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He suspected that his skepticism about the world at large dated to the disclosure of the Zapruder tape. The moment he saw the president's shattered head snap back in the opposite direction of Oswald's shot, doubt about public announcements seemed to become a mental reflex. As in, lone gunman? No way. And his divorce and subsequent isolation from family and friends as he aged poorly produced a sense of social alienation that reinforced said skepticism. The fact that he was a freelance journalist by trade following decades of desultory staff work, albeit a marginal one undaunted by dutiful fact checkers, only added to his epistemological hesitation.

Yet his skepticism extended to conspiracy theories themselves other than the one surrounding the assassination. Certain elections were stolen? Of course, but the operative word there was "certain." Climate change a hoax? Nonsense. Memory chips implanted by the NSA at birth? How? The moon landing and 9/11 staged? Come on. The earth flat? Sure. Reality a movie directed by god? Please, people.

The fact was, conspiracies such as the one involving JFK required too many people to be in on the conspiracy for it to remain one, an elegantly perfect contradiction in terms. And yet

Zapruder's evidentiary imagery was irrefutable notwithstanding the patently ridiculous claims issued by unnamed sources immediately upon its public release that gunshots such as the one that killed Kennedy often produced violently backward reactions. Again, people, please. But as for most of the rest, yes, absurd, however tempting any grain of verisimilitude and compelling drama contained therein. And thanks to his increasingly contrarian nature, the attraction for him of more believable theories faded over time. Except, that is for the assassination. And don't tell him the tape was edited to produce the imagery in question.

Meanwhile, personal history and the passage of time produced a growing discomfort with public spaces, via the combined form of creeping inflammation of the body, sensory and mental decline, and lingering regret. And so even as he pottered about his apartment all day every weekend, venturing out only for bare necessities, doubts about everything from nominal facts exterior to his experience to his ability to ascend or descend stairs without falling would dog him like the harried shadows of windswept clouds. Or worse when disturbing dreams about the oligarchy and unbreathable air jimmed themselves into consciousness at three or four in the morning. And when the pandemic hit, there was even less reason to venture into the outside world or believe anything he heard or read except on certain websites or podcasts. That is, from trusted sources.

Meanwhile, isolation deepened. He was online most of the time but never engaged in social media except to tap into four dating sites, and he abandoned those after three disastrous attempts to do more than have coffee with his electronic matches. He rarely even spoke with anyone except to interview sources for the sponsored corporate content he produced on a contractual basis to pay the rent, all of it carefully masked as objective reality though exclusively

angled to serve sponsors' commercial interests. And those interviews were conducted at least partly through email.

Even his body seemed to conspire against perception outside of his own, forcing self-absorption, pain dominating consciousness even as he attempted to stave off its decay through Zoom yoga, forays to the gym, and even solo surfcasting ventures in Montauk for which he went to the trouble of maintaining and legally parking a Toyota 4Runner. But given his symptoms, there was no escaping the doctor's visit he faced that fateful day, though he naturally distrusted medical professionals and had grown to despise the healthcare system itself, which he was convinced had become a complete set-up for private equity, thanks to the collusion of investors and politicians.

Yet venturing outside was not a problem so long as he could avoid crowds. The subway of course was a crapshoot in that respect. Every time he boarded a train, he thanked the daily dose of Lexipro his doctor had prescribed, as in easy now, sweet serotonin, no hurry whatsoever. The trip on the G train to his latest appointment went well enough, as did the visit itself, though the young but unattractive receptionist as usual seemed off her own meds or something, unable to find his appointment in the computer system for five minutes, and snippy over it to boot when she finally handed him much the same paperwork to complete that he had already filled out online. After doing so nonetheless, then sitting back down for twenty more minutes, he was shown through the door to the examination rooms and down a long hallway to an underheated one. There a masked woman in a silver track suit and matching sneakers had him strip to his underwear and sit on the edge of a platformed vinyl recliner covered in paper that stuck to the back of his thighs while she asked various questions and took his vital signs before departing.

After another twenty minutes, his doctor entered in a white coat and said, “Good news. It’s not cancer.” This in response to yet another test he had ordered and to which his patient had reluctantly succumbed. He then palpated several of Daniel’s organs and body parts, told him to keep taking the medications he’d prescribed, added another to the list, and told him to come back in three months.

After paying his copay and descending the elevator to the street and, after traversing the street, the stairs to the subway, he found the platform filled with people waiting for the train, many carrying cardboard placards and bullhorns, blowing whistles and chanting slogans, so that he had to push his way onto the train after it arrived and its doors opened. Inside were more people with signs and whistles, though the noise was merely a general din within the overcrowded car. Yet Daniel found himself sandwiched between several people with cardboard signs, one of whose wooden handles abruptly poked him in the stomach. He tried to move away but was poked again by the same handle. Now he turned to look at the owner of the sign, a tall young man with long blonde hair extending over a black hooded sweatshirt who was chatting animatedly with several similarly attired companions also holding placards. Daniel attempted to read these but could only make out certain words such as “Patriarchy” and “Capitalism” and “Black Lives” and “Fascism” and “Racism” and “Police.” And then Daniel was poked yet again, and this time he said, “Hey!” and when ignored or unheard, repeated the exclamation, only louder, but still went unrecognized. “What the fuck?” he finally shouted at the blonde young man. Now his tormenter turned and looked down at Daniel and said, “What’s up?” And Daniel said, “Would you please stop poking me with your damn sign?” The young man simply turned away, prompting Daniel to repeat his request only at twice the volume. Now the blonde fellow turned and said, “Relax, old man, would you?” And Daniel just stared back in hostile silence.

At last, the train pulled into his station. But when the doors opened, he found most of the crowd inside the train also attempting to exit. And the platform was packed with still more people with placards and whistles and bullhorns and the like. Now he found himself next to the blonde man with the sign, which Daniel could at last see read, "Fuck the Patriarchy." He tried to take no offense, though some inevitably registered in the far reaches of his left brain as he trundled along next to the young man, who had begun to chant the words along with the rest of the crowd, which now showed no sign of moving forward. The train also stood in place, doors open, still disgorging protesters. Now claustrophobia beckoned as Daniel found himself frozen in place among the crowd. More and more people filled the platform, eliminating more and more of what remained of free space, until he found it difficult to breathe. At last, however, the crowd began to move forward toward the exit. Step by step, it made its way onward and Daniel did as well, body moving without volition, as if pulled away from shore by a slow and inevitable riptide. Behind him, he heard the train doors close at last and the train itself start to screech forward toward the next station.

Daniel's portion of the crowd began to approach the first set of stairs, and as he reached them he climbed each slowly, one by one, while his accidental companions did the same, placards in hand. At one point, however, Daniel faltered on a step and immediately felt someone's hand reach out to steady him. It belonged to the blonde young man in the black hooded sweatshirt. "Thank you," Daniel said to him, and the young man nodded. "Of course," he added.

Outside the station at last, Daniel realized he'd missed his stop and had gone one further. And he found himself in a sea of protestors that stretched as far as he could make out in every direction even as it moved along the street in the opposite one of his apartment now more than

the usual few blocks away. Police vans stood every fifty yards at the edges, flashing red and blue. Helicopters hovered overhead, backgrounding the blare of chants and shouts and sing-song instructions impossible to make out as the crowd inched forward, then stopped, inched forward again and stopped once more. He looked toward the sides of the street but saw nothing but metal barriers locked together between the flashing vans and police every few yards behind them, along with rows of curious onlookers. He tried to move sideways to cross over to the police, hoping they might show him a way out of the street, but he found such an effort impossible, as the bodies surrounding him were packed too tight to do anything but move forward. The crowd did that again, stopped, then moved once more, all the while chanting its chants and singing its songs and protesting its protest, bearing him along as if he were simply floating on its surface while his apartment drifted ever further away. Daniel turned to see the blonde young man not far to his left and drew vague comfort from the fact. He trod on with the crowd, hoping in vain to find an exit even as it moved further and further from his home and the din continued to rise and surround him, deepening his isolation even as it drew him on in its midst. It wasn't long before he grew tired, however, and his knee and hip began to ache, so that he was forced to limp along as the crowd moved on in its swollen mass and resounding din. Soon there seemed to him no end to the protest, no destination, no outcome. And eventually, it seemed that he would never return home.

What was any of this about besides the usual clichés? What did it connect to historically? What did it mean in societal terms? Who exactly was involved and with what significance, political or personal? He had no answer. He simply longed for the solitude of his apartment, there where he would pretend he was autonomous. Limping on in ignorance and pain, he looked to his left to find the blonde young man, but now he was nowhere in sight.