

Limbic Moments

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(Stills of a small city on the edge of a large lake, emphasizing the wooded and abandoned areas. There is no consistency in the time of day or the season. Occasionally, someone is seen from a distance walking or driving, sometimes in a cowboy or Roman-soldier outfit.)

1. This is the way things looked just before dawn: orchids and hollyhocks compete for space between the cracks of rotting asphalt, while the economy grows rich and fat, helping the poor and the disadvantaged. Compassion shelters this small town like a trusting arm around frail shoulders. The only sickness here is gambling, but plans to eliminate that problem will soon be perfected.

2. Savage Beasts prowl the hills on the perimeter of the town, probing for weaknesses. Wretched and restless, with vile olive-brown fur, they are nonetheless cunning, and are kept at bay only by steely resolve and high technology. Yet even here, with all the desolation and danger, the land is graced with the scent of lemon trees, and sometimes avocado. Tangles of broken branches, heavy with sweet fruit, litter the hillsides, ignored by the beasts too dumb to desire them. The trees and beasts coexist, barely visible marks on the remote horizon. Together they look down on the placid scene below and watch the smoke from the hearths curl languidly up, to disappear in the straw-yellow sky.

(A five-year-old boy explores alone in various abandoned lots.)

3. But then a boy appears, different from the rest. His laughter and his play are strange, causing unease in those around him. His innocence is incompatible with the innocence of other children. His speech, intended for creatures unseen, is scarcely fathomable to others. Jealousies and suspicions not known here for generations are newly laid bare. Those who gaze at him as he sleeps describe feelings of nakedness and guilt. The sky outside hardens in shades of ochre and patina-green.

(Two doctors, long white jackets in an institutional setting.)

4. Doctors are called in, skilled ones, trained to dissect the mind. Injections are given, having no outward effect on the boy. The doctors look at each other and nod. The probing continues. Outside, the gloom deepens.

(An unfinished cellar. Doctors examine the boy who is lying on a table.)

5. The doctors, following their instincts, hasten directly to the boy's amygdala, two small, almond-shaped structures just below the pituitary gland, richly and reciprocally connected to most areas in the brain. The job of the amygdala is to filter and interpret incoming sensory information concerning our survival and emotional needs. The doctors find it quite astonishingly busy, dispatching messages in directions far too numerous to track. Some prove to be well-travelled neural pathways, and these are the ones the doctors choose to follow. From these knotted webs and bloody ganglia, a vague sense of displeasure begins to emerge, scarcely discernible to the doctors. A familiar melody can be heard, faintly at first, then growing louder, the opening bars of which are played and replayed, but never finished. What the doctors would never know is nevertheless right there in front of them, the three songs: "Ba Ba Black Sheep," "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," and "The Alphabet Song," it was discovered, had all these years, been quietly freeloading off the same melody. What had earlier been the source of such enchantment, was now the instrument of disappointment, and another fragile childhood was diminished.

(An older man is playing an old stand-up piano. He is improvising on "Ba Ba Black Sheep" in major and minor keys.)

6. It is through the actions of the hippocampus just adjoining the amygdala, that this trauma is so forcefully felt, for it is here, in these two integrated finger-sized structures, that short-term experiences are transformed into long-term memories. The doctors happen on other memories hiding; stubborn, irrelevant memories, yellowed and spoiled with age. Here, for example, is found a meaningless list of fairy tales: "The Three Feathers"; "The Three Clever Kings"; "The Three Wishes"; "The Three Languages"; "The Three Sluggards"; "The Knapsack, the Hat, and the Horn"; "The Three Sons of Fortune"; "The Three Brothers"; "The Three Little Men in the Wood"; "The Three Snake Leaves"; "The Devil With the Three Golden Hairs"; and "The Three Apprentices." There appears to be more, but it is becoming too obscure to see.

(The man and the boy are conversing earnestly in the room with the piano.)

7. "Suppose one were to do this?" the boy asks. "What would happen then? Or suppose that happens? Then what?" The questions are tricky. Perhaps, thought the man, they are insincere, for the boy seems to be looking not at him, but through him, beyond him. Numerous, minute physical adjustments are required to aim the two eyes, which are crucially separated by a distance of about two inches, at the same object. But if the object is too close, the eyes will seem crossed. The man steps back, sensing the difficulty the boy's brain may be having converging the two images of him into one. The four sides of their two brains grapple with the problem, while across the street, at a point in space marked precisely by the distant tip of a dead branch, the paths, of a ball thrown up and a crow swooping down, converge perfectly.

(Close shots of man.)

8. Meanwhile, the man has been seized by a feeling of melancholy. Nowhere is this more true than in his amygdala, two small, walnut-shaped structures just below the pituitary gland, whose job it is to filter and interpret incoming sensory information concerning our survival and emotional needs. And a rebellious, knotty, bloody ganglia of neurons it is, blocking his efforts to rid himself from this unwanted sensation. "Let me go! Let me go!" are his muffled cries heard by no one but himself. But this is a man who knows well the inner-workings of his brain. Through long years of discipline and effort, he has trained himself to feel the mental operations at work: the rhythmic swelling and ebbing of the dendrites, the tugging and pulling sensations as the synapses flood with strange chemical brews. There was a time when he could scarcely guess at what they were. Now his mind is a pharmacopoeia of knowledge. He knows with exact precision what they are, especially on special emotional occasions, when, as now, his brain is awash in cortisol.

(Boy in abandoned lot. He sits beside a large stuffed green frog.)

9. A cold wind sweeps down from the high plateau, scattering the defenceless mist which clings naïvely to the yellowed yobelia blossoms. The high and lonely horizon, the only home the Savage Beasts have ever known, conceals the waves of advancing snow to everyone but the boy. He had not slept that night, though his youthful face masks the haggardness he feels. The essential rocks which he must collect burn coldly against his fingers. By his side sits his enduring friend. "All is not well here," says the frog wistfully. And the boy listens, for he knows that only the frog can speak the truth. "If P, then Q," says the frog in a distracted

voice. "If Q, then R..." After several moments of silence, he speaks more forcefully and confidently. "All pirates are bad," he warbles meaningfully. "I am a pirate. Therefore, I'm bad." The boy listens with increasing interest, as large pieces of ice crystallize out of the air and fall heavily to the ground. "Jane is a pirate. Therefore, Jane is a pirate," the frog continues with growing animation. "Samuel is a watchmaker. Samuel is not a watchmaker. Therefore, Samuel is dead." His tremulous voice carries the excitement of discovery, but his face is as still as a statue, betraying nothing, as if in deep meditation. In some animals, facial control is located in the pons, which can be found just above the medulla oblongata. Unhappily, no such organ can be found in the brain of a frog. It has been suggested, however, that the frog brain's elemental design, lacking parts more advanced animals take for granted, has the great advantage of freeing up more energy for the cerebellum, allowing it unrivalled powers of concentration.

Meanwhile, the pitiless cold began its surprise attack on the unsuspecting town. Those insects which had not yet laid their eggs for the winter were finished as a species.

(The boy and the man are walking rather solemnly at the edge of a lake.

Location sounds are isolated and amplified.)

10. The boy and the man stroll laughingly along the grated side of a large pink reservoir. The green and bad-tempered clouds hovering on the horizon, are, for the moment, distracted by something just beyond the next hill. Several beasts have been recently slain, their bodies left to rot ceremonially under a flawlessly symmetrical mango tree as a warning to the others. Crack! The boy's keen ear detects another gunshot, and a full fidelity rumble splinters the pumpkin-white sky. And so at least for the moment, life is good, the air is birdy and blue, and the boy begins relating a news story about Sylvester Stallone he has recently encountered. A lawsuit is pending, he explains, filed by five of Stallone's domestic workers who have been recently fired in the middle of their contract. He laughs. It seems the servants were under strict orders to not look, under any circumstances, into the great actor's dark black eyes, and to immediately back out of the room and vanish should he unexpectedly enter.

(Boy wanders off, exploring, mostly at night. The man continues walking in various locations during the day.)

11. Though the boy embellishes the story cleverly with irony and sarcasm, the man finds it difficult to feign interest. The pons, an organ the man does not share with the frog, deploys different muscles to fake a smile

than would be used were the smile authentic, and the boy has no trouble recognizing the difference. For the man, the cost of such attempted deception is high, for one way to trick the boys into producing a smile that looks authentic is for the deceiver to come to believe his own falsehood.

Unconcerned, the boy delights to the sound of more gun shots, the broken morning air so distorting their pitch that sometimes they sound more like gabbling dogs, crooning church-bells, babies thumping, snuffling, clacking, sizzling, the beeping of trucks backing up, like slamming or grating, or like snapping or throbbing.

12. But the boy slowly drifts away, incuriously seeking his amusements elsewhere. Life is now flawless, and the prospects for pleasure never better. (Pause) He is very patient. (Pause) He continues browsing. (Pause) He eventually discovers a spot just tantalizingly out of reach of the beasts. Ah, how he will torment them! Happily, none of his actions have any consequences.

(Several children's faces, staring straight ahead against a black background.)

13. And what luck! By the most miraculous good fortune, he chances upon his good friends! There's Jimmy, his face ripped right off and a sword jammed up his butt! And splendid Judy, her brains smashed all over the ground! And Bobby, with his crooked smile, has his limbs hacked off, bleeding from a thousand ugly wounds! The boy races deliriously toward them. Like other brains, his brain believes that it is better to over-respond to danger than to ignore it. "Hey boy," they cry in unison, "come, we'll rip your head off and stick sticks in your eyes! Come and kick our guts out with us!" And just when it seems that there can't be any more fun in the world than this, on the far bank of the river, but unable to cross, shrieking with rage and frustration, are the Savage Beasts! Every time one of them nears the river's edge, a shark leaps up, grabs it by the throat, and pulls it screaming under the water. Moments later, bubbles of blood and gore float rapturously to the water's shimmering surface! The excitement of the children's whoops and cries is intoxicating.

(Boy continues his solitary exploring.)

14. Soon however, over the puzzled objections of his friends, the boy's attentions wander elsewhere. This time he is lured not to another pleasure, but to the sober disciplines of duty and obligation. The brain has its own dark methods for distinguishing what is important from what isn't.

The primary, innate emotional responses allow us to react appropriately to sudden loud noises, or dark disturbing shadows, or help us cope should we suddenly encounter a menacing animal on our path, like a tiger, or a snake. But there comes a time when one must advance to the secondary emotional responses which come to us through, and are informed by, experience. As the intermingling vibrations of children and beasts fade behind him, new stimuli urge the boy on.

(Boy, examining the signage in front of various churches, day and night.
He takes pictures with a toy camera.)

15. He carefully examines the marketing, following each letter, looking for clues. What do these marks really mean? What do they say? He moves on willfully to the next. (Pause.) And then the next. (Pause.) And the next, still searching for a pattern, anything that might help. (Pause.) And the next. (Pause. The boy sits down, rests, then continues.) The next. (Pause.) The next, still looking for signs. (Pause.) And the next, still seeking the principle which will explain their significance to a reasonable person. It's taking too long. After all, he's just a boy.

(Boy sees a dog in the distance.)

16. But then—wait. Why, that was no dog! That was a hyena! So. They finally penetrated the walls of the city. Of course, no one else would know. He might have to kill it himself. No one else would have the courage or the strength. With a sigh of resignation, he gets on with the work.

Credits.