

Wayne Walker

Waiting

So much of adolescence is waiting, long and drawn out. Waiting for stupid shit, like class to start or finish, but also for important shit, like acne to pleasepleaseplease go away. Waiting to be noticed by potential sexual partners. Waiting for rides, for one's own car, for graduation, for a letter from college or a call from an employer and one's own money, for recognition as an adult, at last, and to be treated as such. Waiting for the kid to whom you gave your money to return with the stuff you want, for the football season to start, for the football season to end, for the weekend, to find out where everyone/ anyone is and where the party might be, for somebody's parents to leave town, for the drugs to kick in, for the drugs to wear off, for "real life" to commence. Waiting for your turn at happiness. If not true, abiding happiness, then at least enough to be used as a weapon such that those who once made us miserable can have their turn at same. Waiting, adolescence as anticipation, the agonizing passage of so much time. We are never able to recognize the value of a commodity while we are awash in it, drowning in its imagined overabundance.

My high school was big, one of the biggest in the city. Like most public schools that lack sufficient funding—which is the same as saying "like most public schools"—it was a building of aggressively unaesthetic design. Classrooms and lockers lined the inner walls of a huge, two-story rectangle, jointed on one side by a smaller one-story rectangle of entryways surrounding the massive lunchroom. I never once ate in that lunchroom, probably because I came to loathe it and all of the nefarious activities within, the first of which I witnessed on my initial day of high school.

It was an orientation hosted by an imposing and stern middle-aged woman with the title of Principal. She told of what a special place high school was, both in general and this one in specific. Her oration that day centered around an anecdote, a carefully sculpted tale of the redemption of a former student, one of her all-time favorites, a delinquent who had been given up on by most of the community, kicked out of other schools and districts, left for incarceration and death by a society unable or unwilling to see the special light within him. She alone saw that light, one that she could see in all her students, in each of us seated before her. Against all societal misgivings and advice to the contrary, she took this student in, *she* gave him special attention, *she* funneled his aggression away from classmates and towards the kingly sport of wrestling, and *she* ultimately handed him

his diploma, sending him to college on scholarship. Through all of the self-congratulatory hyperbole and back-patting, the message got through: this school doesn't give up on anyone. We'll take them all: your tired, your hungry, your formerly expurgated.

Now, this anecdote may sound heart warming, an uplifting tale, some serious education-as-empowerment-of-the-downtrodden, we-gotta-have-Oprah-play-her-in-the-movie shit, but to a skinny white suburban kid on his first day of high school, peering around at some of my fellow "sophomores" who looked like they might be in their twenties, it signaled that I was going to have to watch my goddamn back every day for the next three years.

During those years, huge groups of students would be periodically shepherded into assemblies, pep rallies, and other similarly-forced exhibitions of positivity and spirit and connectivity, as if such notions could be imposed, imbued in us from the top down. But anyone who has attended a similar school knows that real community doesn't arise from the formal gatherings, or even the classrooms, but from those passages in between. It was the hallways, the action and interactions therein, organic and spontaneous, that provided the true lessons, an experiential education everlasting, the one most influential in what we would become.

The school was big enough to necessitate staggered lunch periods. Half of the school had lunch before fourth period, the other half before fifth. I ended up in the latter category, my small group of friends all somehow in the former. It would be a semester before a driver's license and car opened my possibilities and until that blessed time came to pass, I elected to walk two blocks, alone, for gas station hot dogs. The tubes of "meat" were passable and cheap but not particularly filling, so I often partook heavily in the "*Chill-ee*" that oozed from a giant pump dispenser, free with purchase, a condiment that complemented the dogs just fine if you didn't actually look at it or attempt to contemplate its preparation. That I was willing to consume such matter on a daily basis should tell you all you need to know about the state of food on offer at school.

The gas station was unwelcoming of loiterers, so eating there usually meant returning to school well before sixth period, which meant having to wait. At first, I tried peeking into the lunch hall upon return, but, big as it was, the room was too small for its purpose. Faces were hard to see, seats were hard to find, especially in any sanitary condition. The tables in the last part of the second lunch hour were filthy, displaying remnants of cheap, greasy food, often less-than-half-eaten for obvious reasons, and soda cans, oh the soda cans, steadfast on sticky and darkened laminate surfaces, empty at best, emanating the pungent wintergreen scent of masticated tobacco at worst. Noise

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levels were always high and seemed to rise as lunch-hour sugar consumption peaked, particularly hard on the ears of those of us who had not yet acclimated to the subtle differences between friendly shit-talking and the strikingly similar words that signaled actual threat and impending fracas (much of the student body was functionally multi-dialectical in this way). The school had no air conditioning system, so the temperatures in any room that saw mass congregation during the first and last months of the school year tended towards the sweltering, bringing all of the olfactory stimuli that one would expect from an overcrowded room full of teenagers of questionable hygiene. In short, this was not a desirable place to be for someone who had recently consumed a gas station chilidog.

On one particular day about three weeks into my tenure as high school sophomore, I returned to school from lunch and intended to get to my locker and the unfinished homework assignments therein. I sauntered down the long entry hallway alone, passing the dusty trophy cases and three consecutive entrances to the lunchroom, finding it easy to resist the cacophonous call of the social melee within. As usual, the end of that hallway was roped off. No one was allowed to enter the classroom hallways until lunch period was over. Waiting.

I was usually alone at this time of day, but one is never truly alone in a large public high school. Plenty of other students were standing around waiting in the same fashion. I quietly scanned them and placed them within my vastly oversimplified system of social classification, formed out of presupposed necessity, the best way to navigate my time at that particular high school in those particular years in that particular mid-sized city in flyover USA.

I noticed a small group of girls first, those of the peppier cheerleader variety. I didn't know any of them, but judging by the physical development on display—and the palpable comfort within said development—I guessed they were seniors. I found myself wondering if any of them might collect human fingers and/or toes, as I would have willingly cut a couple of mine off in exchange for certain carnal considerations. Many of these girls were romantically attached outside of the school, to men well of an age legally recognized as adult, all due to a cycle of male/female relationships at the school that I was soon to become aware of (and would eventually validate via direct participation). Sophomore guys stood little chance with their female classmates, whom the senior guys seemingly had dibs on, something I already knew well. The reasons would be made clear in my own senior year, when access to sophomore ingénues served to salve the bitterness of having been previously scorned by those in my own class. Until then, another excruciating wait.

Juxtapose this with another clump of females adjacent, a

few of the self-proclaimed *gangsta girls*. A racial rainbow, whatever connection they shared seemed to transcend skin pigment. A week before, I had let my eyes linger on one of them, mentally calculating the height of the hairspray-stiffened claw jutting straight up from her forehead (easily over six inches). She caught my stare and said, “*Watchoo lookin’ at, white boy?*” a query posed with more intrigue than threat. Rattled by the conflation of arousal and fear she’d elicited—coupled with my confusion about the fact that her skin pigment was lighter than mine—I slunk away without response. The fights between these females that I witnessed that year, while relatively rare in comparison, proceeded with a passion and viciousness unrivaled by those of their male counterparts. I certainly never saw a guy drag someone down the hall by the hair, and the only person I ever saw punch a hallway fire extinguisher case in order to shatter it for the purpose of brandishing a shard of glass as a weapon was a woman (probably technically a “girl” by any chronological measure, but I want to be careful to call that individual by whatever nomenclature she herself would deem most respectful).

Between those groups of girls, and providing a peaceable-enough buffer therein, stood two kids with hairnets, a signature style for a subset of the Latino students that called themselves *cholos*. Headgear of any kind was prohibited in the school, but a few of these kids wore hairnets with impunity, something I didn’t understand. They sure-as-shit didn’t work in the lunchroom. Maybe the administrators were too blind to even see the nets, or perhaps they were hesitant to confront the students who wore them, a displaced fear of cultural displacement, a raw form of PC. I liked and respected them, these kids who would patch together seven hundred dollars on a massive late-model piece-of-shit hooptie, then drop three thousand more on some tiny, blinding-chrome wheels and rims. They tended towards quiet and nonchalance, cool about it all, as if their waiting had been expected all along, accepted as fact.

Taking up more space than they needed in the middle of the hall were a couple of the big goofy white kids, the ones that, whether or not they actually played any team sports, tried their hardest to appear as cable-movie-standard jock/asshole types. They screamed ridiculousness via their Skidz or Jamz or whatever other overly-bright, overly-baggy 1990’s clothing pluralized with a “z.” Two of them in the hallway that day were wearing aqua socks, a confounding trend in landlocked country. I was typically friendly with these guys, and they with me, probably because I looked so fucking much like them. But I tried hard to keep a barrier there as well. I often found myself studying their movements and mannerisms in order to differentiate myself, to avoid appearing quite as fucking awkward and goofy as they.

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There was a small group of metalheads against the wall, stoners of the old-school variety. They had long, long-unwashed hair and wore faded denim jackets over inevitably-black t-shirts, a contrast with the inevitably-pale white skin that had very clearly never known the sun with any intimacy. These kids kept to themselves in groups, gathering in small circles in the parking lot to smoke and exude anger at nothing in particular. Pretty harmless overall if you avoided overt, prolonged eye contact.

The black kids were the biggest mystery to me. There was a small group of them clustered there, itself divided into two subgroups of a kind that I would come to recognize quite clearly over the next few years. There were the loud ones, kids who threw their voice against the hallway with purpose, periodically announcing how hard they were to anyone in earshot, "*Can't no nigga fade me!*" or words to that effect. This was usually said at intentionally high volume and with unintentional tinge of fear, more an act of self-assurance than outward communiqué. A member of that subset was bragging about his "moneys," brandishing a new gold tooth and announcing to all that it had been afforded via stolen car stereos, a plausible enough story to most in the hallway. It would have been for me as well had I not seen him cooking fast food burgers that summer. I had to respect his work ethic if not his veracity.

The other major subset of the black kids there, in contrast, existed in stony silence. These were the ones who needed no words to communicate their recalcitrance, hard-earned in relatively short lifespans and quite visible at first glance. They didn't have to tell anyone who they were, and few within those hallways were stupid enough to ask. I was never really intimidated by the kids who displayed their bravado, but the ones who never said a word always scared the shit out of me. Not coincidentally, the verbal signifiers seemed to be tethered to at least one of the silent types at all times, and the gold-toothed burger-flipper was no exception. He launched his tales of ill-gained dental work next to a statue of an acquaintance, the latter's searching eyes serving as his lone movement. I avoided that eye contact in re-upped gratitude that the school was big enough to remain anonymous in.

Feeling no authentic social connection to any individual or group around me, I stood alone. The one commonality was the waiting. We collectively bided, anticipated that sound of the bell. We never heard it. I didn't, at least. Instead, the hallway frame tilted within my vision, a soon-to-be-familiar spark of energy alit, that shifting of malice in the air signaling that violence had erupted within.

The heads of all of those around me turned in tandem, pulling mine along with them, a sort of public school choreography. There was

a new one amongst us, a kid who had not been standing there just a moment before, a fellow waiter who'd materialized as if from nothing. His back was to me, so I could not make his face, but my attention was drawn to his awkward stance, a crouch with ass jutted out and arms forward, stiff and in a ready position, the new center of the radii of all our staring eyes around him.

The student standing directly in front of him, who had his back to me as well, started to look around at his feet, full of confusion and spasm. He started grabbing at his shirt, tugging at it as if he was trying to turn it around his body without taking it off. It was a plain white t-shirt. Actually, it was white with streaks of red. Wait, it was patterned in a splotchy mix of red and white. No, it was a solid red t-shirt, clinging to his body. He spun 180 degrees to face us (the kid who was crouching behind him, and me). His eyes were huge, fully open and bulging outward. No one I knew. I then saw that his shirt was, as originally noted, white. At least in the front.

A quick beat passed in silence. The new kid stayed in his ready stance, adrenaline emanating out of his every tensed muscle. Mr. Magic Shirt stood totally erect right in front of him, seemingly two feet taller, running his peeled-open eyes all over this person crouching before him, assessing his stead and holdings and possible next moves.

"MOTHER FUCKER! YOU DON'T STAB ME!" Ah, thanks for explaining that. The shirt now made sense. It was only after this guidance that I noticed the blade in the first kid's hand. And then, causing some level of what I can only describe as *cognitive dissonance* in those of us around him, the person who had just been stabbed, the one *without* the knife in hand, yelled, "I'M GONNA KILL YOU!" and, ignoring the other guy's weapon as well as the fact that he himself was massively hemorrhaging, lunged forward towards his stabber's neck.

Like I said, the stabber appeared ready, but not for further offensive attack. He stepped backward to avoid the bleeder's reach, quickly spun around, and sprinted down the hallway towards the front doors of the school.

The stabbee, much taller and heavier and probably at a speed disadvantage even when he wasn't losing what appeared to be multiple pints of blood, took chase. He repeated his earlier shouts of "YOU DON'T STAB ME!" and "I'M GONNA KILL YOU!" Thus, the victim of the knife wound had appropriated the role of assailant. We onlookers stood silent while watching the short kid with a knife disappear down the hallway. A few more distant shouts of "MOTHER FUCKER" and "I'MA KILL YOU" echoed back at us. We looked around at each other, several of us quite literally agape.

"Holy shit," almost a whisper, was uttered by someone. It may have been me.

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Then someone else blurted, “That little dude stabbed that big dude.” This was said as a verbal method of shared mental processing, one of those statements of fact that we make when we need a little help in getting ourselves to come to accept that fact. I’m sure I wasn’t the one who said this, but I was grateful that someone had done so for the sake of the rest of us.

“He just walked up, all quiet and shit, and stuck that dude under his shoulder blade, and then ran it down his back. Sliced him wide open and shit!” This was a recap of the action, a helpful commentary from someone who had seen the actual motions of attack in service to those of us who hadn’t.

We looked around at each other in mutual disbelief. For the next brief moments, I felt a bizarre kinship with those around me, the temporary collective that had formed within that small area of high school hallway. The lines that had just seconds before been so obvious to me, the social boundaries so easily traced and labeled, had dissipated, banished by the spell of but a few blinks of intense, shared witness. A couple of seconds of fear and shock made short work of flimsy social construction.

Then someone removed the rope blockade and a wave of adolescents overtook us, instantly eroding our episodic connection. Lunch was over. But for a few precious moments, we had forgotten about all the waiting.

I didn’t take in everyone waiting in that hallway, and my meager classification system of schoolmates would be erased and rewritten countless times more before I left those halls for good. The shared experience of youth has several rather obvious exemplars, things like school colors, football games, mutually despised teachers, and even hallway stabbings, but we are left to question the level at which we share our experience *of one another*, our perception of social stratification and our own relative placement within. I’ll never know whether those kids around me saw themselves within anything even remotely resembling the light and categories in which I had placed them, whether they used the same adjectives to describe themselves, the same overly-broad labels. Better yet, what was the light in which *they saw me*? Where did I fit in? These are questions that can drive a high school kid crazy, lead to some wild emotions and pretty irrational acts in our early lives (one of which I had just witnessed).

I was just an average high school kid, or so I repeatedly told myself. Didn’t everybody think the same thing about themselves, or didn’t they at least *want* to believe as much? All those others were just that: others, sitting neatly under their social umbrellas that separated us from each other, seemingly at our respective cores. I thought about

and wondered whether all of these kids, each going through their daily actions, struggling with acne and school and family and friends and that tedious-as-fuck teenage waiting, felt the same about me, viewed me within my other-umbrella, however it may have appeared. It was quickly becoming apparent to me that those who actively perceived themselves as being well outside of the center, as substantively *othered*, were going to struggle in these school hallways and maybe end up doing some pretty fucking crazy things.

Those two kids, the ones at the center of that particular day's lunchtime action, with blood on respective hands and back, turned out to be forgettable enough when a policeman called my home the next night. The cops had been given a list of names, those who'd stood witness that day, and they were calling each one of us for statements. Our conversation was short. I described what I'd seen but stated that I couldn't have picked those kids out of a lineup, couldn't have connected a face with an action or an ethos outside of what they wore and who they huddled with, their other-umbrellas, and that I would be unable to do this whether tonight in the police station or tomorrow in the hallway. In short, I told the truth. I think they thought I was lying, stonewalling out of fear or some code of silence. Might I have said that those kids were nobodies at my school, or that they were everybody? The conclusions were equally startling.

Yet, something in me had shifted, new options of frame made available. This use of easy categorizations—my lazy othering of hallmates, so seductive in simplicity of application—started to feel a little less comfortable, a little less necessary. Arbitrary at best, soul-tainting at worst. Overuse leads to calcification leads to trauma, self-inflicted, an othering of self. The commonalities were fuzzier, to be sure, took more work to recognize, but they were there for a seeker. Collective adolescent waiting, for instance, that inanimate existential object. Its recognition a weight upon one's shoulders, its acceptance a tiny initial step towards enlightenment, respective paths towards bloodshed or brotherhood.

This would be made vivid soon enough. We didn't yet know it, but we were on the precipice of a new American era, the Columbinas about to bloom, an arrival of true and massive violence in the nation's school hallways, yearly supply lists to be amended with translucent backpacks, entryways adorned with hulking detectors of metal. Some of us achieve adulthood, others have adulthood thrust upon us. Waiting looks utterly desirable in contrast.

Not that there was any choice in that matter, some magical method allowing any of us to forego the waiting. But for my own miniscule part in the picture, I decided to embrace that new frame, pressure one corner of it, keep it askew. Wait not for anything better,

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but for everything worse, keeping in mind that there are things worth waiting for (meaning *for-as-long-as-you-fucking-can*). Why not wait to clock in and out of some shitty hourly job? Wait to file taxes, to pay rent, to buy insurance I don't feel like I need. Wait to fill out the massive stacks of forms, application/supplication, begging for acceptance and aid. Wait to pick some arbitrary and arbitrarily-defined "major" well before the onset of any true direction or self-knowledge. Watch patiently as old trajectories fizzle out and fade, then create new ones and witness them actualize. Understand that waiting for your turn at happiness means never getting there, that worrying about those who make us miserable is its own distinct, self-perpetuated misery. Anticipation as adolescence can signal any number of passages, not just of time, but of anything. Even, if you let it, of everything.

