

This Space Between Us

KillToParty | 13 April, 2020 | by Billy Pratt

“Look boy, either Michael Jackson is some guy working in a recording studio in L.A. or he’s here with you willing to work on this song. It’s your choice.”

It used to bother me thinking I didn’t exist outside of how others perceived me. The moments I spent alone, while significant to me, felt shapeless- as if what’s experienced in solitude existed on a plane between dream and fiction. The inner world can only be represented in close approximation- and that representation is all that exists; you are who others perceive you to be. No one is interested in *you* beyond the value of your public face.

You are nothing.

The coldness of deep space.

In “Videodrome” they had the homeless watch television- the most pragmatic form of charity- food and shelter would only be a temporary fix. The socially discarded- those without a public face, who *no longer exist*— can only be brought back to life learning the etiquette of public existence. Erase the lunacy of authenticity- speaking without a veil is feral behavior- your personality needs a high-degree of digestibility. Good morning, America, *Coke is it*. Like that.

Only that isn’t it- it’s a starting point. The difference between something and nothing- being “patched back into the world’s mixing board” and existing as a walking corpse. Social intelligence is acting within the scope of acceptability while pretending as though you aren’t- that you’re the brand, the influencer, and the genesis of memes.

Even if the counter-culture is where you find yourself settling- the alternative, Pepsi instead of Coke, or *RC-fucking-Cola* for the real crazies- there is still a mixing board to find, and a set of unspoken rules to follow with only a small allowance for authenticity.

The greater degree to which you’re able to find originality within the narrow band of acceptability, the higher degree of social intelligence you’ll be regarded with. Making a Borat joke at a party in 2020 isn’t exactly a faux pas, but would serve as a dog whistle to anyone hipper than you that you aren’t part of the club- making an Austin Powers reference, even worse. When aging content creators don’t understand how they were left behind, it’s that the unspoken language of the mixing board changed without their notice.

“We are who we choose to be,” is what the Green Goblin tells Spider-Man. The reoccurring theme of “Master of Puppets” is how little control we have over these choices- manipulated by forces from both outside and within. Tyler Durden thought it better to be defined by destruction if the only other choice is consumption. To Shane Carruth, our identity is shaped in ways that are so distant- so far *upstream*— that they’re unknowable.

When Laura Loomer was kicked-off the internet she was pulled away from the only reality she had come to know. A bag of guts resembling *Laura Loomer* cried and screamed on talk shows, threatened suicide, and hand-cuffed herself to an office building- but none of this mattered, because Loomer was already dead. If the self is meaningless when not translated to a language that can be understood by the other, then Laura Loomer was erased. She’ll survive, but she’ll need to become someone new- a different mixing board, a new set of social rules- but one without all the Twitter followers and attention. Only she can answer whether that’s a life worth living.

The decade of peak American excess pushed with vigor the idea that all people should be photogenic while simultaneously eating a diet of processed foods- this is what was considered *progress*; beauty and convenience. Of course, these ideas existed at odds with one another, which brought the diet industry to the forefront of American life. No longer were already trim girls chasing an ideal and a husband- now obese Americans were playing catch-up, and late-night infomercials promising beauty and convenience were there to exploit them- this is where Richard Simmons enters the story.

Simmons may have sold different products over the years, from *Deal-a-Meal* to *Sweatin' to the Oldies*, but really, Simmons *himself* was the product. Simmons had tremendous charisma that popped off the screen- a ball of kinetic energy who was constantly screaming with joy, or breaking down in tears, depending on what the situation called for. Most of all, Simmons conveyed an incredible sense of *authenticity*- when he cried, relaying his own struggles with self-image, you knew he'd understand you- when he shouted that *you too* could do it, you believed him.

It's easy to think that Simmons was the ultimate used-car salesman, but the curve-ball to the story is the friendships he formed with clients along the way. Simmons would meet obese women, desperate and depressed, and provide free personal coaching- which turned into soft-therapy- which often became late-night phone-calls with Simmons having his own emotional breakdowns; needing his own support- these relationships went both ways. Similarly, Simmons would use his exercise studio- *Slimmons*, where he would personally lead classes for twelve dollars per session- as a form of group therapy. His breakdowns, and the resulting sweaty hugs, became a part of the experience.

And then one day, Richard Simmons disappeared.

He stopped making talk show appearances. He stopped teaching at Slimmons. He stopped coaching obese women over the phone. He stopped talking to friends. He stopped leaving his house.

Richard Simmons stopped being Richard [Simmons](#).

It's easy to think that this serves as proof that Simmons was a fraud- a late night, infomercial hustler- using the perception of authenticity to make millions. Maybe he needed the ego fluffing of obese women in middle America being dependent on his phone calls and his friendship. Maybe he felt safe using them for his own therapy, late-at-night, when there was no one around to perform for.

What seems more likely is that Richard Simmons *couldn't be* Richard Simmons anymore. The animating spirit that embodied the bag of guts that became known as Richard Simmons had left the body- and this public face had become so strong, that Simmons is effectively dead without it. All that existed was the public face, and now there is nothing left.

There's a feeling to things slipping away with someone. It happens so gradually that the bits of progression toward the end, taken individually, are mostly invisible- only at the end does it all comes together like an Agatha Christie novel- but, if you close your eyes and *reach out with your feelings*, it's all there; certainly in retrospect. She doesn't respond to you like she did; she doesn't have the same look in her eyes. These were things so strong and immediate at the beginning that you could have almost touched them.

Sex with her had felt choreographed. I guess they call that chemistry. The way our mouths would move in-synch; the way our bodies would entwine. Flowing from the bed to having her pressed against the wall in what felt like a single motion- the softness in her eyes during the pauses we'd take from kissing.

Your act will turn parody by the third month. You become Bob Crane flubbing his lines while doing dinner theater. To you, it's all the same, but the audience will notice. By the time she was mirroring my pout, repeating my signature "baby..." with exaggerated emphasis, I should have known it was over. Dates went from fucking all night while forgetting about dinner, to fucking before dinner dates because

who wants sex after? All deliberate clues that the attentive reader would catch on a second go-through, but indistinguishable the first time around.

I made up for my Christmas gag of only getting her gifts that were actually for me- the plaid mini-skirt, the perfume I wanted her to wear- by making Valentine's Day *selfless*. A hand-written love letter and a movie gift card for her and her daughter- where they could, "talk about how great I am," I joked in the letter. When she took the envelope she had a minor look of terror as she felt it thoroughly for the outline of a ring. Another bit of foreshadowing- now you know why Mrs. White had the candlestick in the study. The last time I saw her I asked her to see me again. One last time would change things. "Why," she asked, "what would that do?"

And, with that, we were strangers again. Slowly, over time, the person she had known disappeared. I had become a bag of guts wasting her time on a Wednesday night. I discarded the script we were using and started to ad-lib my own. I unplugged from our mixing board and fell too deeply into the lunacy of authenticity.

I had stopped being me.

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