

Nathaniel's Twin

Since we were babies, my brother Nathaniel has been the more resilient twin. I am the frail one. On our fifteenth birthday, he received a motorcycle; I got a watch. It was handy enough, good for timing his secret journeys by night to the houses of young girls I would help him seduce. I cannot explain why I conducted that exercise, or timed Nathaniel during each tryst's culmination, except to say that somehow quantifying the experience in terms of minutes and seconds and not infrequently hours, helped me overcome my jealous anger, which otherwise lingered, as if floating in a void.

For that is a lesson known especially to the frail: how connecting emotions to concrete aspects of reality, such as the radial movements of a wristwatch's puny arms, purges those emotions, where their only other course is to fester. When one is frail, one must summon all possible defenses against the festering of bleak moods and bad spirits. A paradoxical strength arises from these provisions, but remains dangerously unrecognizable to the world at large, which has concluded anything frail is unremittingly frail, and by that weak conclusion establishes its contrasting strength.

Again, that conclusion is dangerous, as I set out to prove specifically to Nathaniel. Fifteen years in his vile, oppressive company had proven to me well enough that reason was not productive as a means for his enlightenment, which I considered essential. Without it, his comprehension of the world promised only the most diminutive proportions. I could not tolerate that outcome as his brother,

as his twin, as the other half of his identity. For that is how people view twins: they are generally one party, responsible in active society as such.

What then could I do about Nathaniel's unfortunate contributions to our society? He was terrible in school and I could not tutor him. Instead, he insisted I take his more pressing tests for him—as him—and pass them only within ranges believable of his abilities. As I sat in classrooms in his sneakers, holding the fat green pen he flourished as a means of making an association for his teachers that Nathaniel, unlike me, was the one with the fat green pen, I became almost too sick to concentrate, and in that condition almost ignorant enough to meet Nathaniel's request regarding the final grades. At times, I threw my arms up in despair about my forced participation in this drama, while the teacher further accepted it on account of the despair, which seemed to attach to the exam.

"It is not the test that is difficult!" I felt like shouting. On one occasion I did shout these words. It was during the eighth grade Social Studies final on the caste system in India. The teacher, Mrs. Penny, cocked her head like a surprised Cocker Spaniel when she heard me. Her frazzled hair, newly arranged as an unbecoming permanent, framed her limp cheeks like leathery ears, which did not believe or understand what they heard. As Nathaniel, I watched her walk to my desk, shaking her head slightly and wearing on her haggard face a quizzical form of consternation unfamiliar to me in this or any context, except at my bedside when my frailty has most asserted itself.

"Are you ill?" she asked Nathaniel, tenderly palming my forehead.

“Ma’am?” I slowly replied.

“You don’t look like yourself today, Nate. You look weaker than normal. You shouldn’t be in school looking this way. But you didn’t want to miss the test,” she deduced, and promised to make a note of my poor brother’s dedication, as if to factor it into his grade. In that way he passed the only exam of his I ever purposefully failed. I was angry that afternoon, and took it out on Nathaniel in his remaining essays, illustrating the difference between the Brahman and Sudra castes—the revered and rejected—by discussing twin brothers and the heinous chasm between their respective treatment even though they are essentially the same, as are all people, regardless of caste. This democratic manifesto won Nathaniel an “A” and a new academic reputation he insisted I convincingly maintain.

Nathaniel’s method of inspiring me toward this and other arrogant objectives was nothing short of mercenary, and strangely I developed a thick strain of respect for him on account of his tactics. On one noteworthy occasion, when I stubbornly refused to craft him an overdue report on the lineage of England’s King Henry VIII, Nathaniel unconsciously revealed his similarity to that portly figure, binding me in leather belts from our shared dresser and submerging me repeatedly in an ice cold bath. To survive the assault, I complied with the unsavory task, scrawling in one frantic draft, amid lingering shivers, the easy road to kingship afforded by Divine Providence, and the resulting mistreatment of innumerable wives and manservants. To my surprise, Nathaniel read the piece

before turning it in, and tempered my subtextual critique of brutality by deleting key adjectives.

In another instance, he pinned me to the ground beneath his knees and coated me in saliva applied directly by his saturated tongue until I conceded to expand the bibliography of his first formal research project for an Honor Society award, which he won. He brought me with him to the Principal's office both to turn in the entry and also to pick up the certificate of merit. There, in bold calligraphy reminiscent of the Magna Carta was Nathaniel's full name by birth, scored with abundant double slashes and curlicues, like allusions to the invisible scars I suffered at promoting this success. The runner up for this award was my essay, provoking an ironic collective conviction among faculty and students that Nathaniel had probably structured my paper too, as the styles coincided.

At first, I was livid, enraged at my victimization and helpless alienation from not only my social world, but more deeply from myself. Then I perceived the tight crawl space to my liberation and eventual victory over these and all preposterous circumstances. In passing, it is funny to note how freedom is a goal best pursued against the grain. For I knew as I forfeited my identity to Nathaniel, and likewise he forfeited himself to be me to gain glory, that gaining him this glory was the only road to my salvation. Thus, I abandoned my instinctive resistance to helping Nathaniel, and instead devoted myself to the task with a cold and calculated abandon.

Nathaniel was pleased with this new attitude of mine. To his limp imagination it suggested a permanent victory and confirmed his restricted

perspective that Might does in fact make Right, as the facts of our brotherhood seemed eager to reveal. I became his friend in this manner. For the first time in our lives he expressed affection for me, including me in his meandering and intolerable discussions in the schoolyard at recess, often putting his arm around me, as if protective of some mute songbird that might eventually sing under his kind protection.

And so I would: deep, poetic songs, rhapsodies, incantations, evil spells. In my first attempts, I concentrated on those prizes most beloved to my adolescent brother, whose trifling mind I would never have fully comprehended without my new commitment to inflating it until it burst. I often pictured this result, relishing intensely graphic details, such as how widely his jaw would drop open to accommodate the forceful ejection of his brain meat in the form of a thick hamburger soup. At times, I pictured white anal maggots within this discharge, each one grown fat on soft, greasy tissue.

Yet these fantasies remained secret nourishment for me as I concentrated on their realization. The work at hand was tedious and required such visions. How else was I to win Nathaniel the bed privileges of countless women too stupid to know better and therefore essentially repugnant and irredeemable? They flocked to him like groupies, frequently initiating bonds by joining him as he disparaged his brother the morbid outcast. Worse, some young ladies deeply sighed at these remarks, sending the conversation into absurdist territories, where Nathaniel's harsh judgment of me quickly reversed, becoming a fidelity

and compassion too enormous to bear without a protective insulation of slander as a mask.

Such was the first theme of our new collaboration: Nathaniel as emotional martyr. I do not suggest he understood, but this ignorance of his as he willingly played along made the performance that much sweeter to its author. Behind the scenes, I wove elaborate narratives for Nathaniel about how much pain he experienced at his new academic success as timed against my unexpected decline. Against his contrary and adamant opinion, I taught Nathaniel the attractiveness and consequent manipulative energy of humility in the face of good luck. He became my complaint Pygmalion, spouting words and intonations I balanced masterfully on his tongue.

In his first rehearsed woo, Nathaniel approached a head cheerleader in the hallway after a test we both knew she would bomb. Much like Nathaniel, she never studied, and among the students she was the object of authentic rumors that she cheated on tests. In this regard, Susan's inconspicuous intimacy with several male teachers and sports coaches was enormously suspect. So too was her uncharacteristic muteness whenever she got back a test she had passed. On those frequent occasions, she would sit at her desk with her head down and fold her hands squarely across her lap, as if shamefully hiding from public scrutiny the actual source of her accomplishment. Meanwhile, if she failed, as if to compensate her former silences, she practically bragged about her grade until it seemed a pivotal letter in the Pep Rally. The behavior was transparent and immensely sad.

Nevertheless, I exploited it for Nathaniel after Spring Break, at which time his Health class received the results of a mid-term comprising 40% of the final grade. According to Nathaniel--who at this early stage in our complicity boasted wildly about our predictive brilliance--Susan wore a wide Cheshire grin as Mrs. Landover returned to her a paper with a circled C- on its face. "C for Cheshire!" Nathaniel exclaimed amid wild piggish laughter. So moved was my brother by his own cleverness in this editorial detail that he included me in a warm follow-up compliment that striking not during failure, but during near failure, was our most masterful stroke. Although I agreed, I asked him why, maintaining my position of deference to his higher analytical skills. "Because she needed help, but not too desperately. Laziness is a bigger trap than despair," he explained loftily. The words came off his vile lips like the last unwritten lines of our script, reminiscent of Shakespearian foreshadowing. Still, I pretended bewilderment about their philosophical complexity and conceded my probable need to think on them before understanding them any. Nathaniel commended this wisdom and tenderly patted my shoulder.

A new physicality arose in him during this period—not expressly for me, but probably inclusive of me by extension. The world of touch was very new to him, and explored along the hipless waistlines and perky contours of girls he once considered unapproachable, it must have had a strong effect. For example, he took to rubbing his hands together and simultaneously stroking his wrists whenever sitting still. In our shared bedroom, especially while Nathaniel was clothed, he paid almost religious attention to his confined, expanding penis. On

several occasions, he brought himself to orgasm in his pants without any concern whatsoever that I witnessed this disgusting exhibition from my bunk, where thoughts of his impending, if figurative, castration could not erase the image of his rabid face from behind my eyelids. In those moments more than any other, as I looked at or did not look at but still saw in my mind's eye my physical reflection in the form of my brother, I most reviled being a twin: Nathaniel's twin. I could taste my deep hatred for him as a corrosive battery acid in both our souls.

This sensory translation of my disgust for Nathaniel into a nauseating flavor occurred often for me, demonstrating again how the frail will connect an emotion to something more tangible in order better to exorcise it. In this instance, however, the mechanism chose its own form of expression rather than complying with my choice. No, this was no simple connection between a ticking clock and a minor burst of jealousy. After all, jealousy was surmountable, and passing time emphasized that characteristic. Here, I underwent something more primitive, something timeless. In this quality, it aligned with a deeper, more primitive faculty: that of taste.

Unfortunately, Nathaniel too was discovering tastes, and sharing them with me as if to reward my work in gaining him access to them. On several occasions, late at night, after rolling his disengaged motorcycle down half our street and along our driveway to its designated parking spot beyond the thinner hedges and our large stockpile of firewood, he would creep through our upstairs window so skillfully as to use only one hand in the tall leaning pine tree. Then, upon rousing me from feigned sleep with that hand, he would thrust beneath my

helpless nose the other hand, fragrant with moist vaginal secretions, he supposed. In truth, these aromas were already evaporated, replaced by the smell of his motorcycle's throttle, which he often gripped tightly enough to imprint a light black grid across his palm. I never told him about this replacement, but rather submitted to his terrific excitement, enduring intentional slips of his fingertips into my nostrils, as if he were still probing female sex. I tasted the battery acid during these violations and lay awake all night above Nathaniel's deep snoring.

Yet the plan progressed too infallibly to abandon it. Within two short months, before the academic year was fully declined, no less than ten girls in our class had slept with Nathaniel on the grounds that he was intelligent and sensitive, and by these qualities a shining example of how to stand bravely apart from the behavior of the general junior high school population as an example of independent thinking. That he took to this role was impressive to me, and my reluctant admiration of him grew too apparent to deny. Soon I wondered why I couldn't be more like him—a distasteful introspection that resulted in massive confusion, especially when I admitted to myself that Nathaniel was my creation, and therefore an extension of myself. Although I tried to disregard the implications of these parallels, they goaded me in both my waking and sleeping existence.

One evening their deep hold of me produced a remarkable dream. I was alone in the bedroom; Nathaniel spent the night at the posh residence of a new glamorous male friend who had third row tickets to a Radiohead Concert. I

listened to some CD's, purposefully avoiding the new Radiohead albums in our collection, but eventually put on "OK Computer," and sulked. The music had an ethereal nostalgia to it that spoke directly to my situation, while the lyrics communicated an almost mythic vindictiveness:

Please could you stop the noise?
I'm trying to get some rest
from all the unborn chicken voices in my head?
Huh? What's that?

When I am king
you will be first against the wall
with your opinions
which are of no consequence at all.

Ambition makes you look very ugly.
Kicking squealing Gucci little pig!

[chorus]
In an interstellar burst
I'm back to save the universe!

That excerpt was from only the second song, but I listened to it over and over, programming my CD player for a continuous loop. Somewhere in the tenth or eleventh run, my head buried deep in my pillow, I must have dozed off. For the next thing I knew I was Nathaniel, running around naked in the long, glowing hallways of our school. I was late for a class. I checked my watch to see how late, but it was not on my wrist. I was Nathaniel. Nathaniel did not own a watch; he owned a motorcycle. I ran through the front door of the building to look for the motorcycle as a possible means of escape, but outside I found all my classmates waiting for a fire drill to end. In the front of this congregation were all the women

with whom Nathaniel had been intimate. My recognition of them aroused me. I was Nathaniel. Nathaniel wanted to sleep with these women.

Through the smiling crowd, Mr. Halberd, the principal, approached carrying a fireman's axe across his chest. He gestured to my groin and said, "Put that away, son, or I'll put it away for you—forever!" I looked down in dismay at a terribly swollen erection, but there was no way to comply with its concealment: I did not have any clothes; the girls struck provocative poses, moaning, deeply sucking their manicured fingers. In a fit of inspiration I decided I could fly, but only as powerfully as a chicken or a rooster. This ability carried me above the crowd by a very narrow margin so that my feet struck several people's heads—in particular, Mrs. Penny's.

"You look much better today, Nathaniel," Mrs. Penny remarked as my foot knocked her head clean off her shoulders. It bounced on the densely assembled crowd like a beach ball, reminiscent of a rock concert game. As the crowd propelled it ever upward again, it took leering bites at my toes, licking its lips as it descended in a blunt show of lust.

Yet I flapped awkwardly out of reach, arriving to the school's flagpole, where I rolled myself into the American flag, as if ending a bath. At once the crowd became silent and parted to accommodate my slow, now graceful descent. I spread my arms and settled into the center of the congregation, the flag staying with me without my having to unfasten it from the pole or cinch it at my chest. At ground level, I was a head taller than everyone—two heads with Mrs. Penny. People were ecstatic at the sight of me, trying to touch me even

lightly, as though I were precious. This reception warmed my heart, which beat strongly in my chest, visibly glowing beneath a wide stretch of blue fabric, illuminating the stars. These I plucked one by one from the flag and distributed tenderly to my new devotees, placing them lightly on upturned foreheads, as if delivering a Communion from Dr. Seuss. Daylight slowly magnified into a blinding glare, and I awoke to a new morning and the ceaseless labor of my stereo, which I did not shut off right away, but contemplated distantly.

I did not know what the dream meant in any practical sense, but responded from another angle, which obliquely suggested I devote myself to Nathaniel not out of malice, but fealty. I was anxious to see him and raced through my morning shower to accompany my father on the ride to pick Nathaniel up. My father was very sleepy that morning, committed to dreams of his own and reluctant to leave them behind. He backed out of the driveway haphazardly, overturning a plastic garbage can that should not have been there at the time.

"Who's turn was it to bring that can in yesterday. . . Nathaniel?" he asked, pausing just long enough at my brother's name to blur the distinction between audience and addressee. In other words, I wondered to myself was my father asking me if the turn belonged to Nathaniel, or was he asking me, as Nathaniel, if I knew whose turn it was?

"It wasn't my turn," I said cryptically, encouraging the issue.

"Well it is now," my father huffed.

“Anything for my brother,” I said cheerfully, and popped quickly from the stationary vehicle to the curb, where the can gently concluded a slow shiver. As I raised the can upward, a manila envelope slid from its former position along the inner rim to the bottom. The envelope was sealed shut and pristine, as if intended for the mailbox, although it bore no address. I stretched my arm into the upright receptacle up to my shoulder and reached for the lone item. As I seized it, I noticed my watch at arm’s length, surrounded by dim empty garbage can. I tried to shake it from my wrist, but the band was secure. The impulse passed and I grabbed the manila envelope and returned to the car. I climbed into the passenger seat and placed the envelope on my lap, but did not open or further examine it. My father put the car into drive and pulled away from our house and the quiet court.

Some distance later, my father noticed, after yawning deeply, that a package sat on my lap. At a red light, he turned his head to me and opened his mouth, but did not speak. First, he examined the bundle, examined me, the bundle again, then me again—confused about all of it.

“What have you got there. . .Nathaniel?” he said. It was a funny idea that in that small envelope I was carrying Nathaniel—however accurate.

“My doubles comics,” I said quickly, squeezing the package tightly in my hands for the first time, as if to find a fast answer by that action. The envelope was the right size for comics. Nathaniel certainly owned enough duplicates to fill it that well. But more to the point, I wanted to say something of very little interest to my father, thereby discouraging his curiosity.

"Let me see," he said anyway.

"The light's green," I indicated, pointing.

"Oh," observed my father, suddenly sleepy again. He pushed on the gas pedal with an obvious resignation about continuing our journey. "Do you boys want to get breakfast somewhere after we're all in the car? Just name the place."

"I have to trade these comics before the shop gets crowded."

"We can do that afterwards."

"No, they don't take them if there are too many people," I lied.

"Oh, all right," my father conceded, too tired to disagree with me further.

He slowed the car for a turn and stared away from me, left. As we mounted the new road, my father muttered his reluctance to go home and work on our den. He sounded like a punctured tire losing pressure and going completely flat before it gets where it needs to. I thought about that image and its suggestion of assistance: that is, one loving, filial slice and the den was a wash.

I did not have the tools on me for this remedy, of course. When I badgered my tired father to ring at the front door himself for Nathaniel instead of sending me, the request was not a means of gaining the solitude needed for a charitable act of vandalism, but rather an extended sleight-of-hand, by which, while my father was climbing a long assembly of steps, I worked the front seat back, lifted the revealed lip of the floor board carpet, put the envelope beneath, replaced the carpet and mashed it down with both my feet, examined the arrangement and decided against it on account of the obvious physical

distension and likely distraction it would cause, again peeled away the carpet, removed the envelope, juggled it nervously for several seconds while biting my lower lip, opened the glove compartment, fought unsuccessfully to wedge the envelope among the billowing accordion of papers and manuals there set into motion, forced the glove compartment securely closed with my feet, craned my neck during these latest exertions and therefore took notice of the sun roof, instantly remembered essential details of its construction, depressed the open button only halfway so as to slide back the sunroof itself but leave the higher tinted sun bubble in place, slid the envelope onto the remaining portion of lower sunroof without further opening it, reversed directions on the open button, and by that whole procedure snugly sandwiched the envelope between the closed sun bubble and closing sunroof, which was opaque and above our heads. The only dangers in this arrangement were: would my brother or father notice the envelope through the sun bubble while getting back into the car, and if not, would either suddenly opt for an open sunroof when we started to drive again? I could not answer these questions, but sat tensely, awaiting their resolution. As my two family members approached the vehicle, I bit my thumbnail and trembled.

With head bowed, my father walked around to the driver's side and opened the door. He never raised his eyes. He was too busy digging into his deep hip pockets for the car keys, which were already in the ignition, which was already on. As my father sat down to this discovery, he muttered something annoyed about driving. "Why not and well and driving itself," he said, or some

such gibberish. Then he absently turned the keys forward and made the engine screech horribly.

Meanwhile, Nathaniel was in the middle of a stern injunction, gestured to me from beyond the passenger window with a shrugging forefinger, that I make myself scarce for his immediate seizure of my current position. I complied with this request, but not before manually popping open the front door for him as an invitation to replace me, and then kicking it open further with my feet as I squirmed between the narrow gap between the front seats, like a frog. When the engine screeched, I was almost all the way through, and broke into hysterics as I completed the maneuver.

“What’s so funny?” Nathaniel demanded suspiciously.

“I’m a frog!” I exclaimed, puffing my cheeks.

“Oh, that’s brilliant: a frog.”

“Yes, a frog,” I confirmed. But already no one was listening. After passing judgment, Nathaniel cast his attention elsewhere very quickly, gazing out his window at the enormous house on the big mound of earth. There, by the open front door, beneath a shadow too thick to penetrate clearly, a lone figure stood perfectly still under a jutting extension of the roof. As my father pulled away from the property and we lost our line of sight to the figure, its distant, indistinct face flared into view for one split second behind the glow of an upheld match. Then the darkness closed around it.

“What have you and Adam been doing?” I asked in a general fashion, aware that Nathaniel was experimenting with cigarettes lately.

"You know perfectly well," he replied, not looking at me. "It was your stupid idea!"

"What are you boys talking about?" asked my father.

"Nothing," we said.

"Then how about that breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"I'm starving!" exclaimed Nathaniel. His one vote of agreement was enough. Suddenly my father came to life, almost speaking in tongues from a cryptic list of possible eateries, the spare few I recognized at least forty five minutes away driving.

"I want Hudson's," Nathaniel voted at its passing name. But my father kept listing others, each less likely than the next. Meanwhile, he leaned on the gas to match pace with his racing mind, which did not promise a fine additional model for our navigational needs. In a short while, we began a practice of surprise turns and counter-turns that got us virtually nowhere, although we passed countless diners and fast food courts in our frenzy to settle on any such place.

At length, my father's paroxysm abated, and he pulled into a gas station to ask directions from the chubby attendant. I watched through the speckled windshield as the two men—one lean, the other lumpy—exchanged inscrutable words and exaggerated gestures. Their conversation lasted uncommonly long, and I took to filling its missing volume with a dialogue of my own invention, as was my craft and occasional gift: *Be patient, it always climbs out eventually; I*

ain't waitin', mister, this belt buckle's a time machine; I'd rather not look way down there, I'm going to look that way; Suit yerself, but I'm pickin you one generous smurf berry from under my shirt; I'll eat it like so; Oh no you won't, I'm throwin' it, throwin' it; That was unkind and fills me with regret; That customer has shocking immeasurable hemorrhoids to regret, see the difference; Those children don't belong to me. . .

Eventually, Nathaniel caught the spirit of this meandering diversion and contributed several lines of his own. Mostly, he took up the part of the gas jockey, disagreeing with our frowning father about how easy it was to stay thin on a diet consisting exclusively of pudding pops. To prove this point, the helpful gentleman bent over for a coin and promptly tore his greasy pants wide apart in the posterior. That my father missed this detail was unfortunate, considering the wide vaudevillian possibilities already set in motion by the drama. Yet who would have connected them? Nathaniel and I were laughing too hard over the split seam to tackle that responsibility. As our father returned, we convulsed helplessly, causing the car to bounce with us. Our father gripped his door handle from the outside and Nathaniel and I tried—by some unspoken, instantaneous, strongly compelling meeting of minds—to stifle our laughter with an alert and disciplined silence, but the exercise was useless. Not only did our telltale breathlessness rekindle our hysterics uncontrollably merely by reminder, but had it not, our father's contribution afforded no possible defense: as the man positioned himself to sit, his backside blazing the trail, the red and black

checkerboard of his boxer shorts appeared like a flag through a vertical tear in his trousers.