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HAPTICS

R. L. Futrell

Haptics: of or relating to the sense of touch; tactile. [Greek: *haptikos*, from *haptesthai*, to grasp, touch.]

1.

She calls it a *nook*. A *breakfast nook*. I don't know why but I don't like this word. This combination of words. It's the way she says it. The way it rolls off her tongue. It rubs me the wrong way. It's a table. It's our kitchen table. It is up against the window and there is a bit of an indentation in the wall there, but this, in no way, qualifies the space as being a *nook*.

I have explained my feelings to Anne about this, have told her that I simply don't like the word, *nook*. I have even, on two separate occasions, read to Anne the definition of *nook* from the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*: 1. *A small corner, alcove, or recess, especially one in a large room.* 2. *A hidden or secluded spot.*

A noun, I said. *Middle English. Probably of Scandinavian origin. This is not a nook.* On both occasions she told me to shut up and eat my waffles.

Waffles, she said. *A light, crisp battercake baked in a waffle iron. Most likely of Dutch origin. And don't forget that we have your birthday party thing to go to this evening.*

Anne and I have not been getting along well lately. We don't talk anymore, at least not the way we used to. We speak in fits and starts. We get quickly to the business of the day.

Today is the 24th of August. My birthday. School has recently begun and already I don't know what to do with myself. This is the first year in the twenty-one years that Anne and I have been married that I have not been teaching. For the last fifteen I've taught *World History* at Patrick Henry High School, just a five-minute drive from the house.

It feels odd not to be heading out the door after breakfast. I don't know what to do with myself. The school board called it budget cuts, but I understand (and even accept) that it is something different. I'm afraid that they too, like Anne, have noticed that I haven't been myself lately.

2.

What I have not said, but what I believe Anne suspects, is that something is wrong with me. I don't feel anymore. I don't feel anything. Not for her, not for our marriage. Not for the students I'm not teaching this year. It's as if I've lost something of myself and don't know where to find it. I am certain that Dr. Anderson cannot help me in this regard, but I'm hopeful that Dr. Okamura might be able to teach me something.

Last week I applied for admission into Johns Hopkins's continuing education program and in the course catalog's description for Dr. Okamura's class I read: *A haptic interface is a force reflecting device, which allows a user to touch, feel, manipulate, create, and/or alter simulated three-dimensional objects in a virtual environment. Such an interface could be used to train physical skills such as those jobs requiring specialized hand-held tools (e.g., surgeons, astronauts, mechanics) to provide haptic feedback modeling of scientific concepts to trainees in a classroom (e.g., "feeling" how molecules attract and lock-on to, or repel one another), to enable modeling of three-dimensional objects without a physical medium (such as automobile body designers working with clay models), or to mock-up developmental prototypes directly from CAD databases (rather than in a machine shop). Training motor skills requiring the sense of touch, or teaching physical relationships at an atomic, molecular, bench-top, or cosmic level are the domain of haptic interfaces.*

3.

Dr. Anderson insists that I call him Kyle. I cannot bring myself

to do this. I hate this. I hate this more than I hate the word *nook*. In our weekly meetings he sits there in his newly re-upholstered leather chair, jotting things down on a yellow notepad and, without looking up says, *Please, Kyle is fine*.

It frustrates him when I refuse to do so.

Please, he'll say again, *Call me Kyle*.

I have been meeting with Dr. Anderson for two months now, at the request of my wife. She insisted, after our last big fight, that we each meet with a counselor, independently of course. He is a nice enough man. If you were casting for a movie and needed to fill the role of *marriage counselor*, you would cast Dr. Anderson. His hair is unkempt in a way that indicates it wasn't so when he left the house. His salt-and-pepper beard is nicely trimmed. He is, above all, calm in every situation.

Dr. Anderson does not force conversation, does not steer things in any particular direction; or rather, if he does, he does so in such a way that you do not notice. Sometimes we spend the first ten minutes of our session sitting in silence across from one another.

In our last session we did not speak for thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds. I used this time as I always do: I took note of things. I enjoy this. Enjoy simply sitting there and looking around his office. I have built a world for Dr. Anderson to live in, have created a life for him based loosely around the facts I'm able to piece together. He is married, with two children (this I gather from the pictures on his desk); he is religious (this I know from some of the books on his shelves and from the fact that he is a deacon at the church my wife attends on occasion); he is well educated with a Master's and PhD from East Tennessee State and the University of Alabama respectively (this from the framed degrees on the wall—there is no posted degree from his undergraduate years, but there's a throw-pillow on the couch against the wall that says, *Go Dawgs*. I'm guessing Georgia, but I could be wrong. There are, after all, a number of schools that celebrate the bulldog as their mascot); he has a secretary who we are both mildly attracted to (I've talked to her on the phone.

Her name is Amy. I've seen prettier women before but have yet to come across a voice quite as naturally seductive as hers).

Finally Dr. Anderson began.

It's been about fifteen minutes, Jim, he said. Would you like to begin?

I told him that I did not really care either way, that it was his call.

Well then, he said. Let's begin this way. Tell me a bit more about Dr. Okamura.

4.

On the 24th of August, 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted, wiping almost instantaneously from the earth the small Roman village of Pompeii. Most everyone is familiar with this story—is familiar with the images of men frozen in place while working on some sea-faring vessel for the town, with images of mothers clutching their nursing babies tight against them or frozen in time while weaving a tapestry at the loom. What few remember is that nearby Herculaneum, the other coastal village on the Bay of Naples, was also buried that day in pyroclastic ash.

But it was Herculaneum that was discovered first, in 1738. And it was the art, the architecture, the philosophy, and the literature rediscovered in Herculaneum, not Pompeii, that sparked the Neoclassical movement of Western Europe. But this is just history. No one cares about history anymore.

5.

Anne works from home, and this too has caused a bit of a problem. I get the feeling she does not like having me around the house all day. She does translation work for a number of German companies conducting business here in the States. Mostly she spends her time in the little office we put together a couple of years ago and is at the computer for a good part of the day (collecting emails, gathering faxes, compiling documents for this company or that one). She works hard. She doesn't talk to me

much. Every now and then I hear her speaking in German, nothing more than the usual greetings and salutations, and her easy, flowing manner reminds me all over again why I fell in love with her.

When she's on the phone she paces around the house, walking in and out of rooms, stopping occasionally to write something down, or pour another cup of coffee. And then, from the other room, she'll say something to me. Usually centered around me being in her way, which I don't understand because I'm anything but in her way these days. I spend my time reading. Mostly history books. Going over the things I've taught before but am already beginning to forget. I read the papers, I do crossword puzzles. Sometimes, in the evenings, as the sun is going down, I'll sit out on the steps of the back porch and wonder what Dr. Anderson would say if he could see us in action, if he could see us work our way around the house to avoid one another.

Seven down, four letters, starts with *n*: "_____ and cranny."

6.

Anne has been trying for some time now to get me to attend church with her. I have yet to go, but I'm not against the idea in theory.

It would be good for you, she says. It would be good for us.

7.

A few days ago I read in the paper that another site has been approved in the Arizona desert for the storage of spent radioactive waste. What a beautiful solution: the burying of things. We seem to have a knack for this sort of solution; and when we forget to do it—forget about how necessary it is that we bury things—nature seems to handle it for us.

Sometimes whole civilizations are destroyed in this manner.

In Carlsbad, New Mexico, there is a facility called the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, which, for the last thirty years has been one of the main salt deposit waste repositories operating in the United States. The WIPP isolates wastes, mostly containing long-lived alpha-emitting radionuclides and chemically hazardous constituents from nuclear weapons research and production, in thick-bedded salt 655 meters below the desert surface.

The article proposed using these facilities for multiple purposes: *A deep geological repository, whether functioning as an afterthought to mineral extraction, or being excavated and operated just for waste disposal, can offer essentially the same infrastructure support as a single-purpose mine. To make better use of the WIPP, without compromising its primary mission, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has encouraged proposals to search for weakly interacting massive particles, to discriminate among neutrino flavors, and to study other hot topics in particle astrophysics and cosmology.* The WIPP underground environment is eminently suited for this sort of work—the 655 meters of overburden shields against almost all cosmic radiation, and the salt “host” rock contributes less natural background radiation than virtually any other geologic medium.

The only thing better being, perhaps, volcanic ash.

I tried explaining all this to Anne while we sat together at the breakfast table.

Things get buried, I said. But then we dig them up again and study them. Nothing stays buried forever.

This was the conversation that prompted her to request professional counseling.

8.

Dr. Anderson knows that I am no longer teaching. He knows also that I am working two days a week as a janitor in an office building for the Applied Physics Laboratory, a part of Johns Hopkins University’s research and development division. I have expressed to Dr. Anderson my interest in taking a class there

entitled “Haptics for Virtual Reality” taught by Dr. Allison Okamura, although he and I both know I would not be able to take such a course. I have no educational background in the sciences. But this is beside the point.

What is important for Dr. Anderson to understand is this: that I am interested in taking the course, that I care about “Physical User Interface Design” and would like to be a part of the good work being done at the laboratory. I have explained to him that the APL has quite a number of projects currently underway for the Department of Defense, NASA, and other government agencies, and that I would like to do my part. I feel that this is important.

And what I need right now is to be a part of something important.

I have spent entire sessions with Dr. Anderson explaining some of the ways the research is applicable to the medical community, the sciences, life in general, but together we keep coming back to one main issue. That being that I don't know what I'm talking about. This, too, I see as beside the point.

9.

On our way to the birthday party this evening Anne and I said little to each other. As is common this time of year, the clouds were beginning to gather and billow. We had the windows down and could feel the air beginning to cool. Rain was coming. The radio was on but only barely, tuned in to the NPR station out of Washington. I could hear voices, mostly solemn and news-like, but couldn't quite make out what they were saying. Probably more of the same.

It's my birthday, but no one in Iraq cares about that. They're busy over there in the Middle East burying civilizations in their own special way, a way they've seemed to grow accustomed to over the years. I am forty-nine today. As good an age to be as any other I guess. A good age to get some things together in my life before turning fifty. Everyone should have to

sit with Dr. Anderson the year before they turn fifty.

10.

The other day, while sitting at the breakfast nook, working another crossword puzzle, I was reminded of the time that Brent Howland hit me in the face in the tenth grade.

Noun. Three letters, an athletic facility.

It was just after gym class, the group of us boys lined up by the wall, towels over shoulders, waiting for an open shower. I had been making fun of him for wearing his underwear in the shower when he just turned around and hit me. It actually felt good. Immediately reaping the consequences of my words. Blood dripping from my nose. There's a moment, just after you've been hit in the face, when your brain goes into overdrive—nerves active and popping like electrical wires—and everything is pure and white and blinding, and everything is right with the world. It's like having an epiphany.

I have tried, in my adult years, to remember what it is like to be hit in the face. It seems important to hold onto history in this way. I have tried to remember what it was like to feel something, anything. I have finally, in this past week, talked to Dr. Anderson about this, and when he just sits there and nods, I think, *This is a man who has never known pain. This is a man who needs to be hit in the face, who needs to be reminded.*

Sometimes, when Anne is arguing with me, I hope that she will hit me in the face. I hope that she will pick something up from around the house—a mug, an empty vase—and smash it against me. That she will make me bleed for her. But she never does.

11.

I have never been to services with Anne, but on occasion have joined her for a Sunday afternoon “Dinner on the Grounds.” I enjoy standing by her, listening to her talk. She has a missionary

friend there she speaks German with and who makes the best ham biscuits I have ever tasted. I have seen Dr. Anderson there a few times and find it is the only situation in which I can refer to him as Kyle. I have never seen his wife and children.

In our sessions Dr. Anderson asks me why I come to the dinners but not to the services themselves.

I am not a religious person, I tell him.

He always nods as if he understands but is disappointed.

What I want to tell him is that I'm afraid that I will not feel anything while I'm there. That I will sit next to my wife—my back against the wooden pew, listening to them sing, listening to them preach—and feel nothing. I want to tell him that I don't breathe well in church, as if the walls were closing in around me, growing thicker, encapsulating me.

In Poland, at the Wieliczka Salt Mine, there are chapels and cathedrals carved in salt. There is an altar in Saint Anthony's chapel, completed in 1698 by the brothers Josef and Thomas Markowski. There are lakes with high timbered ceilings—salt statues of worshipers and Saint John Nepomucen rising up like an archipelago. The Chapel of The Blessed Kinga is 101 meters below the surface and is 50 meters long, 15 meters wide, and 12 meters high. It contains a volume of 10,000 cubic meters and has working chandeliers. This seems a temple in which I could find sanctuary.

12.

Heading home from the party, Anne asks me how my birthday has been. It is the first direct question she has asked me in months. She is driving and it has begun to rain so hard that she has slowed the car down to a near crawl.

I am looking out the window for the white line along the roadside, thinking of how to answer her and all of a sudden I want to tell her everything—that at night I lie awake in bed next to her and wonder why we are seeing, independently, the same therapist. I want to tell her about Dr. Okamura and the class at

Johns Hopkins, and about forgotten Herculaneum on the shore of the Bay of Naples. I want to tell her about the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad and about the salt mine cathedrals in Poland. I want to tell her that the human hand can detect a raised dot just three microns high etched onto a smooth plate of glass; that the average human hair is 50 to 100 microns in diameter; that by using a texture, rather than a dot, Dr. Okamura has discovered that the hand can detect roughness just 75 nanometers high; that a nanometer is only a thousandth of a micron. I want to tell her that the hand is comprised of twenty bones and has joints that allow for twenty degrees of movement; that there are twenty muscles in the hand itself, and twenty in the forearm, and twenty different nerves types that register feeling in the brain. I want to tell her about the Markowski brothers and the time Brent Howland hit me in the face.

I want you to do something for me, I say.

Ok.

This is important to me.

Anne can tell from the faraway sound of my voice that I am serious. She has pulled the car into the parking lot of a store that sells Christmas decorations year 'round and though it's closed for the evening we can see all the shining white lights through the windows as the rain begins to let up. The parking lot is flooded but I open the door and step out of the car and can feel the ambient warmth of the day's heat rising from the asphalt like life itself oozing up from volcanic ash.

Anne opens her door and joins me, the two of us now standing in the rain, staring at one another over the top of the car.

Do you promise, I say.

I don't know yet. What is it?

Promise me. Promise me, on my birthday, that you will do this for me.

Anne is facing me squarely now, her hands on the roof of the car, her hair hanging in wet ropes across her forehead.

I don't want to do this, she says, and I know that she

means standing in the rain like this, facing one another.

I don't want to do this anymore, either. I don't want to see Dr. Anderson anymore. I don't want to have to call him Kyle. I don't want to wake up and not know my place in the world. I don't want to be asked to go to church if I don't want to. I don't want to say the word *nook* or sit around solving crossword puzzles or reading books.

I want you to hit me in the face, I say.

Excuse me?

I want you to hit me in the face. Right on the nose. Hard.

Anne looks around as if I'm no longer talking to her. She squints the way she does when she can't remember the German word for something.

I want you to hit me in the face so hard it makes my nose bleed. I want to remember what that feels like. I want to hold my head up and pinch my nose to stop the bleeding and feel the rain coming down on me and taste the salty blood on my lips.

Why? she asks. *Why would you want me to do that?*

To remember what it feels like.