

## The First Full Thought of Her Life

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There is a place where a real river runs along the edges of the parking lots, lots that stretch a mile, asphalt poured out over the earth and the whole resort crunched down on top—planted trees, swimming pools, a store that sells snacks, liquor, and a small selection of wines. And a family (mother, father, girl, baby), driving away from it toward the dune.

...

Her dream had been to go there, the whole time she was pregnant, each time, she imagined it, how they'd all climb the sand dune, how they'd stand in the sun at the top, the breeze, the lake in the distance, the photo they'd bring home of their hands raised in triumph. They'd lost the rental car in the lot and almost didn't make it, found the car, couldn't find the exit, couldn't find the road, found the wrong road, found the right road, arrived finally. The parking lot was half-full.

The dune was so white it looked like aluminum. A flawless day.

...

The shooter was already in position at this point.

...

The father pulled the visor down and said that a dune is a pile of sand on a parking lot. He said that people wrote books, created myths, invented whole philosophies about trudging uphill in hot sand, the futility of such an enterprise. He said that sand works like a microwave, cooks you from the inside through its reflective properties. He said that a glacier dropped this stuff down here and left ten thousand years ago. Sand is unhygienic, full of prehistoric infection. He was out of the car now, frowning into the backseat and attempting to dislodge the baby from her car seat. The little girl said that pee is unhygienic and the father agreed.

...

But the mother had climbed this same dune as a child. And now she'd brought her own family here, on a mission of making memories for her daughter, hopefully ones as good as the best of her own, and this dune had been among them. You couldn't drive right up to it back then. You hiked a path through sandy woods. None of that was here anymore but you could still go up and come down. The same sand carried away on the bottoms of your shoes.

...

STRUCTURE:  
GOOD USE  
OF LISTS...

RHYTHM - GOOD VARIATION

WHY NOT  
CONTINUE W/  
THE  
STRUCTURE?

Humor is a  
GOOD COUNTER TO THE  
OBLIVIOUS "SHOOTER"

INTERESTING NARRATIVE STANCE... UNCERTAINTY + COMPARED TO OMNI IN

The shooter was in a silver pickup, '13 or '14, green license plates (Colorado?), first letter Y.

MOTHER

The mother and girl walked around the shooter's fender, and started up the dune.

WOULD  
HAVE USED  
THE PARALLEL  
CONSTRUCT  
TO BE  
CONTINUED

Three miles away a dozen families were waiting for the boat ride. A tour of tiny islands seen from afar. Two miles away a dozen families were creating devastation by the pool: pieces of meat and bread, toys that made strange noises, hairpins and spilled drinks, smeared ketchup, tiny stray shoes, wads of napkin, towels tossed into chairs, strollers overturned, french fries on the ground, and the families— in swimsuits, T-shirts, floaters— parading over the cement toward the water.] . . . The shooter's primary weapon lay across his lap, a Bushmaster AR-15 semiautomatic

rifle. He also had a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun for short range, if necessary. E had used a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun. D had used an Intratec 9mm semiautomatic handgun attached to a strap slung over his shoulder. N had used such an inferior weapon as to be almost adorable, but that was in 1967. L had brought 6,300 rounds of ammunition, which seemed either paranoid or optimistic, or like showing off. W had used an AK-47-style assault weapon with a thirty-round magazine. Y had had a multitude of weapons: an AR-15, a Glock, a SIG Sauer handgun. F and C had had sawed-off weapons thirty years old. They'd had bombs and knives, a real showdown. White sand. The angle was steep. There'd be nowhere to run. And sand is heavy. It would all be in slow motion. Keatonesque.

LIKE IT

It was hard to climb in the sand. The mother hadn't counted on that. Halfway up she paused, stopped to catch her breath, and started again. When they were almost to the top, she stopped, sat down in the sand. (She'd been up half the night [again] with the baby and then couldn't fall back asleep, and she'd sat on the floor in the bathroom like a drunk.) You go, she said to the girl now. I'm right here. It was only a few yards really. Below, the father was walking gingerly toward the dune, [arms out as if he were holding a grenade because the baby was alert but not yet screaming.]

WORKING  
TOO  
HARD

YES... STRONG CHARACTERIZATION. COMPARE TO

Green cargo pants, a black T-shirt that read Don't Shoot, a black cap, bill forward, which he'd now taken off and put on the seat beside him. He spotted the girl, a lone child, staggering, her belly protruding, the sand forming a wave to lift her and gently undulate her higher. The girl, and the shooter raising his weapon.



Oh, the layers under the surface (he thought), the air pockets, the parallel worlds, the possible futures that could explode out of this moment, the pasts that didn't come to pass: they continue to spin themselves out until they run into concrete and unspool where they are, spilling into the gaps, gathering around him as he lifted his rifle.

...

Oh, the inaccessible inner lives all around us (thought some birds flying by overhead), the lives we can't imagine, the water world, the dominion of the insects, the plants, the antediluvian consciousnesses, made up of light and dark, moist and dry.

...

There is how time doesn't work the way we think it does (thought the baby), or space either, the scientists have it all wrong and someday we will know this, or someone will, but in the meantime, the wrong way and the real way run alongside each other, along with all the other rejected theories going back through history, the lives of the baby and the father running along them, strings of frayed yarn.

There is how people think their lives are one thing but they are wrong (thought the father). They think they know the world. What entitled, self-satisfied assholes.

...

Ahem. The mother would just like to chime in at this juncture, if all parties have quite finished philosophizing? If she wouldn't be interrupting anything urgent? If everyone isn't too busy? (Ummmm, sure.) Did her husband just propose that she has an illusion of certainty? Did he just suggest she thinks she "knows the world"? (Ummmm.) And you, shooter, did you assume you'd be introducing something to this family by flattening the girl out dead and bloody right before their eyes? (Well, surely it'd be a shock.) In fact there'd already been a "shooter" introduced to this family. (There had?) Her husband, shot as a child in the head. (The father below, the one who's afraid of sand, he'd already been shot?) Lived anyway. (In the head?) It had been a break-in. His mother had been unable to protect him. Picked off at five years old. World is full of danger. (And he was fine, the husband?) Fine enough. No pituitary gland. Those things don't just grow back like a tomato. To this day he had to medicate with hormones every night of his life or he'd die. Try looking that one in the face, Mr. "Shooter." (Well the shooter wasn't going to go for the head. Jesus. The middle. He'd get her right in the heart.) We'll see about that, Mr. Stupid.

SO THIS IS ALL SUPPOSED TO BE "CLEVER." AND IT IS DIFFERENT. INVENTIVE. BUT FOR THE SAKE OF, LOTS OF "TELLING"

BLAT

↓ H

NOPE

AND

MAYBE

STRUCTURE... OK, SURE.

...  
At the bottom of the dune another family was arriving, the inside of their car like a circus: ponies and dolls, a tinkling music, glitter sprayed over the seats along with other less respectable spills.

NICE

Half a mile down the road another father had pulled to the side of the road and was saying could they shut up back there, could they just please goddamnit shut up for thirty seconds while he figured out where they were? Three miles away a dozen families had waited so long for the boat ride that they'd descended through all the rungs of impatience available to them and now were all nearly asleep, a collection of dazed, brightly colored bodies, possessions dropping to their sides, the smallest faces drooling.

...  
Oh if he had any notion of the clatter of deaths and broken bodies behind this family. He thought they didn't know suffering? At twelve she'd nursed her mother through an illness that had lasted three hundred days. She'd had a brother— now in a grave in a desert. She'd had another baby, before these two, who hadn't made it out alive. There had been her grandmother, whom she'd never met, locked up at forty and never seen again so that her father had had a hole in him while he raised her. There'd been plenty of others, dead, or alive but damaged. Earth is full of them, more assembling and disassembling every day. Among them, yes, this perfect little girl, but she'd been pretty unlikely, considering. (And the baby, don't forget, if the father might put a word in, holding her up at the edge of the lot, one foot in the sand.) (The baby, who had screamed for eight months when she was born, before settling into an intelligence not yet seen in this family and frankly a bit frightening. Arranging her blocks in perfect rows. Sitting alone in a tiny chair with a book, "reading.") NICE TENSION IN A THROW AWAY CHAIR.

...  
A civilian version of the M16, tremendous instrument, the same kind carried by F at C, now half-hidden behind the sunshade, impossible to see through the tinted glass, only the tip visible as he cracked the window. His body so tense it felt calm.

And don't give her any lip about privilege. This family holds representation of nearly all the seven categories of earthly sufferings. It earned its privilege through immense striving in the face of grief the shooter will never know, [and she knew this because she herself was too busy managing this striving and grief to take an afternoon out and wander the area with a weapon.] Did

INVENTIVE THOUGHT & SOLID EXECUTION IN THIS "EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED" STORY



he think she never looked around and thought, "What a bunch of assholes. I'd like to take them all out"? That is a particularly unoriginal thought. She had that thought at the supermarket every week. She saw a whole plane of people having that thought on the tarmac three days before. She'd think it right now if she took the time to look around, but she wouldn't because she was busy, unlike Stupid over here.] She had other things on her mind. The idea of killing everyone around her was just one little pile of thought in her brain, off in a corner, might get stepped on and tracked around by her shoe. Her mind was fertile with thoughts, all of them growing and twisting and filling the space, filling the sky, most of them more honorable than that. She'd take this guy on. She would. (Seven categories ...?) Poverty. Her husband grew up in a concrete house by a swamp. Her husband's family picked garbage to eat and her husband grew up among them. His brother spent half his life in prison and came out with so many tattoos he looked like a comic book. Political strife. On her mother's side she was descended from a race that had been chased over every continent. For thousands of years her people had had to move at a moment's notice, hide their coins in their hair like magicians. In Europe her people had been rounded up, placed in cattle cars, and incinerated without ceremony. Practically every relation she should have had was never born. The world still despised her race today. Don't think she never felt it. (Political strife, boff! That's a little finger waving itself.) And what is his ethnicity, might she ask? Hmm. Brown eyes. She'd been hoping for blue. Well anyway, tough guy.

...  
He was drawn by her purposeful tread. When she'd clearly cleared the top he'd do it, her full childish figure delineated by the sky. He could hear the cheers of the other shooters of America, he could hear their voices.

...  
The girl kept climbing. She didn't look back over her shoulder to check that her mother was still there. She believed her mother could no longer see her. The sun blinking over the dune, the sand heavy under her feet, her hat (print of whales and waves) blowing, the arc of earth in front of her. To her she was going on alone. In fact that may have been the first full thought of her life, forming on that dune, a strange sand flower, her mind, blooming into existence that very moment: that she was alone She didn't mean alone alone, of course. Obviously there were people milling around, struggling in the heat, feet slogging, sliding down as they trudged up. At

→ NICE, TO CREATE THIS MOMENT OF SELF AWARENESS... BUT DO WE EXPECT WHAT'S COMING?

least two kids in the vicinity were throwing tantrums and another was rolling past her, laughing. But no one was watching her at that moment, looking at her.

... *← SUPPOSED TO BE AN "AHA!" BUT...*

The shooter was watching the girl. Her mother was watching the girl. Did you think she'd let her daughter toddle off unattended? Child was four. She was only twelve feet away, now fourteen. A young woman, a soldier in Nevada, was watching the girl through a drone-based surveillance camera in the sky. Practicing. She was scooting around overhead, focusing in on objects, in this case, the girl, to see how much detail she could get. Could she see each of the girl's fingers, could she see the shape of her eyes? Could she see the design on her shirt (little fishes, sea-themed head to toe, mermaids on her shoe tips)? Skill-building exercise. Taking a break while the first lieutenant was gone getting a sandwich. Her father below could make out the girl's tiny figure. He had the baby, weeping miserably into his shirt, in one arm, and he was squinting under the other arm to see his daughter. Look at her go, the little locomotive— but why was his wife sitting in the sand? *[The girl's grandmother at home was watching in her mind's eye. The* **BLAH** *grandmother always had been a little witchy. While pulling on her Salvation Army volunteer smock, she had a flash of the child's shirt in the sun]* In this moment more people were watching this small, unremarkable human tread through hot sand (her mind blinking on like a night-light, like an alarm)

*ALWAYS TOO MUCH*

Other things were happening. The heat was too strong— the mother had underestimated it— and the girl could get heatstroke and die. The father was right about sand: the girl planted her next step four inches from a tick that carried a new sand-borne disease related to Lyme. The girl was about to spontaneously develop a deadly cancer (it can happen like that). She could in this moment become someone who would grow up to be an alcoholic. But no kidding there was a shooter on the ground. He'd released the safety now, he was adjusting his scope. The girl, drawing a bead on her.

...

A thousand miles away a family was at an amusement park and it was awful. The boy was sick. The in-laws were cheap and wouldn't spend any money. It was cold. They were snapping the Mickey Mouse photo. The father was trying to get his money's worth, exhorting them to "draw on a smile" with their invisible pens. They were all grimacing and the boy had torn off his ears.

*HA. SURE. BUT WHY?*



...  
Dune. Ridge of crushed shells and stones and evaporated water. Built by air and ice. An accumulation of simplest elements. *OK. SURE. BUT...?*

...  
The mother. She'd told him all she could to save her daughter's life, all she was able to, though there was more that she could not tell him because she could not speak it, not even in her mind.

At a certain moment six years before, none of this might have happened. No little girl in the sand, no baby screaming at the edge of the parking lot, or at least not this particular one for the shooter to now glance back at irritably to see where the racket was coming from. There'd been one night in particular at a hotel. They'd been trying to create a rekindling "getaway" (despite all their debt, despite the baby who hadn't made it out alive) but there'd been a scene and he'd

*Everything is telling except the moment on the dune*  
gotten away, left, and walked the dark, foreign streets while she sat alone on the bed and wept, ("Don't you dare come back, don't you dare," but he'd dared, and at the time it had seemed like a supreme loyalty after all that had been said between them in that room (though where else was he going to go? she thought six years later on a dry hill, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen feet now from her daughter) and they'd made it through. Now in the sand the sound in her head went, Six years later she was walking up the dune with her daughter. These things happen but one goes up the dune anyway, bare-headed, no bulletproof vests, faces open to the sky, and if everyone else has peeled off— father, baby, brother, and so many more— if you yourself won't make it, you sit in the sand and you send the girl on without you, as you must, and if that doesn't work, you hope something will and that one day she will know that to see her in front of you was all you wanted.

...  
*? (NARRATOR) ??*  
Will he shoot? I don't have access to his brain, to all of it, only to his intention and then I am swept out (like a fluff blowing off the table). The sun might be too bright, for one thing, too late in the afternoon. They were all looking dead west. He may have waited too long. He may have to come back tomorrow. He had the whole summer, his whole life really, before him. But the girl was perfect, the other shooters of America were saying. The most obvious example in the area of what it is to be human: one's continual encounter with inequity. The marking of that encounter. The world would be horrified by the first shot landing on a little blond girl. Then he'd work down, plucking off the others. Or not. One could be enough. This one.

...

One mile away another mother was buying them nothing from the gift shop. Four miles away another father was pulling up to a cabin. *INCREDIBLE CAMERA PULL BACK*  
... *↳ SUSPENSE. POINTLESSNESS.*

The girl reached the dune's top. She stood in the hot sand, the parking lot below on one side, the lake in the distance on the other, Mother twenty feet down. For the first time she knew what it was like to be her. The foreignness of herself to herself, the surprise of her existence.

He released the safety, winked into the scope, finger trembling to pull the trigger, shoot, send the girl rolling, spewing blood, her mouth in the sand.

If she lives, if the shooter doesn't pull the trigger, later the surprise of herself will dull. She'll grow familiar (or frightening) to herself, then bored (or desperate). Then will come that inconvenient teenage self-hatred, like an avalanche, the worst of it hurled at the poor mother, another entry in the ledger of bad luck. But the girl would soften later, she would unstiffen over the years, over the decades, by degrees, until one day thirty years after this day on the dune, she would achieve the middle-age calm that is happiness. *22.222 - OH. SURE* The simplicity of the formula somehow takes that many years to reach. She would take a trip to Hawaii and bring her aging mother, leaving her own children and sister behind, and she and her mother would have the time of their lives (well, not exactly, but it would have its moments).

And the baby, if he doesn't shoot? What will become of her? Same as anyone, though she would never reach the top of this dune, this particular one. She would grow up and climb others— sand dunes, snow dunes, grassy hills, mountains, slopes of all sorts— but her father hadn't carried her up this one and they'd never come back (" Why on earth would we voluntarily go there more than once?" he'd say), so that would be that. But many other people would climb it, if he doesn't shoot, nothing exceptional there. It's a tourist attraction, after all. In summer season hundreds of people a day would clomp up that dune through the sand, take photos of themselves, and go back down. Those photos would wind up in all sorts of spaces and arrangements online, six races regularly represented (though the average skewed heavily white and Latino). A mound of sand, sky behind, arms open in conquest. Something about the light made the people look fit, an optical illusion.

*WHY???*

*TIME  
ZOOM OUT  
ONLY  
SERVE  
SUSPENSE...  
BUT MORE  
TERRIFYING*



...

If he shoots, one doesn't want to think what will become of this family.

...

The gun will go off. He will shoot. He must. But here, now? He had casings all over the floor of the car. He could feel every cell as the air touched it and changed it. He'd never felt younger. His brothers, the other shooters of America. He saluted them. But they were impatient. Stop stalling. Get on with it.

...

Don't, don't do it, the mother screamed over the dune, though the shooter couldn't hear her. Not this one. Please. Not her. Somebody, help.

...

Thirty miles away another family was arriving. Tangled up in three seats, they looked as though they'd been in that row for days, though the flight was only two hours. They were wearily watching a movie. The protagonist on the tiny screen was the hope of civilization. He embodied all the world's longings and sadnesses. When he flew away, it got dark, and civilization waited for him to come back, which he did, barely in time. He was there to save them. Just then, below, the shooter pulled the trigger. Above, the screen blinked off. The plane was descending. Out the window the glinting waves were like spilled jewels or glowing undersea algae or floating space junk. The earth was made of water and filled with floating islands of light. They were diving right into the thickest part of the biggest, widest island.

INVENTIVE TO BE INVENTIVE

PLOT: EXPECTED

CHAR: DON'T CARE

STRUCTURE: SURE. BUT WHY?