

Famous Disappearing Act

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Thanks for the package you sent—it was most interesting, it's nice to see what you're up to. What is particularly ironic, I think, is that basically you're achieving... recognition for more or less the same type of things you were doing as a kid. In essence, you are living your childhood dreams.

I received this e-mail message from my younger sister, René, in response to a package I had sent her with documentation of my art work. Since we haven't had very close contact over the past twenty years, and she has had no opportunity to see my work, her response struck me as being both perceptive and completely arbitrary. It seems a little funny that my childhood might be seen as a precursor to my career as an artist. I was self-effacing about the art projects that I made in school and can't remember very much about them, except for a few anecdotes. I don't remember any talk or acknowledgement of art in the family home, other than a painting my father once brought home from Paris: a mass-produced, but hand-painted portrait of a girl who he thought resembled René. I don't recall ever going into an art gallery before the late seventies, either with my parents, friends, or on my own. I don't recall having even a dim awareness of Leonardo da Vinci, let alone Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol, who might have been household names for many of my contemporaries. I remember once being told about Michelangelo by a friend's parents, but this was only to explain why Charlton Heston was spending so much time lying on his back, sweating in the heat as paint dripped onto his face, and being verbally abused by the Pope. I have a vague recollection of seeing Dick Van Dyke sporting a beret and a Van Dyke beard (was that some kind of joke?), painting in a Parisian loft, but I can't be sure that I saw that movie before the seventies.

On reading her letter, I had to ask myself what childhood dreams my sister might have been referring to. I didn't have any particular dreams for my future, other than playing in the NHL, or growing up to be John Lennon, Mick Jagger, or perhaps, for a much briefer interval, Bob Dylan (which would make more sense for my sister to remember, being a devoted fan who has travelled the world to attend Dylan concerts).

In any event, her comments started me thinking about a number of pivotal childhood events—daydreams, fantasies, philosophical or linguistic puzzlements—that might be seen in retrospect as formative (though they

might not be seen to have any relationship to art *per se*.) I was born in 1955 and my childhood took place in the sixties. The first event takes place in 1958 and the last in 1973.

1958:

I am sitting on the floor of the living room looking at dust particles in the sunlight coming through the window. I recall doing this while holding a small plastic cowboy on horseback, who had one arm raised to fire his pistol. I was mesmerized by the dust particles suspended in the air, drifting in and out of the sunbeams. Meanwhile, I gingerly inserted the tip of the toy gun into my nostril so that it made contact with my nose hairs, producing a pleasant tickling sensation. The reflective solitude of a slow motion, real time, visual experience seems, in retrospect, not unlike the qualities I like to achieve in the making of video or audio works.

1959:

My older brother and I shared a portable record player, and we had a small collection of 45-rpm records, many of which came in bright colours not unlike our toys. I can remember “The Teddy Bears’ Picnic” and the sadness I felt each time the song slowed to its ending: “...because they’re tired little teddy bears.” One of my favorite records was bright red, featuring the song “Little Sir Echo.” Of the song I remember very little, other than the refrain: “Little Sir Echo how do you do?...HELLO...hello ... HELLO...hello...”

There was also a recording of a severely abridged version of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, and, though I enjoyed the drama very much, I didn’t understand the finale. At the end of the tale, after being reformed by his hair-raising experiences with the various ghosts of Christmas, Scrooge confers his generous gifts on the Cratchit family. The record ends with Cratchit announcing what he has received, to a chorus of “oohs” and “aahs” from the family, but the best I could make of Cratchit’s announcement was “a raising celery.” I imagined that a magic, levitating vegetable would induce the apparent delight of the fictional family, whom I clearly understood were finally being given a fair treatment. Years later I learned that it was “a raise in salary,” but at the time the words and the concept were outside my experience. Though I was a little perplexed by my interpretation, it made enough sense in context, and besides, I would have been too embarrassed to let on that I didn’t understand.

My father was in the air force so we moved to a new city every couple of years. Before we left Boston *en route* for Ottawa, we went in to have a last look around the house, presumably to make sure nothing was left behind. There wasn’t much sentimentality about our domestic situations.

I recall being fascinated with the empty white rooms, not having any identity as defined by furniture. More than that, they sounded different, even if you weren't really talking or making any noise. Rooms, where days before we may have slept or played or eaten, had been magically transformed into completely new and foreign places, wide open and full of possibilities.

1960:

The television era had settled in nicely and I had fallen in love with Lucille Ball. I can't really explain it, but then who can adequately explain love of any kind? I don't remember having thoughts about her being beautiful, or wanting to kiss her, or any feelings even remotely sexual. Nor do I recall thinking that she was especially funny. Although the family watched her on television I didn't really catch much of the humour. It couldn't have been her famous red hair; we only had a black and white set. She was just there, and I was obsessed. There was a particular dream that I had around that time in which she played a prominent role. But I've never been able to figure out whether she found her way into the dream as a result of my fascination or if in fact her starring role in my dream was the source of my crush.

This was no ordinary dream. It was a serial nightmare, or at least that's how I remember it. We were under siege by an evil family living next door. At the time we lived in an apartment-style dwelling, a duplex where we shared an entrance with another family. In the dream this family had supernatural powers, enabling them to do things like invisibly take hold of my leg under the kitchen table and drag me away, even though there was nobody in the room except me and my family eating dinner. There were scenes of struggle as I held on to my father or mother until the evil neighbours gave up and let go. Various strategies were employed, most of which involved attempts to kidnap me. This continued over the course of several nights. Finally, Lucille Ball intervened to save the day, though her methods remain obscure to me. I can only recall watching wagon wheels turning on some kind of cart in which she led us away from the evil people. We rode off, not into a sunset, but into the sunrise of a clear, new day. Ah, Lucille, how I loved her!

I also recall the first instances of a peculiar visual experience, one which was to be a regular event over a period of time. This was a film-like hallucination that would come to me as I was falling asleep. The closest thing I can compare it to is television snow—the flickering pattern of black and white dots you see on a set not tuned to a station—being projected onto the backs of my closed eyelids. I remember being very happy each time it started to happen. It was a magical experience and I enjoyed

it immensely. In a state of dream-like fascination, I would concentrate on the dancing dot patterns that seemed to be there to entertain me as I fell asleep. Then, but only sometimes, the scene would shift from passive observation to one in which I could exert a measure of control, though not in an overly conscious way. Once this began, other things would start to happen. The uniform snow pattern would be interrupted by and overlaid with larger geometric patterns, broad bands pulsating and swooping through the field of flickering dots. Even though this advanced phase of rhythmic interference began once I was almost asleep, it nevertheless included a distinct feeling of control. It was as if I were initiating the changes, playing them and improvising variations as if they were a form of visual music. While this was underway I was totally mesmerized by and absorbed in what seemed to be, simultaneously, an external event and a self-generated hallucination. Yet, even knowing the experience was conditional on the very fact of my falling asleep, I would struggle to stay awake and prolong the magic. Always in vain—it would soon end as I drifted off to sleep. This experience would continue to occur, even into my adult years. Unfortunately, it is now extremely rare. The feeling remains much the same, even though I know that it's only a dream, and will soon vanish into gloom.

1962:

Because I was the shortest kid in my grade two class (this was the case every year but one, up to and including my high school graduating year) I was often seated at the front of the room. One day the art project was to make Rorschach-type paintings by smearing liquid poster colours on a page which was then folded over to create a symmetrical, abstract painting. As I was seated at the front of the class, the teacher used my desk as a convenient location to demonstrate the process. She put a little paint on a page, folded it over, and, in an attempt to make a crisp crease, gave the paper a smooth, swift swipe with her hand that, in addition to accomplishing the fold, resulted in a substantial blob of paint flying out and landing on my shirt. Rather than find it funny and laugh, which was my reaction (and, I suspect, the reaction of my classmates), the teacher seemed quite horrified. Nothing I said could convince her that I was not the least upset by this minor inconvenience. I was perplexed by her apparent dismay and horror. It was as if she had caused me serious bodily harm.

In the same art class I made a drawing that I was required to bring home. It is possible that it was selected as a kind of trophy, but whether that was the case or not, my feelings on the matter were quite the opposite. I was particularly uninterested in the prospect of bringing anything home, for reasons that I cannot fully recall, but I think it had to do with

not wanting to be fussed over. Any specific attention of that sort made me embarrassed and uncomfortable, and bringing home art projects was a good way to bring on extra attention. I was determined to find a way to avoid that, but at the same time I was quite dutiful and fearful of authority, so I felt that I had to cooperate. Up to a point. There were the rules of the game, but if I could find a way to not bring the damn thing home and without breaking the rules, I felt that I would win. My first move was simply to “forget” the drawing, so I tried leaving it on my desk. The ever-vigilant teacher however, came to my rescue and kindly reminded me to take my project. I maintained an optimistic outlook, for I was still a long way from home. Waiting for the bus, I put down my school bag and the project (too large or too precious to be put in the book bag) and when the bus arrived, I again “forgot” the drawing. This time it was a helpful, older student who came to my rescue and kindly reminded me that I was leaving something behind. Not to worry, I still had a plan. Surely it would be easy to leave such a thing on the bus, it happens all the time. But again I was foiled, this time by the driver who, in an unlikely occurrence, stopped me as I was getting off the bus, went back and retrieved the blasted thing from where I had stashed it beside my seat. The situation was getting serious—I was almost home—so I sat down on a bench to think it over. To drop the thing as I was walking was a possibility, but it seemed a little obvious. Perhaps somebody would see me from their window and run out to my aid. After all, I was apparently being watched from all quarters to ensure that I arrived home with my embarrassment in hand. Besides, that would be littering and I wasn’t quite willing to go that far. Having exhausted all possibilities that I could think of, I sat on the bench for what seemed a long while, immobile and despondent, until it came to me in a flash of what, on reflection, I might refer to as artistic insight. I decided that maybe the rules weren’t so inflexible after all, so I put the drawing in the trash bin, got up and went home. “What did you do in school today, Danny?” “Nothing.”

1963:

After the Christmas break I was moved into grade three, for reasons that were never clear to me, though I don’t recall questioning them at the time. Things were different, a little more serious, and perhaps a little harder for me to keep up. I don’t recall any art lessons in that classroom. The following incident might be seen to be an early artistic endeavor, though I was equally unwilling to acknowledge my efforts. I was wearing sneakers, which in those days were the standard black, ankle-high canvas shoes with rubber treads. During a moment of boredom I began to draw on the soles with my pencil, filling in the recessed areas of the tread to make

a black-and-white-patterned drawing. It was only mildly entertaining, but presumably more interesting than whatever it was I was meant to be doing. Of course this was not destined to go on forever, as I was caught by the teacher. I must have been hunched over somewhat awkwardly in order to work on my chosen project. "What are you doing?" "Nothing." "You're drawing on something. Bring it here." "No, I'm not." "Yes you are. I saw you drawing on something, so bring it here." This continued, but I held my ground, and of course, once I was sitting up in my chair there was no drawing to be discovered. I won the standoff, though I was rather humiliated. As far as I recall it put a hasty end to my blossoming career as a draughtsman.

In another vaguely recollected event I embarked on a rare and much more artistically motivated action. In the woods behind our house I found a speed limit sign reading "15 mph." Somehow I decided that it would make a good beginning for a boat building project, and I set to work. I knew where to find a hammer and a few nails in the basement. My father had a small selection of tools, which I don't recall seeing him use, but which my brother and I were allowed to use for the purposes of customizing our hockey sticks. I spent about an hour driving a few nails into the sign, and might even have gone so far as to tie a few strings to the nails. It didn't look like a boat, but that's how I thought of it, until somebody discovered me at work and asked what I was doing. Like before, I answered, "Nothing," and put aside the whole endeavor.

1964:

My mother, who had been diagnosed with cancer four years earlier, died. I recall that we were lined up in the living room by a close family friend, who then called us one by one into the dining room, starting with my brother, the oldest, to be told something very important. Clearly this was a momentous event, but I had no idea what was coming. I didn't hear what was said to my brother, but he replied angrily: "You mean she's DEAD!" He ran upstairs, crying. My turn came and the friend said to me, very gently: "Your mother's gone to heaven." I understood from my brother's response what that meant and, following suit, ran upstairs to my room in tears. A few days later at the funeral home I stood in front of the open casket with a cousin my age. I don't remember whose initiative it was, but, on some kind of dare, we both approached the coffin and touched her face, and our morbid curiosity was satisfied to feel that her skin was cold.

Part of my mother's legacy was a love of The Beatles. It was she who first brought home one of their LPs, in the first wave of Beatlemania. One day, with a friend as an accomplice, I positioned my record player in the

bedroom window overlooking the front yard. We had the volume turned up to full blast and a song selected, as we watched carefully for the mailman, whom we knew to make his rounds at this time of the morning. He approached, made his delivery to our box, and as he turned to walk away we set the needle down at the beginning of the song, broadcasting The Beatles to the neighborhood: "Wait! Oh yes, wait a minute Mr. Postman, Way-ay-ay-ait Mr. Postman." Though we laughed uproariously in devilish delight, his nonchalant, backward glance might easily have gone unnoticed to anybody observing from across the street. So much for artistic interventions into real life situations

In that year I sang in the school choir. I don't know what inspired me to join, but somehow I ended up being a member, despite my shyness and unwillingness to be in the spotlight. Our program for the year included a competition which involved a bus trip to another school where we sang on stage in front of a full house in a rather large auditorium. My embarrassment was highlighted by having it pointed out to me by my older brother that during the recital I kept myself busy by nervously wrapping the leg of my gray flannel trousers around my finger. As if that incident didn't leave me embarrassed enough, there was a subsequent occasion when, walking to school and thinking I was alone along one stretch of the sidewalk, I practiced one of the choir songs at full volume. I was devastated to find that I had been heard by a man who must have been walking much faster than I, and who condescendingly (or so I presumed) smiled and said hello as he overtook me. That was enough to effectively end my public performance career and, though I finished the season, I decided not to sing in the choir the following year despite the pleas and urgings of the music teacher.

1965:

Throughout most of the sixties my grandmother would spend a week or two with us in the summer. Though she and my father told us that they had lived through the depression, it never meant much to me at that time. I was once particularly touched by an act of kindness, when she picked every last scrap of edible meat from the carcass of a leftover chicken, and presented it on a platter to me and my friend as we were watching television. But for the most part, her stern demeanor seemed to set the tone of her visits, and we often found ourselves faced with new household rules that were foreign and inexplicable. She seemed bitter and had a habit of complaining. On one occasion she was having her say about the current parish priest (as we lived on an air-force base, the priest was liable to change between her annual visits). That year she didn't like the priest for reasons I didn't understand. Weren't they all saying the same lines every

week, anyway? Nevertheless, she had it in for him, and complained at the dinner table about his various shortcomings. The ultimate insult was saved for the end of her brief tirade: “And besides, the man couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket.” Another conceptual puzzle for my young mind to mull over.

One activity I engaged in somewhat earnestly, though it seems to have been simply in imitation of my older brother, was the making of model airplanes. I was wretched at it. Though I could sometimes carry out the instructions to the point of completing the basic construction of the plane, the smaller details such as the landing gear would be too tricky and beyond my patience. Then there were the decals, those flimsy bits of printed plastic that had to be soaked in water, separated from their backings, and gently pressed to the curved surfaces of the plane without being allowed to wrinkle, tear, or slip out of alignment. They were often paired in symmetrical locations, which made my mistakes more obvious. I was hopeless at it, but in spite of that, I received them as gifts and found myself with several of them in my room in various states of incompleteness. I don’t remember where I got the idea that they would burn nicely—probably from my brother. It’s quite a spectacular sight to see one of those planes burning: tongues of flame shooting out in rhythmic bursts, black smoke billowing up into the room, and little specs of soot floating in the air, not unlike those specs of dust I had focused my attention on several years earlier. I burned several of them in my room when I was home alone, before being discovered. One Sunday morning as I came down the stairs dressed in my church clothes—standard outfit of gray flannel pants, a white shirt and a clip-on tie—I was greeted with a line of suspicious questioning from my father. “What happened to your shirt?” “Nothing.” “What are those black spots all over it?” “I don’t know.” I had failed to consider that burning the model airplanes near the closet, in an attempt to confine the smoke to my room, would irreparably damage my clothes with soot.

1966:

For a brief time Bob Dylan was one of my pop idols. Alongside The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Byrds, Donovan, and Sonny and Cher, I had on my wall a picture of the twenty-five-year-old Dylan in a recording studio (probably looking for that “wild, thin mercury sound” I read about many years later) with his uncombed hair, heavy-rimmed dark glasses, a pin-striped shirt, narrow pants, and pointy, Cuban-heeled boots. I would race home from school, gobble down my lunch, dash up to my room and play, “Like a Rolling Stone.” I would keep the arm of the record player up so that the song would repeat over and over, until I had to rush back

to school. Despite my obsession with the song, I can't say for sure that I understood any of the words except for the famous chorus, "How does it FEEL?"

It seems that almost every year I would be sick over the Christmas holidays. Just a flu or cold serious enough to have me confined to my room, when I would rather have been out trying the new toboggan or playing in the snow with my friends. Instead I was left to my own resources, and had to entertain myself fooling around at my desk in the corner of my room. Nothing very productive seems to have come from these efforts, but I must have learned something about amusing myself in private. Various activities were involved: crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, books. During one of those periods of illness, I attempted a paint-by-numbers project—a well meaning Christmas gift, no doubt. It was a still life with roses and I didn't get very far with it. I didn't understand the point of labouring over all the details. It wasn't an interesting picture, and besides, it was already completed as a picture on the box that it came in, in a much more accomplished version than I could ever hope to achieve. On top of it all there was all this messy stuff that spilt everywhere, smelt badly, and was hard to get off your hands.

Magic tricks on the other hand, seemed worth every bit of effort. I didn't really get much farther with that though. I mastered a few elementary card tricks. Although I didn't understand the mathematics, I knew that's what they were based on—you just had to learn the steps and then the tricks performed themselves. There was nothing clever about them at all. There was a joke shop downtown where I bought sneezing powder, handshake buzzers, and other basic tricks, which didn't ever seem to fool anybody. I really got excited when I figured out on my own, a simple method to "load" a pair of dice. All you had to do was go into the bathroom, remove the blade from your father's safety razor, and carefully whittle down the edges on one or two sides of each die. It seemed fool-proof, so I set to work. Even before I reached the point where there was a noticeable effect on the rolling of the die, the edges were looking a little ragged and obviously tampered with, but, I pressed on with rare determination. It wasn't easy, holding onto what were confusedly referred to as "safety blades," with their two sharp edges. It was only a matter of time before I gave myself a rather nasty cut on my finger. It was not so bad that I had to get stitches—well, it probably wasn't, but I didn't want anyone to know what I had done. I did my best to bandage it up and tried to hide it from my father in my usual evasive manner. "What happened to your finger?" "Oh, nothing." "Is that a bandage?" "Yes." "What happened?" "Nothing."

1969:

In the tenth grade I spent a lot of time at the home of a classmate and his younger brother, engaged in the kind of activities that twelve and thirteen-year-old boys might engage in. Their household differed significantly from mine, in that they had more culture and education imposed on them. For example, their mother was studying at university and had a red Mustang-convertible for her one-hour commute. They had a range of books and magazines. It was then that I began to read reviews of movies, books and art exhibitions in magazines such as *Time* and *Maclean's*. In most instances I was unfamiliar with the subjects of these articles, but I was mysteriously drawn to them anyway. All four children were required—for the most part against their will—to take music lessons. It was there that I first laid my hands on a cornet and a clarinet after asking, out of curiosity, to be shown the instruments in the cases that were lying around. When I asked how to play one or the other (I tried each on separate occasions), I was given a brief explanation and was allowed to handle the instrument. After a little fumbling and a few sputtering sounds, I was delighted to achieve one clear sounding note. Though it made little or no impression on my friends, the sound was enough in its volume and clarity to leave me in awe. These moments have remained clear to me, and I often think them the source of all music making, the wonder that can be had from wresting beautiful sounds from mere, dumb matter.

Also to be found in that household were complete sets of *Time-Life* books, the popular educational volumes that came in several thematic series. They may have had the art series, or countries of the world, but I don't recall ever looking at them. What caught my interest was the "Life Science Library," with titles like *Light and Vision*, *The Mind* and *Mathematics*. These books were filled with fascinating things to consider, like optical illusions, mathematical curiosities, prime numbers and Möbius strips. One image stayed with me well into my adult years. It was a photograph of a prominent mathematician, lying on a couch in his office, staring at the ceiling. The caption read: "I do some of my best work lying down." That could be the life for me, I thought.

1970:

With those same friends, I had the opportunity to play with a cassette tape recorder, one of the first wave of cheap portables. We wasted the better part of one afternoon in a half-hearted and laughter-ridden attempt to spontaneously compose and record a radio play, complete with improvised sound effects. The subject of our drama is long forgotten, but I recall the glee with which we messed-up practically every scene we attempted to get on tape. Somewhere in our efforts we accidentally discovered that by

pressing the PLAY button down only partway, the tape would play at double speed. This seemed slightly mystical—it was, after all, the same year we spent long hours trying to discover further clues about the death of Paul McCartney—and it also gave us ideas. We had access to another machine, which we used to record and re-record our voices, speeding them up each time, effectively doubling their pitch and halving their duration. After a few experiments we set our sights on something far more ambitious. Out came the “Iron Butterfly” LP. We recorded the drum solo from “In a gadda da vida,” and set to work on it, re-recording it several times over, until the twenty-minute solo was reduced to a few minutes of high pitched, frantic clicking. But like most of our other grand plans, this one was dropped before we achieved the intended result of reducing the long and boring solo to a single click.

1973:

The final scene is set in Ottawa, in early May. I had spent a year at university, which I squandered in a haze of drugs and friendship, and had returned to Ottawa to continue “finding myself.” I had a group of friends living there in a high-rise apartment building. At least six of them were sharing two apartments. One day a bunch of us were hanging out on their nineteenth-floor balcony, facing west over the city. It was late afternoon, one of the first warm, still days when the summer is just getting underway. Somebody was rolling a joint (not the first) when a momentary gust of wind caught hold of the rolling paper, lifting it up into the air. But the air was so still that, instead of flying off or falling to the ground, the paper just hung at eye level. In amazement we watched it flutter out of our reach, moving slowly and steadily further, floating out over the city at a constant altitude. The paper gradually receded from view, but we continued to keep our eyes focused on the distance. Every few seconds a tiny glint of sunlight reflected off the paper as it drifted over the rooftops, unnoticed by anybody except a couple of stoned guys transfixed by an unlikely, but sublimely beautiful accident of nature. Almost nothing, but at least something, and certainly notable.