

“There are no people in what I’ve written. Only ghosts.”

Susan Sontag

THE MARBLE CORRIDOR

a book of fragments

The 52nd Degree

I’ll begin by saying this: everything written on these pages is basically true, yet at the same time treading the line between two distinct worlds which I’ve only glimpsed. Up to this point, through the chaos that is time, memory, and fantasy, I’ve been able— without fear or need of censure— to describe what I’ve seen, and hopefully what I have gained from these experiences. To be clear, this is not an autobiography or memoir, but rather an attempt to outline the fringes of consciousness. Like any story there are characters, and perhaps two of the most important are Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka. The two writers whose shadows still linger on the walls of literature, continually haunting me with every pen stroke. I might even go so far to say that they are the

bricks and cement for the distorted tower I've created in my mind...

Five of Borges's stories I go back to frequently, but one—barely two pages—I've read countless times, maybe even emulating it on some level ever since. The story is *Covered Mirrors* from his short story collection *The Maker*; and without saying much else it involves the coming together of masculine and feminine forces in a rather strange, awkward way. The feeling of this story lead me elsewhere over the years toward someone in-between Kafka and Borges: Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, who, incidentally Borges admired. The same could be said of the Argentinian's love of Kafka when he penned that superb essay *Kafka and his Precursors*.

Maybe, just maybe, each was a reflection of the other...Three points in a Triangle...Symbolizing not only literary greatness, but a trinity of mystery.

As I walked through the decrepit backstreets in the Western Quarter, a heavy drift of old memories slid across the edge of my mind. Impressions and images from a dense period of my life... What happened then? Can I even remember the time and place? A melody of

unseen notes and subtle music behind the curtains or in a wisp of smoke. Something was there, waiting.

I passed by a storefront of paraffin wax masks of women whose features seemed to resemble the faces of women I knew, or perhaps even *would know in the future*. Each had a distinct colour to them, and as I looked past the masks I could see what appeared to be the owner, sitting in a large, plush armchair, smoking a pipe.

He smiled widely and I kept on walking.

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A rumour persisted in the city about a ghost train that ran through the river valley. Many people swore to its existence and attested to hearing the clanging bells as it weaved its way across the High Gate Bridge. The bridge entrance, which opens onto a foot path nearly a kilometre long, looked reminiscent of the Rashomon with the same peeling red lacquer. Many times I crossed the bridge at night with its dim luminescence above me and a sense of dread below me as I looked into the murky waters. An old saying about the nature of the river, the *Velox*: *Never pass by the river at twilight. You, weary traveller, are liable to fall in due to the tricks of the*

water spirit that inhabits its waters.” I came to realize in the midst of wide-open space that there is no prescription strong enough to dull the sensation of impending death. Actually, on the contrary, that's not true: the embracing of mystery tends to be the soothing balm the further I dive into myself...Maybe this occurred for the simple reason we endlessly drift everyday toward the ultimate mystery on a distant shore...Of course, this is all hearsay.

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They silently bloom as all other flowers do, but their fragrance induces a deep sleep producing terrible nightmares. A. imbued these flowers with a rich texture of shadow, leading me to believe that behind all beauty lies a smattering of darkness. She came here in the way they all did, on a train from the Outskirts through the only entrance and exit, the Marble Corridor. Her essence—or rather the blueprint of her life source—stood between the claws of the Crab and the vestal Virgin. Her brightness, like the Sun, was only a disguise. I began asking myself if she might have been a regular visitor to the man with the masks—sitting as

a model for the multiple personalities that he hung in his window.

We walked across the High Gate Bridge once, at the turn of the New Year, in the very dead of an unseasonably warm winter night. She said: *When I was a girl, I could see the edge of darkness coming over the horizon, slowly but surely in my direction waiting to consume me. That seemed so long ago, eons in my mind, but I didn't know what it was that spurred me to embrace it gently and accept the power it radiated.* Me in response: *And what was it? Something tangible?* She said: *About as tangible as a shadow—visible but ever present beside you. I felt it in the midst of that beautiful place, full of exotic flowers and butterflies.* Me: What place was that? She looked at me with serious eyes and said: *Paradise, of course.*

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The summer—95?—is when the universe conspired to shake my spirit. If it was the summer of 1995, I would have been 16 years old and visiting my sister in the Eastern Flatlands. During a trip to a second hand bookstore, I perused the shelves holding out little hope

of finding anything worth reading as my fingers caressed the spines of old romance novels, cookbooks, and thrillers. To my amazement Orwell's *1984* lay wedged between a series of forgettable titles, and a little further on is where I first laid eyes on Kafka's *The Trial*. A strange twist of fate.

In retrospect—through the hallucinatory lens called time—one has no idea how a work of art will transform thoughts, actions or spirit, but it would seem the most sincere works always will. Both books proved to be the antidote to a sickness I didn't know I had, a disease called boredom. My reading habits permanently changed after absorbing those defining works. What surprised me years later is how similar a feeling they conveyed despite their obvious differences...The world as prison and labyrinth; the world as faceless and tortuous; the world as mysterious and ultimately unknowable.

The shadows of those two novels still hangs over my heart like heavy talismans, each holding a power like no other. And yes, that shadow looms large, for there are moments in the early morning hours still under the haze of sleep when I wonder if a pair of men in black will come to my door to take me away. During those times I

shut my eyes, hoping the gentleness of sleep will find me again.

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When I walk past shuttered windows, down darkened halls, empty passages, or lonely roads, I get closer to that elusive goal that I know nothing about other than it's somewhere that I must reach. Eyes sore and red due to lack of sleep under a roof of continuous sickness. Morning beckons. Every day is a chance to begin again and reset the cosmic clock and watch the sun spill surreptitiously over the horizon. Dreams are lost and only a few razor-sharp shards remain on the precipice; a precipice that looks down into a warm, inviting abyss that inevitably snakes back into the heart of the city where I was born.

I think I've left, but really, I've gone nowhere.

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The sheer lack of light became the stimulant that eventually became the narcotic, the addiction by which I measured myself. Darkness, *true darkness*, became every bit as interesting and seductive as anything tangible. And just like tangible addictions, the results

were nearly fatal. I entered the Corridor so long ago that my initial memory of its landscape I can barely remember. The dim fluorescence of the train platform at night with its handful of travellers high or drunk, quiet or bursting with prophetic verse still makes my body stiffen and my thoughts turn cold. Only the smell of the spring rainfall dancing over the city streets and that intense ozone scent reaching my nostrils give me pause here in the Land of the Dead.

As Banville put it in his novel *Ghosts*: “*My horizon had been limited for so long, high walls make the gaze turn inward.*” I thought about those words as I stared off into the distance from my old balcony north of Salamander Road, not far from the empty skyline where the original train line used to run. As a young boy the area almost resembled prairie, and the openness that stretched from east to west would give way to the deathly hooves of the Iron Horse. Casting my eyes west, I would think of our old house nestled in the pre-war streets, and how during that time of conflict in our history that used to be the edge of the city. One has to wonder what it all looked like before...Before the movement of the wheel and the laying of brick. We tread on the graveyards of the

shamans, warriors, and animals now— walking hand in hand with spectres.

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A cigarette at the Gothic Arch (After Piranesi). The lay of the land in the midst of steam and fog is really just a blur of half-formed images, and the four districts dedicated to the Four Founders are four quarters and four elemental sources. Agni (Interzone), Isis (Rubicon), Vayu (The Istanbul), and The Rainbird (Trinacrium). The scene in my head: nightfall in the summer near the arcade, my bike propped up against the wall, kids puffing dope, knowing there would be no light on at home when I arrived. The key that would let me in the house only served to keep me from the unknown of the growing darkness, talking me away from the rivers of soma flowing outside my window. Inert and still, time unmoving, eyes seeking light and unveiling the secret within me. I would often look in the mirror and mimic people and accents to keep myself occupied as I waited for my Father. Waiting in silence always proved to be difficult. Hours passing that had no true feeling or description, only a dense, empty presence. The television didn't work properly and the phone line had been cut off

due to non-payment. I would sometimes shuffle to the bathroom, running the water until it was warm and splash some over my face...eyes puffy and red...my feet sore from too much walking. After a while I would just go to bed, sit on the edge and turn toward the window, forgetting there was nothing for me to see.

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The Guidebook Maker

Around 1844, the famous guidebook maker Karl Baedeker had this to say about the city of Midtown in its infancy: “*Midtown is quiet and subdued, yet it has the ambition and drive inherent of any city caught in a unique time and space with a flair for the ancient in its architecture and general design. One can also tell as they walk the streets— in particular the Dragon Court— that calamity could greet the tourist or idle flaneur at any moment. I would say Midtown has a resemblance to cities such as Paris or Rome, though it's more fitting to say the image of this city on the plains is closer in spirit to places I've not yet glimpsed but only heard about. Cities like Raissa, Marozia, and Theodora...*

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