

Portrait in Black

by [Eric Morlock](#) (November 2024)



The Intrigue (James Ensor, 1890)

Peter was getting used to being alone. His partner had left him almost four months ago, and the agonizing loneliness was finally giving way to a kind of numbed acceptance. The sounds of his solitude—the echoing of his footfalls en route to the bathroom at night, the hollow clink of his coffee cup at breakfast—no longer had the kind of resonance they once held. The absence of once familiar and comforting sights, like the abstract art posters lining the walls, or the silken red-and-grey paisley bathrobe hanging from the bedroom door, did not trouble Peter anymore. It was a special relief for him to discover that he did not even miss the ubiquitous and intoxicating smell of cedarwood incense that his partner vowed would remain alight in every waking hour “as a symbol of our love and devotion.” Now that the incense no longer clouded his

mind, Peter knew that it was over. While he took no joy in this discovery, at least the worst of the pain was gone. Better, almost, to feel nothing at all, than to be in constant pain.

Although he was not by nature a particularly fastidious person, Peter had slowly begun to change his habits. When he awoke in the morning he immediately got up and made his bed. Next came a hot-as-he-could-stand shower, after which he removed all traces of hair from the drain, then closed the curtain behind him to cut down on mildew. He hung his towel neatly on the rack, then turned to meticulously groom himself. His hair was combed just so, with a perfect part, and his electric razor left not a trace of stubble behind. After five strokes of stick deodorant under each arm, he was ready to get dressed.

Peter hadn't changed his wardrobe much lately—he would probably be a gabardine man forever—except to make sure everything was clean. It used to be that he would wear the very same clothes for days at a time, a habit he had acquired from his partner, who was something of a retro hippie. Now, aside from the pants, he changed each article of clothing every single day. Often, after depositing his garments into the hamper before bedtime, he would suddenly remember that cloying feeling of four-day old socks sticking to his feet, and his stomach would turn.

Being a late riser, Peter usually skipped breakfast in favor of an early lunch. He made a fried egg and cheese sandwich and a bowl of canned soup. With slight variations on the kind of soup, this was his standard daily luncheon menu. Without fail, he washed and dried the dishes afterward, and put everything in its proper place.

The afternoon hours were devoted to writing. Peter was a freelance writer and he spent four hours a day, from one o'clock to five, at his computer. He covered the health

beat—everything from nutrition and exercise to “New Age” lifestyle interests, such as meditation and yoga. But Peter no longer practiced much of what he preached. His diet was the typical bachelor fare. Aside from his daily excursion into the garden, as a mid-afternoon break from his writing, he hardly ever exercised anymore, and any personal interest in Eastern philosophy and metaphysics had been abandoned years ago. And yet, despite his seeming disinterest in it, Peter rather enjoyed his work. Feature writing, no matter what the subject, was exactly like solving a puzzle. Once you knew the formula, everything fell neatly into place.

In the evening, after consuming a microwave entree, or a veggie burger, or a small cheese pizza, Peter watched television. He turned the monitor on at seven o'clock and turned it off at ten-thirty, following the local news. He tended to favor old movies, classic sitcoms, or nature documentaries, while avoiding sex and violence like the plague. Especially the former—owing to his stark and unwelcome solitude, any depiction of physical intimacy was simply too much to bear. It brought back vestiges of the pain he had tried so hard to dispel.

After his three and one-half hours of television, Peter was ready for bed. He washed his face, brushed his teeth rigorously, applied some deodorant, and swallowed a sleeping pill. Then, after pulling on his pajamas and powdering his feet, he hopped into bed. Another day gone, marked off cleanly and evenly, just like all the rest.

Though he was barely conscious of the fact, Peter tried to extend his new-found sense of domestic order to his social interactions, such as they were. First and foremost, he wanted no *problems*. He wanted to go about his daily business with as little conflict as possible, and to otherwise be left alone. Fortunately, his occupation allowed him to live a life relatively free of human contact. Since he had no friends to speak of, and rarely went out anymore, Peter could lead a

simpler and safer existence, and keep any emotional entanglements at bay.

Of course, there were always complications, caused, invariably, by human stupidity or neglect. There were so many fools out there, causing you no end of problems. There were rude waiters, moody postal workers, officious bank tellers, corrupt mechanics. Not to mention truly mean-spirited people, like the corner grocer, whose permanent scowl was enough to send Peter several blocks away to the supermarket.

Worst of all were the fickle lovers. Once they grew tired of you they were gone, leaving you to wonder just who in the world you were.

Peter gazed out his kitchen window at the encroaching clouds. It certainly looked like rain, no matter what the weatherman said. Peter cursed the man under his breath. He had wanted to spend most of his time in the garden today. Just yesterday he had finally completed an unexpectedly long, exhaustively researched article titled, "Bean Sprouts: Underrated or Overvalued?" and he felt he could use a break from writing. In fact, the thought of opening his document file again so soon to tackle another assignment made him slightly nauseous. So what to do, if not work in the garden? There must be something to fitfully occupy a person, especially on a Saturday. Sometimes the free spirit cannot be ignored, grey skies or no.

Peter turned away from the window and moved back to tend to his soup. It was condensed split pea this time, which always took a good deal of stirring in order to smooth out the lumps. Peter used a vigorous figure-eight motion—over and over again—to get the creamy consistency he wanted. Finally, satisfied with his handiwork, he turned down the heat, sprinkled in a little sage and thyme, then went over to the kitchen table to have a look at the morning paper.

Peter sat down and began to scan the headlines. "Oil Spill to Cost Taxpayers Millions" announced the lead article. Beneath that were two stories of local interest: "Protesters Arrested at Family Planning Clinic" and "Councilman Charged with Sexual Abuse." Peter ignored all of these and focused instead on the little box in the lower left-hand corner. "Today's forecast: increasing cloudiness with a chance of afternoon showers." Peter snorted in derision then shrugged his shoulders. At least the paper got it right. He turned quickly to the Lifestyle section.

Usually this part of the paper had several health-related articles which Peter, in his expertise, liked to criticize. They were always full of generalizations and misstatements, not to mention blatant grammatical errors. Unlike magazine writers, newspaper writers were a pretty sloppy lot, as a rule, though this was somewhat understandable given the kind of pressures they had to endure. Impossible deadlines, merciless editors, chaotic working conditions—truly a writer's nightmare.

Perhaps the only time Peter felt anything resembling good fortune was when he thought of his job. While he often worked on assignment, the angle was usually left up to him and, most importantly, the deadline remained flexible. Plus, most magazines paid well. A thousand dollars a shot, if you played your cards right. And so, despite his increasingly jaded outlook on life, Peter was rather content with his career, and could even feel a twinge of sympathy for his blue-collar brethren.

Since there were no health articles today—the entire Lifestyle section being devoted to women's fashion—Peter skipped ahead to Arts and Entertainment. There he discovered two book reviews which seemed almost certain to offend his discerning eye. One concerned yet another slice-and-dice horror novel, while the other addressed the latest bit of fluff from one of America's premier Gothic romance writers. To his

disappointment, Peter found both reviews to be well-crafted and appropriately critical of the shallow, formulaic writing so common to each genre. Two perceptive reviews! Will wonders never cease?

Although Peter rarely checked the schedule of events listings, he did so now in the hope of finding something to occupy his time today. If he had to get out of the house, let it be for a good reason. Perhaps there was a classical music concert at the college, or a play down at the community theater. Peter scanned the listings for something remotely interesting, but to no avail. He was living, it seemed, in a cultural wasteland.

Of course there was always the Art Fair downtown at the pedestrian mall. Today was evidently the last day for that auspicious event. Peter shuddered to think of the so-called "artistic" activities going on at this very moment: jugglers, puppeteers, street musicians, mimes—the true dregs of the art world. Truth to tell, however, it wasn't so much the activities of the Art Fair that Peter objected to, but rather the presence of so many people.

Peter was quite agoraphobic, and tried to avoid crowds whenever possible. Large gatherings in public places always reminded him of the time, as a teenaged boy, when he and a hundred others had assembled to watch a group of firemen battle a blaze at the old YMCA building. The fire was confined to the fifth and highest floor, and a fireman had just started up the truck ladder when a man appeared at one of the windows. Peter couldn't see his face clearly, but he could certainly hear the screams. Thankfully, the man soon disappeared from view—perhaps he had found an escape route. A moment later, though, a human fireball came hurtling through the window and sailed right past the fireman to the pavement below.

Peter got up to check his soup. It was at a gentle boil, so he quickly turned off the heat, ladled a healthy amount into a

bowl, and then carried his steaming hot dinner cautiously over to the table. He sat down to sample the soup, but found he could barely touch his lips to the spoon. So he pulled his chair back alongside the kitchen window and stared out again at the ominous clouds.

Suddenly the thought occurred to Peter: What if the Art Fair were to be rained out? Wouldn't that be something? Imagine all the people scattering in every direction, bolting for their cars or the nearest awning! And think of all the trouble it would make for the performers—musicians rushing to pull the plugs on their amplifiers, puppeteers hustling to cover their little stages, and, best of all, the mimes frantically tending to their streaked and ravaged faces. Now *that* is entertainment!

And so, despite his aversion to crowds, Peter decided to pay a visit to the Art Fair. Wouldn't it be too perfect if a storm hit and they had to cancel the whole affair?

Peter was tired of walking in circles. He had been wandering around the mall for almost an hour now, and in spite of the ever darkening clouds, not one drop of rain had fallen. His feet were sore, his legs had grown bandy, and his back ached like never before. What was worse, he had seen enough bad art to last a lifetime. Leather workers, driftwood carvers, basket-weavers, costume jewelers, ceramicists, crocheters, tie-dyers—this Art Fair had every obsolete handicraft known to man. Not to mention the requisite performance artists: the clowns, the jugglers, the busker musicians, the mimes. *Especially* the mimes. You could barely turn a corner without running into one. Peter hoped they knew better than to fool with him. Just let them try!

Peter meandered over to a bench by the public fountain and sat heavily down. Though the water usually has a calming effect on

him, he was too tired and irritable now to be placated. If there were one thing Peter hated it was the feeling of having wasted his time. And here he had been cheated out of an entire day's work in the garden. Peter cast his eyes heavenward. The dark, still sky—so ominous, yet so impotent—seemed irrelevant somehow, like an empty gesture of nature. All all of these people rushing about...weren't they equally irrelevant?

After a time, Peter noticed some new activity at the opposite end of the fountain. He craned his neck to see past the spouting cherub statue blocking his view. From this angle, all he could make out was the profile of an old man's head and the rapid movements of a young woman's hand tracing something onto a large tablet. A small group of people had gathered around them and an occasional "Oooh!" or "Ahhh!" could be heard. The woman was either a portrait artist or a caricaturist—from the increasing number of giggles and moans, Peter guessed the latter. He shook his head in derision. Another amateur!

After an energetic round of applause, the woman removed the sheet of paper from her tablet and handed it to the old man. Peter could see his eyes go wide in astonishment. Then, laughing, the old fellow reached out to shake the "artist's" hand. Then he handed her a bill, which she tucked into her tablet. After taking a little bow, she moved on to find another subject. She walked up to a middle-aged woman sitting at the edge of the fountain, but was turned away. Then she moved toward a young man straddling a bicycle, who smiled and waved her off. The woman approached virtually each and every person she saw—even poking her head into a baby carriage at one point—as she slowly made her way around the fountain.

She was coming ever closer to Peter, and now he could clearly discern her features and mode of dress. Though not particularly pretty, she had a deep, even tan and long, lustrous black hair, both of which contrasted with her white dirndl and silver blouse. She cut a rather striking figure, this woman, and as she stopped to greet the last person

between herself and Peter, he noticed especially her eyes: large, dark, and penetrating. Why was it that so many artists had those big, bulging Picasso eyes?

The woman finally appeared alongside Peter's bench, and though he had resolved to ignore her she surprised him by asking if she could sit down for a minute. Her feet were killing her, she said. Peter glanced up for a second, then looked away. "Nobody's stopping you," he said with a shrug.

The woman set her sketchpad on the bench, then sat down wearily. Lifting her right ankle to her left knee, she slipped off her sandal and began to massage her foot. Peter couldn't help but notice how large her foot was, and that her legs were even hairier than his own. Why wasn't he surprised?

"Could I draw your portrait?" the woman asked at length, sliding her sandal back on and crossing her legs casually. "You look like an interesting subject."

"I don't like caricature," Peter said flatly, staring straight ahead.

The woman paused a moment. "Doesn't have to be a caricature," she said finally. "Although they're obviously faster and easier. No, I can draw a standard portrait just as well. Have to work a little harder, of course." The woman leaned her head far back and gazed up at the sky. "God, look at those clouds!" she exclaimed. And then, in a more subdued voice: "People say they're very realistic."

"What? The clouds?" Peter couldn't help himself.

"Hmmm?" She turned her head toward him. "What? No, no, of course not!," she said, snapping to attention. "My *portraits*, you know? My *portraits* are very realistic."

"Is that so?" Peter said sardonically. "Well good for them. That is the final criterion for great art, after all. Trompe-

l'oeil realism.”

The woman hung her head and gave Peter a mock-wounded look. Then she reached out and pushed at his arm playfully. “Hey, you’re kind of a punk, you know that?”

This woman certainly seemed immature for her age, which Peter took to be late-twenties. She was probably one of those professional students or something, hanging around the college forever. Just another dizzy coed, it appeared. Then, to get even, Peter nodded at her dress and said cuttingly, “What are you thinking with *that* outfit? Shouldn’t you be saving that for the Oktoberfest?”

“You’ve really got an attitude, don’t you?” the woman teased, flashing her eyes at inPeter mischievously.

“I’m just saying that snap portraiture is an overrated art form,” Peter stated, eyeing the woman dispassionately. “In fact, one hesitates to use the word ‘art’.”

The woman winced slightly, but recovered well enough. “So how does one define art?” she countered.

Peter threw up his arms helplessly. “You *know* it is impossible to formulate an objective definition of art,” he complained. “At the same time, it seems obvious that the best art demands a special level of skill or talent that separates it from mere craft-work. Certainly, caricature does not demand a profound talent, therefore it is not a meaningful art form.”

“You’ve never heard of Honore Daumier?” the woman asked pointedly. “Or George Grosz?”

Peter pursed his lips. “Hacks,” he proclaimed, though he was only vaguely familiar with the names.

If she was offended, the woman did not show it. Instead, she looked at Peter rather quizzically, as if she couldn’t believe that any human being could be so obtuse. Then she glanced away

and began to shake her head slowly and sadly. "I am an artist," she said at last, but mostly to herself.

"What?" Peter queried. "You are an *artist*, you say? Well then prove it. Go ahead, draw my portrait. Not a slipshod piece of kitsch, but a real portrait."

The woman reflected a moment. "It's going to cost you," she said finally, in a slightly ominous tone. Peter wondered if she were talking strictly about money.

"How much?" he demanded.

"Fifty bucks," she said, without batting an eye.

Peter registered no surprise, but merely nodded curtly then reached back for his wallet. He pulled out a crisp fifty-dollar bill, handed it to the woman, and returned the wallet to his pocket. Then he sat back and folded his arms across his chest. "This better be good," he said.

The woman calmly reached for her sketchpad, slipped the bill into the middle of it, then cradled it between her left hand and shoulder, rather like a violin. Then she withdrew from her dress-pocket a long piece of black chalk, which Peter assumed was charcoal. She turned to her subject and looked at him long and hard. Then she set to work.

What Peter noticed most about the woman was her confidence. Though her hand was hidden from view he could tell, by the rapid motion of her right arm and by the constant scraping of charcoal against paper, that she knew exactly what she was doing. Her face reflected a total absorption in the work at hand—an absorption bordering on the hypnotic, it seemed. Peter found that whenever she looked at him he was compelled to turn away and stare stupidly off into space. It was those piercing dark eyes of hers. Those damned artist eyes that looked not just at you, but *inside* you.

During one uncomfortable moment, when she appeared almost to be glaring at him, Peter glanced down at the pavement and noticed a few raindrops accumulating at his feet. Soon he began to feel them plopping, in an irregular rhythm, onto his head and shoulders, and then his arms and legs. He looked over at the woman, but she seemed not to have noticed anything at all.

Peter focused his eyes on her, determined not to be stared down the next time. But then, abruptly, the woman stopped drawing. She held the sketchpad at arm's length, studied her handicraft for a moment, and then nodded her head in satisfaction. She dropped the piece of charcoal into her pocket and carefully began to tear the drawing off the sketchpad. Then she handed it to Peter and smiled at him pleasantly, almost benevolently. Strange. Any animosity she may have felt toward him seemed to have disappeared. Finally the woman got up from the bench and began to move away. "Better find some shelter," she said lightly, covering her head with her sketchpad. "It's going to be a hard rain."

As soon as Peter looked at his portrait a wave of nausea passed over him and he thought that he would be sick. The image before him was like some kind of grotesque mask, all twisted and distorted into something truly monstrous. His whole face had been hideously transformed—the mouth into a toothy grimace, the eyes into black, evil slits, the ears into elongated horns, the nose into a gaping wound. And yet, it looked like *Peter*. That was the horror of it. Somehow this terrible mockery looked every bit like Peter.

He stared at the picture for a very long time. Soon the rain became more insistent, and yet the only reason Peter noticed it was because the portrait had begun to streak. The monster was starting to cry. Peter got up from the bench, stuffed the portrait into his shirt, and ran for cover.

Peter had been staring at his computer screen for over an hour, trying to come up with a good opening sentence for his new article on Cuisinarts. He was working on assignment this time, for a major consumer protection organization, and the piece was fairly straightforward, essentially a comparison of the five best-selling food processors. Peter had finished the research in quick order—having received five free cuisinarts from the companies in question—and all that remained was the writing, which in this case simply meant restating all the facts in your own words. But that was the problem. How could you express yourself, in even the most basic way, when you felt, deep inside, that you had nothing worthwhile to say about *anything*? How could you find your voice when you had been stricken mute?

Peter swiveled around in his chair and got up to go to the bathroom. As he crossed the study he glanced over at his “crying monster” portrait hanging from the wall—the Art Fair original, which was now framed. It was strange how the picture never lost its impact, no matter how often you looked at it. It sent a chill down your spine every time.

In the bathroom, Peter turned on the hot water and began to wash his hands. He gazed into the mirror for a moment, ignoring his unshaven face, to check his eyes. They seemed to be getting more red and bloodshot with each passing day. Perhaps tonight he would have better dreams. Peter glanced over his shoulder, in the mirror, at a photocopy of his portrait glowering at him from its place above the commode. He finished rinsing his hands, then dried them on his shirttails as he wandered down the hall to the kitchen.

Peter opened up the cupboard and took a box of crackers from the shelf. He looked disinterestedly at the pile of dirty dishes that filled the sink, thought for a moment of washing some of them, then shrugged and crossed over to the kitchen table. He sat down and fished some crackers out of the box. Peter munched away absently for a time, then his attention was

drawn to another copy of his portrait, tacked onto the refrigerator with four little round magnets. Unlike the treasured drawings a mother might save from her child's kindergarten class, this picture was not placed there with love.

In hanging a copy of his portrait in every room in the house, Peter had hoped to somehow dispel the pain it aroused in him by confronting it at every turn. So far, this tactic had not worked. As grotesquely distorted as the portrait was, Peter felt a shock of recognition each time he looked at it—the recognition of a darkness within him that he had until recently refused to acknowledge. In his own particular way, Peter was doing his best to fight against the darkness.

Abruptly, Peter lurched out of the chair, tossed his box of crackers onto the kitchen counter, and strode down the hall to the study. He sat resolutely down in front of the computer screen. He would chain himself to his chair, if need be, to come up with that first sentence. But no sooner had Peter sat down than he popped right up again, and began to pace the floor anxiously. It was impossible. He simply could not do it. It was only *Cuisinarts*, for God's sake! But the words were lost to him somehow, and no amount of wishful thinking was going to bring them back. It was time, Peter knew, to find some answers.

He retreated from the study and crossed the hall to his bedroom, where he gathered up his wallet, car keys, and some loose change from the bureau-top. He glanced out the bedroom window and, noticing that there was a steady drizzle outside, went over and snatched his umbrella from the hook on the closet door. Before leaving the room, Peter stopped a moment to consider whether he should make his bed, which was a disheveled mess. Maybe one of these days, he thought, gazing at another copy of his portrait, tacked onto the wall above his headboard.

Peter emerged into his living room and, wading through a sea of discarded newspapers and magazines, made his way over to the front door. Yesterday he had collected up two box-fulls of empty brandy bottles, and had placed them by the door to remind himself about redeeming them one of these days. It couldn't be done now, since all the liquor stores were closed on Sundays. Peter yanked the door open and stepped out onto the porch. As he turned to pull the door closed, Peter caught sight of his "living-room" portrait, which he had taped to the side of his breakfront so that it would be the last thing he saw whenever he left the house.

He walked down the sidewalk to the garage, squinting his eyes against the drizzle that hung in the air like a heavy, wet fog. Once inside the garage, Peter paused a moment alongside his car to have a look around. It was a bit startling to see how orderly everything was here, compared to the house. It seemed that this was the only place left that remained free from his destructive touch.

Peter turned and threw open the door to his Volvo, then hopped in and started it up with a roar. He reached over and flicked the button to his door-opener, waited for clearance, then backed the car out of the driveway. He stopped momentarily to hit the garage door button again, then, just before starting off, he glanced hesitantly into the backyard jungle at his once-beloved patch of garden—now riddled with weeds. Peter looked away immediately, and backed the car out of the driveway and out into the street. He turned on the windshield wipers, jammed the car into drive and, tires squealing, took off for the public library.

As he drove down the mist-shrouded streets, Peter wondered first whether any insightful books on writer's block even existed, and, if so, whether they would do him any good. This new malady of his was so perplexing that a commonplace online search for a solution seemed somehow frivolous. He wanted to feel the weight of a well-read, oft-consulted and meticulously

researched tome in his hands, full of case-studies, that stood the test of time. Peter was pretty far gone, to be sure, almost to the point of despair. If he weren't so stubborn he might have even considered seeing a psychiatrist, but that would mean admitting that he had lost control: the equivalent, in his febrile mind, of conceding defeat. He never conceded defeat in anything.

Peter was lucky to find a parking place only a block away from the library. The downtown streets were crowded today—Peter remembered something about a big basketball game at the college. He hopped out of the car, popped up his umbrella, and hurried down the sidewalk and into the library vestibule.

Peter closed his umbrella and tapped it dry on the brick floor of the vestibule. Then he walked up to the door, yanked at it several times, to no avail. Suddenly he remembered, and then noted from the hours displayed on the door, that the building now closed an hour earlier than it used to. Peter cursed out loud and stamped his feet in frustration. Why me?, he hissed, throwing his arms up in desperation. Why me?

Peter moved over to the large plate-glass window that overlooked the street, and sat down at one of the two benches provided. He looked blankly out at the street scene before him, at the shiny wet cars lined up at the curb and the various pedestrians hurrying past him, anonymous beneath their colorful umbrellas. To him they were all inherently as anonymous as could be, umbrellas or no.

At length a young couple—all dressed up in their Sunday best—came strolling by, laughing and nudging each other playfully. They lingered at the window in front of Peter and, unaware of his presence, began to embrace. He drew her close to him with one arm, holding an umbrella awkwardly aloft with the other. She threw her arms around his neck and began to kiss him. As the embrace became more ardent, and the kisses more passionate, Peter grew increasingly disgusted. When the

couple began, tentatively, to fondle one another, Peter decided enough was enough. He rapped the handle of his umbrella on the glass several times, and the lovers separated with a start. Peter leaned close to the window and shooed them away with his hand. The couple stared at the man in amazement, then looked at each other and broke into a fit of laughter. As they walked off, the young man slipped his arm behind his back and formed an obscene gesture with his hand.

Peter was not so much offended by the gesture, which came as no surprise, as he was with the incongruity of it. How could you both smile at your lover and revile a stranger at one and the same time? How could a person carry within them such conflicting emotions? Was it a kind of schizophrenia—or what?

Peter had only to think of his own doomed love affair to realize how truly insane love could be. All the insatiable taking in the guise of giving. Not love at all, really, but blind selfishness through and through. Peter couldn't help but wonder if what we call "love" is, in the end, just a form of hypocrisy in disguise. One thing was certain: As long as he could help it, he would never fall in love again.

Peter kept staring morosely out into the dark, damp street. The rain began falling more steadily, and puddles were forming on the sidewalk. Suddenly a young boy clad in a blue hooded raincoat rushed by, then stopped abruptly just outside the vestibule door. His mother and little sister soon appeared in bright red hoods of their own, and the group then marched through the door and into the vestibule. The woman reached deep into her tote bag, pulled out a couple of books, and walked over to deposit them into the book-drop. She then crossed over to the window where Peter sat, and looked through her hood at the dreary street-scene. The woman sighed deeply, then turned to sit down on the bench next to Peter's.

"Melissa," the woman said sternly, patting the bench, "come here and sit down." The child did so without complaint. "Alan,

you sit over there.” The woman pointed toward Peter’s bench. “We’ll wait and see if this rain lets up.”

The little boy walked tentatively over to the bench, but did not sit down, choosing instead to stand and gawk. Though Peter stared straight ahead, he could feel the boy’s eyes on him. Finally he turned his head and looked absently at the small hooded figure watching him. The boy tried his best to smile at the man, but it came out more like a lopsided grimace. Peter pursed his lips in disapproval, shook his head in derision, and gazed back out the window. The child edged back over to his mother’s side. “Mommy, let’s go,” the boy said insistently. “I want to go *now*.”

The woman hadn’t noticed Peter’s sour look, so she responded crossly. “What? Would you just go sit down like I asked?”

“I don’t want to,” the boy protested. “I want go to the store, like you said.”

“We *will* go to the store,” the woman said wearily. “I told you we will. Now would you just down for a minute, and let me rest?”

“No! I want to go *now*!”

“Oh for God’s sake! What is wrong with you, Alan? Why are you being such a pill?”

“I just want to *go*, that’s all. I don’t want to wait for *nothing*.”

“What about the rain?” she said calmly.

“But it’s not raining *that* hard, mommy. I think we should go now before it gets worse ”

“Well *I* say we wait,” the woman said firmly. “Now just sit down on that bench like I asked, alright?”

"No!!" the boy shouted. "I don't *want* to!"

"What in the world...?" The mother put her arm around the child and drew him near. "Alright, Alan," she said in a soothing voice. "Now you tell me what's wrong, okay? Otherwise we'll have to go home. I can't have you whining like this all day."

"I can't tell you..." the boy sniffed. He looked haltingly at the stranger.

The woman looked at her son quizzically. "Well, you'd *better* tell me," she said at last, shaking him by the shoulders. "Because we're not going *anywhere* until you tell me what's gotten into you "

Realizing he had no choice, the boy leaned down and whispered quickly into his mother's ear: "I'm afraid of him."

"What??" she said, astonished. "You're *what*?"

"I'm *afraid* of *him*!!" the boy blurted out, pointing directly at the man.

The man surely heard this pronouncement, but he did not respond in any way. He kept looking straight ahead, sitting perfectly still, though perhaps a bit more stiffly than before. The three hooded figures stared at the man for an uncomfortably long time, expecting some sort of reaction from him—a denial, hopefully, of his capacity to arouse fear in children. The thing was, the man did look slightly threatening, even in profile. The greasy hair, the unshaven face, the disheveled clothes. If not for the quality of the latter, he could almost be taken for one of the homeless. Finally the mother got up and led her children out through the door.

The man remained at the bench for quite some time, and scarcely moved a muscle for the duration. The street was rather busy at one point—the basketball game had ended, and

there were many black-and-gold clad persons scurrying about, their umbrellas tilted to the now driving rain. The traffic became quite congested for a while, and it was hard to tell if people were honking their horns in celebration or in anger.

Occasionally someone would wander into the library vestibule, either to return books or to escape the elements. They saw the strange, rumpled man sitting bolt upright on the bench, staring out into the street. Though he looked dry enough, his cheeks seemed to be moist from the rain. Or could it be tears? No matter. No one ever stayed long enough to find out.

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Eric Morlock is a writer and playwright from the Seattle area. He has published two short stories and two essays over the past year, and a one-act comedy received an honorable mention in the 2023 *ThinkingFunny* radio play festival. Eric is an avid walker, bicyclist, and volunteer, and enjoys his quiet writerly life on cool and beautiful Puget Sound.

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