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Atrocity Exhibition

by Ivor John

Of course, I can remember how it started. I couldn't forget, even should I want to. It's always there. The indelible evidence of my irresponsible hedonism. When I learned by experience, long practice taught me that one pleasure leads to another. Until it's no longer pleasure. I had little experience of pleasure prior. I didn't really know that then, I thought my life was OK. But it's when you can look back, to review, years later maybe. Having had different experiences you can come to the slow awareness that things need not have been the way they were.

Sixteen and having finished with school, some money in my pocket from job in a small independent supermarket. I didn't mind it, despite what my teachers had said. Hopeless, no! I had hope. I had friends, we had fun. We had spent the day on the beach, a group of us, enjoying the August weather. Our exaggerated behaviour annoying people around us, families with children, young couples trying to ignore us, drinking cider, shouting at each other to disguise our inhibitions.

I enjoyed cider, the sweetness belied the strength of the alcohol. Then Paul, who was clearly drunk, threw up on the beach. Even outside, the smell of cider and bile was nauseating, causing me to gag violently. I managed to avoid puking myself, by guzzling the last few mouthfuls from the four litre bottle of Woodpecker. Flat now, it felt thick as I drank it, the dregs of the sunshine, the last few drops of the late afternoon. We went back to someone's house. I don't know whose it didn't matter. We were OK, it was fun as we staggered and shouted our progress.

There were no adults at the house, so we went into the front room. Somebody put on a CD, to play loudly, Joy Division. We spoke about what a blast this was, enjoying our friendship drinking and boasting of what we were going to do. There were two girls in the group, one of them was with Ian, they were sprawled across an armchair, deeply tonguing each other. I could see he was trying to undo her jeans, she was not trying to prevent him from doing so, neither was she assisting him.

The other girl, I would imagine her friend, was sitting on her own, looking uncomfortable. She was trying to look inconspicuous. I would think they were fourteen or fifteen.

Somebody had brought some blow, and were passing around a crudely rolled joint. The unmistakable earthy smell of burning cannabis filling the room. It was resin back then. Not the skunk, not herbal. Small blocks of light brown resin, like a stock cube, crumbled with religious reverence and appropriate ceremony into tobacco and rolled into a Rizla paper. At my turn I took a toke. My throat feeling raw as I drew the mixture of the spicy sweet smelling old Holborn and Lebanese Red deeply into my lungs. I could feel it burning and irritating my throat. I had to gulp to avoid coughing my lungs up into that room. It was important that I was cool with this, casual.

I could feel my body pulsating as the narcotic raced through my nervous system. My heart beat went crazy, forcing blood directly to my brain. Already, disoriented by an afternoon and evening drinking cider I slumped back onto the cushion.

I don't know who produced that little bottle of India ink. Somebody else searched through a sewing box by the sofa, finding a pack of needles. Atrocity exhibition was playing loudly now, on the CD 'This is the way, step inside, this is the way step inside'. I still don't really understand if I agreed, or I was held down. Either way, I could immediately sense the metallic odour of blood as my cheek was repeatedly pierced. I was still trying to be cool as I cried out that it was hurting. The pain was immense and I was terrified that my eye would be gauged out. The gorilla tattooist promised to be careful, but the grip on my shoulders by his unseen assistant increased. I saw that the girls had gone. For about ten to fifteen minutes I felt the repeated sharp pain of the needle, pushing ink into my cheek. Blood from the injuries, running down my cheek and into my mouth. The salty taste of blood and ink, as well as the pain.

When the next day I finally I felt able to look, in the mirror, there was a scab on my cheek, just below my left eye about an inch across. My head was throbbing and I could still smell stale cider and vomit on my clothes. A few days later the scab cleared, revealing a black spider tattooed on my cheek. And so that is how it started