

Ten Inside

No one knew it. Over time they would have figured it out, but he was very good at hiding it. Hiding it was his only vocation. He had no other job, no career, no calling, no creed. He was a man of 37, but for some mysterious reason, one he never asked about out loud, he stopped aging on the inside when he was 10, right before adolescence began. It was therefore as a child—that is, with the eyes and mentality of a child—that he watched his body betray him, growing into hirsute manhood. He would look in the mirror and shake his big bulbous head in disbelief, although between you and me he had a great love of shaving. It was a game to him and remained one the rest of his life, big thick whiskers like licorice nubs in the washbowl, floating on whipped cream. Who in his right mind would go numb to that madness? Who in his right mind?

His right mind was his home. He liked to draw. Yes, with crayons. He also liked singing, but only songs with no formal melody. Were he able to philosophize, he would likely explain that life itself was a song with no formal melody, making it fun, conferring freedom on everything. But he didn't talk that way. He was no philosopher. Not recognizably so. Analytical thinking and marshalling thoughts into articulate speech were both the province of the left brain, not the right, and as I've said, he was right-minded, not left. Do you see the distinction? Now imagine you can't. That's how you see things as he did. You won't even notice I've repeated myself.

Since most people do repeat themselves and he never noticed it, he quickly became popular to blowhards and gossips of all varieties, including aspiring authors, who certainly repeat themselves, but generally rearrange the words. On one occasion he came to my house and I told him for what must have been the tenth time about the novel I was writing. I remember that I ran out of fingers that day for counting how many times he had indulged me. I felt guilty. There was no reason to. For him it was the first time all over again and he listened attentively, asking unexpected questions afterwards and gasping at some of the answers. Does a happy ending last? Where does everyone go when the book is on the shelf?

Frankly, I never knew what he was talking about. And questioning him often threw into doubt whether he had spoken at all. That's why I offered him astonishing answers instead. Almost in spite of myself, he inspired me to be astonishing. I tried to mask the behavior with droll platitudes, but he didn't care. A happy ending is a disaster in the making. When the book is on the shelf, everyone goes mad.

He stared at me from his chair and nibbled on his thumb. I'm afraid of the dark, he confessed.

I asked him why.

It makes me old.

How old are you? I asked.

He admitted he was 10. I can trust you, he said.

I asked how old he became in the dark. It was a curious conversation. Until that day I took him at face value as a man of 37.

I can't count that high, he said. But that's what I do. I sit in the dark and I count and I count and I can't keep track of the numbers. I forget what I'm up to and start again and then it's morning.

How high can you count?

He said, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6—

Oh.

7, 8, 9, 10! Ten, he exclaimed.

Is that it?

He wondered what I meant by that question. There was no recollection of what we were talking about.

I told him I was writing a novel. It doesn't bother him much that I'm writing it about him. He didn't notice that one day the subject matter was different than it used to be. He sat and listened with deep fascination to hear a story about someone he relates to so strongly. His questions afterwards are often incredibly useful for me as I map out the actual details of a daily existence for my protagonist. I know how confusing it is that things we take for granted can also be surprises, like turning jars to the right when you want to get them open. What if one of them went the other way? With so many jars in the world, it's bound to happen soon, on the very next jar! And how do we know in the

middle of the night that the sun is coming back? My character lies in his bed and counts how long it takes and calls every second his sheep.