Not a Matter of Choice

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by Bob Slocum
English 3

I'm the idiot, but I've got them figured out. I know—I know how everybody talks about me, even to me: in history class, "Hey, Gabby, tell us your life story;" in the hall, "Whaddaya say, Gabby;" or in the cafeteria, after having ice cream put on my head, "Happy Birthday, Gabby! Speech! Speech!" It's kind of irritating, being treated as an inferior by inferiors, but it's necessary. I know it's not perfect withdrawal, but by choosing to be silent I'm making it as good as it can be.

I even manage to have a little bit of fun sometimes. I'm famous at school. Notoriety, even that spawned of ridicule, has its positive aspects. For instance, I hear things other people don't get to: secrets in the hall—"Go ahead, Angie, he won't tell anyone," nobody's afraid to attack someone who won't attack back. You want to win an argument? Go argue with Gabby—victory by default. And being recognized everywhere I go in town gives me that vast feeling of celebrity (merited, even; I'm an actor, of course). I don't need an American Express card.

Maybe someday I will, though. Not too many people know what a writer, even a famous one, looks like. Yes, that's right, a writer. Gabby Pederson, the school idiot, the town loser, number one on the Zero Popularity Chart, wants to be a writer. And right now he's paying his dues, doing his homework, learning the ropes. He's experiencing.
I figured it out a few years ago, before my family moved to Singleton. It came to me in sociology class, when even as an eighth-grader I was planning my writing career, while bits of Mr. Greyson’s lecture mixed with my straying thoughts. Of course! How do you make sure a survey will provide valid information? You keep your hands off—keep your feelings out of it, don’t manipulate the surroundings or objects of study—just report what’s there. That’s how a writer should work, too. If he wants to show what’s really there, he can’t get in the way. It’s like taking a snapshot with your thumb over the lens opening. I saw a painting once that showed the painter in the foreground, looking at his scene and painting it onto his canvas, which was a portrait of the painter in the foreground painting the scene with painter in foreground painting the scene, etc., etc. It was a neat idea, but that’s not reality. The artist is not his world, he’s the artist and the world is something separate. The world does, the artist tells. It’s like the evening news. I needed to separate myself from the world I wanted to write about. I came up with an idea of how to do this, but if I did anything drastic where I had lived all my life, in front of all of my friends, I’d be the center of attention. I would have done. But when we moved to Singleton my freshman year, I saw an opportunity to quit doing, and I did so, at least in the most significant way I could imagine. I stopped talking.

Of course, my poor parents were worried to death. They took me to all sorts of doctors and psychologists, who didn’t know what to think. They probably suspected that I was faking, but couldn’t trick me into revealing myself, so eventually they attributed it to a variety of causes, mostly dealing with the shock of a new environment. My parents wanted to move back, but I told them I didn’t want to—I write notes or shake or nod my head when I have to communicate with them, and of course I write all my homework assignments (I have to stay in school)—so, with me under a psychologist’s three-hour-a-week care, they stayed and hoped for my “trauma” to heal.

I hated doing this to them, but I think they’ll understand when I explain it to them someday. Imagine how happy they’ll be to hear my voice again! But for
now, I guess they'll just have to worry. As I said, this is necessary.

Sometimes I begin to wonder if it's worth all the trouble I'm causing them, and myself. It seems like there's something wrong. But when I think it through again, I see that there is no flaw. I know I draw attention by being this way, but it's not because of what I'm doing, but what I'm being. I'm surroundings, albeit peculiar surroundings, simply something for everyone else to react to. I'm a freshly-painted wall, made ready for graffiti. I'm a streetlamp in a deserted park—throw rocks at me, break me! I'm a leafless tree; cover me with toilet paper! I'm like a one-way mirror in a public restroom—they all look in and see what they want to see—make sure that their hair's straight or that they're better than someone, assure themselves that they're not now man on the totem pole—and I look out and see them the way they are, their alone selves, their private parts. I see how they want what they want as well as what. I see not just them as they see themselves, two-dimensional—I see them and I feel their reflections in me, I feel how they see themselves. I understand them—I make snap judgments, I jump to the right conclusions. And, pitiful as they might be, I feel no pity.

You can tell what kind of person somebody is when he's alone in a public restroom. A nice guy, a guy who would help an old lady across the street or would treat a poor dumb kid with a little respect, he'll always flush the john, he'll use just one paper towel to dry his hands instead of a whole wad of them. He'll look in the mirror and I'll smile back at him, I'll remember him. A rotten guy, the guy who snatches purses, beats up little kids, who picks on someone because he's different, he'll piss in the sink and break the soap dispenser. Sometimes he'll even break the mirror. Which will, ultimately, get him in a lot of trouble. The proverbial seven years bad luck, not so proverbial now, and not just seven years, will catch up with him. I'll look out at him and I'll frown, but I'll remember him, too. And let me tell you, there's a hell of a lot more people out there smashing mirrors than there are flushing the johns.

I feel so giddy with the power I'm gaining that sometimes I think I'll burst. When it gets the toughest—
when I'm sitting in study hall fielding paper wads with
the back of my head, when I'm trying to ignore fingers
poking me in the face, when even a teacher chuckles in
spite of himself at some trick played on me—then I often
smile, thinking of the trap they're falling into, the fools
they're making of themselves before the whole world, of
how I'm tricking them into serving me. Someday, they'll
see their reflections, they'll see the way they really are,
the view of themselves they've been trying to deny, and
they won't be happy. But there won't be a thing they can
do about it. It'll be too late. During the moments when
the abuse becomes the worst, worse than anyone should
have to take, I take it, because the more I take the more
I'll be able to dish out. I feel like God—I'm going to
punish them for their sins. Only here, there's no
repentance, because once the deed is done it's done, the
debt is recorded and it will be repaid. I smile gleefully
during these moments, and they pour it on even thicker,
digging their own graves.

And I'm so powerful, so full of the secret knowledge
that no one else knows how to get, that I'll be able to
bury the whole world. Like I said, I'm God—fuck the
rainbow, here comes the flood again. Sorry folks, but you
laughed at the boat, you were mean to that strange
kid (remember me?) you tried to break the mirror. Now
it's too late. I'm going to indict everyone around me on
this one—verdict: guilty, on all counts; sentence: not life,
but eternity, eternity spent suffering for their wrongs,
imprisoned between the covers of a literary jailhouse,
held in stocks built of language, exposed for the rest of
the world to execrate.

* * * *

One guy I'm going to get is Harry Chambers, he and his
friend John Marty. They're always devising something to
try to get me mad. They usually succeed, too. At times
I'm nearly blind with fury, and I want to attack them
and scream at them, but I get a hold on myself in time
and remain passive. It's hard, though. The time they
filled my locker with water balloons, I could have killed
them. Only just in time I remembered: I'm going to do
them worse.

Ted Embers likes to bully me. He'll push me up against
a wall, painfully, and raise his fist like he's going to
hit me. I try not to cringe, although I feel like sobbing out loud. When I don’t do anything he laughs and knocks my books onto the floor. I wait, staring at the wall, until he leaves before I pick them up again. Everybody is laughing, everybody, that is, except this fat girl with braces, Missy Tupman. I’ve never seen her laugh at anything. She looks at me with an expression of overwhelming pity, like she’s going to cry, but she doesn’t do anything to stop Ted because she knows he’d do something to her. Next to me, she’s probably the most-abused person in school. I avoid looking into her eyes, because I get the feeling she’d understand me completely if I gave her a chance.

There are times when everybody picks on me. There’s a little kid, a sophomore, who everyone calls Crunchy. He’s afraid of everyone, even me if there’s no one else around. But if he sees a chance to show off, he can be really cruel. Like when he poured rubber cement in my hair, or when he lit the cuff of my pants on fire with a Bunsen burner. Once he gets started, everybody joins in, because they figure if Crunchy can do it, so can they. They’re stupid—like sheep, they all follow where one goes. But a sheep leader, even though he’s a leader, is still a sheep, and he’s still stupid. And he doesn’t know any better than the rest what kind of trouble he may be leading them into. They do a lot of damage, though, they trample over a lot of things.

The worst are a bunch of girls that like to tease me. I know females are supposed to be more compassionate than males, but these girls are a lot more merciless than any guys I know. More than once they’ve sent Missy Tupman home crying by teasing her about seeing her in a van with a bunch of guys from Ricketts, stealing her underwear in gym class, and some even worse indignities. Once she swallowed a whole bottle of aspirin in school and they had to take her to the hospital to pump her stomach.

They’re pretty ruthless when they start on me, too. There’s five of them, all good-looking rich girls, and Patty Warden is their leader. She’s the best-looking girl in school—Dorothy Hamill haircut, smooth, comely face, short skirts or tight jeans and half-unbuttoned blouses covering only as much as necessary. She’s a cheerleader
and drum majorette and was named queen at the senior prom. She's the school's number one brown-noser and teacher's pet. She voted for herself for homecoming queen when she was junior class attendant.

I'll be sitting alone in the English room, reading, when Patty and her friends will walk in. They're early for poetry class. Their giggling and chattering will quiet a bit when they see me, and I won't even look up at them. I sit and wait for the attack, already planning my distant but certain retaliation.

In a couple of minutes Patty comes over and sits by me. "Hi, Gabby, how ya doing?" she singsongs sweetly, to the merriment of the other girls. I refuse to acknowledge her presence. She continues, undaunted. "What are you doing this weekend, big fella?" She puts her arm around me and cuddles close. I look at her and force a smile, causing howls from the other side of the room. Kicking myself for being dumb enough to try, I look away.

"Come on, Gabby, you big hunk of man," she says, putting her face almost against my neck and blowing in my ear. "I'm just so horny I can't stand it." The other girls fall from their desks, shrieking, as Patty pulls her shirt open and puts her left breast right in front of my face. I stare at it, emotionless. I always thought that a sight like that would excite me, but it doesn't. Her nipple looks like a piece of pink candy. I barely resist an urge to bite it, hard.

"Wanta see some more? Meet me tonight at the shelter house in the park. I'll be waiting for you." She lowers her eyes seductively, licks her lips, and pulls her shirt back over herself. The other girls are wiping their eyes, delirious. Someone else enters the room as she stands and walks away. Then she turns and says:

"Unless you're going out with Missy again tonight."

I want to jump up and yell "Slut!" and "Whore!" and "Bitch!" at her, grab her neck and choke her, and make her run home crying, but I know she wouldn't, she'd just laugh, or else tell the superintendent that I attacked her and have four witnesses defend her. I think of how good it would feel to hurt her, but I realize that the satisfaction would be only momentary, then I'd feel that nausea of dread caused by disaster, like when you fall down on an icy sidewalk and realize that it hurts too badly to get up
before people notice and start laughing. I can't do anything now except stare stupidly at my feet.

She'll suffer for this, though. I almost laugh when I think of how I've fooled her, made her do her worst where it will get her in the most trouble, like shoplifting at Sears right in front of a surveillance camera. I look back across the room at her, and she winks at me while the other girls continue giggling, and for a second I almost feel a twinge of pity. But I don't change my expression. My face remains blank, it is opaque.

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I often sit in class and make notes about things to write about someday, when I've learned everything I need to know, finished my apprenticeship, when I have the skills to rebuild the world. This world. Rebuild it as it is for everyone to laugh at and feel ashamed.

The laughter will come first, with the recognition, like seeing yourself on TV, waving your arms behind the police chief being interviewed at the scene of an accident—they'll see the things they've done, the jokes they've made, the attention and laughter they've earned for their humor, man's inhumanity to man. The shame will come with the understanding—when they see the other side of the story, the side they never considered, the side that matters. They—Patty Warden, Ted Embers, Crunchy, all of them—will realize, too late to make a change, to tip the scale of significance in their favor, that instead of playing the heroes in their own lives they've been the antagonists in someone else's life, the bad guys of some other hero. The worst part for them, though, will be when they see how willingly they've helped to build this story, the story that will come down solid and massive on their brittle lives.

Ecstatic, I see this world growing in front of me, this ultimately natural world, the world as it's supposed to be. It will be my story. Finally, the hero will be me.

And as I see this, at the same moment I realize, soberingly, who the heroine must be.

Missy Tupman.

Missy Tupman, with her fat, red, pimply face, her stringy, mud-colored hair, waddling down the hall amid taunts and laughter, will be the heroine. I wish it wasn't so, but it's not my choice to make—it's been chosen,
predestined, her countenance carved of misery as sure a sign as Excalibur in the hands of Arthur. Well, then, if she’s to be a heroine, I’ll make her a fine one! If I can take all the torture, the torments I’ve been dealt, the horrible, humiliating experience of high school, and turn it into something positive, then surely I can turn a homely girl into a princess of righteousness. She’ll be a ... a comrade, my comrade in arms against the evil of the world. Robin Hood had his Maid Marian. Superman had his Lois Lane. Tarzan had his Jane, Batman his Batgirl. I’ll have my Missy Tupman.

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I’m sitting in the bedlam of algebra class. Mr. Foil left for some reason. I’m at the front of the classroom and behind me Patty Warden and her friends, Ted Embers, and a few others are initiating the destruction of the class. Today, they’re bothering Missy, who’s sitting in the very back, nearly crying. I sit alone, unmolested, plotting our revenge, putting together our fictive future, more powerful, more meaningful than any action we could be capable of. They’ll be fantastic tales, stories of my determination and ability, of her bravery and sacrifice. Heart-stirring stories with sad, satisfying endings—we part, sorrowfully, but necessarily; bravely, with no sentimental pleading or selfish desires for it to be any different, scorning mere human love for the ideals of goodness and justice ...

I’m wakened from my daydreaming by a sudden, oppressive silence. I look up, but Mr. Foil’s not back yet. Curious, I turn around and look toward the back of the room.

Oh my God.

Missy Tupman is out of her desk, half out the window. She’s sitting on the window ledge, four stories above the parking lot, tears streaming down her face. She starts to scream back into the room: Patty Warden, Ted Embers, Crunchy, they’re all zombies. She could be shouting at mannequins, or at still projections of people in a three-dimensional picture.

“I hate you all, I hate you,” she sputters, convulsing with sobs, and I can see it in her eyes that she’s not bluffing, she’s going to jump. Somehow, I feel calm.

“You bastards, you—you fuckers,” she howls, then she
becomes completely hysterical and I can't understand what she's saying.

"Missy, please," says Julie Brown, nearly crying herself.

"Missy, we're sorry," Randy Smith says, standing up and holding his hands out to look earnest.

"Please, Missy, we didn't mean it," says Ann Wilson, walking slowly toward the open window.

Missy wipes her eyes roughly with the back of her hand. "Get away from me!" she screeches. Everyone freezes again, helpless.

I watch fervently. It occurs to me: It has to be this way. The other kids start again to plead with her, but even though she's calmed down a bit, she's not coming in. She thwarts every move made toward her by edging further out. I look at her wild, incoherent eyes, and I know her. She's going to jump.

Of course. Missy Tupman, a heroine? Of course. It makes perfect sense now, everything's falling into place. She's proving me right by doing this, she's giving her life for me. I look at her with admiration. Missy Tupman: fat, ugly, unpopular—a heroine, a martyr. I think I know now what love is.

Someone moves like he's going to grab her and she lurches outward, losing her balance for a moment, then gaining control. The girls scream, the guys gasp. Patty Warden faints.

Missy sets her hands against the side of the window frame to push. "I hate you all," she announces, finality hard in her choking voice like the "clack" of rocks in an avalanche.

They start begging her again, pleading, apologizing, rationalizing, moralizing, desperate. I look at them contemptuously. It's too late, I feel like saying. It's too late now. This is the final injustice, the last straw. This one will follow you to your deaths, and beyond. I sit smugly, like a reassured father who can say I told you so, satisfied, yet I'm suddenly sweating, and I feel this itchy tightness in my throat and a rattling in my ears . . .

I glance at Missy, one last look, and she's looking back, and something's wrong. Suddenly she's staring at me with that understanding look that I dreaded, and though there are still tears in her eyes and running down her
face, her expression has changed, and I can see—*damn it!*—I can see that she’s not going to jump. My head cloudy, noisy, I look around the room, and they’re all looking at me, mute, and slowly, torturously, I notice a dull rasping echoing in the room—oh, no, *no*!—it’s my own stupid voice, three-plus years of disuse choking it like powerful emotion, saying:

“Don’t, Missy, please. Come back.”

I feel something shatter inside me as she climbs back into the room, fresh tears in her eyes. Relief rushes in like spring air, and I almost gag breathing it. She comes over and hugs me, bawling; I can smell her repulsive body odor. Someone pats me tentatively on the back. The room is buzzing, twitching. I am a hero.

But it’s not the same, and Missy Tupman, the fat, disgusting pig, is making me sick. I look down at Patty Warden, just now being revived on the floor; hair messed up, eyes, red though clear, finding assurance in the scared smiles around her; she’s beautiful. I say to myself, now there’s a heroine . . .