

They Only Liked and Enjoyed Lesser People



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Wrinkles flatten on a lake, then clutch together—that is time. Movement cannot be saved or stored. Because our lives so shortly turn into nothing, it may seem as if time is winding in, slowly constricting us. Yet time could not be what we imagined.

A man turned slowly in a restaurant booth. His name was Ned Shake. He sat with his brother. Turning to glance at a businessman sitting at the counter, Ned sneered. He did not like the businessman, or competent, capable adults in general—those who wore suits or held mixed drinks and telephones in their fingers, laughing and chatting. Ned's brother was of the same mind, so the two stayed far away from people who fit in with regular life.

Instead, they only liked those who were deeply troubled, wounded somehow, weak, labile, ill, marginal, inappropriate as friends, or in frequent deep trouble with merchants. To Ned and his brother, such people were simply better, for they were never run-of-the-mill or conventional; they held surprising riches, they were utterly unique, and besides, it was so easy to best them.

The brothers sat in the restaurant, quietly as always, conferring in a near-silent manner as if telepathically, as if there were no separation

between their bodies, no space, in any way, for living, vibratory air. Together, the two had befriended all the lesser people of town who did not hold jobs, and also those who did hold jobs, for employment can conceal a host of problems, such as lying, delusions, or hurtling aggression.

Recently, Ned and the brother had grown closer than ever to old and new friends who displayed behaviors such as blunt manipulating, hiding, checking, overexcited shouting, tapping, hoarding, storing, prevaricating, small-goods stealing, and fleeing. It was certainly true of a wonderful new friend, Sheri Korn, who often wandered through city government offices, sitting in waiting room chairs and yelling in a way that was out of reality so that everyone stayed away, except for the guards who expelled her. But the brothers locked onto Sheri, vowing to remain her devoted friends through the ongoing years, which would be difficult, though good and right, since Ned and his brother simply wanted everyone close at hand to be significantly broken down and that was all.

The brothers also had the deepest possible friendship with a man who never wore shoes, not even in slush. His name was Tom Shively, and the brothers had met him some years before when Shively worked at a cinema barefoot until he got fired, not for barefootedness, but for a verbal standoff with a guard; and Shively recounted this incident to the brothers on the night they met, standing on the sidewalk after the firing; and Shively had poor glucose too, he reported; his doctor had discovered it. So the brothers went in to tell the cinema manager about the glucose, but it was too late; Shively was barred from the cinema. He had a horror of spiders. He usually felt low, living down the block from the cinema in a sunken apartment that smelled, somehow, of all the years, the sense of absence in time; ladders of dust-laden cobwebs lifted when a visitor closed the door. But Shively was special, as the brothers always said, for many reasons; he was bright, well-read, and always rebellious; smartness and specialness always go hand in hand, the brothers knew, and they were ready for it. They wanted lesser people always, for with these unique folks surrounding them, they could live more meaningfully; they could plunge into a different arena, separate from the real world and freer of adults' conventional dullness than most people. Besides, they could say anything they wanted to their special

friends, even wild, brutish cruelties, for these friends were accustomed to extremes, and otherwise did not notice or care.

After lunching in the restaurant, Ned asked his brother about Shively, and the brother, whose face was indistinct generally such that he resembled others, including Ned's former schoolteacher, reflected that he, the brother, liked Shively less than Ned liked Shively.

"Could you put a percent on it?" Ned said. "Do you like Shively ten percent less than I do?"

"Fifty percent less," said the brother, leaden.

"No," Ned shouted coldly. "You like him two to ten percent less than I do, a hairline difference which is none at all."

"Fine. It is more than none, even if you don't know it," the brother said with a new steel about him, then muttered, "You'll be sorry."

The two found Shively outside. Though tired, they conversed with him on the curb until dawn, which was worthwhile, another chance to see how special friendships were deeper and more important than anything in the everyday world of superficiality, and the brothers understood Shively as no one could. Difficult, belligerent, off-track people are more worthwhile than normal ones, Ned emphasized to the brother as the sun rose, laughing a long time and loudly with the force of his convictions while customers stared from the market.

Overall, the brothers leaned toward lesser people, as they put it, though it could never be a blind person, Ned reminded his brother crossly as they headed home, because the blind were no lesser. It could not be anyone with a wheelchair or IV pole, either—that did not count. Neither did epileptics, the merely depressed, tumor patients, or a drunkard. It could not be the mildly concussed or anyone deaf. Paranoiacs were ok. It could be a professional editor or educator, of course, and it could be—as once it had been in the past, and could be again, no one knew—a former physics researcher who had quit his job to work as a convenience store clerk because a metallic voice told him that physics was evil.

Such friends were simply best, Ned reiterated, trekking home. Besides, all these unique friendships proved that the brothers were uniquely perceptive; the most important thing was to find individuals so heavily problemated that the complexities of their lives were dizzying and offputting to others—"that is what I have been seeking and always

will seek!” Ned said finally in the bright blur of the morning, sitting in his rough-hewn, thread-laden apartment chair, eyes welling with these opinions, and the brother silently nodded, understanding. They lived with such recirculating thoughts each day. The kitchen walls were smeared. Grit from the brothers’ walking boots filled the concavities of the blue carpet.

Later that morning, sleeping face-down on a dust-colored sofa, the brothers felt a pressure, a vague sick feeling that was all too real. Ned thought the younger brother looked small beneath the shawl. He looked to his own arms—the knotty muscles seemed to roil inside. He sat up, frightened by an awful premonition: “My brother is going to rebel against our life,” he said to himself.

Ned grabbed himself in a panic to think that soon he could hear a pop and his brother would be gone.

In truth, he knew there was scarcely enough space for both brothers in this apartment or world; he ran along the path in the carpet behind the sofa, prickly, panicky, looking for his sibling; Ned’s body’s cells had aged; he did not know himself; he ran outside. The sky: hot and bold. The years with his brother pulled away as a long train. The map of his skin effaced, Ned ran, sad and raw. At the corner he saw, his eyes opening in their blue, that his body matched the bodies of others. Ned grew more solid. He walked toward the city, lightly touching the roof of a parked car.

“I might find friends,” Ned said.

It could be a plain man who owned a tackle shop, or a middle-aged woman, imperfect, shy, who ran away from a New Year’s party through the basement door. It could be a teacher who did not like to hear engines starting or a student playing cutthroat on the game court. It could be anyone who routinely bit the insides of their mouth or who felt wrong and fat; it could be a natty-looking man wearing blue dress pants, like the one across the street picking marred apples at the fruit stand, moving with startling certainty in the wind. Ned was alone and the future was merely an idea. But it would begin.