Footprints

ALICE LI

A boy died at my school last year. His name was Mark Kenny, and he perished of a sudden cerebral aneurysm early on a September morning. I remember seeing his name on the Austin High School morning news broadcast when I glanced up from my calculus derivatives; I observed the name, birth date, and death date scrawled across the TV screen. 1989-2006.

Mark Kenny was a senior like me, but I had never heard of him until that September morning. It wasn't difficult, in a senior class of 650 students, to wander through all four years of high school without ever meeting certain people or encountering particular faces. After Mark Kenny's sudden death, the principal issued condolences to his friends and family and informed the rest of the student body that counselors would be available by appointment if anyone needed therapy during this time of tragedy. A Facebook group was started, entitled "RIP Mark Kenny." One hundred and fifty-seven members joined, but I didn't. I never knew the kid.

A few months before Mark Kenny's death I heard a sermon at my church. It was by a guest speaker from a neighboring church. I don't recall which one exactly, but I guessed he was Baptist because all he talked about was damnation. I can still picture him on stage, walking briskly to and fro as he gesticulated wildly with his arms, tracing large circles in the air as his words formed a venomous pool around our feet. Everyone was going to hell! Every nonbeliever was going to roast like Independence Day sausages in the fiery pits of Hades! I cringed in my seat, feeling his bitter words resonate within my head and sink into the recesses of my skull. I was thinking of my mother, a staunch atheist who rebuffed my every attempt at evangelizing with a dismissive scoff, telling me that religion was a fad. Now I felt as if the speaker's words were aimed directly at me, as if he were an archer firing arrows of truth into my bosom, reminding me that my failure to convert my mother would result in her damnation.

But then he stopped, his words dropping off suddenly into the silence of the room. "But this is greater than your non-Christian friends or family," he whispered, breathing heavily from the exertion of his previous condemnations. I imagined wisps of smoke rising slowly from his nostrils. His eyes darted erratically around the room, settling on the face of each parishioner who sat, stone-faced, in the pews. The next words that emerged from his mouth were soft, cradled with care, spoken with a whispered hush that made me roll my eyes but stuck like peanut butter to the back of my mind for a long time after: "This is about more than simply saving the people you know. You have to save the strangers too."

I live in a world of strangers. Strangers walk with me through Washington Square Park every morning on my way to class. Strangers stand with me in line to pay a buck seventy-five for that perspiring cup of coffee, that slightly stale breakfast croissant. When a five dollar bill slips from the back pocket of my jeans, a stranger taps me on my shoulder and hands it to me.

Strangers weave the web of my experience, and yet we know nothing about one another. We pass each other every day, share the same world, but we are all lost in our own dimensions, toiling in our own thoughts, living out our separate scripts. I do not care about strangers. That is the startling, and frightfully reassuring, reality.

When I see a man on the street, I do not stop to ponder his name or where he might be from. I do not wonder about the tragedies that have clubbed his back, the sweet victories that have slid across his tongue, the memories that are emblazoned in his mind. When I see a man on the street, I keep walking because I do not know this man. I keep walking because I know our paths are different, that my life is sealed off from his, and so his existence is inconsequential to me.

That is the hard truth. But oh—how liberating, how utterly freeing! To not care about the unfamiliar—to not learn the names, memorize the faces, feign interest—to realize that strangers come and go, briefly cross into my consciousness before disappearing, unceremoniously, over to the other side. Strangers succeed one another, without fail, like a string of footprints that belong to no one and lead nowhere.

A Southern debutante once remarked, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams 142). By the time those poison-tipped words dropped from her lips, she was but a wilted flower, a scattering of crushed

petals that possessed only a lingering scent of sorrow and regret. When they came to lead Blanche Dubois away, she had already given her life to strangers. Strangers had ripped her apart, shredded the fragile white petals, torn the slender, arching stem, crushed the bud.

She entrusted herself to them, relied on the comfort of anonymity, on the constant stream of footsteps that would carry her up above the ground—without questions, without expectation—and shelter her from the startling reality of responsibility. Blanche relied on the kindness of strangers, and strangers took her for what she was—an aging southern beauty with neither fortune nor family to keep her vital. She stretched out her arms to gather their compassion, to draw them closer, to allure them with her faded charms and past glories, but they were cold, unfeeling. To the strangers of Blanche's world, she was just another tragedy. She gave herself to them, and they helped destroy her.

When Mark Kenny died, all the officers of the clubs on campus were required to attend his funeral. A pain, one of my friends confided, pursing her coppery lips together in distaste. She was the secretary of the National Honor Society but had never known the guy, either. It was an inconvenience. The funeral was on a Sunday, and she had an economics test the next morning.

Indifference is a beautiful thing. Indifference allows us to walk blindly past the glaring wrongs of the world, to shrug off whatever is uncomfortable or unfamiliar, to immerse ourselves in a pool of selfishness without ever coming up for air. Strangers allow us to revel in a state of apathy. Indifference is a mask, a permanent state of inscrutability that permits us to act as we want, to ignore our responsibility to others.

At times, however, it is possible to break this detachment. Sometimes a hole emerges in the sturdy wall that separates us from the outside world, and a stranger crosses into the realm of familiarity. Then he or she becomes at once accessible, welcomed, beloved—distinct from the river of obscurity that we swim in. The stranger becomes a human being.

What happens when this phenomenon is reversed? Suppose it is possible to climb back through that hole, disappear once again into oblivion. Imagine losing a loved one to that other side, to that strange, antipodal dimension, to a fate worse than death or sickness—to the fate of indifference.

Once, my father and I went to Cambridge to visit Harvard University. All morning we looped the neighborhood in our rented Toyota, traversed streets we had already driven through twice before my father finally stopped at a

Days Inn for directions. He strolled into the shabby establishment and asked the concierge, "Excuse me, ma'am. How do you get to Harvard from here?"

The woman behind the desk peered at him down her long, aquiline nose. She had yellow skin stretched tightly over high cheekbones, an austere mouth with lines of rusty rose streaked across it. Raising an over-plucked eyebrow, she asked, "I don't understand what you just said. Do you want to go to Har*vard* or the har*bor*?"

My father repeated his question, and again the woman pretended not to understand his Shanghai accent; she asked him to repeat himself over and over. She wore a look of contemptuous superiority as she silently mocked his speech, stared him down with eyes that were like the surface of a murky, bottomless pond. I glared at this woman, reeling from her brazen discourtesy. I could only imagine the pathetic life she led: standing at the counter of a second-rate inn, answering phone calls from gruff customers, typing reservations into the computer with her short, paint-chipped fingernails, making coffee, filing paperwork, checking customers in and out daily—customers who had places to be, appointments to attend, adventures in store, while she stood there day in and day out, a fixture, nonmoving, nonascending, just there.

But it was my father and not the woman who shocked me. It was as if the woman's words had ricocheted into his ears, down his spine, through his chest. Standing there, he looked like a little boy with a slap of defeat splashed like red paint across his face. His words shook like dead leaves on a brown autumn day as he looked at me helplessly, his lost eyes begging for my intervention. He was so small. Suddenly, the man who had raised me for sixteen years—the man who had taught me to walk, to multiply fractions, to squirt water from the palms of my hands like a water gun—had disappeared. The man standing next to me was a stranger.

I felt entrapped. I wanted to break free from the moment, walk away from this man whom I did not know, relinquish all affinity with him. The stranger beside me was weak—he was not my father—and his humiliation was not my burden, not mine, not mine. My father had disappeared through that hole, and the figure left in his place was an alien.

The woman did not know all of this, but she would not care. We were just people to her, insignificant, like the specks of dust on her computer monitor or the gray lint that clung to her cardigan. At the end of the day, she would inflate herself with the knowledge that our paths would never cross again. To her, we were just footprints in the sand corresponding to a set of nameless faces, easily washed away by the rising tide.

The year that Mark Kenny died I was enrolled in an Art History class. My teacher, Ms. Kurzym, was actually the school's theater teacher, and she not-so-subtly hinted on several occasions that she hated Art History and was being blackmailed into teaching the course. I don't remember learning much about art that year, but there was one painting that embossed itself in my memory. The painting was a relatively famous piece, something I had stumbled across many times in the popular media. But despite the popularity of the work, I was freshly enchanted every time I laid eyes on it, taken aback by the mystery and sensuality inherent in the image—in the long flowing lines, the penetrating darkness. *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli depicts a young woman in the throes of a restless sleep. Soft patches of light reflect off her sweat-drenched nightgown, illuminating her form beneath the gossamer fabric and revealing the supple lines of her figure. Her milky skin is bathed in a virginal glow; her cheeks flush rosy pink with exertion. But her face, with its lovely and unblemished complexion, is distorted in terror.

On her chest, staring right at me, perches the demon. It hunches menacingly, sucking greedily at the woman's vitality like a vampire feeding on its victim. She moans in pain, twists her sweaty limbs in a futile attempt to escape her demon, but the monster sits there triumphant, proud.

How I wished I could pluck the demon from that painting! I imagined leaning forward toward the canvas and, in one fluid movement, peeling it from the image like a faded paint chip. I wanted to smooth the wrinkles in the woman's gown, rearrange her curls daintily about her head, press a trembling kiss to that blushing cheek, and send her adrift in peaceful slumber. I wanted her to be beautiful, untroubled.

I saw that painting a year later on the street, only this time it was so real, so close. She wasn't lying on a bed—she was lying next to a subway entrance. Her gown—that lovely, gossamer gown!—had turned mottled and gray from years of injustice. Those luxuriant curls were as listless and dull as moldy straw. But indeed it was she, stretched out before me in that familiar, excruciating pose, her face contorted in that same silent scream. The flimsy sign next to her read—HOMELESS, HELP IF YOU CAN.

I would have gone to her, smoothed the wrinkles in her gown, rearranged her curls daintily about her head, pressed a trembling kiss to her soiled cheek, but I couldn't. I no longer knew this woman, and so I walked right past her pain-stricken form, daring myself not to glance back at her.

I imagined that if I had looked at her closely, I would have seen that same demon sitting on her chest, grinning at me triumphantly.

The end of my senior year was marked by the distribution of yearbooks. Everyone who had been willing to pay the exorbitant price of eighty dollars was given the glossy-faced book, filled with smooth pages that featured the year's ups and downs, memories, keepsakes, secrets, betrayals. The back of the yearbook was reserved for senior class "advertisements," which always sold like hotcakes to over-proud parents still grappling with the joyful notion that their child had made it all the way to graduation. It was a delight to flip through those back pages, to peruse the photo montages of my fellow classmates, a medley of pictures that spanned from the clipping of umbilical cords to senior prom. There were the usual snapshots of blonde, gaga-eyed cheerleaders with Vaseline-endorsed smiles, a caption underneath stating "Amber! We are so proud of you for making Varsity! XOXO, Mommy and Daddy."

It was while I was thumbing through these pictures that I saw the advertisement for Mark Kenny. It was nothing spectacular, simply his name, birth date, and death date printed across a subdued background, a trite farewell at the bottom. A conclusive way to seal off the death of a boy I thought I had never known. I would have flipped the page immediately had it not been for the picture. I looked.

Mark Kenny was a cherubic boy with wavy chestnut locks and a half-drawn smile. His eyes were a rich, cocoa brown, his face smooth and unlined like ocean waters on a lazy August afternoon. He looked like a boy who had a lot of life to live, a lot of reasons to hope for a future. He looked like a boy worth knowing. And that's when I remembered him, the boy who sat behind me in Spanish II during sophomore year, the cherubic boy with wavy chestnut locks and a half-drawn smile who had asked to borrow my pencil on the first day.

The curtain opened the day I discovered who Mark Kenny was. The curtain opened, blinding me with a light that penetrates steel, bone, and indifference. Suddenly, Mark's death mattered. I could rewind time and replay the moment when I half-heartedly glanced up from my calculus derivatives to see the birth and death dates flash across the screen on that September morning. I saw the black-clad figures at the funeral, their faces down-turned, looming like mountain ranges in the distance. I imagined the faces of his parents as the doctors told them that their son's headaches and nausea were not caused by exhaustion but rather by an artery in his brain ballooning out of control.

Only then, when I viewed Mark Kenny's picture, did it matter. Only then did it matter because I realized that Mark Kenny was real. He had been flesh and blood and bone, and he had died and gone deep into the Earth, his foot-

prints washed away by the rising tide. And I hadn't cared simply because I considered him a stranger.

Footprints stretch through my life. They always succeed each other, predictably, without fail, corresponding to a set of shadowy faces. I do not ask anything from these footprints. I do not ask because of Blanche, whose desire to be loved by these nameless entities led her to madness. I do not ask because of the woman on the street, whose silent screams were drowned out by the deafening roar of indifference. I do not ask because of my father, whose sudden cross-over to unfamiliarity caused me to turn away in disgust. And I do not ask because of Mark Kenny—I always think of Mark Kenny—one stranger I did not try to save, whose identity arose too late from the river of obscurity. I opened the door to recognition only when it was at last convenient to me. I wonder about this thing called compassion—why it ebbs and flows erratically, why it is selective in its emergence, why our capacity to grant it is often defeated by our compulsion to hide it away. I wonder about these things, but I do not dwell. I know it is useless. In the end, we are all just footprints, belonging to no one, leading nowhere, stretching on for miles and miles, overlooked, forgotten, discarded, easily washed away by the rising tide.

WORKS CITED

Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*. 1781. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit. *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination. Tate Britain.* 8 Oct. 2007. <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibition/gothicnightmares/rooms/rooms1.htm>.

Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: Signet, 1947.