

David had been alive for one week and already the weight of the world was pressing against his skin. Time moved here in fits and starts, crawling like a wounded animal, then rushing past in blurs of sound and light. The air was thick with human breath, with their heat, their sweat. Every second was a new assault on his senses. He could *feel* the world. The body that he inhabited - this fragile, clumsy thing of blood and muscle - reacted to the environment without his consent. It felt hunger. It ached. It sought comfort. These were things foreign to the essence of what he had been, and yet they ruled him now, tethered him to the ground, to the dirt and the flesh.

The humans had decided he should learn. *About them*. About humans and their culture, as if such things could be distilled into small doses, spoon-fed to an alien consciousness. The thought was almost laughable, if laughter were something he was capable of.

Johnny, the boy with the wide eyes and the easy grin, sat before him like a preacher at a pulpit, glowing with a kind of naive reverence for the things he was about to show. David saw it in him - the pride, the giddiness, like a child eager to share a secret too big for words.

"**This is music,**" Johnny said, and pressed a button.

The sound that came out was not music to David, but a vibration that pulled at the fibres of his body, tugging at the marrow of his bones. He could feel the frequency in his teeth, in the base of his skull. It was an intrusion, a force imposing itself on him. The rhythm pounded, like the pulse of some great, unseen heart. It reverberated in the air, pushing against him, through him, until he could no longer tell where the sound ended and his body began.

Johnny moved with it. His limbs jerked in time to the beat, a body responding to invisible strings. There was something primal in it, something ancient that humans had never quite forgotten, a movement born in the dark, long before they had words to explain it. David wondered, not for the first time, what it was like to *feel* things the way they did. To let sound in and call it pleasure. To move with it and call it joy.

"**Do you like it?**" Johnny asked, leaning forward with that strange, soft anticipation that humans carried when they sought approval.

David said nothing for a long moment. He did not know how to answer. *Like* was a concept that shifted like sand, elusive and formless. His mind reached for something that would satisfy the boy. A signal. A nod. Yes. That was what they did when they wanted to convey understanding. He nodded. It was easier than words.

Johnny beamed, his grin wide and careless. "Okay, yeah — I knew Joy Division was a good start! Next up: cinema. We'll start with baby steps — no sense in going straight to Herzog. But I *think* you can glean a lot from this."

He fumbled with another device, and the screen flickered to life. Colour, light, and sound all converged at once, spilling out in jagged bursts. Human faces. Emotions stretched too wide, too raw, smeared across the glass. It was chaotic, like watching thoughts being pulled apart in midair. A mosaic of fragmented realities that made no sense, no rhythm, only collision.

The body sat there, staring, but David's mind floated somewhere else, further back, watching it all with a detachment that was deeper than the screen could reach. The humans, their endless parade of stories, each one bleeding into the next, their lives flickering out in brief, savage arcs. These were their creations, these reflections of themselves, born out of need, out of a desperation to explain what they could never truly understand.

*Story.* That's what Johnny called it. As if a narrative could be found in the tangled mess of their existence. But David saw nothing that resembled sense. The images on the screen moved too quickly, people lived and died in flashes of violence and tenderness, and somewhere, Johnny was explaining it all with a kind of childlike wonder. As if the chaos made sense to him.

He caught fragments. A man walking through a desert, alone, the sand whipping against his face. A woman screaming into the night, her voice lost in the wind. Blood. Always blood. As if these creatures were obsessed with their own fragility. They died a thousand deaths in their stories, and yet they could not seem to let death be the end of it. They re-imagined it. Repackaged it. Every frame was a monument to their impermanence.

Johnny was still talking. He was always talking. But David wasn't listening anymore. His mind was somewhere deeper, sinking into the pulse of what was beneath the images, beneath the sound. He could feel it now - the thin veneer that held their world together, the scaffolding of *culture* they'd built up around themselves like a fortress against the void. They had to keep telling stories, he realised, because if they stopped, they would have nothing left to hold on to. They would be swallowed whole by the silence.

"Joan Didion once wrote, '*We tell ourselves stories in order to live — we look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We live entirely by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience,*'" Johnny was saying, his voice quiet but insistent. "Stories — art — existential grasps at understanding. That's humanity."

David blinked, the body blinking with him, responding like the machine it was. Johnny was wrong, of course. What was on the screen was not who they were. It was what they wanted to be. It was the lie they told themselves over and over again, because the truth was too unbearable. The truth was the empty space between each frame, the silence before the next note, the stillness after the last word had been spoken.

They were creatures of the void, clinging to the brief spark of their existence, terrified of what waited in the dark. David had known the dark. He had been born in it. And now, sitting there in this body, feeling the slow crawl of time pressing down on him, he was beginning to understand.

It wasn't the stories that mattered. It was the fear that created them.



So... not all human culture is good. I need to show you this picture of our upcoming opponents.

Fascinating. Some of your kind have antennae on your head instead of hair? What function does it serve?

No! Uh, believe it or not... that's hair!

Does yours do that too? Can this one? What is the significance? This one asks again: what is the function?

Woah, woah, one question at a time. So: "yes, and yes with a lot of hair product." As for the function, it's simple: aesthetics.

Does this 'aesthetic' aid in finding a mate to reproduce with as is finite life's purpose? This one finds it very peculiar.

I... **guess?** I'll be honest, I get it's to have a certain vibe. Intellectually, I know that nobody is trying to look stupid and unfuckable — like, the hair, the jewellery, and the tattoos aren't cheap. This is a dedicated and curated aesthetic, and these guys don't strike me as deep enough to be doing it in the name of "artistic expression". It's to look tough, look rich, and look appealing. And I'm going to sound like an old man here, even being their same generation, but I just don't know **who** would find it to be any of that.

Interesting. So for instance, if this one wished to secure a mate this one need only attempt to look tough, rich and appealing? And this can be done in a multitude of ways? Surely the most thorough way of doing this is to actually **be** tough, rich and appealing? The outward flaunting of one's nonexistent values surely must crumble under more thorough scrutiny the likes a potential mate would subject you to.

Ding, ding, ding. We have a saying that goes, "the person speaking the loudest tends to be saying the least" — you saw that first hand last Warfare when you had to face off with Madison Dyson; she's the archetype. Madison Dyson doesn't just want to be seen as a hateful psychopath: she wants to seem cunning, clever, and classless. Madison Dyson projects a smug demeanour of "working class" American everyman grit and political cutthroat, but when you peel back the persona you're left with nothing but a rotten soul of a blubbering imbecile. And the Bing Bing Twinz are not so different, just more obvious.

Because projection and pastiche require a degree of panache to properly produce.

History lesson: in the late 2010's there was an internet movement in hip-hop music based off a platform called SoundCloud. I'm not as negative about this movement as others, but a common critique of this movement was that on a platform so democratic, it tended to be choked with

indistinguishable mediocrity. It wasn't enough to have a **sound** — you needed a **hook**. You needed to be **seen**.

So what did some of these guys do? Lean into that. Aesthetic took precedent over talent. That's how you got the Tekashi69's of the world — *no, I'm not gonna make you listen to him*.

Soon, that ethos of aesthetics over quality spilled beyond music and into the public consciousness. On platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, content and engagement was king. No press was bad press. Have an eye-catching look and make enough noise, and you *will* be talked about. It's no wonder this current would eventually enter into an industry as gaudy and showy as professional wrestling: it's pure freak power cabaret, regardless of the attempted respectability of some. No person of sober mind attends a public demonstration of violence: this is as carnal-in-carnival as the gladiator pits of Rome or the rodeo.

So... send in the clowns.

Cunning, clever and classless was enough to allow Madison to get the victory over this one. A blubbing imbecile, perhaps, but this one thinks also it's a great possibility these personality traits make for fantastic distractions. Is this what these people are? Two men whose very ludicrous and one-note presentation is naught but a ruse? A multicoloured, monosyllabic, repetitive white-noise that lulls you into a trap? This one would exercise caution after last week. You gave me all the information on her, you showed me all her videos.

It was supposed to be easy prey. You told me it would be easy prey. Now you're telling me the same thing all over again. This one wants to feed - now this one has to compete in a meaningless contest and for what end? Two subhuman entities just wasting away their finite existence and we are supposed to humour them because what, the rules of this ridiculous sport say so? There is so much more to experience, so much more to do in this world and you have this one stuck here - preparing to eviscerate a pair of 'clowns'. You promised this one excitement, you promised this one...fun. You gave this one a faux-fascist and now this?

Are you a liar, Johnny?

**No.**

Firstly, I don't pick who fight — not *yet*. Second, you're on the right track, which is good. I think this is a common fallacy across our entire industry.

Over in the East Bay, we have wild coyotes. A coyote is easy prey — a grown adult can take a coyote with little trouble. That *doesn't* mean you should turn your back on a coyote; it's still a wild animal. It's still dangerous — all wild animals are, especially if they're hungry and cunning.

Cunning and intelligence may overlap, but they're not *quite* the same thing. I know brilliant people who aren't clever in the slightest, and I know cutthroats who are barely literate.

You saw it last Warfare. You're going to see it again with an added twist: now there's two of them. That doubles the danger — one coyote isn't the same as a pack of them.

You speak very well. They follow you for this reason - this one is almost convinced.

I'm *not*... trying to give you a line. I don't want to set you up for failure, don't want to use you as a shield or a tool.

Nobody follows me — we're a team. I know this isn't ideal for you. But while you're here, you are as much my responsibility as anyone I step in that ring beside: Grace, Teddy, Jules, whomever.

I don't have a reason to lie to you, David. And I wouldn't even if I did.

Belief is an interesting concept. Do you believe in this one - in...me?

You came through a chalk circle in the ground, David...

But I don't think belief is that important in certain context. The context matters. For instance, I don't believe in Da Bing Bong Twinzz, but that doesn't mean we don't take them seriously.

To take unserious things seriously is a talent. This one will make a mental note. It is interesting to learn these things about your culture. These two are the most bizarre things about it so far, to even begin to understand any form of nuance one must have an incredible amount of layered base knowledge about a multitude of adjacent topics and artforms. This one prefers black and white to a multichromatic spectrum. Simple things are easy. Binary thoughts, binary decisions - logic and simple reasoning - base urges...this one sees these twins and wants to simply rip and tear. There is weakness, there is terror just bubbling under the surface. This one doesn't need to know their story, the beginning or the middle. This one already knows how it ends.

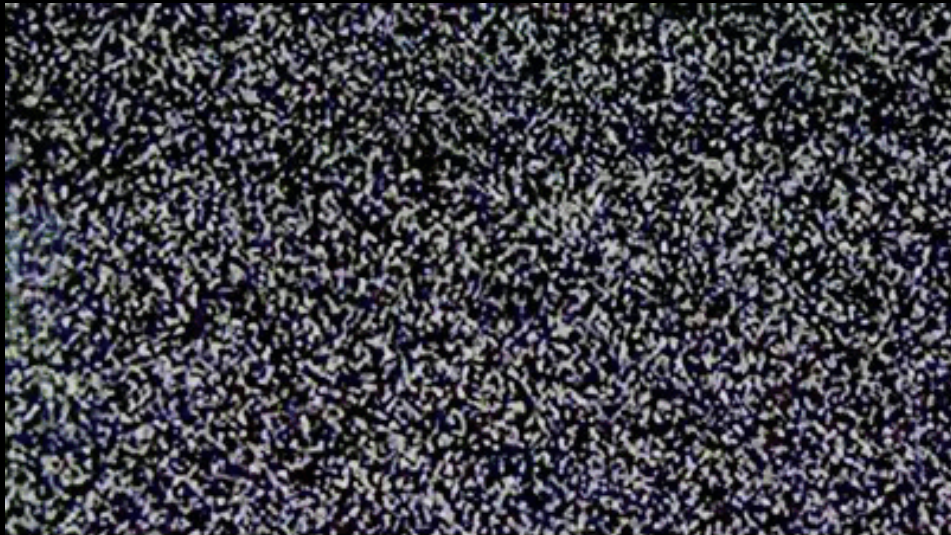
We have each other's backs unconditionally. We keep our eyes open, don't be distracted by the spectacle, keep our heads cool, calm, and focused. We ignore any and all noise they produce, put emotions aside, and take out the trash. They're multi-time Madness Tag Team Champions, even if that brand is defunct and their wins came through cunning: we don't take our eyes off of them or take them for granted. We minimize tags if it could lower the saws in our disadvantage and maximize them if the opposite. Pure, cold, efficiency.

If I'm still holding the Xtreme Championship or not is irrelevant — the offense is the best defense. Ignore the dangled prize of a tag title shot: let it be a perk and victory be its own reward. Near-sightedness is a blessing in this industry under the right context: focus on the now rather than the later. Right now? We have Da Bing Bong Twinzz.

We snuff them out, leave them a gore pile for Silent Hill, and bleach the walls clean.

Or as a wise man once said...

Body bags on deck.



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We sat in the dim glow of the television, the only illumination in the hotel room being the color radiating from the scroll of the credits. The light flashed and flicked off his features — pale, washed, and expressionless. Yet, this was still impossible to draw from, as it had been David's default demeanor since that moment we found ~~it him~~ them huddled and naked in the center of a sundered scrying square, ripped violently and accidentally into our realm by the mere folly of humanity.

I was trying my best, attempting to speak a language neither of us fully understood. And *that* I understood. They were articulate, logical, comprehensive, and intelligent — but as frames flickered and notes played, I saw no expression of realization or epiphany, merely the cold, mechanical replies of submission.

*“Yes, this is good — you played it for me and appreciate it, therefore I accept it.”*

*“Yes, this is good — you showed it to me and accept it, therefore I appreciate it.”*

The fruitlessness of offering up millennia worth of humanity’s artistic achievements, great or small, to something with aeons worth of perspective. Sisyphus shoulders the boulder towards the summit in hopes it sticks.

*C-beams glittering in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gates — tears in the rain.  
What’s a mob to a king — what’s a king to a god?  
Does anyone know where the love of god goes when the waves turn the  
minutes to hours?*

“Sorry,” I muttered, “*Maybe that last movie was a bit heady.*”

They stared at the television as the credits concluded, watching as the screen shifted to its screensaver. Their brow furrowed and lips curled down.

*“This one does not understand.”*

“Well,” I said, prefaced by a long sigh, “*There’s a lot to take in. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have dropped this so soon — I just thought, y’know, that the themes might be ‘universal’ and resonate. So, anyway, back about thirty years ago in the 90’s, there was —*”

*“That is not what confuses this one,”* they said abruptly. It was the first time they’d asserted themselves such a way; I ceded the floor.

David bent forward, allowing themselves to collapse from the couch to their knees on the floor. They moved slowly towards the television, hands raising slowly and fingers splayed out as though attempting to peer in through the screen. Their lips quivered — their eye twitched. It wasn’t mania or even excitement but a strange curiosity, as though attempting to claw through the monitor and back into the pictures on screen.

“When the man — Owen — when the show ended,” they continued quietly, in an almost hypnotic drawl, “The television did not go to black as this one does. There was something else: movement, vibration, patterns.”

They paused and looked over at me, their hands now against the screen and head near rested upon it. Their eyes seemed to shine with an emotion I hadn’t seen before.

“What was it?”

I paused. I thought about the movie, what symbol or image they could have so clung to. And after a moment, it hit me like a bolt of electricity.

“You mean the *TV static*?”

“Is that what it is called?”

“Yes,” I responded after a pause, hoping I was correct in my deduction, “The black and white fuzz?”

They nodded.

“Why does this one not do that?”

“Well,” I continued, “We’re on an AV channel. It doesn’t require signals, so it doesn’t have any white noise coming in. Most TVs don’t even do that anymore — kind of an old hardware thing.”

I saw their head cant. They wanted me to go on.

“TVs used to pick up broadcasts from radio waves. You’d have these antennas — like you mentioned earlier — that would pick up the signal and make a picture and sound. If you didn’t have those or were on a channel not broadcasting, you’d get that static — just the white noise of everything else in the air that wasn’t coherent enough to make something. Not to say it was nothing: it was basically everything at once, and your TV couldn’t figure out what to do with it. So you’d get that. Most TVs are digital now and don’t run on that technology anymore, so it’s not really co—”

“Can this one?”

They looked back at me with eyes wide, their fingers seeming to contract and relax involuntarily against the smooth surface of the screen. It was certainly an old television, and this hotel was far from luxury or modern.

"I'll look, just sit on the couch. Don't kill your eyes."

As they obliged, I moved towards the television set and looked to the back. It was older: the cable was hard-wired and streaming device we'd been using connected through red and white input cables. I paused for a moment, considering the request — then I unscrewed the cable wire from the back of the set. Returning to the couch, I picked up the remote and flipped to the proper input.

White and black flurries filled the screen as the speakers hissed. And in the darkness of the room, I saw the TV glow.

We sat in silence, the static raining down upon us. While it wasn't cold or cloudy, I could hear the wind pick up just past the panes as a second and deeper darkness seemed to engulf the room as the moonlight became obscured. The lights of the screen flashed upon our faces.

David did not react, at least not when I looked over at them. Their face was featureless of emotion, eyes transfixed upon the swirling static upon the screen. I looked back: chaos. Before my eyes danced colorless patterns and shapes of neither rhyme nor reason as the speakers continued that gurgled hiss of meaningless. But I sat in that space and paid no mind or mention on behalf of David, instead watching patiently for an epiphany to leap forward, none to find like the dissonant melodies of an infinitesimal universe.

"This one does not quite understand, Johnny," came David's voice, their eyes still firmly forward, "But this one can conceptualise your intentions earlier. About cinema, songs, and stories. About looking for resonance and commonality in a manifest experience or expression."

The world felt smaller, like there was naught but the two of us — and the television's glow.

"When you first birthed this one into this realm," they continued in that same quiet monotone, eyes never leaving the television, "The first emotion this one felt was 'fear'. Confusion, anger, distance — these are all aspects of the same emotion, are they not? This one may be unable to synthesise and articulate this concept. But, yes. 'Fear'. That is your word for it, is it not?"

I said nothing. I merely observed. It was the most they'd said unprompted.

"But that is not what this one sees when this one looks into this," they said, "What do you see?"

My eyes turned towards the screen, the continued hum and dance of white noise from everything and nothing in the air all at once desperately trying to make itself seen.

And that's when I saw it:

*The fog of Silent Hill rolling forth.*

*Ruby Goldhirsch was strapped to a chair. Her hair was dirty and unkempt, her clothes torn and disheveled, and her eyes were red from her sobs as her mascara rolled down her cheeks.*

*Grace Leary leveled a gun under the pale light of the moon, her eyes and smile wide and wild as her finger curled around the trigger and she stared forward with crazed determination.*

*Cookie lay slumped in an alleyway, a freshly discarded needle just beyond his naked elbow exposed by a pushed up arm of his sweater, as his eyes remained shut and jaw hung limp and empty.*

*I lay in an alleyway, clutching my ribs. Blood seeps between my fingers as I attempt to apply pressure to the wound, alone and abandoned as a call for help chokes in my throat.*

Words failed. I sat in the silence of the static, forcing them up like a lodged bone. But once free, and I felt my jaw move, it was no revelation that escaped my chest.

**"I see... a void."**

And as the world contracted and burst out from me, I looked over to David. He hadn't acknowledged my reply, still watching the television as his lips curled up into a small smile. A single tear had slid down his cheek.

**"This one sees The Void, too."**