

CRYING AND THINKING IN A STREAM OF CARDIGANS

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I just want to pick off every little loose fiber from his fuzzed up cardigan. Pick them off like little ticks and snack on them as I go, like those little monkeys I saw at the Atlanta Zoo the other day. Spreading the hairs, exposing the scalp, picky, picky, poo. I think he has one in every color. At least the fabric is thick enough for the tears of my childhood. For the spit of my S's. Remember drugs? Remember the weed store that looked like an Apple store? Sweet Flower, I think it was. You could browse the rows of shiny pinewood tables, check out the buds, the creams, and the accessories. Now *this* is all the craze. This is the new addiction and escape from our problems. The gateway drug to it: depression, anxiety, life. Still, only a temporary relief, like a phone call to get out of a bad date. But in order to escape your problems, you have to talk about them. It was the way that everyone tricked themselves into feeling safe and secure. Just take a hit of *I'm working through my problems! I'm facing my demons, my shadows, my trauma, my nose hairs!* Oh, how we lust after the opportunity to pay another human being to sit there, shut up and talk at them for an hour, or 30 minutes if you need that quick fix. Except for the occasional affirmational moans to keep us coming back, you just purge your feeling guts and feel the dopamine hit on the inhale. On the exhale.

I can feel the ants climbing my ankle hairs. I can't sit on this couch any longer across from cardigan face. I wonder if he's still listening. I can hardly hear him through the smell of his teakwood and tobacco incense, dripping ashes on the table in front of us. I walk over to his bookshelf, pretending to be interested, though you can actually discover a lot about a person based on the curation of their bookshelf. This one is built into the wall, which means he had an obligation to fill it, not a compulsory pleasure to. There's the unsurprising psychoanalytical texts, of course. A framed degree here, a framed degree there. Some kind of spherical sculpture. Actually one here. Cement balls there. Just balls everywhere? Black balls, balls with speckled paint on them. Balls in a trio, balls by

themselves. Jesus balls of Christ! Out of an uncomfortable reflex, I pull a random book like a slot machine lever:

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Great Essays in Science. Seems pretentious and I take it. I like the bend of the softcover. It's heavy but malleable. The lamination is ripped at the corner and starting to peel away from it. Charles Darwin, Bertrand Russel, Oppenheimer, Sigmund Freud, (explains the balls) Albert Einstein. It looks old, from the 1980s, with its fat inky font, maybe a bold serif, like a Times New Roman wannabe, maybe Garamond. *Can we know the Universe?* *Reflections on a Graing* by Carl Sagan. I bring it with me to the couch and sit. Don't want to waste my remaining time dilly dallying. I glide my thumb over 2 the edge of the book and it sounds like a hundred typewriters bustling in the distance with tiny little pops at the end of each bar. Cardigan face watches me as the smoke of the incense makes baby tornadoes from my book wind in between us.

He knows the exact angle his head must be tilted to show listening. It's like they keep protractors in their pockets in training to get it just right until it's ingrained in muscle memory. I've memorized all of the angles. Ninety degrees is neutral, then shifts to the left, his left, to signal that the session has begun. An obtuse angle, away from the right shoulder, is the cozy angle that shows the sufficient amount of acknowledgement to make you feel heard. Anything less than forty-five degrees and they've zoned all the way out and cleared their swimmer's ear. In that angle, each word that comes out of your mouth starts to feel distant from yourself, shaky and inaudible. It increases the heart rate, sends signals to the brain to prepare for disappointment and devise a plan to get your money back. But there's a certain a gle of the head tilt that's just right. It's just enough affirmation to keep you satisfied and just enough curiosity to make you want to prove something more - to signal to yourself that you're hitting the ultimate climax - the breakthrough.

The thought of it brings a smile to my face. I squeeze the book in my right hand and it starts to melt behind my knuckles. The angle of his chin is almost right there but could use a slight adjustment. I know he hears me, but is he listening? Just a little tap in the right direction. Maybe a big tap. Maybe a *Great Essays in Science* to that rosy cheek. I pull my elbow back and raise...



“And that’s our time. See you next week?” he says.

“Yep, see ya,” I place the book down on the table, next to the stray ashes. A little bit of it gets swept up in the wind and scatters. That was a good one. Inhale. On the exhale.