

Awakening, Awareness, Awkwardness

Time for a distraction.

But what kind? Vexingly slowly the seconds aligned themselves to form even slower minutes, just like my thoughts had thickened into the consistency of syrup. I stared out of the window, seeing but not seeing at the same time. As if to emphasise the never-ending vacuum of the school, the street was unnaturally deserted. An orange-red cloud of leaves crossed the dark asphalt like the robes of a Buddhist monk twirling in the wind. Inside, the air was heavy, tangible almost. It smelled of sweat, of dust and of being stuck at school until this infinite day finally came to a close.

A different kind of movement made me focus on the sidewalk next to the window. I noticed a big, ginger cat with piercing yellow eyes and thick fur that was blown by the cold wind. It scurried off across the street into a well-kept garden to hide in the infinite palette of green tones that only provided a strong contrast with its bright autumn fur.

Time to focus. A cold shiver slid down my back as I started conjuring up a mental image. Where would I start? I briefly considered the places I had visited before during the endless hours I spent at school. There was the faraway planet with half a dozen moons in the sky, the infinite library, the idyllic country village, the island of the wise and the silly, and dozens of others. It only took me a split second to realise that none would suffice. They were too familiar, too tainted with the smell of nervous sweat and the sound of teenage purgatory. No, it was time to create a new place. Excitement took hold of me as an elaborate plan started to form in my mind. This world would be bigger, more exciting and, especially, more unpredictable than ever before.

My thoughts were interrupted by a change in the steady murmuring of the teacher. Something resembling an expectant tension alerted me. I could not quite tell what had changed, but when I looked up, Mr. German had fixed his eyes on a point approaching, but not quite reaching, my face. I wondered idly how many years it had been since he had given up his attempt of mustering enthusiasm for the subject he taught among the deeply uninterested adolescent population. How many years of teaching had it taken for the disillusion to reach the deadened core behind his eyes? Or, I briefly considered, had this enthusiasm never even existed in him? His appearance certainly indicated a bottomless indifference to whatever it was he was attempting to teach us. This apathy had worn off on the class. A thick lethargy muffled all stimuli from the outside world.

I directed my gaze back to my book and read out the sentence I hoped I was meant to read out. I had marked it at the beginning of class - several hundred years ago - after counting the other students and determining the sentence that would befall me. Uncertainly I looked up, but his gaze had lifted and the educational murmur picked up again. I had guessed correctly. Relieved, I looked at the clock again. We were only half-way.

I sighed softly and looked out of the window again, only to find that it made my neck hurt. I had stared in the same direction for too long. Instead, I decided to scrutinise the clock again. The way time was passing in this room seemed to me the irrefutable confirmation of relativity theory. Or was it quantum mechanics? I was not quite sure which theory said that time was not constant, but relative to the situation. Relative. Mmm... Einstein then? Eyeing the clock with suspicion, I pondered the possibility that it was moving backwards when I wasn't looking. It would certainly explain a lot.

I felt my stomach twist in a knot. Suddenly I could hardly resist violently pushing over my table and running into the hallway towards freedom. In my mind, I was doing exactly that. Especially knocking over my table felt like an immensely satisfying act. I roared with repressed frustration, throwing my arms into the air, stomping on the floor as hard as I could and flinging my chair through the window. I imagined it shattering in a million pieces of satisfaction. Frozen behind my table, I balled my hands into fists and strained them hard. I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth. I needed that distraction right now.

All right, where to begin? I mentally closed my eyes again, staring blankly at the teacher. Mr. German, looking anywhere but at his students, seemed oblivious to the fact that my mind had departed the building, the country, the planet.

I let my mind wander idly for a moment. The endless possibilities were at once freeing and terrifying. Quickly, I started building a place of my own. It was time to properly escape this classroom.

A light room appeared, its walls bending into a crescent moon on both sides of me. The large windows let in a golden rain of light, which reflected on the pristine white walls and the blood-red furniture that appeared around me. An enormous, springy couch was the centrepiece of a cosy sitting area arranged around a fireplace. A polished wooden desk was pushed against a window, spreading a comforting musky scent.

I sauntered slowly through the room, running my fingers over the soft fabric of the couch and feeling my feet sink down into the dark blue carpet of the sitting area. I stopped at the wooden desk, placing my hands on the smooth surface and leaning forward to look out of the window. A warm feeling untied the knots in my belly as I realised my house was built in a mammoth tree, placing it at least fifty meters above the ground. Safe, easily defensible. I shook my head. This was my world, there was no need for defence.

A brisk knock made me spin around. I blinked in shock as a boy, no older than thirteen, walked into the room through a door that had materialised in the previously immaculate white wall. He left it open, and behind him I could see the stubby tree trunk that had led him to it. A slight breeze rustled the canopy of a million green leaves that protected and caressed my house. I wondered if his tree was some kind of minor deity.

The boy was staring at me. I felt bewildered, unable to comprehend where he came from. His round face was framed by a mass of floppy blond hair and his eyes were scrutinising my reaction through round spectacles. As he tilted his head a little, I could not help but smile. He looked like he could be a first year at my school. I normally hated those kids, those tiny brats that did nothing but get in your way. At the start of term, I never needed more than a few seconds to see which bratlets would soon make a career out of making a few select others' lives as miserable as possible. I liked to smack those occupational bullies in the head whenever I got a chance. I could also see which kids would become their targets - their sad scrawny bodies almost collapsing under the weight of the refrigerators they all liked to carry around on their backs. Those kids got smacked by my classmates. According to them, the only good thing about the start of term was that it also marked the opening of the first years hunting season.

This kid was different though. With his glasses and childish clothes he looked like the perfect target for reasserting someone's popularity among the throng of skinny girls and pimply boys that constituted a high school class. His attitude, however, suggested something else. He looked at me with real self assurance, not the fake poster-boy confidence of popular kids that only made the gaping hole of mortal fear behind their eyes that more obvious to me.

"Hi, I'm Otto," the boy said to me, looking at me earnestly.

I looked at him in disbelief. I would never name anyone in my fantasy worlds Otto.

"You wanted this place to be unpredictable. That's why I'm here."

I frowned. Had I wanted this place to be unpredictable? Oh, yes, I had. Interesting. Otto smiled at me and I couldn't help but like him. He was so unlike anyone I had ever seen in the real world. That was precisely it of course, he was different and that was enough in itself. I smiled back.

"You're right. Hi. My name's... am I allowed to have a different name?"

Otto cocked his head to the side. "Different from what?"

Good point. I dug through my brain, trying to find a name I liked. They all sounded silly. Not that I objected to a healthy dose of silliness every now and then, but this was not the right kind of silly. The boy looked at me expectantly, pushing his glasses a little further up his nose. I sighed, defeated by my own lack of creativity.

"I'm Gertie."