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Tragedy, 1979

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ASHLEY HEESTAND

Tragedy, 1979

I imagine:

Bodies: sweating, pulsing. Your stomach contracts, your lungs contract, your face contracts. Lick your lips; taste the salt and iron. Breathe in; expand; don't breathe out. Imagine bodies: pushing, falling. You're swept up and swallowed whole, like Jonah in the whale. Close your eyes! Wake up! Escape the ribs and blood and organs and bodies: teeming, swarming, overflowing. The walls crawl closer, like suffocating shadows. An elbow grinds a gap in your spine, in your collarbone, in your mouth. Bones strain and snap, collapse: purple blossoms and red vines and a symphony: buzzing, shouting, screaming, sobbing, rock music. Fleishy fingers grab your arms, your waist, your pants, your neck. Flesh heaves under black cotton t-shirts. Flesh against your flesh: wet, hot, desperate, panting. You shrink.

I read:

All 18,348 tickets were sold in 90 minutes. Almost 204 tickets were sold per minute, more than three every second.

I remember:

Looking at a photograph of my uncle Kevin and my mother as teenagers. They stood side by side behind a dark wooden table. My mother was smaller, two years younger, and she smiled. She had long, straight hair like Marsha Brady, and a face like mine. She says she avoided getting in trouble because my uncle always did. My uncle Kevin was tall and thin. He wore flannel, prescription aviators, a bushy beard. My mom listened to the music I grew up on: Genesis, Kansas, Queen, Lynyrd

Skynyrd, and Bad Company. Kevin listened to Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Yes, Black Sabbath, and The Who.

I imagine:

Connie Burns' funeral. She has two small children, a husband, a sea of people in black ties and skirt suits: friends, family, neighbors, strangers. They wait in line at the calling hours to offer condolences to the family: handshakes from the men, hugs from the women, I'm sorry for your loss. A young girl waits alone. She does not cry. She wears wide black trousers, a gray sweater. She has a large envelope tucked under her arm, wrapped in the comics from the Sunday paper, a red bow taped to the top with too much scotch tape. When she reaches the open casket, she places the gift inside, next to Connie's right hand. "Merry Christmas," she whispers. His hand on his small son's head, Danny Burns watches her; his eyes clear with curiosity. When the girl shakes his hand, he starts to ask, "How did you know Connie?" but she is already gone. She flees the funeral home, runs past flower arrangements and uncomfortable chairs and the boy who hangs coats. Outside, the cold air soothes her flushed face. She gulps it in furiously, and fumbles to get her keys out of her pocket. She unlocks her car and gets inside, sits for a moment, staring out the windshield at the cars that pass by, unaware. As she drives home, she cries.

At the funeral home, the mourners leave. They shake Danny Burns' hand one more time, clap him on the back, get in their cars, and drive away. He sits in silence in an uncomfortable armchair with pink upholstery. His children have gone with their grandparents, and he should have gone too. He couldn't. Yet again, he stands to look at his wife, promising himself that he will go home soon and try to sleep. The package from the girl in the gray sweater sits next to Connie's hand. He lifts it out of the coffin, careful not to bump into what once was her skin. The newspaper crinkles under his fingers, and he reads part of Charlie Brown. He smiles, then tears the paper away slowly, letting it drop on the funeral

home floor. It's a record: Who Are You by The Who.

I read:

that when they found out, the band went silent. They were four grown men, four famous men: Kenny Jones, John Entwistle, Pete Townshend, and Roger Daltrey. Four men posed in the textbook definition of despair; one pulled out a cigarette, but couldn't light it, one collapsed against the wall, one just stared. I read that Roger Daltrey cried. At the concert in Buffalo, New York the next night, he said to the crowd, "We lost a lot of family last night. This show's for them."

I remember:

listening to the Roger Daltrey's voice go crazy as he sang "You Better You Bet" in our car all summer. My mother had bought their greatest hits CD at Target, although The Who was traditionally "Kevin's music."

I remember driving to the job I hated too early in the morning, my windows rolled partway down and Daltrey's voice exploding from mediocre speakers. "When I say I love you, you say you better, you better, you better, you bet!" I sang along.

I imagine:

a teenage girl waiting outside Cincinnati Riverfront Coliseum on the day of the concert. The parking lot fills up by mid-afternoon, with thousands of teenagers and twenty-somethings wearing concert t-shirts under heavy coats and scarves. Wes and Tom got them tickets back in September.

On the day of the concert, they're ready to go by noon. She wears straight jeans and a button down shirt, a headband; her friend Jackie is in a belted dress. It's cold outside, and they both carry winter jackets under their arms. Tom picks them up in his small, rusting sedan. He and Wes sit in the front seat, she and Jackie share the back. They stop at the gas sta-

tion on the way there to buy snacks and cheap beer. The boys carry two six packs each back to the car, then hurry back inside to pick up two more. Their tickets are general admission, festival seating; the earlier they get there, the better seats they get. When they set up camp in the parking lot around 1:00 PM, the crowd is already arriving. A drunk girl in a tight skirt offers to take Wes into the back seat of her car. With a sidelong glance at his girlfriend, he declines. The concert won't start until 8:00.

They drink beer and laugh and introduce themselves to the group of people at the neighboring campsite. Tom and Wes get into a conversation with a skinny kid in a floppy hat. The three of them wander off to smoke weed, and the two girls huddle together under their coats, drinking beer more quickly now that the boys are gone. When Wes comes back, he sits close to them, and slides his hand in the back pocket of the girl's jeans. "Ready for the concert?" he says. She kisses him quickly. "I can't wait." They walk off together. As they push their way through the crowd, he keeps kissing her neck. She shoves him away playfully, then grabs onto his arms, his waist, his belt loops, until she regains balance. He laughs and laughs, wraps his arms around her. She looks over his shoulder at the crowd; it seems to extend forever, marked by clouds of smoke and close clusters that swell larger each second. "We'll never get a good seat," says Wes. She doesn't care, she laughs, and grabs his hand. They sway together a moment, then he lifts her, his hands on her waist. "What can you see up there?" he yells. She laughs, "Absolutely nothing. Nothing but ecstasy."

I read:

that eleven people died that night from compressive asphyxia.

Here are the ten names that were released. Not one was over thirty. It was a Monday.

PETER D. BOWES, 18

TEVA RAE LADD, 27

DAVID J. HECK, 19

CONNIE SUE BURNS, 21
JAMES T. WARMOTH, 21
BRYAN J. WAGNER, 17
WALTER H. ADAMS, JR., 22
KAREN L. MORRISON, 15
JACQUELINE L. ECKERLE, 15
STEVE M. PRESTON, 19
PHILLIP K. SNYDER, 20.

I remember:

watching VH1's 100 Most Shocking Music Moments. It's one of those marathons that lasts five hours because it's impossible to cover more than twenty shocking events per hour, plus commercials. You don't want to over-stimulate your audience. Of course, nothing important ever happens until the fifth hour. And of course, you can't stop watching once you start. Luckily, I didn't even turn the television on until the host was wrapping up number fifteen.

And I remember being shocked.

Repeatedly.

Then horrified.

I imagine:

panic. Fear jolts through your body, an impulse that screams to run, run! People mill around, but they are not people; they are bodies, and bodies do not mill; they teem, swarm, pulverize. They overflow. The walls crawl closer. You clench the bench seat in both hands: crush, kill, obliterate. The bodies are alive. Their flesh ripples and dances. Their flesh calls out to your flesh. They flock to you. One sits next to you on the bench, and your body convulses. Pain flashes from your ribs through your knuckles to the tips of your fingers, and your head clears. You watch the children skate by; they laugh and wave. The girl in the pink skating skirt blows you a kiss. You hear her whisper, "My auntie's an a-gora-

phobic.”

I read:

that the Who formed in London in 1964: Townshend, Daltrey, Entwistle, and Keith Moon. The Who’s first single was “Zoot Suit” in 1964. Their first studio album was *My Generation* in 1965. It reached number five on the UK charts. Moon died from a prescription drug overdose in 1978. He was replaced with Kenny Jones. “You Better You Bet” reached number one on the US charts in 1981. The year I was born, they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. *Rolling Stone* magazine wrote: “Along with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, The Who complete the holy trinity of British rock.”

I remember:

being a child at Christmas time. It’s December, 1999. I’m a third grader, nine years old, four foot seven, and fifty-nine pounds. I’m fairly certain that Santa Clause does not exist. He brings me gifts anyway. He’s left them under our huge fir tree, and they’re the only ones unwrapped, just like always. I pull my reluctant older brother down the stairs at 7:00 AM just to make sure Santa didn’t forget.

My family packs up at noon to go to my grandmother’s house. I wear an entirely new outfit, my winter coat, purple gloves. We pile in the car, and I pull out my new Walkman. It’s clunky, gray, and only plays cassette tapes. I only have cassette tapes. I slide in Britney’s *...Baby One More Time*. My favorite song is “(You Drive Me) Crazy.”

When we get to my grandmother’s, I wait impatiently for presents while the adults chatter about events and people I know nothing about. As far as I can tell, everything they talk about happened before I was born. My brother and I play cards on the floor in the family room; he wins. I decide I want to draw pictures instead.

Finally, my uncle Kevin comes in the room to tell us that it’s time for dessert, then we’ll finally get to open our presents. His t-shirt pro

claims “The Who.” The H in “The” converges with the H in “Who,” and an arrow shoots out of the O. The who? I wonder. The what? Who? I don’t get it.

I imagine:

Roger Daltrey, crying. He’s in shock. He can’t believe he just played a two hour set, while people were right outside, dying. They’d told him to keep the encore short, to keep the fucking encore short. Then they’d delivered the news to the band. At first, he can’t imagine playing again, and certainly not tomorrow night, not in Buffalo. But Pete says if they don’t play tomorrow night, they’ll never play again. He’s right, Pete’s always right. God, he can’t believe he’s crying. But how could he not cry? Jesus, he’s a murderer. He murdered eleven innocent people with his music. But that’s absurd. It’s all too much to grasp. Eleven strangers, eleven strangers from Ohio, are dead, and somehow it’s his fault. Together, these four men who stand together, silent and mourning, are guilty. But of what? Of popularity? Of great music? Jesus, they’re dead. And they died so horribly, crushed to death in a crowd. Maybe they called for help; maybe they reached up to grab skirts and pant legs. “Please, please, help me.” No one expects to die at a rock concert. It’s supposed to be fun.

I read:

that there weren’t enough doors. There wasn’t enough security. There weren’t enough laws. There wasn’t enough order. There wasn’t enough assigned seating. There wasn’t enough time. There wasn’t enough patience. There was a sound check. There was pandemonium.

I remember:

that it might have been my uncle.