



## The Boy

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### I

They had cut the umbilical cord, cleaned him, weighed and measured him.

His parents had held him.

- He looks so alive, said his mother.

- The child should be crying, said his father.

Testing was done on the little body and they gave contradictory results. His heart stood still, while it grew. His body did not respond to any treatment, still his growth was normal. The doctors disagreed, was he dead or alive? They tried various methods to resuscitate the boy, trying to find out what nurtured him. The efforts were useless. The boy showed signs of life and he showed signs of death. They could not explain it any other way.

- He does not need care, the doctor summarized it for the parents. They found the news reassuring, positive. The boy was not ill.

They brought him home. It was their right.

His body was neither hot nor cold. He radiated no heat and no gave out scent. They did not need to bother changing his diapers or keeping him clean. The boy was like a piece of furniture, thought his father, caring for him was easy. Soon they would have to buy him a bigger bed. One time, when the boy was three years old, his father had taken a pin and stuck it in the soft flesh of his son's middle finger. When there was no blood coming out of the finger, he had taken a razor blade and cut into the little arm. A few days later he was sneaking around at night with a flashlight and struck the little boy over the head. He wanted to bruise him. In the summer when they pushed the boy out onto the porch in the hospital bed they had bought to be able to easily roll him through the house's various rooms, the mosquitoes stayed away. *This* frightened the father. Other than that, there was nothing unpleasant about the child. He radiated no presence, nothing supernatural, nothing.

After the initial confusion, she made the only possible decision, when the boy awoke from his Sleeping Beauty sleep, he would not learn that he missed out on anything. Every day she dressed him. Naked, under a sheet, he looked like a dead person. She read to him, first she read children's books and bedtime stories, later she read all the books in the curriculum, newspapers and novels. She decided that he would learn German and later French. During breakfast she played classical music, lunch was accompanied by jazz, dinner music was varied, sometimes opera or a musical to lighten the mood. She took all her meals in her son's room and convinced herself that they were listening together, that the music filled him up. During the times that she was not with him, she worried that he was bored, although she always had the radio on in his room. Her every thought was preoccupied with him and her time consumed by him. Every Sunday before she went to bed she weighed and measured her son, made sure he grew the way he should.

They adapted to the undemanding child. By their sacrifices they hoped to appease God to *awaken* the boy. They agreed that there were obvious benefits to their son's condition, the boy was free from worries and demands, he stood over injustices, free from guilt or having to take others into account. What concerned them was the issue of the boy's soul. He was in a way already dead. Could he be more dead? Had his soul, by an evil chance, gotten stuck in the lifeless body? What if their son was a body without a soul. This was their main concern.

The boy's status consumed many people's time. Could somebody be dead and alive at the same time? Where do you draw the line between dead and alive?

He was not breathing, did not bleed, did not eat, did not sleep, did not laugh. He did not respond to love nor cruelty. But he grew. His hair got longer. Nails. They took turns cutting them.

## II

She wanted him up high. The ground was an infection that pulled him down. He must not touch it. It began when the hospital wanted to pronounce him dead. Bury him, in a coffin that soon had become too small. The ground become intimidating, it reached for the boy as if to take him. As if he belonged there. At first she was walking with him in the stroller. Under the blanket, it looks as if he is sleeping. As the boy grows, people won't leave them alone. Curious people mistake the boy for a doll and thinks that she needs help. They move to the penthouse of the tallest building she can find. Neither human eyes nor the intimidating ground will reach them up here. From the panoramic window, he has a good view over the city, all the way to the forest where the city ends. She cannot prove it, but she knows that the boy can see and can zoom in to street level. Just like a telephoto lens.

She is a photographer by profession, yet it takes her a while before she dares to take pictures of the boy. When she sees the photocopies she realizes why. He was born as an image. The immobility of the image is natural. The boy is alive in her pictures. They confirm him. His stillness is filled with a purpose. To be photographed; reproduced. He is the ultimate image. Contained in it's own right. Without references; models. He is the image and the camera at the same time. Every morning she opens his eyelids, they are like the shutter on her camera. In the evening she closes them. Slowly she realizes the importance of her discovery, and what she has ahead of her. He is an image that will take a lifetime to experience. An image that is not transparent, with a hidden surface at least equal to the visible surface. This image is not defined by the viewer's perception, and is not limited to three dimensions. All images are equal, have the same right to face a critical audience. *The false image is confusing, the real one help.* Her task is to document the boy for posterity. He is her masterpiece, a work of art, which when complete will require a lifetime to view. She is filming him around the clock. Won't miss a minute. Eight stands with eight video cameras rotate in groups of four every three hours so that all surfaces are covered. The boy's bed stands on a podium, it frames the face, body, reminiscent of an altar. There are no blind spots. Studio lights are on, day and night in the room. Every morning, she holds up a newspaper in front of the cameras with the current date visible. The care of the cameras, storage and labeling of tapes takes up all her time.

She stops closing the boy's eyelids so that he can face his audience with his eyes open. He always stares into the camera. At least that's what it looks like. Her commitment is to depict the expanding surface of the static image. She will be long gone before the task is completed. The work is exhausting and she can not sleep for long periods of time because the cameras have to be loaded with a new tape every hour. She barely goes out. In order to store all the tapes she rents another apartment on the same floor. Before she runs out of energy she tries to find someone who can take over the work. She finds Fred, an ambitious young boy with artistic dreams. Fred needs the money and believes that this will be his big break on the art scene. She relies on his greed, the image must remain a secret until the exposure is completed. If Fred publishes anything before then the archive will be donated to a research institute, he will lose all rights to the material, and its maintenance.

When she no longer manages to get out of bed, Fred moves into the apartment. A few days later he calls the funeral parlor. The boy does not react to the loss of her. Now Fred is the only one who sees him. Fred dedicates his life to preserving *the first real image*. He systematizes and digitizes the documentation of the boy, which makes him no longer bound to the apartment. But the undelivered masterpiece is preventing him of thinking of anything else. His painting stops, he loses his friends and his social life ceases to exist. Everything revolves around the boy. He begins to look at their early recordings. A worrying question begins to grow within him.

## III

It takes much longer time to view the tapes than it takes to make them. After three years he barely made it through two years of recordings. It's been a long time since he realized that a picture is not worth a thousand words. He wants to bring out the image's *own voice* and is considering letting the boy be hypnotized. It must be possible to penetrate the surface. The more Fred looks, the more uncertain he becomes at what he sees. The image must depict something: man, a thought, idea, a state. Fred's approach to the intangible is to paint. Observe, absorb, then visualize, describe, and communicate. For years he makes paintings of the boy. He examines various techniques and materials, watercolor, gouache, tempera, oil, but does not succeed in recreating the image's dominant color, a pale, yellowish surface of dirt. With a Polaroid camera Fred takes close-ups of the color, studying it carefully. Thousands of dirt stains, small as grains of sand constitutes the boy's skin color. He puts the pictures on the walls until the room is covered by the boy's skin.



With a soft sable paint brush Fred covers the image with gold paint. Carefully, so as not to damage the surface, he covers all visible surfaces. When he finishes, he realizes that the paint has created a metallic surface on the boy's skin. Instinctively, he has a change of mind and tries to wash away the paint, but it has been absorbed by the surface and embraced the boy. Recording's from the next few days shows a boy of gold. Fred touches the boy with his fingers, the surface is smooth, the same temperature as before, neither hot nor cold. With the help of recordings and portraits that he has painted of the boy he begins the arduous process of reconstruction of the image. First he found the glossy surface with a thin layer of dull ocher, oil paint diluted with turpentine. Then he adds several layers of paint mixed with linseed oil. The Polaroid pictures are helpful. He has taken pictures of the skin of the neck, hands, thighs, elbows, feet, ears, etc. Already after a few weeks he has restored the image, but worries that someone will discover that it is a forgery. The boy's skin expands and creases, while nails, hair, eyelashes and eyebrows grow. Wherever the oil paint cracks and the gold color shines through Fred fills the gaps with paint. Every day he improves on his work. He wakes up, examines the changing image, then begin the painstaking the restoration of the image. The boy has never looked so much like himself as he does now.

The daily restoration of the image helps Fred to hide the changes, the slow decay of the painting is different from the image's own shifts. But Fred finds it difficult to stage the boy's aging with the brush. After a couple of years the cracks in the paint show up more rarely, until they start changing in nature, the paint is peeling, tension causing major cracks in the underlying paint layers, the top layer has lost its elasticity. Fred fills in the gaps with thick layers of paint again, stretches the surface, brings the image back to its original condition. His job is to keep the image alive.

#### IV

The apartment is located at the top floor, four rooms and a kitchen. Two of the rooms are filled with videotapes and in the third room, which seems to have been used as a studio, the police find a body in between a worn desk chair and an easel with a large canvas. The man is identified as Fred Rubins, artist and owner of the apartment. The second body is found in a brass bed on a podium surrounded by video cameras on tripods. Identity unknown. The scene is similar to many of the paintings found in the apartment. In one of the paintings you see the artist in his studio in front of an easel working on a large painting, he looks towards the podium where the boy is laying. You see only the back of the canvas. The painting is drawn from the boy's perspective, whom even if he is outside the canvas is perceived as the main character. In another painting, the artist sits in the open window with a brush in his right hand and a cigarette in the other. The easel stands further away, and also this time the canvas has its back facing the viewer. The artist looks at the viewer, which coincides with the boy. In a third painting, the artist sits in his chair, behind the canvas, as if he is hiding. A dozen paintings with similar motifs are examined in order to determine the two men's relationship to each other. The neighbors in the house know very little about the men who lived for 50 years in the same house. The forensic examination shows that they have died around the same time. Cardiac arrest. Autopsy reports that the death took place on the night between Tuesday and Wednesday. But two witnesses have been observing Fred when he left his home on Thursday. He was always out on Thursdays. He had taken the trash out, then done some shopping, always at the same supermarket, a few blocks downtown. He has ordered the tapes and cameras by mail order. Little is known about Fred, he finished an art degree at one of the nation's universities at age of 25, after that he was in a couple of exhibitions at smaller galleries and in a few group exhibitions. He was a promising painter who went into hiding before he turned thirty. The only tracks that Fred has left behind is a pair of paintings acquired by a minor collector, self-portraits of the young artist painted during his years as an art student. But the portraits seem to depict the dead boy. In one of the paintings he stands in front of an easel, gazing past the canvas, straight at the viewer. In the other portraits he lies on a couch, and in a bed, his gaze is intense, almost threatening. The similarity between the two men suggests to the police that the boy and Fred Rubin were relatives.

Later they find another apartment in the same building in Fred's name, a three-bedroom apartment has been used as an archive of videotapes. The total number is estimated at more than four hundred thousand. The tapes are handed over to the forensic department who proceeds with random testing. The tapes show the dead boy as they found him, lying in bed. On each tape, it looks as if he has been filmed shortly after the moment of death, as if he died again and again. According to the coroner's report, he had to drill through several centimeters of thick oil paint and a layer of gold to get to the body.

Translated to English by Ylva Mazetti