

‘ ... if we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee.’

– Giorgio Agamben

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You Don't

exist – for just this moment. So for just this moment there's nothing, nothing happening. For just this moment. Enjoy it because, sadly, it's gone.

You exist.

Now something is happening.

Let's say it's the radio. That much could easily be happening.

Let's say it's the television. Or congested traffic. Let's say it's kids.

Here's a kid. And then over here, another kid, and over here another one. Let's say you're the sunshine bouncing into their homes, peeking into their windows and laying a little grace on them. There are kids everywhere. Here's one – a girl – she's sixteen. Here's a boy, he's thirteen. Here's an eight-year-old girl and an eleven-year-old boy. Here's another sixteen-year-old girl. They're all hanging out as you bounce in on them, shining bright as you are.

Say you were a kid. That could be happening. Try to imagine what that might be like. It's not like you've gotten where you are without having been one. If you have a second, make a list of all the things you've learned since then. Or forgotten since then. Which would be the bigger list?

Let's say it's the first day of summer. Look at the sky – the sun is hanging overhead taking its sweet time. The day is warm, bright and beautiful. And we hope we're not taking too many liberties when we say: so are you.

Over Here,

sixteen-year-old Kaliopé Vally lies on a futon in the corner of a tiny room in a house somewhere downtown. She points a remote, her stereo the only thing she brought up from Dearborn, Michigan, just a couple of weeks ago. She's scanning the airwaves, trying to get a sense of this new city.

In addition to the stereo's remote she also holds her stomach. She's not feeling very well. The state of the world makes her nauseous.

'I can't stomach all the lies,' she's fond of saying. And it's true. She can't.

She decided to leave America a few days before the president declared Red Alert, before the streets started crawling with military, doors got busted down and people dragged away. She managed to get in by convincing the immigration official that she was just coming to visit the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Her real mission was – is – to find her legendary aunt, the long-lost Amina, a sister to her mother and famous in some circles. Someone in Detroit told Kaliopé that her aunt had headed north a few weeks back. Or maybe it was a few months – time flies even when you're not having fun.

There's Also Another

someone, another kid, little eight-year-old Rani Vishnu. A nervous kid. Well, maybe not nervous but kind of an alert that might feel like nervous. And like nervous, it could get to be a little much. She had started going grey, a single strand standing out from shiny blackness.

And that was before the Red Alert.

Having been pinned down with her mother, Anu Vishnu, by a line of riot cops, engulfed in clouds of tear gas and shot at

with a couple of rubber bullets, the kid then sprouted a few more.

Subsequently, when Anu witnessed a number of her colleagues at the University of Michigan being rounded up and detained, Rani had agreed that perhaps it was time to follow some of her mom's research leads that pointed north – until the dust settled.

Now they're stuck on the Queen Elizabeth Way, idling in congested traffic, surrounded by construction and all the other cars with American plates.

In the middle distance a yellow backhoe labours, tearing up the road, vomiting exhaust into an already wheezing atmosphere, and, way off, the CN Tower, world's tallest freestanding structure, appears to be standing aloof. The angle of the view creates the impression that it's edging away from the rest of the city's buildings, contemplating dipping its toes in the lake.

While over here there's another kid. Over here –

Here.

There's this kid. This kid in the bathroom. This white kid. This really white kid. This sixteen-year-old named Ruth Racco.

Ruth is locked in the bathroom staring at her face in the mirror and ignoring her brother, Michael Racco, and his friend James Hardcastle – that little piece of shit who had walked on water – as they pound on the bathroom door.

'I believe Ruth is staring at herself again,' Michael shouts to the house.

Ruth remains fixated on her ghostly image.

Ruth had been born with vitiligo, a condition in which not only is there no melanin but there are no melanocytes, the cells that produce melanin. While she was gestating, her father, John Racco, backhoe operator, had punched Ruth's mother, Katherine, in the stomach. It was in play, he had claimed, and Katherine corroborated his story, stating that he had been pretending to be the great Muhammad Ali. Ruth was born premature and born white.

She's sixteen. She has spent the past year saving money and trying to convince her parents that she's old enough to move out; she needs to be downtown, because down there, there's a scene.

And This Is Her

brother, little eleven-year-old Michael, a kid with a few good food allergies. He's in his living room removing cushions from the sofa with his friend, the thirteen-year-old water-walker, James Hardcastle. James had walked on water in the fountain at the local mall in what was heralded as a miracle.

Back in the day, some thirteen years ago, James's mother, Joan Hardcastle, had simply decided to start dividing the egg herself. On a whim. To see if she could. And she could. Nine months later little James was born into obscurity. With no father, he had, at first, felt he was in some way deficient, not a whole boy. His walk across the water at the mall had changed all that. He was now a holy boy.

The state had taken a dim view of Joan Hardcastle, Jim's mother, hurling accusations of genetic manipulation and so forth, and, for the boy's own good, had sent little Jim to a group home.

When the miracle first occurred, James's name appeared in the newspapers on a daily basis. Over the course of the following months this gradually lessened and now it's hardly there at all. People still occasionally recognize him – like in the good old days – but even that's happening less and less. Soon the population of the city won't remember him at all.

And speaking of the city – it is, in fact, a teenage city, pubescent, a little nervous; masking shyness with a performance of aloofness; snooty but universally so and born only of an unawareness of just how beautiful it is. Still, efforts to distinguish oneself from forces that can be considered parental are reactionary and, ultimately, ugly. So, it's an ugly beautiful city; a shy city; a city that has a hard time saying hello to acquaintances. A sad city. A lonely city.

Kaliope Isn't Sure

what to make of the city. It sounds pretty ordinary on the radio. And if it's an ordinary city it shouldn't be that hard to find Amina. If her aunt has been here for more than a couple of weeks, people will know about her. She has a lot of charisma. She might be in a band. She always could rhyme. And talk. Amina could talk a lot too.

Kaliope rolls onto her stomach, stretching out, trying to relax. She lifts a *NOW* magazine – one of the city's eager entertainment weeklies – and opens it. The ads for the city's clubs fill a few pages, tight little ads with tight little text. Band after band after band. Kaliope clenches her jaw, shuts her eyes and holds down a burning in the middle of her chest. The sounds of the city's radio frequencies wash over

her, a description of the city's busy traffic. Names new to Kaliopé: the Don Valley Parkway, Yonge Street, Eglinton Avenue.

Kaliopé speaks, testing the strange word: 'Eglinton.'

The radio tells her that the QEW is clogged with cars and construction.

Kaliopé flips to the back of the *NOW* magazine.

Maybe she could take out a personal ad: 'niece seeks long-lost aunt.'

Back In Michael Racco's

living room, Michael and James are loading up their arms with sofa cushions. 'The only thing I can eat is the discarded water in which my mother boils the perogies,' jokes little eleven-year-old Michael. He doesn't feel particularly Ukrainian but his mother, Katherine, does and is mortified by the fact that she is, the sound of her voice wafting in from the kitchen. 'I know I'm not dumb. But what the hell, everyone occasionally fucks up.'

The swear causes both Michael and his taller friend, the thirteen-year-old James Hardcastle, to explode with laughter, run down the stairs, throw the cushions onto the roof of their fort and dive in.

'I'm going to fuck your mother,' says James.

'The fuck you are.'

'Some things are just meant to be.'

And speaking of Mrs. Racco, she is always making sure the scene is peanut free.

'A peanut-butter cookie? Please, put that away,' she says to Joan Hardcastle, James's mother, the two chatting over

cups of coffee in the kitchen. ‘A little oil from one peanut has enough power to flatten my kid fifty times over.’

The phone rings and Mrs. Racco grabs it, thinking it’s her husband, John Racco, the backhoe operator, with the information that he’ll soon be home with dinner: pizza from some pizza place, say, or Mexican fast-food style, or, ultimately, thick chicken. But it isn’t John, it isn’t her husband, it isn’t a backhoe operator, it’s that little kid – that little kid James, that kid who walked on water.

‘Hello, Mrs. Racco.’

Mrs. Racco notices the call comes from the second line in the basement. ‘Hello, James.’

‘Hello, Katherine.’

‘What can I do for you, James?’

‘What can you do for me?’

‘That’s the question.’

‘Well, you could swear in my ear.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Mrs. Racco, I have to tell you that I just feel like shitting my pants with desire.’

Mrs. Racco, surprised by the child’s obscenity, knocks her knee into the table, the coffee cresting over the rim and into her lap.

‘Fuck!’ she exclaims.

And just at that moment laughter, ‘hey,’ and ‘cut it out,’ the phone banging and ‘give it to me,’ and more laughter, and finally Michael:

‘Mom, be careful he wants to – ’

Click.

Out On The

road, the situation on the QEW remains the same, with all cars stopped. Little eight-year-old Rani and her mom hang out playing games.

‘Is it the sun?’

‘Cold.’

‘The banana.’

‘Colder.’

‘That flashing light.’

‘Mommy, that’s not yellow, it’s orange.’

There’s the sound of a dull explosion, a low crunching, crumpling metal and shattering glass.

‘Is it that big machine?’

‘Warmer.’

Anu continues looking at the big yellow backhoe, not understanding what she’s seeing.

Back In The

cushion fort, James and Michael stare at the tv. A clip of the president talking about intelligence too sensitive to disclose, threats to the nation that are so serious that even to whisper them would jeopardize lives. There are images of tanks cruising America’s streets, and long lines of cars broiling in the day’s sunshine trying to get across the border. The anchor interrupts with breaking news: a high-angled shot of a highway, immobile traffic and a piece of heavy machinery. A big yellow backhoe, the shovel of which punches into cars, panicked people running for cover. The angle of the image shifts, revealing the backhoe operator in a close-up.

‘Michael, is that your dad?’

‘What?’

‘It’s your dad.’

The two boys stare silently at the television.

Little eleven-year-old Michael calls out. ‘Mom! Dad’s on tv!’

The Backhoe Is

roaring, its engine labouring, as John Racco manoeuvres the machine, punching the shovel through the roofs of car after car. From behind him, a man in a suit sprints up and clambers on board, reaches into his own pocket and removes a cellphone. His foot slips, and he nearly falls beneath the machine. Regaining his balance, he swings open the door of the cab and, using the cellphone as a weapon, administers a powerful blow to John Racco’s temple. John collapses and the man in the suit lets John’s inert body roll out of the cab and tumble to the ground. He then sits in the seat, examines the various levers, grips them and resumes what John Racco started: punching holes through the cars stuck on the Queen Elizabeth Way and the people in them.

A crowd has formed a safe distance from the spectacle. A helicopter descends, the red and blue logo of the Metropolitan Toronto Police prominent on its side. The chopper hovers low over the highway and an amplified voice commands the man on the backhoe, the details of the directive getting lost in the chopping din.

Little eight-year-old Rani Vishnu stands with the crowd, holding her mother’s hand, and watches the police helicopter with curiosity. She has always been interested in power differentials. She had, in fact, recently come in second in

the Science Fair with a model for an equitable, balanced and democratic conversation. ‘You talk about you, I talk about you, I talk about me, you talk about me, you talk about you, I talk about you, I talk about me, you talk about me, and so on, until there’s a good reason to stop.’

The project, simply entitled Fair Talk, was edged out of first place by a beautifully designed model, created by fifth grader Avril Anderson, that demonstrated the mechanics of evaporation and condensation.

‘A cloud,’ the little winner had stated, ‘can be considered the soul of a lake.’

The helicopter dips in close to the backhoe. There’s the sound of a couple of sharp cracks in quick succession and the glass in the front of the backhoe’s cab shatters and blood and body matter splatter the back window.

Kaliopé Stands In

her tiny room listening intently to the radio, the description of the action on the QEW coming in at real time from a news helicopter hovering somewhere. She looks out the window at the side of the neighbour’s house, a crack of sky just visible, and scans fruitlessly for the helicopter. If there are maniacs, killing sprees and sharpshooters, it may not be such a bad town after all.

She had expected dog sleds.

The Evening News

has already given it a name – the Backhoe Massacre – and brought out a variety of experts on the phenomenon of unfettered rage, some applying the tenets of epidemiology

and discussing a viral theory of emotional contiguousness. The second man involved – the man in the suit – has no connection to John Racco. He is a businessman named Daniel Young whose only resemblance to John is that they are both respected members of their communities, both fathers and little-league hockey coaches. The experts suggest that Daniel somehow contracted John's rage and that's why he did what he did. Why John did what he did, however, remains a mystery.

The news continues on Kaliopé's stereo, the chatter shifting to the subject of refugees lining up to get across the border, people turned back, jailed, deported. Kaliopé has heard that it isn't even only Muslims like herself anymore; poor neighbourhoods all over America are locked down, there are reports of people disappearing and security forces who don't bother to flash badges.

Kaliopé's first serious encounter with the police was a few years back during a meeting of her father's community cricket team at a local church. A frightened neighbour, not used to seeing so many brown people in uniforms, dialed 911, resulting in the dispatch of the city's Anti-Terror Unit. No one was hurt, but the image of young – mostly white – men in military uniforms pointing an arsenal of deadly weapons at middle-aged brown men in cricket uniforms has become a permanent reference point in the kid's ideological canopy.

Kaliopé lies on her bed listening for news about the conflict in America, about the massive protests in a couple of cities and about the car bomb that has been detonated outside a Homeland Security office. The American military, Kaliopé's aunt Amina once claimed, has been training for

years to deal with their own populations, practicing war manoeuvres in a variety of suburbs.

Sixteen-Year-Old

Ruth Racco chats to her little brother Michael, as he balances on the rocks outside the police station. ‘How’d Dad look?’
‘Focused.’

‘I guess you won’t have to play hockey this year.’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘Well that’s a good thing.’

‘True.’

‘And I can move out now.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘You’ll be able to go soon.’

‘Soon?’

‘Well, in few years.’

Little Eight-Year-Old

Rani Vishnu’s interest in the power differentials of policing was initiated by an incident in her very early years at a Gay Pride parade. A cop had slipped on a hot dog, which had been accidentally jostled out of someone’s hand, and crashed down on top of the kid. Since then she has preferred to keep her distance from cops.

But now that’s impossible – there are cops all around, shadows in the dusk, guarding the gates to the parking lot of a vast empty warehouse: Rani and Anu’s new home. The warehouse is situated along the railway lines snaking up from the centre of the city, into the west end, then north and further west across the rest of the country. The building looks like it’s been sitting quiet for a few years, not

quite abandoned, just empty, waiting for some condensation in the evaporative process of the economic cycle, an upturn that many feel is coming. They always come.

Rani carries a couple of small bags and trails after Anu as they walk through the warehouse, passing people.

In a vast open area, a representative from the city explains that there are three dorm-like areas – one each for women, men and families. There's a common lounge area and a sort of kitchen for rudimentary food preparation, the bulk of the food being provided by the city in twice-daily deliveries. There are makeshift showers, and one of the phone companies has set up a trailer, providing pay phones to which phone cards are sold. The lights in the dorms are always kept on, in the day fully bright, in the night just slightly dimmed.

Rani stands, barely listening to the announcement, focusing her attention on the question of gravity. If the planet is spinning, why doesn't everyone just fly off? And if tossed off the globe, what then? Rani imagines a science project, herself onstage in the gymnasium with a piece of chalk in her hand.

'I envision floating communities,' she would say, 'with no ground, no permanent point of reference, and, with the universe always expanding, it would be impossible to agree to meet your friends. Nothing would ever be in the same place. Not even the same place. You'd have to be friends with whoever was there for however long they were there. The same would go for enemies.'

Ruth Racco Insists On

walking down from the suburbs along the railway tracks in the dark; she wants to feel the centre of the city leaking

slowly into her body. James and Michael help carry some of her stuff. The sound of a helicopter chops high in the air, the CN Tower blinking in the distance.

‘You make it sound as if not having a dad was somehow detrimental to you,’ says Ruth.

‘Well, it certainly didn’t give me any advantages,’ replies James.

Ruth rolls up her sleeves to reveal her skin, defenceless against the sun’s rays. ‘Yeah, well, you didn’t get any disadvantages, either.’

‘Whatever, your dad is a genius.’

Ruth grabs James by the front of the boy’s T-shirt and slams him against a railway car.

‘Our dad is a killer.’

‘Look, sister, that dude had a point to make and he made it, so get your hands off me or I’ll punch the colour back into you.’

‘Suck me, you little fucker.’

‘I was saving that for your –’

‘Look.’ Michael points toward one of many warehouses along the railway. In the parking lot there are cops, military and people pulling up in cars filled with possessions. It looks like families: some older people, some younger people and some kids. And stuff. Lots of stuff. The contents of their lives.

‘They’re American,’ says Ruth.

‘This city makes me puke.’ James continues walking. ‘They wouldn’t recognize the miraculous if it grew hair on the streets.’

They reach the overpass where Dundas and College streets converge, the rich smell of the chocolate factory hovering in the air.

‘Catch you later,’ says Ruth as she makes her way up the embankment onto the streets, waves at her little brother, then disappears. In the southern distance, somewhere over the lake, there’s a faint flash of lightning.

It’s a dangerous city. There is one sewer somewhere downtown that is said to have eaten a child. The cops have a helicopter. People describe the inhabitants as ‘cold.’

Like many in their teens, the city thinks a lot about suicide. But then, who doesn’t?

It’s an obvious one.

Like the nose on your face. Look at it – the nose on your face – you can see it as you read these words. It looks a bit abstract, floating out of focus, your eyeballs only catching fragments, blurred and inchoate but fully there. Just like suicide.

The City’s Dusk

speeds along, propelled by the approaching storm, and infiltrates Kaliopé’s bedroom. She lets it slither in, choosing not to turn on the light. She sits in the room’s only chair, leaning against an old kitchen table stuffed into a corner. The blue cast of her stereo illuminates the newspaper spread across the desk. She has settled on a station at the left-most reaches of the FM spectrum. Bhangra quietly leaks out of the speakers.

She studies the newspaper, taking particular interest in the section that focuses on the city, trying to learn more about her new locale.

The DJ on the radio lists the tracks just played. Outside, the rain begins to fall, spattering against the window. Kaliopé reaches out and raises the volume. The DJ talks about the

recent deportation of an Algerian man who was dragged out of the sanctuary of a church. Kaliope turns up the volume. It's a very familiar voice.

And Here In The

hallway of his house there's little eleven-year-old Michael Racco peeking into his parents' bedroom and watching his sedated mother sleeping.

Michael clicks his mother's door shut, walks to his sister's old bedroom and enters without knocking. Ruth's collection of plush animals sits on a shelf, staring at Michael. Rain can be heard ticking the window. Michael stares at the toys and begins to speak to them.

'I once did a survey about suicide,' he says. 'Some people think Danes are most likely to kill themselves due to a pathological lack of sunlight, some people think the war-torn Sri Lankans, but, actually, most feel it's dentists.'

Michael allows a space for laughter.

'When I find my mind dwelling on the possibility of ending it all, I usually focus on one method, exploring all angles. These days I keep thinking about going to the tracks, laying my neck on the rails and shearing off my head. My only concern is that neural activity will continue long enough after the act to formulate anxiety or, worse, terror. I worry that final states of mind might be carried into the afterlife – eternal terror in heaven seems a more uncomfortable option than inert depression on earth. Don't you think?'

There's a rumble of thunder.

James Hardcastle,

tucked tight between the sheets of his bed at the group home, listens to the rain drumming on the roof. Turning his face skyward, he attempts to bask in the sunny benevolence of God.

‘Am I getting a tan?’ he asks his bunkmate, a young boy named Xiang Pao.

‘No,’ says Xiang.

‘I’m telling you,’ says young James, ‘I can feel the presence of something.’

Shhh. Be very still.

And, Here,

Rani, eight years old and unable to sleep, stares at the ceiling of the vast warehouse, watching the rainwater begin to drip.

And Kaliope,

cramped in the corner of her room, wrapped in blankets, talking on the phone with her aunt, the rain outside, feeling like it is washing relief into her body.

And Then Ruth,

standing downtown at the intersection of Yonge and Dundas in the middle of the square in the middle of a rainstorm, illumination provided by all the televisions beaming their advertising into the faces of the multitudes.

Then lightning flashes, followed by a quick clap of thunder, people hearing it at different times.

And Then ...

What happens next will be the source for many discussions about the state of the world, the nation, the city, the environment and the populace.

The dark purple clouds begin twisting and touching down, a tornado forms, thundering and careening into the city, knocking over its point of pride: the world's tallest free-standing structure, the CN Tower, lifting it and dropping it right into the lake.