

THE CROWD IN ALL OF US

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The day was warm, the shoppers, government employees and the bored squatted on benches, or leaned against store walls, or hurried to be a line-up on the next block of the outdoor mall; brushing past me, hurrying around me, looking beyond me. They sat in the sun, they moved to the shade.

A middle-aged man stood naked on the stone ledge that surrounded the water fountain. He flexed his muscles at the men who chatted to his right. He wagged his pecker at the woman reading a book to his left. He stole a French fry from her and she didn't noticed. He chewed it and watched her, while she turned a page, yawned, squinted at the sun with a frown, then resumed her reading.

He pissed in the fountain, leaning back and arcing the stream in the same fashion as the water spewing from the metal fountain faucet. He looked at the men for approval, but they were watching cleavage and short skirts and eating lunch. One kicked away a brown paper bag and forced the last crust of warm salmon sandwich between his teeth. The other sucked grease from his French fries and laughed at the crude comments, dropping semi-chewed potato mulch to the asphalt.

The naked man bent over the water and his face contorted, spits of sweat dotted his eyebrows, and he deficated in the water: once, twice, three times, then no more.

He stood up. There was moisture at the tip of his pecker. He shook it at the woman. She absently brushed the drop from where it spotted page 156. He shrank from her, from the two men, from the busy crowds passing him. He stepped down into the fountain and submerged himself to the waist.

"Here no, you can't do that," a uniformed man proclaimed, rushing to the fountain.

"Why not," he asked.

The uniformed man pointed to the silver plate attached to the concrete edge of the fountain. It said POSITIVELY NO SWIMMING OR BATHING. "It says so right here."

"I can't read."

"I don't care. Do you think that matters to me?"

"Who are you?" the naked man asked.

The uniformed man looked startled. "Why, I'm the Municipal Regulator of Fountains and Ponds," he said assertively. Then to the young woman with the book he said as he touched her on the shoulder, "He says he doesn't know who I am ... as if!"

She cleared her throat but concentrated only on turning to page 160.

"Now get out of there," the uniformed man insisted. "Go find somewhere else to stand. Go bother the regulator of L and E."

"L and E?"

"Lobbies and elevators."

"Can I stand there?" the man asked, stepping from the fountain.

"Do you smoke?" the regulator asked.

He looked down at his naked body for some cigarettes but there were none. "No."

"Then why would the regulator of L and E bother you?!"

The regulator muttered as he walked away. "Honestly ..." and the naked man walked behind him, but the regulator didn't notice him.

I was intent on following them but a loud voice caught my attention, so I turned.

"Push me higher! ... higher!" she screamed and laughed, her frail old hands grasping out in front of her at imaginary ropes or chains, her legs straight out but her heels on the ground, her head swaying rhythmically. Her blue-grey hair switched across her forehead and over her eyes.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

"Are you swinging?" I asked.

"Wait your turn," she answered sharply.

She swayed quietly for a few moments, then excitedly, breathlessly, she giggled and screamed again.

"Look at me! Look at me everybody! Look how high I can go!"

She pulled and pulled on the imaginary chains of the swing and threw her upper torso back and forth so that I thought she might have a heart attack, or at least fall from the bench. Pedestrians stepped over her outstretched feet, though no one could see how high she swung.

"I bet no one ever swung this high before! I'm the highest ever! Look at me! Look at me swing!"

I couldn't resist: "That's pretty high all right," I said to her.

"I said wait your goddamn turn, asshole," she snapped, so I left her alone.

I thought maybe I would find the naked man up the street, so I walked in the direction he had gone. I wanted to assure him that I had seen what he'd done.

I would have continued to the next block, but I glanced in the window of a bank on the corner and I stopped. There was a robbery in progress. Two people, a man and a woman, were waving pistols at the tellers and screaming at the people waiting in line. I could hear them because the door kept opening, customers were still entering to join the line, scanning statements, adding columns of deposit slips, filling out withdrawals.

"I'm trigger-happy," he shouted. "Gimme your money right now. I'm trigger-happy I tell you."

"Put it in here," she snarled at each teller as she passed a paper bag across the counter.

"I could shoot you, you know. I'm not afraid to do it," he said.

He took a small wad of twenty-dollar bills from the woman third in line. She had recounted them six or seven times during the robbery and compared the total to the one written on the deposit slip. When the bills were taken from her, she saw the gun. She screamed and screamed.

"There's a security camera," the woman robber said, pointing.

"I could hit it from here ... one shot," he said.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"You look good. How 'bout me?"

"You look good, Arnie."

"I'm trigger-happy too!"

They took the money and ran out the door. I ran after them. No one joined me in the chase. I wasn't going to stop them. What could I do? I was curious as to where they were going.

I gave up the chase after two blocks. They weren't running anymore. It wasn't as much fun. They counted their money, the male robber holding his pistol in his teeth as he did.

Then I heard a moan pleading. I looked up.

"Come back in dear," she begged from the open window six stories above me. She held out one hand, but he was well out of reach, wavering on the thin ledge.

"This is all she wrote, Dorothy. I can't go on." His voice was shrill and chaotic. But it didn't sound right. It sounded as if it were acted.

She screamed. "Help us!" she demanded.

I looked around to see who might help, but I was the only one looking up.

"You better move, all you people down there. I'm gonna do it. You don't want me falling on you, that's for sure."

"Please John, there's so much to live for."

She was exaggerating too.

"No Dorothy, I can't take it anymore. One little swan dive and it will all be over. Remember me fondly."

He edged his feet further from the wall. He appeared about to fall at any moment.

"John, I ..."

"Yes?"

"There's something I never told you, John ..."

"Yes, Dorothy ..."

"I love you, John."

He paused in serious thought for a few seconds. Then he burst into frantic laughter. "Not good enough Dorothy! I'm a goner!"

"Wait," I said urgently, just in time.

John and Dorothy both looked down in surprise.

"What do you want?" he asked crossly.

"Don't jump," I said, meekly this time.

"Why not?"

"Well ... Dorothy doesn't want you to jump."

"So?"

"Well, I don't know," I said, confused and tentative. "Why do you want to jump anyway?"

"If you must know ..." he said, then paused. He shifted closer to the wall. He opened his mouth once but said nothing. Finally, he blurted: "People won't leave me alone."

"Really?"

"Every night all of my friends call. They always have something planned and want to include me. Long lost friends call me from out of the blue. Old girlfriends call to make up. People I don't even know stop me on the street and act friendly. They want to know about me. I can't stand it anymore!"

I didn't say anything.

"Poor soul," Dorothy whispered in sympathy.

"No privacy," he continued. "No time to myself. There are just too many well-meaning, decent people out there. I want to be left alone."

I gestured at the passing crowds. Not a single person had noticed. "But these people ..."

"That's what I mean!" he shouted.

His feet moved closer to the edge again. I grabbed the closest pedestrian to me, shaking him with both arms.

"hey, pal," he growled.

I pointed up. "That man is going to jump. You have to talk him out of it."

He looked up. He whispered at me, but he didn't take his eyes from John on the ledge. "I don't know what to say."

"Say anything. It's up to you."

"My name is Edward," he said much louder. What's yours?"

John smiled.

I grabbed another pedestrian, then another. I had to shake them violently each time before they recognized the situation. Soon a roaring discussion began. I was so pleased, and John and Dorothy were happy, that I didn't see the old lady who'd been swinging on the bench, walk up.

"Jump!" she shouted above everyone else.

We all looked at her.

"Chickenshit! Jump!"

"Don't listened to her, John," I said, moving toward her.

"They won't see you tomorrow!" she continued. "You're a fool! Jump! Chickenshit! Jump!"

The crowd watching John backed away from the side of the building, leaving a larger patch of asphalt below him.

"Stop it!" I yelled at her. "Stop it!"

"Chickenshit! JUMP!"

John jumped. He went head first. Dorothy covered her eyes.

There was a thud. I felt a splatter across my pant leg.

"Wow, look at the blood," someone said.

A passerby who had not seen John on the ledge walked past the crowd and casually stepped over the body, leaving a trail of bloody footprints as they walked away.

Edward knelt beside John and closed the lids of his eyes.

Someone else commented, "No one dies with their eyes shut for real, do they?"

It took no time for the crowd to disperse. I left as well.

When I passed the bank again, a cop was standing outside the door interviewing a teller.

"What did he look like?"

"I don't remember."

"What did he wear?"

"I don't remember."

"What did he say?"

"I don't remember."

"His name was Arnie," I interrupted. "The woman robber called him by name."

"Were you there?" the cop asked me.

"I was outside, standing right here."

"Well, this young lady was inside. Butt out."

Then he asked the teller, "So, did she say his name?"

"Of course not. I'd have noticed that."