

## Union Station

Peter was only four. But already he knew a lot, and had a mind of his own.

Well, sort of. Fairly often his mind reached its limits and faded out. But he always got it back very soon, and was off in a new, exciting direction.

Of course fairly frequent blackouts of sense did confuse and frighten him. He didn't know this was normal, but in spite of not knowing he bounced back so well, and things were basically so good in his world, that he avoided paying much attention to this fear.

He was on his way to his favorite place, the train station. Trains, forever now his best thing, gave him the happiest experience of his entire life, which was to lie in his mother's lap for three whole days almost without interruption. Sometimes he looked up into her pretty, smiling face warmly greeting him with love, basking in the powerful security of that care. And sometimes he just stared out the window at the blurry objects that raced by the train, and daydreamed about having the power to make this go on forever.

When his mother had carried him off his beautiful train several days before, he had not noticed the station because he was so sleepy. So he was anxious now to see what it looked like for the first time. He just knew they were going on another long journey so he could do it all over again. Maybe they were even going to live on the train and travel all over the world.

Of course his mother denied all of this, but he was sure she just wanted to surprise him.

When he finally viewed the vast space of the train station fully awake and in daylight, he was utterly amazed. It was so enormous he couldn't even see the hazy top of it. Somehow the station had captured the sky and clouds! Trains, and the houses in which they lived, really were the most magical things to be found!

Though he normally had trouble waiting, he didn't even mind when his mother said they had to wait awhile before anything good happened. He'd waited the four years of his life before his first ride, so he didn't have any trouble waiting a few minutes for the second one.

There was one problem though, which he tried mostly to ignore, but he couldn't get entirely away from. Something about his mother was very different. She was acting in a way that he'd never seen before.

She wasn't angry, an experience with which he was very familiar, not because he was the least bit afraid of her anger, but because he could tease her out of any rage with a simple, "I love you" applied to her heart with his small hand placed right between her large, beautiful breasts. She loved to be loved, and he knew how. It was the one way he was smarter than his older brother, who didn't know how to love at all.

A grown-up Peter would have realized that his mother was afraid. Peter had never seen his mother really afraid of anything, or if he had he didn't remember it. So he was confused, unsettled underneath his buoyant enthusiasm for life and this particular day.

There was one thing he did know instinctively, which was to stay out of her way, not to demand anything. He sensed she couldn't handle one more thing.

She kept pacing back and forth between two pillars talking to herself under her breath, completely oblivious to anything else. Watching her, Peter began to feel strangely unfamiliar to himself.

As usual his older brother Pendergast had wandered as far away as he could get from his mother and Peter, and what he regarded to be their stupid love affair with each other. Pendergast couldn't love, but he had something that might be even more powerful. He could command.

He was called "Pentup" by his friends because he was usually very cool-headed no matter what was happening. But then very occasionally he'd explode. Since he was the neighborhood leader that meant his anger defined the law, at least until he changed it. Nobody ever argued with Pendergast because it was pretty clear he was more independent of grown-ups than the other kids. So he was King.

Naturally Peter admired him very much. The King was his brother.

But the King was contemptuous of Peter and largely ignored him.

Today Pendergast was searching for something to distract him from his mother and brother's usual cavorting lovingly together, which he thought was about the dumbest thing anybody could do. He was denying that he felt anything when Peter usurped his mother; his solution was to throw mothering to the four winds. He didn't need it anymore.

As soon as they arrived in the train station, Pendergast set out on a private expedition. Hugging the tall walls of the enormous waiting room, he checked out everything he could get his eyes upon that really mattered, like two teenagers leaning up against the wall kissing, or an old woman trying to change her pantyhose behind a huge pillar because the line was too long in the lady's bathroom, or a disheveled man dressed in tattered clothes hiding behind another column at the corner of the hall frantically jacking off.

The old man closed his eyes when he realized that Pendergast was just a boy, of no consequence, and resumed his thrusts.

Pendergast usually fascinated Peter. But today he was so excited about another train ride, and so nervous about his mother's fearfulness that he failed to notice what normally he'd have watched with enormous curiosity. In this instance it was the amazed look upon his brother's face as he stared open-mouthed at the masturbating man, discovering what it was all about for the first time. On any other day, Peter would have wanted to carefully examine what his brother was looking at.

But today he was trying hard not to notice the worry on his mother's face, so he ended up not noticing some other important things.

The problem was that he was trying to keep track of everyone else. He kept glancing back and forth between his brother and mother, never settling upon one or the other long enough to focus very clearly.

The next time he glanced to where his brother had been, a stranger was there right in the middle of his sight, walking very fast in Peter's direction, looking straight at him!

Peter jerked his eyes away from the dark-set, determined stare of this stranger. He hated strangers even more than most kids did. One had visited his mother once or twice and it scared him to remember those times when this alien was in his house for a few days. Something happened to his mother when this stranger was around that felt creepier than anything he'd ever experienced.

Peter felt compelled to look at the stranger again. A tiny piece of familiarity had irresistibly pulled him back, though he tried hard to deny it.

He suddenly realized the man walking toward him was the same stranger that had visited his mother! Creepiness engulfed Peter, making him feel very sick to his stomach!

In a vigorous rebuke of reality, he turned away from his own feeling by refusing to see this menacing man, as if by ignoring him, he and the bad feeling would go away.

To his enormous relief his eyes instantly found his mother.

But suddenly he realized something was wrong! Something had drastically changed! She had stopped pacing! At first it looked like she was looking straight at him, Peter. But then he realized she was actually looking beyond him! He knew instantly that meant the object of her worry had just appeared!

Peter raced over to see where his mother's eyes were pointing, and followed their path right into the face of the stranger, now almost upon them!

A flush of terror almost shook him apart! His mother was looking directly at this same alien man who had already tried to get inside of Peter by staring at him! And here he was already inside Peter's mother!

Peter panicked! He had never before experienced being on the backside of his mother's attention!

He suddenly felt overwhelmed! He tore himself away from the dread to which this specter riveted his heart, and swung around desperately to find his brother. Pendergast was his last resort as an escape from this terrible nightmare!

By some miracle his eyes instantly caught sight of his brother. The only problem was that Pendergast was acting very strangely. The masturbating old man's indifference in closing his eyes had lured Pendergast's curiosity into a false sense of security, inducing him to take two steps closer to the man for a better view.

What Peter saw when his eyes caught hold of his brother was Pendergast furiously falling backward trying to keep his feet under him, as he frantically back-peddled, just barely escaping the old, now very ugly man with an evil expression, who still had his pants down! He was trying desperately to hit Pendergast!

Peter suddenly remembered what his brother always told him when they were alone, that the world was just one big fuck-you place.

Peter panicked! Pendergast was in as much trouble as he was! He had no choice but to look back for his mother. She and his brother were the only two people in his life.

But what he saw undid him. His mother was embracing this strange man!

Peter tilted inside. Everything scrambled. He wanted desperately to go to sleep!

But then it got worse! The alien thing turned toward him and reached out!

Mom!

The room suddenly became the whole world, and his mother the only important part of it! He became deaf to anything but the horror that his heart was pumping!

Artfully dodging the stranger's hands, he raced over to his mother and dove at her large thigh, literally jumping onto it with a vengeance, grabbing what belonged to him!

She stumbled when Peter impacted her leg! Which is precisely what Peter had desperately hoped would happen, because it put distance between her and this strange man!

"Mama," Peter said in a sweet manner. "Can we go now?"

“There is someone here you must remember,” she said with pain in her voice and a false smile on her face.

Strange hands suddenly lifted a squirming boy off his feet. Everything started spinning, continuity became scrambled, and consciousness was lost. Peter fainted.

When he came back to life he was banished to a completely strange land very far from home, populated entirely by strangers.

Slap!

Suddenly awakened, something terrifying started to happen! His stomach was left on the bed, while the rest of him rose up like he was flying! Jerked toward the bathroom he knew he wasn't flying, because he couldn't turn that fast even in his flying dreams.

Yanked, thrown about suspended by one arm, a flurry of dangerous sounds reverberated off the walls of his small world, deafeningly echoing danger and death!

Smack! Hard, cold, not-bed ceramic slapped his body with shame! It left a blushing stain that stayed there for decades.

He'd urinated again in his bed, and the monster was punishing him.

Involuntarily cooperating with whatever the gods ordained, Peter's body was learning how to carry emotional pain so it couldn't be seen, making terror only a stomachache, or a pulsating dreadnaught-in-his-ears only a headache. His flesh was the only part of him capable of holding the terrible turmoil of emotional violence that had become his daily diet—but only by this spending of extra life-credits, robbing heartbeats of survival from the length and breadth of his existence.

And it kept happening, year after year after year.

## Psychotherapy—Intimacy Formalized

Fifty-eight years, fourteen days, and eight hours later, Peter sat in his professional office with a patient. The waning light of early evening filtered through the partly closed louvers of the window shade, illuminating only the brightest hues of the oriental carpet, the only object in the dimly lit room that both men were touching.

They sat facing each other inside a triangle of chair-couch-chair that encircled the carpet and their togetherness, the younger man on the left end of the couch and the older man in the green leather chair opposite him.

The couch was made of a dark-green, velvety fabric that deeply cushioned but firmly supporting the six-foot-two, thirty-two-year-old frame of the younger man. He had a strong, athletic body that sported a round, friendly, jovial face that invited others to like him, though he often feared that face revealed to everyone how inadequate he really was.

Behind and to the left of the younger man the walls were filled with a colorful display of wall hangings and paintings. Sitting on the four tables that book-ended the chairs and the couch were sculptures, all collected and put there by the older man to evoke in the room's occupants their most archetypal dreams, impressions, and fantasies.

Two of the sculptures had been carved by an east African tribe whose religious rituals for over eight hundred years had required the use of psychedelics, evoking in the artist who carved it her most primitive visions. In one a man stood upright on the back of a deadly predatory animal, the beast's head turned unnaturally upward so that man and beast peered deeply and intensely into each other's eyes, two predators measuring the other for life or death.

In the other sculpture a man and his twelve-year-old boy stood together holding each other upright with only two arms and two legs between them, making their togetherness a Siamese twin-ship, leaving neither of them the opportunity of separateness, revealing and reproducing this most ancient symbiotic form of human love.

All of the decorative objects in the room were intended to evoke for Peter and his patient a dramatic sense of history taking place in the present tense, which connected them to the realm of mythological origins.

But the myth which they were living and studying, was not a cultural myth shared by everyone. It was the myth of this particular

person, created by the specific dramatic context that had formed and now characterized the peculiar life of this particular human.

The younger man began crying quietly, covering his eyes with hands that wiped the tears before they could run down his face.

“Something painfully grieves you this evening,” the older man observed quietly after awhile.

Oliver’s tears flowed more freely.

“I wish I’d never gone there,” he moaned. “It was so depressing to be around him for five days.”

That remark hung suspended in a silence that gave it the recognition of a full hearing.

I wonder what happened at his father’s that has upset him so much? Peter asked himself.

“Can’t you help me?” Oliver asked with a demanding urgency of which he was unaware. “I mean I can’t stop visiting my father,” he complained.

“Would part of you like to do that?” Peter asked.

“How can I do that?” Oliver protested, implying Peter was toying with him. “He’s my father!”

Though it might have been better to respond to another part of Oliver’s communication, Peter responded to his anger. He sometimes had trouble with his patient’s anger. He chose it as a focus partly to manage his own discomfort.

“Am I sometimes as disappointing and frustrating to you as your father is?” Peter asked the younger man.

Silence.

“Well, you asked for it,” Oliver warned. “I’m having one of those critical thoughts about you.”

Silence.

Apparently he’ll tell me the critical thought only if I ask for it. But I think I won’t.

Oliver had confessed a few weeks before that he sometimes had bad thoughts about psychotherapy, and about Peter’s interpretations. These thoughts viewed psychotherapy as just a lot of made-up theories pretending to make things better just by talking about them, just so much psychobabble.

“Don’t you get it?” Oliver insisted with frustration, as if Peter should already have said something. “I don’t like having them! They just make me feel worse about coming to talk to you!”

Another silence followed.

“Damn it, I wish you would say something,” Oliver insisted.

Silence.

“Because it’s true!” Oliver exclaimed. “I’m really not any better! Actually I’m a lot worse! I’ve never felt so depressed in my whole damned life!”

Peter felt and expressed sympathy in his facial and body postures, but said nothing.

“Aren’t you just the least bit concerned?” Oliver complained.

This was just the opportunity for which Peter was waiting, where he could use Oliver’s own words to tell him something new.

“I think you’re very concerned about something yourself,” Peter replied.

“About what?” Oliver challenged.

“About hurting me with your critical thoughts,” Peter said.

“You’re just making that up,” Oliver protested, denying his fear. “I don’t think I’m feeling that.”

“We all sometimes have the impression,” Peter gently insisted, “that when feelings get to be huge and overpowering they will explode and hurt others.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Oliver insisted. “By feeling all this I am getting worse!”

“When powerful and frightening feelings surge through you, it doesn’t mean that you’re getting worse,” Peter replied. “It means that you’re feeling things that are moving you, and remembering things that have hurt and frightened you.”

“Who wants to remember such terrible things?” Oliver asked. “What’s the point of it?”

“So you can change them.”

Though obviously moved by this statement, Oliver said nothing for several moments.

“It’s happening again,” he warned.

“You’re having another negative thought about me,” Peter suggested.

“Yes.”

Peter waited this time for Oliver to explain.

“The thought says it doesn’t really help for you to tell me why my feelings are so strong, because they’re still there!” Oliver spit out.

“What do those feelings say about me?” Peter asked.

“Well,” he began, very reluctant to answer. “Since you insist, they say that you’re just making things up to try and convince me to feel better.”

“Perhaps you feel that I’m just trying to get rid of you with a worthless piece of advice,” Peter added.

The effect of this interpretation upon Oliver was electric! His whole body stiffened.

“I really should be grateful to him,” Oliver insisted. “They let us do anything we wanted. There were almost no restrictions. I got home when I wanted, studied when I wanted, and went to bed when I felt like it.”

Oliver had previously confided that his father’s permissiveness had felt like neglect. Though a very kind and gentle man, this parent maintained a great deal of emotional distance from everyone. He spent almost no time at all with Oliver, though he was almost always present in the home. And when he was with his son, or any other person for that matter, he secretly felt extremely awkward and protective of himself, which he managed by saying almost nothing emotionally personal. He disguised this aloofness with a dry humor that seemed to declare a kind of closeness, but whose content projected a gloomy message of caution against expecting too much out of life, encouraging careful watching for danger signs that warned of disappointment. All of which made Oliver’s connection to his father vague, tenuous, ominous, and deeply disappointing, though Oliver had never admitted this to himself.

“It sounds like your family turned parental authority over to children, as if having power and authority was an evil thing, thus depriving you of any structure to bounce off of, or by which to measure yourself, and against which you could make your own choices.”

“So now you’re suggesting I blame my parents for what’s wrong with me?” Oliver quipped defensively.

“Do you blame them?”

“They weren’t that bad,” Oliver protested.

They sat in silence for several moments as Oliver struggled with his conscience.

“Do you believe perhaps, Oliver, that in order to protect your connection to someone important whom you love, that you must be just like them and feel the same things they do?”

Oliver’s face suddenly became ashen! Tiny sweat beads appeared on his forehead. He spoke now with great urgency and anxiety.

“But now that mother’s dead he doesn’t really have hardly anyone!” he pleaded. “He denies that anything is wrong. It’s only when he gets so nervous that he starts to shake, and can’t teach his classes, that he consults a doctor. So what’s the solution? Drugs! He refused to talk about it with anyone!”

He paused.

“He’s all alone,” Oliver pleaded. “My brother hardly ever sees him! Dad denies it, but he’s really a very lonely man!”

“I think you’re afraid that if you stop being depressed that you’ll have absolutely nothing in common with your father,” Peter suggested.

Oliver gasped with recognition!

“Then what would we have to talk about?” Oliver cried with fearfulness. “How could we stay in touch?”

“So if you become undepressed,” Peter suggested, “which is your greatest desire, the reason why you came here, then you fear that in doing so you would permanently sever your connection to your father, thoughtlessly abandoning him to his depression.”

Oliver gasped and sat up on the edge of the couch!

“My god, that’s it!” Oliver shouted with excitement. “That’s why I hate being around him so much! I’m trapped. I can’t escape! Both he and my brother are always so goddamned depressed! What else is there to talk about but what’s wrong with the world?”

Oliver cocked his head downward and to the right, and turned inward for several moments.

“I was just thinking about having dinner with my parents when mother was alive, how superficially everything was treated. Anything controversial, like a difference of opinion, was instantly covered over by my parents spouting liberal ideology, as if our family was supposed to be a place where no one ever got angry with each other because we never did anything wrong and never disagreed.”

Oliver became silent and drifted.

“I’m having one of those critical thoughts again,” he finally said. “Only it’s not attacking you this time. It’s attacking me, telling me I’m spouting a lot of nasty lies about my parents that aren’t true, that I’m trying to blame them for my own shortcomings.”

Oliver was obeying two gods, the one of healing, and the one that had tethered him to others needs most of his life. To keep his balance he just jumped backward into his old perspective, where it was his fault that he was so disappointed and upset. In doing so he was testing the survivability of the reprieve that had just uplifted him, needing to be sure that these new insights were completely true, and could overcome assault by his old beliefs.

“They were really great parents,” he insisted. “I mean they were good people. Mom really loved me. And I loved . . .”

He started tearing.

“Someone can be both wonderful and hurtful at the same time,” Peter suggested. “Including your father. You seem to be afraid your thoughts are going to cut him to pieces, making you stop loving him, destroying the connection between you.”

An enormous look of relief came over Oliver’s face.

“It’s always been that way,” Oliver explained. “Everybody pretends to be so happy. And nobody ever talks about it. To do so would be so disloyal.”

The time was up.

“The time’s up for now,” Peter said gently.

Oliver sat up, put his shoes back on, and they both stood. It was time for their hug.

A few weeks earlier Peter had felt strongly that Oliver needed a closer, more affectionate connection to an older man. When he had suggested to Oliver that he sensed the younger man wanted to touch, perhaps even to embrace, Oliver had leaped at the opportunity. Since then they had hugged at the session’s end whenever Oliver felt like it, which was most of the time.

Tonight Oliver squeezed Peter harder than usual, clearly expressing his gratitude for the emancipation from false-belief that had just taken place.

“Thanks,” Oliver said in great earnest.

“You’re very welcome.”

## **E-mail Bullshit**

Checking his e-mail later than night, Peter discovered a curious message among the usual advertisements:

*Please regard this e-mail as a messenger of good things to come. Very soon you will receive an invitation of great importance. It is hoped that its message will feel sufficiently different than the usual falsehoods with which many advertise themselves on Earth, for we have a special interest in you and wish to make a proposal. This message has been sent to give you an opportunity to anticipate your surprise.*

*Sincerely . . .*

*A friendly other*

Somebody’s very clever, Peter thought. That message projects genuineness. But I don’t believe it. There’s a touch of seduction about it.

Peter didn’t like surprises. It’s why he always prepared everything so carefully. He was afraid of sabotage.

Just some more goddamned e-mail bullshit!

Somewhere else in the universe, others were being careful to prepare their target person to expect what would eventually arrive. They were convinced Earth people hated surprises.