

The World of Desire

On the tram home from work, the woman across from me died. When she stood up and looked at me, I was confused, pulling off my headphones expecting some question of what stop was next. Instead, she gave me a look full of unspeakable knowledge, and burst into flame.

I did not share the details of this look with the police in my statement. I'm not sure why. Maybe I was more concerned with the burns on my palms, from when I tried to pull off her burning jacket, not realising it was her skin itself that was aflame. Pain clouds the mind, yet not nearly so much as confusion. I could not escape the look in her eyes. Acceptance. Understanding. And yet no fear. It must of been suicide. Why was it then, that once the flames had finished their work and died with a sputter, a newborn child was found amidst the bones and ash? And why did it look at me with those same eyes?

What harsh lives must we lead to deserve questions such as these?

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It was the summer we collectively lost our minds. Mine was one of the first to go – brought low by a messy breakup that was at least half my fault, then worsened by her demonstrating the emotional refractory period of a teenage boy. Her new man seemed like a nice guy. Bastard.

We lived together – always a poor move in the fleeting relationships of youth – so I moved onto a friend's couch while I searched for a new place. The love in the world had dried up, and I sulked. Licked my wounds. Sat in the park reading. Haunted cafe terraces, consuming with wistful eyes each passing beauty, filling my wounded spirit with the potential they promised. *Things will get better*. Admittedly a pitiful and self-indulgent moment, and yet I bare my chin at you, push you to reflect on your own young antics. Either you relate, or you were a boor.

It was lounging out front of one of these cafes that the trouble in the world first announced itself. I was deeply infatuated with the barista there, and had tactically positioned myself in front of the window the coffee machine faced. There I sat, exactly as I had three days that week already, drinking my latte and flipping through *Antigone* in the most aloof and mysterious way possible. About me, Melburnians of all ages caught up with friends, shared an awkward morning-after coffee with last night's Hinge date, broke bad news, announced the opening up of their relationship: all was calm and well in the leafy inner-north.

A child's cry of pain and loss cut through the ambient cafe conversation. The raw emotion in it made me flinch, set my stomach aflutter with anxiety. A few passer-bys congregated at the mouth of an alley across the street. Around me, people craned their heads, whispered worried speculation to their friends. One man at a nearby table caved to his curiosity, standing up and crossing the road. He chatted with a few people in the crowd, then returned to the cafe.

‘A kid’s dog got run over, the poor bugger,’ the man announced, shaking his head and settling back into his chair.

The tables around me echoed sympathetic *ahh!*-s and began retellings of the tragic deaths of their own childhood companions, from goldfish all the way up to ponies. I was glad to have some sense of closure, however tragic, though the finality of it was weakened by the sobs and moans that the dry summer winds carried across the road.

I have never done well with crying children. Young cousins getting in trouble, lost children in the supermarket, toddlers tumbling off their tiny push bikes: all set my skin crawling. And now here, with this unseen boy calling out from the depths of grief, I could not help but join him. There was such honesty in that cry. I was struck by the urge to go over there, to pull him into my arms and say, *Oh! You poor thing! Your heart is broken now, but I promise: you will survive! Live to love again!* But it was not my place to say this, so I sipped my coffee and pretended to read my book.

The crying stopped abruptly, giving way to a moment of nauseating stillness, then broken by a yell of joyful surprise, and then, silence: nothing but the wind rustling through the plane trees. All heads turned toward the alley, moved by the same collective sense that coordinates Meerkats and other anxious prey. *Something is wrong.* The people at the mouth of the alley stood still, silent as mourners. *Something is wrong.* We sat there, transfixed, waiting for the hypnotist to snap his fingers and return us to reality. No snap came. It never would.

I placed my bookmark in *Antigone*, collected my belongings, and crossed the road. I’d sworn off gawking long ago. It’s distasteful, parasitic, to feed on the drama of another to satiate something as indulgent as curiosity: and yet I writhed with unease, pricked by an electric sense. *Something is wrong.* This was not curiosity: I needed to know, to understand how joy could so quickly replace such honest pain. I was not the only one. Rathdowne Street’s cafes emptied as we, with the fumbling silence of sleepwalkers living out their dream, crossed the street. I nudged my way through the growing crowd, and began the moment I now mark as the beginning of the rest of my life.

In the shadow of the car that killed it lay a labrador. Blood smeared its coat that bulged in places where the tire had rearranged ribs and spine. A young boy sprawled across the dog’s chest, arms wrapped around it, looking up at us with wild eyes. Tongue lolling about its broken jaw, the confused pup licked at its master’s head. The boy’s father stepped forward and the child yelled and screamed when the man pried his arms from around the dog, which whimpered and whined and lurched its body as it struggled to stand and follow its friend; its snapped tail thwacked limply against the cobbles with each hopeful wag. We, the silent audience, watched on, wanting with all our might to refuse the scene before us, and yet finding ourselves unable to look away from the wet eyed pup in the pool of its own blood that denied the world itself, and us along with it.

The dog was alive. Bloody and broken, and yet as I watched it squirm and whine, I swallowed the same truth as the boy and his father. Alive. Panting, slobbering, confused, but undeniably alive. There were no open wounds: its silky fur was intact, despite the obvious broken bones beneath the skin and the pool of blood it flopped around in. I found myself wishing the person next to me would

step forward and strangle the dog to death. To set things right. But then I met the boy's eyes as they lolled through the crowd of onlookers, searching for someone, anyone, to save him and his beloved companion. I crumbled beneath those eyes, their lack of understanding, their innocence. We adults are not made for such purity of feeling. I became sick with shame. I wanted nothing more than to turn and hide.

Someone announced they were going to call the emergency vet, though their voice wavered and betrayed the thought we all shared: *what the hell could they do?* This heroic attempt at normal conduct was, however, enough to break the spell of the moment, and with someone finally taking responsibility, the crowd thinned. I fled with them, pushed through the few remaining onlookers, returned to my seat, pulled out my book and tried to forget what I had just witnessed – but my coffee tasted sour and I could not sit still and the number of police and black toyotas with tinted windows kept growing. In the glass of the shop window I caught my own reflection and was sickened by the vague expression on his face, how vacuous and distracted he seemed.

The terrace emptied around me. Friends murmured excuses to each other as if their pretences still mattered. I joined them, eager to get away from myself. We all returned to the once comfortable familiarity of our homes, our partner's arms, lay on the floor with our dogs, poured a large glass of wine, crawled foetal beneath the covers: each in our own way grappling with the sense that something important had been irrevocably lost.