to the right of the room, behind the center row. At first, when the history teacher's eyes landed on him, he could never recall his name.

Once Ben entered his radar, he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed him before, the reason being that though average looking, he had a number of oddly conspicuous quirks. The most obvious being that Ben never laughed. The kids around him would howl like wolves when someone made a dirty joke, or when someone fell out of their chair, but Ben just sat still with a blank expression. He was always sitting still; it seemed as though he never really moved.

Once Ben began to notice the history teacher noticing him, he began to stare at him throughout lectures, a dead stare. He never wavered, never blinked. The history teacher avoided looking in his direction. Every now and then, he would accidentally look over there and his eyes would latch onto his like they were magnetic, and he would feel a shiver go down his spine.

This went on for a month, neither of them mentioning it. Ben didn't turn in a single assignment the entire month, he didn't make a single mark on his tests or quizzes. One day, the history teacher walked by and glanced at Ben's notebook, it was only a blank page.

"Why is there nothing on your paper?"

He only stared and shrugged.

"Do we have to have a talk?"

Once again, the boy stared him dead in the face and shrugged. He did begin to write after that, the threat of a "talk" seemed to do it. He didn't glance down at his paper as he took notes, he transcribed every now and then, never taking his eyes off the history teacher.

The first time the history teacher saw the boy outside of the classroom, he was eating lunch with a woman he was seeing, Paula. She had blonde highlights and she was always either wearing something new or buying something new. Her apartment was half closet, half living

space. It was rather sad to see the way she carried her body as if it was a mannequin to display her new clothes.

They were sitting on the patio of a cafe Paula liked, waiting on the waiter to bring their sandwiches. He was drinking coffee, she was drinking iced tea. She was a dentist and she was telling him some story about one of her patients, just to fill the silent space between them. He saw Ben behind her head. He was standing in the center of the road. A car was approaching, but Ben didn't move at all. The history teacher jumped from his chair and yelled for him to move, but as soon as the shout came out of his mouth, Ben's figure disappeared and the car zoomed by.

"What's with you?" Paula said, turning to look where he was looking, a mortified expression on her face.

"Nothing," the history teacher said, sitting back in his chair. "Thought I saw something."

After that first sighting, the history teacher began to see the boy everywhere: at the grocery store, in the streets, on television, always from the corner of his eye, always disappearing when he tried to look at him. It seemed like the intervals between each sighting were getting shorter as time went on, like every time he thought he saw him, it happened more and more.

He couldn't sleep anymore, the boy's dead stare was burned into his brain. He found himself sitting up at night, pacing because he couldn't stay still anymore.

Paula slept over every so often, but that only made it worse. He didn't even remember what her eyes looked like anymore, all he saw when he looked at her was the boy's stare.

It became an obsession. He asked other teachers about the boy, learning that he never went to school. The only class he attended was history class. He asked students too; a girl in his first period class said nobody knew much about him. This was his first year at the school. Every day, he showed up to history class and then left.

The history teacher asked Ben to stay after class one day. The boy stood before his desk, the dead stare intact. He didn't even bring a backpack to school, just a notebook and a pen, which he carried in his hand. As Ben stood before his desk and the confrontation the history teacher desired rested on the tip of his tongue, he began to notice just how robotic Ben's movements were. He looked into his eyes for what was probably the first time and they were only dark voids.

“Is everything ok?” the history teacher asked. Ben stared at him silently as if he hadn’t even heard.

The history teacher wondered if he should ask again. Maybe he actually hadn’t heard, but Ben responded suddenly. “What wouldn’t be ok?” he said in monotone.

“You don’t go to any other classes?”

“Why would I?”

“You’re required by the state to attend school.”

“Why is that?”

That was what the remainder of the conversation was like. It went nowhere. After that, the history teacher began to hear the boy’s monotone voice everywhere.

He was in the drive through of a fast food restaurant. “Do you want any sauce?” the cashier asked.

Clear as day he heard the boy’s voice, “Why would I want sauce?”

“Excuse me?” the cashier asked. Did she hear it too? She was looking at him as if he’d said it.

“Barbeque,” he said frantically. She gave him his sauce and he drove quickly away.

The day he snapped was no different than any other day. He was lecturing, the boy was giving him his dead puppet stare and he just couldn’t be in the same room as this kid anymore. He was everywhere. The history teacher stared back the entire lecture. They never broke eye contact. It didn’t phase the boy at all.

The next day, the boy sat in the front row, right in front of the history teacher. The hallucinations got worse after that, now he was seeing him every time he closed his eyes.

The history teacher next door was a short man who showed his students videos in place of lectures and looked at them as though they were toddlers who had been placed unwillingly in his care. He asked the history teacher next door to take a look the next day, to convince him he wasn’t crazy. He walked in during fourth period, the boy was sitting in the front row, stare intact.

“Maybe he’s a tad over attentive,” the other history teacher told him in private, “It’s nothing to worry about, just odd.”

Eventually, Paula broke it off with him. She said he was paranoid over something. She wanted to be with someone normal. This sent him into a panic, not because the relationship was over but because he would have to be alone at nights.

He woke up in an empty bed at 3am that night. The boy was standing at the foot of his bed. When he blinked he was gone. He was going insane. It had only been two months with this kid in his class and he couldn't do it anymore. He had to quit. He had to leave. He knew that he couldn't do that though.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked him after class.

"Why do you ask?"

"You've been staring at me for two entire months."

"Why does it bother you?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"Why would it?"

He put his head in his hands, "What do you want?"

"I want you to tell me why it bothers you so much."

That was the first thing he ever said that didn't begin with "why". The history teacher lifted his head from his hands and found himself staring into the child's eyes. He didn't see a twinge of a person in him, just holes where his irises should have been. He couldn't say it out loud. He couldn't say that the pits in his eyes, the inexpressive nature of his face, the cadaveric stillness of his stance, they were haunting him.

"You can't make everyone happy," the boy said, like he was offering the solution.

"What could I have done differently?" the history teacher found himself saying, like the words fell out of his mouth.

"Nothing," the boy smiled for the first time. "It wouldn't be the past if we could change it."

The history teacher must've blinked and all of a sudden the disturbing traits of the boy had all shed off him like an extra skin. His eyes weren't as dull anymore, his movements no longer robotic. He was a regular kid with a gloomy frown and an observant glance. He looked a

bit like his brother, Ty. They both smiled like they were amused by some bewildered expression on your face, something you couldn't see.

“It’s not me you’re afraid of, is it?” the boy said.

Then he left, before the history teacher could say anything.

He didn’t come to school the next day, or the day after. He disappeared entirely, from the room and the memories of the kids in the class. The history teacher stopped seeing him everywhere, at least physically. The first few weeks after his departure, all the kids looked a little bit like Ben. Every time he ran into an old friend somewhere, every time he found himself companion to an empty bottle, Ben’s face flashed like an alarm behind his eyelids.

After a while, though, the memory of him faded and the history teacher couldn’t remember what it was exactly that was so disturbing to him. He figured that it wasn’t worth remembering anyway.