

It must have been great to be alive before I was born

by

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Excerpted from the novel

“Self-Portrait of Someone Else”

<http://www.hidden-people.net>

I know their latest address from the telephone book. I copy it down every year, just in case. This year they're only a half-hour drive along some freeway.

The weather is crisp and clear. I am nearly normal. Maybe I can take it. After all this time.

I pull off the freeway, check the street map, read street signs. I find the apartment complex. I open the gate which has a sign saying, NO SOLICITORS". I stare around, not wanting to be surprised. It's huge, a maze of modern architecture - paths shooting off between bushes and trees, corners that turn into dead ends, plastic plants next to the real. It's a rigid, complicated style, imitating confusion. It's designed to combat the functional style of the block apartments environmental groups call dehumanized.

Lost, I take a long time to find the mailboxes. I read all the names very slowly, my heart pounding in anticipation of reading their name, my own. I dread locating them.

BUCKLES: numbers 48 and 49

My mother's name is on 48, my father's on 49. Separate residences. I hope it's helped them.

I look around. Three paths lead away, disappearing into a different maze of apartments, two stories high. There's no one around to ask directions. I go down the center path. There are ferns, big bushes, small trees, occasional empty lounge chairs, a pool, a barbecue pit, signs stating rules of leisure area usage, but no 48 or 49.

It's eerie. No one. The silence. No.... I hear the muted sounds of TVs behind doors.

I return to where I started.

I go back to my car.

I drive away.

Half an hour later, I park the car in the same space, go through the same gate, walk, and knock on the first door I find. No one answers. I wander until I see a TV image through parted curtains in a picture window. I knock. A middle-aged woman with her hair in curlers answers. Two unseen children cry inside. I ask directions. It's simple. They live right above her. "They're a quiet couple."

Quickly, I go up the stairs and stand before the doors which are side-by-side. The curtains are drawn behind both picture windows. Number 48, number 49. Who first?

49.

When my father answers the door, neither of us says a word. Tim Buckles Sr., inspects me, Tim Buckles Jr., with eyes that express neither joy nor surprise, only a sort of suspicious curiosity.

"You huh," he finally says. "Well, well." For a moment, there's almost a smirk. "Come on in, right?" Without insisting, my father turns and walks back into the darkened depths of his apartment, leaving the front door ajar.

It is the last moment I have to turn and run, but I stand rooted, peering inside, craving.

At last, overcome with some insane genetic need the years have not cured, I pass over the threshold, closing the door behind.

It is dim in my father's apartment, and I stand still, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Slowly I see. The apartment is furnished with the kind of imitation furniture common to apartments where single people sit and stay and wait. Paneling that resembles wood but feels like plastic - this covers a table and a wall; a thick, multicolored, synthetic shag rug wall-to-wall; a long, swaybacked couch, two leathery chairs, a TV set switched on to a game show. The heat's also on, and it's so stuffy, so closed in, that I part my lips to breathe easier. My father stands in a tiny kitchen where he can look out over a counter to the living room. He fixes food.

"Just fixing a bite to eat. Want some?" My father wears black business pants, shiny with wear at the knees and on the buttocks. He has on thick white tennis socks in place of slippers. An grayish T-shirt, very worn, the collar hanging loosely around his neck. Unshaven stubble. This is my father. My size, dirt-white hair, loosening flesh for a face, slightly hunched, sloping shoulders. Dad.

He holds up a can for me to see.

"I love the modern world, just like this can." He tries to open it. "Reads: 'Easy-to-open, Press here,' and then you press there and nothing happens. Is this what they mean by the revolution in technology?" He slides open a drawer, rattles around in it, pulls out a can opener. "Well, what's up? Lose your job? Need money? Why're you here?"

Home sweet home. This is the father I remember. He is mine. He started my existence.

"I have a job."

"Doing what?"

"Life guarding at a pool."

"Is that all? At your age? Is that all you're going to do with your life?"

"It's--"

"Not that it matters."

"I don't know. It's enough for now." He ceases paying attention, dumping whatever's in the can into a saucepan. I turn into him. "It's what I'm doing to kill time until I'm dead."

My father looks up from stirring the contents over a flame. He's not sure how to take me, what to do with me. It's like old times. Finally he only grunts and goes back to stirring.

I sit on the couch in the living room wiping my wet palms off on my pants. The TV's been on all this time but with the sound turned down. For a few minutes I follow the movements and

business of a game show. Dad continues his steady stirring.

I sit back, my head against the top of the couch, staring at the ceiling.

"Father?"

"Son," he replies, as though he doesn't want to commit himself.

"Where's mother?"

No reply. I look over. His face is staring down at his cooking food, but he must feel my eyes, because he indicates with a nod of his head the wall opposite him, where apartment 48 lies.

"You don't live together any more?"

"Haven't for years, sonny boy. It's one of those things that evolve naturally out of a close personal man-woman relationship. Avoidance." My father lifts the saucepan from the flames. "I think my little nutritional masterpiece has reached its completion." He peers into the pan and sniffs. "Ah, mushroom soup ~a la can~, nothing beats it. And you never informed your little papa whether you required sustenance from the hearth."

"No, thanks. I'll survive."

"Don't we all? In our little mushroom soupy ways." He brings his bowl of soup to the couch and sits nearly next to me. He sets the bowl carefully upon the low table before us; some soup slops out. His hands tremble slightly. Disease, nerves, my presence? He leans over and takes a soft sip of the hot liquid. He grunts satisfaction.

He fixes his eyes on the television tube, and no matter what image presents itself, he concentrates, staring.

Then he says something I remember he used to say.

"Did I ever tell you about the good old days?"

He's always told me about the good old days. Listening to my father, I'd grown up wishing I could grow backward. Everything in my father's world was better yesterday. When he was young, he'd gone to war. He had friends; he had a purpose. Life was intense because it might end with a bullet at any moment. Then America won the war, and life hadn't been the same since. Not for Dad. Being so close to death day-after-day, shooting orientals for three years - then peacetime with its wall-to-wall carpets and no threat of death, at least bullet death, was an intense disenchantment to my father. I think he wanted to keep on trying to die while killing

people. That was his idea of the good old days.

"Life," my father concludes, "is a bowl of shit. You wade through, holding your nose, trying to crawl out of the bowl, yet always slipping back in. But oh, I suppose it has its bits and pieces of mushrooms, hey?" He takes a sip.

Then silence. I look over. He's closed his eyes. He's dreaming, thinking about the good old days, of bombs, blood and buddies, basic survival, rations. The simple life.

To bring him back, to get him, I say, "It must have been great to be alive before I was born." His eyes come back hard from his reverie.

"Your birth was a mistake, buddy. And don't joke about my past. You know nothing. Just like your mother - never understood, never will."

"Dad--"

"Don't ever joke about my past. What's so great about yours? What is your past anyway?"

"You."

"I suppose that's supposed to mean something. Everything's supposed to mean something nowadays."

"I came here to know about that."

"What?"

"My past."

"Ah, the mystery begins to clear, the fog separates, the clouds lift. I was wondering, little son, why, after all these bliss-filled years, this intimate, cozy visit. Now, that was damn good soup. Even burned my tongue."

"I wanted you to know that I became the way you wanted me. De--"

"Life's little victories. Satisfaction in old age, something to look back upon, count the minuses and pluses, tote up the old score sheet, see what it all adds up to, if it's all been worth it. Thanks for warming the cockles of an old man's heart. What are, by the way, cockles?"

"Deformed. Half crazy."

"Cockles?"

"Me."

"What do you have to do with cockles? Really, these leaps of logic of yours are most

disturbing. They're deformed, half crazy. If you know what I mean. And I suppose you do."

I have begun to drift away from me, half here, half somewhere else. So much of me is half something. Half normal, half my father, half nothing.

"I've learned," my father says, "that if you want to win a popularity contest, don't have a family. Look at me." He gestures round to the curtained windows, the darkened gloom, the empty furniture, the flickering TV screen. "Top of the polls. So listen. Let someone else be your bad memories, okay?"

Father abruptly gets up and carries his bowl and spoon to the kitchenette. I think he's muttering to himself. Maybe he wants me to think he's half crazy. Alone, isolated, living with his furniture. He rinses the bowl in the sink. "Remember when you went loony and we had to tell folks we were sending you to a boarding school? On my salary, it took me three years to finish those payments. Who could call me an uncaring father? Didn't you have it easy - checked-out of your mind and into a clinic? Pretty smart - I thought you were pretty clever there. Leave the shit of reality to be taken care of by us assholes. See, that's always been a pet theory of mine - that the quiet stages of idiotism are preferable to the normal ticking of the well-adjusted psyche. Ask your brother."

Silence.

Me, a successful experiment. A pet theory come true. I tremble. I feel as though I'm ungluing, my fingers disconnecting and drifting out into the living room. The sounds in my ears hurt. I try to concentrate. The game show on TV has turned into a soap opera. People look miserable between commercials. What more do I need from this father? Nothing to say, nothing to share. It is all so lost and hopeless. My father hates life, and I'm alive. He made me. All twenty-eight years of me.

There is a clock above the TV set. The time shown is incorrect. I watch. The hands do not move.

My father returns with a mug of some hot steaming liquid.

"Your clock is wrong."

"Not wrong. Just unplugged. I'm not interested in time anymore. Haven't been for years. I'm in my timeless, twilight years. I'm retired. God, not that soap opera! It's your mother's." He snatches up a remote control unit and begins switching channels, grunting when he

apparently finds the right program. Evidently, my father has his routines. Together we watch a commercial about a new, revolutionary electronic utensil which performs five separate time consuming kitchen chores in seconds.

"Maybe I should get one of those," my father says. "I need more free time with nothing to do."

"I better go."

"Not going to visit your mother?"

"Is she in?"

"She's always in. Let me telephone her for you, perhaps she'll be overjoyed."

"You telephone?"

"That's our method of communication. I haven't seen her smiling old face for" - he thinks back - "for over six weeks. It's a workable solution, as they say in the big world." He dials.

I only want to gather myself together and go.

"Do something," my father says with the phone to his ear, listening and waiting. "Don't be so immobile. Move. Immobile people make me nervous. Like your mother. You've got too much of your mother in you." His eyes flick away and stare into space. "Ah, hello-hello. You took your time answering. What were you, in the sack with some other guy, cheating on me?" My father laughs at what he considers a joke. "Guess what? ... No, not that. Someone is visiting me. Someone old and familiar and fond.... No, no, not her; she's dead.... Guess again ... no, guess again ... I'm waiting.... You giving up? You're no fun today. Well, take a look somewhere on the floor and what do you see? Do you see a son? You can tell: he's the piece of furniture that drools. Well, his twin is right here right now, rubbing his face at me.... Yes, really.... Yes, I think so.... Okay. Same to you." He hangs up. "She says to come over."

I stand, dizzy, floating, dislocated. What to do next: say goodbye. Shake hands, kiss, just leave? We haven't touched yet. There is only one way to leave my father - escape. I open the front door and look back. My father stands there in his dim living room with his hands in his pants pockets, his legs apart, watching me dispassionately. His small, clear, blue, mean eyes. His high forehead, bulbous nose, thin, unhappy mouth, square chin. This person says:

"You should never have taken me so seriously."

"You're my father."

"Neither of us had any choice, kid. I was never in the market for a child, my son."

"I know."

"So don't come to my doorstep looking for reasons and something to blame. Blame life. But considering my limited parental instincts, I did the best I could, which perhaps was the worse thing for you."

I nod.

I shut the door behind me. Nobody really changes; only become more so.

"Mother."

Entering her apartment is like entering a land of dust - everything's heavy, gloomy, worn out, and without life. Bending, I offer my cheek; mother gives me a soft kiss. She smells like dust. Having let me in, she turns and shuffles back to her chair, a used, frayed piece of furniture, so accustomed to her body that there's a permanent imprint of her sitting form: the indent of her rear, the shape of her shoulders. She's turned completely white-haired since last I saw her; her once delicate features seem to have shriveled and simplified into an elderly mask of immobility, as though layers of dust have covered and re-covered her, burying any last flicker of personality or expression. Her whole body seems to have shrunken, fallen inward.

My mother.

Her chair is angled toward the television set, which shows the soap opera my father abhorred. She picks up her knitting which she'd probably interrupted to let me in. "Say hello to your brother, Timothy."

Automatically, I look around the floor. I spot my brother in a dimly lit corner. He's rocking back and forth, in habitual motion; he clasps a woman's simple handbag and clicks it and unclicks it open and closed; he's always been fascinated by such common gadgets. My brother has been stuck in the land of infantile autism since birth. I go over and squat before him.

"Hello, Babble." His name is Christopher, but my father always called him Babble because of the constant low level of noise he makes in place of speech. He looks up from his concentrated clicking; he looks at me as though I'm a window with nothing outside. He returns to the handbag. I return to my mother. "Hasn't changed."

My mother nods and knits.

I sit on the couch, which, in fabric and design, matches exactly the couch in my father's apartment. I take another awful look at Babble. For years, as I grew up, I considered my brother as a symbol, a malfunctioning someone who I could have been with just the slightest twist of a gene. For years I sweated my brains to discover the meaning in my brother's unfortunate, irreversible mental deformity; I tried to think of everything to answer the question of why this happened. Finally, I knew I'd sought symbols and meanings where there weren't any. My brother had disappeared into wherever he had gone, and he wasn't telling anyone why. Perhaps he had taken one look at my father and let himself slip into a gray fold of brain, giving up, the way I fear to.

I tremble with the knowledge of my fragile normality. Tremble, seeing Babble once more, hearing the wet mouth sounds, the incessant clicking of the handbag....

I blink and turn back to what is left of my mother.

So this is what she's come to: drawn curtains, monotonous TV, dust, poor Babble, and solitude. What a destination for a life - and why? All the whys concerning my father and my mother. All the answers I made up. Why had she remained bound to my father, that callous man? The inertia of human conduct.... She'd never leave him. Once I begged her to. She said something about how unhappiness in a family, no matter how damaging, was preferable to the loneliness of a single square room. Yet here she had ended, in any case.

"Why are you living like this, Mother?"

She looks up at me as though not comprehending a single syllable.

I start to tell her: "I remember that time when...." I tell her what I remember: when I asked her to leave, her not leaving, her reply.

"Did I use to say that?" She thinks back. "Maybe I did once, I don't remember now. One says so many things, going through life.... We used to talk a lot, didn't we, when your father wasn't around." She stops knitting, as memories seem to return. "I used to take you to the movies. You'd hold my hand very tight when it was a scary movie - you'd laugh so loud when it was funny. I remember heads would turn, people would look to see who was laughing like that. I was proud. Now I go with Babble." She takes up her knitting once more. "But not so often."

We sit in silence. I move my body on the couch, unable to become comfortable. My mother, accustomed to hours of silence, accustomed to not moving, knits, steadily clicking the needles together. From the corner comes the clicking of the handbag.

"You don't visit often," she says.

"No."

"I suppose you have your reasons, just like your father; he's always had his, and you are his son - there's no denying that, I suppose." There's another silence. "I had to have four abortions." I've heard this before. "Your father made me get them." I know this too. It's something she used to tell me many times when my father wasn't around. She tells me now. The story hasn't varied in years. Three abortions, then Babble and me, and then another abortion, and sterility. She blames Babble's defectiveness on the abortions. "You two just made it," she says. "I tricked him." And thus I exist. "I always wanted a big family, like everyone else. And now" - she sighs, finished - "all I have is Babble, now you've left me."

I move on the couch.

"I think I'll make some hot chocolate," she says. "You want some, don't you? You always liked that."

She puts aside her knitting and with an effort shifts positions, moves forward to the edge of her seat, then slowly, weakly, rocking forward once, twice, pushes herself up and stands. She takes a moment to get her balance, then shuffles off like a grandmother to the kitchenette. I stare at the indentation of her body that remains in her chair.

From the moment she begins preparing the chocolate to the moment it is served brimming in a mug before me, there is not a word spoken between us.

Sitting rigid, I feel my mind turn, a slow spin. For a mad moment I want to cry. Fall on my knees, babbling about my life, the damage, her life, the emptiness. And telling her how there is one thing she never understood - me.

I must have said something, because she answers:

"There's many things I do not understand. You're just one of them." She's sipping quietly, both wrinkled hands gripping her mug. "Sometimes you still remind me of your father." There's a pause; then: "I did the best I could."

I've had my eyes closed, leaning my head back on the couch, listening. I open them. She

stares at the television. Did she really speak? Am I going away from where I am? I check my face for tears. One.

I've known forever that she doesn't know what to think of me; because of this, she's probably, with time, ceased thinking of me at all. Except as the little boy beside her in the movies. Now I'm a guest, almost a stranger, being politely accepted, nourished, tolerated. I'm the reality her dream became, and this doesn't fit the images of her life that remain in her head.... This woman's womb. Me and it. One of the many things in this life I will never understand.

The rest of my visit is taken up with watching the soap operas with her; by the time they've finished, she's fallen asleep in her chair. Babble has stopped playing with the handbag and has taken to staring at me, rocking to and fro without expression.

I had come looking for rays of light; there's not a glimmer. I must leave. But the thick, lethargic atmosphere of my mother's room has begun to seep into my bones; I have difficulty moving and rising from the couch; the room seems full of a dense, heavy dust, discouraging movement. Shifting my position, moving forward to the edge of the couch, I have to rock back and forth once, twice.... My mother seems to wake momentarily, and she demands a kiss on the lips goodbye. "Be a good boy," she says. "Visit soon." She drifts back into her dream. Babble stares in blank farewell, his parted lips wet with saliva. I leave.

Outside, I face their closed doors, my eyes racing back and forth, from one to the other.

I have the impulse to scream, shatter the air, but I stand still, trembling, alive, without hope, in despair, their child.