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a plague of tics

When the teacher asked if she might visit with my mother, I touched my nose eight times to the surface of my desk.

"May I take that as a "yes"?" she asked.

According to her calculations, I had left my chair twenty-eight times that day. "You're up and down like a flea. I turn my back for two minutes and there you are with your tongue pressed against that light switch. Maybe they do that where you come from, but here in my classroom we don't leave our seats and lick things whenever we please. That is Miss Chestnut's light switch, and she likes to keep it dry. Would you like me to come over to your house and put my tongue on your light switches? Well, would you?"

I tried to picture her in action, but my nose was calling.

"Take me off, it whispered. Tap my heel against your forehead three times. Do it now, quick, no one will notice."

"Well?" Miss Chestnut raised her faint, penciled eyebrows. "I'm asking you a question. Would you or wouldn't you not want me licking the light switches in your house?"
I slipped off my shoe, pretending to examine the imprint on the heel.

"You're going to hit yourself over the head with that shoe, aren't you?"

It wasn't "hitting," it was tapping, but still, how had she known what I was about to do?

"Red marks all over your forehead," she said, answering my silent question.

"You should take a look in the mirror sometime. Shoes are dirty things. We wear them on our feet to protect ourselves against the soil. It's not healthy to hit ourselves over the head with shoes, is it?"

I guessed that it was not.

"Guess? This is not a game to be guessed at. I don't 'guess' that it's dangerous to run into traffic with a paper sack over my head. There's no guesswork involved. These things are facts, not riddles." She sat at her desk, continuing her lecture as she penned a brief letter. "I'd like to have a word with your mother. You do have one, don't you? I'm assuming you weren't raised by animals. Is she blind; your mother? Can she see the way you behave, or do you reserve your antics exclusively for Miss Chestnut?" She handed me the folded slip of paper. "You may go now, and on your way out the door I'm asking you please not to bathe my lights switch with your germ-ridden tongue. It's had a long stay, we both have."

It was a short distance from the school to our rented house, no more than sixty-two hundred and thirty-seven steps, and on a good day I could make the trip in an hour, pausing every few feet to tongue a mailbox or touch whichever single leaf or blade of grass demanded my attention. If I were to lose count of my steps, I'd have to return to the school and begin again. "Back so soon," the janitor would ask. "You just can't get enough of this place, can you?"

He had it all wrong. I wanted to be at home more than anything, it was getting there that was the problem. I might touch the telephone pole at step three hundred and fourteen and then, fifteen paces later, worry that I hadn't touched it in exactly the right spot. It needed to be touched again. I'd let my mind wonder for one brief moment and then doubt had set in, causing me to question not just the telephone pole but also the lawns ornament back at step two hundred and nineteen. I'd have to go back and lick that concrete mushroom one more time, hoping its guardian wouldn't once again rush from her house shouting, "Get your face out of my toilet!" It might be raining or maybe I had to go to the bathroom, but running home was not an option. This was a long and complicated process that demanded an oppressive attention to detail. It wasn't that I enjoyed pressing my nose against the scalding hood of a parked car — pleasure had nothing to do with it. A person had to do these things because nothing was worse than the anguish of not doing them. By-pass that mailbox and my brain would wander for one moment, let me forget it. I might be sitting at the dinner table, daring myself not to think about it, and the thought would revisit my mind. Don't think about it. But it would already be too late and I knew then exactly what I had to do. Exeunt myself to go to the bathroom, I'd walk out the front door and return to that mailbox, not just touching but jabbing, practically pounding on the thing because I thought I hated it so much. What I really hated, of course, was my mind. There must have been an off switch somewhere, but I was damned if I could find it.

I didn't remember things being this way back north. Our family had been transferred from Hitchcock, New York, to Raleigh, North Carolina. That was the word used by the people at IBM, transferred. A new home was under construction, but until it was finished we were confined to a rental property built to resemble a plantation house. The building
sat in a treeless, balding yard, its white columns promising a
majesty the interior failed to deliver. The front door opened
onto a dark, narrow hallway lined with bedrooms not much
larger than the mattresses that furnished them. Our kitchen
was located on the second floor, alongside the living room, its
picture window offering a view of the cinder-block wall built
to hold back the tide of mud generated by the neighboring
dirt mound.

"Our own little corner of hell," my mother said, fanning
herself with one of the shingles littering the front yard.

Depressing as it was, arriving at the front stoop of the
house meant that I had completed the first leg of that bitter-
tasting journey to my bedroom. Once home I would touch
the front door seven times with each elbow, a task made
more difficult if there was someone else around. "Why don't
you try the knob," my sister Lisa would say. "That's what the
rest of us do, and it seems to work for us." Inside the house
there were switches and doorstops to be acknowledged. My
bedroom was right there off the hallway, but first I had busi-
tess to tend to. After kissing the fourth, eighth, and eleventh
carpeted stair, I wiped the cat hair off my lips and proceeded
to the kitchen, where I was commanded to stroke the ban-
ners of the stove, press my nose against the refrigerator
doors, and arrange the percolator, toaster, and blender into a
straight row. After making my rounds of the living room, it
was time to kneel beside the banister and blindly jab a butter
knife in the direction of my favorite electrical socket. There
were bulbs to lick and bathroom fixtures to test before finally
I was free to enter my bedroom, where I would carefully
align the objects on my dresser, lick the corners of my metal
desk, and lie upon my bed, rocking back and forth and think-
ing of what an odd woman she was, my third-grade teacher,
Miss Chestnut. Why come here and lick my switches when
she never used the one she had? Maybe she was drunk.

naked
On the afternoon that Miss Chestnut arrived for her visit, I was in my bedroom, rocking. Unlike the obsessive counting and touching, rocking was not a mandatory duty but a voluntary and highly pleasurable exercise. It was my hobby, and there was nothing else I would rather do. The point was not to rock oneself to sleep. This was not a step toward some greater goal. It was the goal itself. The perpetual movement freed my mind, allowing me to null things over and construct elaborately detailed fantasies. To sit in a chair, and I was content to rock until three or four o'clock in the morning, listening to the hit parade and discovering that each and every song was about me. I might have to listen two or three hundred times to the same song, but sooner or later its private message would reveal itself. Because it was pleasant and relaxing, my rocking was bound to be tripped up, not often by my brain, which refused to allow me more than ten consecutive minutes of happiness. At the opening strains of my current favorite song, a voice would whisper, "Shouldn't you be upstairs making sure there are really one hundred and fourteen peppercorns left in that small ceramic jar?" And, hey, while you're up there, you might want to check the iron and make sure it's not setting fire to the baby's bedroom. The list of demands would grow by the moment. What about that television antenna? Is it still set into that perfect V, or has one of your sisters destroyed its integrity. You know, I was just wondering how tightly the lid is screwed onto that mayonnaise jar. Let's have a look, shall we?

I would be just on the edge of truly enjoying myself, this close to breaking the song's complex code, when my thoughts would get in the way. The task was to ride my time until the record was no longer my favorite, to wait until it had slipped from its number-one position on the charts and fool my mind into believing it no longer existed.

I was coming to terms with "The Shadow of Your Smile" when Miss Chestnut arrived. She rang the bell, and I cracked open my bedroom door, watching as my mother invited her in.

"You'll have to forgive me for these boxes." My mother flicked her cigarette out the door and into the littered yard. "They're filled with crap, every last one of them, but God forbid we throw anything away. Oh no, we can't do that! My husband's saved it all, every last Green Stamp and coupon, every outgrown bathing suit and scrap of lint, all right here along with the rocks and knotted sticks he sweats look just like his old department head or associate district manager or some goddamned thing." She mopped at her forehead with a wadded paper towel. "Anyway, to hell with it. You look like I need a drink, stretch all right?"

Miss Chestnut's eyes brightened. "I really shouldn't but, oh, why not?" She followed my mother up the stairs. "Just a drop with ice, no water."

I tried rocking in bed, but the sound of laughter drew me to the top of the landing, where from my vantage point behind an oversized wardrobe box, I watched the two women discuss my behavior.

"Oh, you mean the touching," my mother said. She studied the ashtray that sat before her on the table, narrowing her eyes much like a cat catching sight of a squirrel. Her look of focused concentration suggested that nothing else mattered. Time had stopped, and she was deaf to the sounds of the rattling fan and my sisters' squabbling out in the driveway. She opened her mouth just slightly, running her tongue over her upper lip, and then she inclined forward, her index finger prodding the ashtray as though it were a sleeping thing she was trying to wake. I had never seen myself in action, but a sharp, stinging sense of recognition told me that my mother's impersonation had been accurate.

"Priceless!" Miss Chestnut laughed, clapping her hands in a plague of tics.
delight. "Oh, that's very good, you've captured him perfectly. Bravo, I give you an A-plus."

"God only knows where he gets it from," my mother said.

"He's probably down in his room right this minute, counting his eyelashes or grinning at the pulls on his dresser. One, two o'clock in the morning and he'll still be at it, rattling around the house to poke the laundry hamper or press his face against the refrigerator door. The kid's wound too tight, but he'll come out of it. So, what do you say, another scotch, Katherine?"

Now she was Katherine. Another few drinks and she'd probably be joining us for our summer vacation. How easy it was for adults to bond over a second round of cocktails. I returned to my bed, cranking up the radio so as not to be distracted by the sound of their cackling. Because Miss Chestnut was here in my home, I knew it was only a matter of time before the voices would order me out of the kitchen and make a spectacle of myself. Maybe I'd have to soak on the broom handle or stand on the table to touch the overhead light fixture, but whatever was demanded of me, I had no choice but to do it. The song that played on the radio posed no challenge whatsoever, the lyric as clear as if I'd written it myself. "Well, I think I'm going out of my head," the man sang, "yes, I think I'm going out of my head."

Following Miss Chestnut's visit, my father attempted to cure me with a series of illnesses. "You need your nose to that windshield one more time and I'll guarantee you'll wish you hadn't," he said driving home from the grocery store with a handful of rejected, out-of-state coupons. It was virtually impossible for me to ride in the passenger seat of a car and not press my nose against the windshield, and now that the activity had been forbidden, I wanted it more than anything. I tried closing my eyes, hoping that might eliminate my desire, but found myself thinking that perhaps he was the one who should close his eyes. So what if I wanted to touch my nose to the windshield? Who was it hurting? Why was it that he could repeatedly worry his change and bite his lower lip without the threat of punishment? My mother smoked and Miss Chestnut massaged her want twenty, thirty times a day — and here I couldn't press my nose against the windshield of a car? I opened my eyes, defiant, but when he caught me moving toward my target, my father slammed on the brakes.

"You like that, did you?" He handed me a golf towel to wipe the blood from my nose. "Did you like the feel of that?"

Lake was too feeble for what I felt. I loved it. If masked with the right amount of force, a blow to the nose can be positively narcotic. Touching objects satisfied a mental itch, but the task involved a great deal of movement: run unsteadily, cross the room, remove a sleeve. I soon found those same urges could be fulfilled within the confines of my own body. Punching myself in the nose was a good place to start, but the practice was dropped when I began rolling my eyes deep in their sockets, an exercise that produced quick jolts of dull, intoxicating pain.

"I know exactly what you're talking about," my mother said to Mrs. Shatz, my visiting fourth-grade teacher. "The eyes rolling every which way, it's like talking to a slot machine. Hopefully, one day he'll pay off, but until then, what do you say we have ourselves another glass of wine?"

"Hey, sport," my father said, "if you're trying to get a good look at the contents of your skull, I can tell you right now that you're wasting your time. There's nothing there to look at, and these report cards prove it."

He was right. I had my nose pressed to the door, the carpet, and the windshield but not, apparently, to the grindstone.
School held no interest whatsoever. I spent my days waiting to return to the dark bedroom of our new house, where I could roll my eyes, listen to the radio, and rock in peace.

I took to violently shaking my head, startled by the feel of my brain slamming against the confines of my skull. It felt so good and took so little time, just a few quick jerks and I was satisfied for up to forty-five seconds at a time.

"Have a seat and let me get you something cool to drink." My mother would leave my father and then my sixth-grade teachers standing in the breakfast nook while she stepped into the kitchen to crack open a tray of ice. "I'm guessing you're here about the head shaking, am I right?" she'd shout.

"That's my boy, all right, no lies on him." She suggested my teachers interpret my jerking head as a nod of agreement. "That's what I do, and now I've got him washing the dishes for the next five years. I ask, he yanks his head, and it's settled. Do me a favor, though, and just don't hold him after five o'clock. I need him at home to straighten up and make the beds before his father gets home."

This was part of my mother's act. She played the ring-leader, blowing the whistle and charming the crowd with her jokes and exaggerated stories. When company came, she often pretended to forget the names of her own children. "Hey, George, or Agnes, whatever your name is, how about running into the bedroom and finding my cigarette lighter?" She noticed my tics and habits but was never shocked or seriously bothered by any of them. Her observations would be collected and delivered as part of a routine that bore little resemblance to our lives.

"It's a real stretch, but I'm betting you're here about the tiny voices," she said, offering a glass of sherry to my visiting seventh-grade teacher. "I'm thinking of either taking him to an exorcist or buying him a doll so he can bring home some money as a ventriloquist."

It had come out of nowhere, my desperate urge to summon high-pitched noises from the back of my throat. These were not words, but sounds that satisfied an urge I'd never before realized. The sounds were delivered not in my voice but in that of a thimble-sized, temperamental doll clinging to the base of my uvula. "Eeeeee-- uuuuuuuuuuu-- mmm-- ah-- ah-- ah-- mmmmmeee--" I was a 'host' to these weirdos but lacked the ability to control them. When I cried out in class, the teachers would turn from their blackboards with increasingly troubled expressions, "Is someone rubbing a balloon? Who's making that noise?"

I tried making up excuses, but everything sounded implausible. "There's a bee living in my throat." Or "If I don't exercise my vocal cords every three minutes, there's a good chance I'll never swallow again." The noise making didn't replace any of my earlier habits, it was just another addition to what had become a freakish collection of tics. Worse than the constant yelps and twitchings was the fear that tomorrow might bring something even worse, that I would wake up with the urge to jerk other people's heads. I might go for days without rolling my eyes, but it would all come back the moment my father said, "See, I knew you could quit if you just put your mind to it. Now, if you can just keep your head still and stop making those noises, you'll be set."

Set for what? I wondered. Often while rocking, I would imagine my career as a movie star. There I was attending the premiere beneath a floodlit sky, a satin scarf tied just so around my throat. I understood that most actors probably didn't interrupt a love scene to press their noses against the camera or walk a quick "Eeeeee-- ah--ah--ah--" during a dramatic monologue, but in my case the world would be will-
ing to make an exception. "This is a moving and touching
film," the papers would report. "An electrifying, eye-popping
performance that has audiences squealing and the critics
nodding. "Oscar, Oscar, Oscar."

I'd like to think that some of my nervous habits faded
during high school, but my class pictures tell a different story.
"Draw in the missing eyeballs and this one might not be so
bad," my mother would say. In group shots I was easily iden-
tified as the blur in the back row. For a time I thought that if
I accompanied my habits with an outlandish wardrobe, I
might be viewed as eccentric rather than just plain retarded.
I was wrong. Only a confirmed idiot would wander the halls
of my high school dressed in a floor-length caftan; as for the
countless medals that hung from around my neck, I
might as well have worn a cowbell. They clanged and
jangled with every jerk of my head, calling attention when
without them I might have passed unnoticed. My oversized
glasses did nothing but provide a clearer view of my rolling,
twitching eyes, and the clunky platform shoes left lumps
when used to discreetly tap my forehead. I was a mess.