

Thinking Cure: Or, An Occurrence at Owl Creek High School

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A teacher stood in front of his empty class in southern Kirkham County, looking out at the twenty unfilled desks beyond. On the table next to him rested the stacks of sealed tests and sharpened pencils: to his left, the box of freshly donated texts the students would read *Some Day*.

He still needed to print the permission slips and make sure there were no gays, swears, or boobs. Guns were fine he knew.

Bus lights peppered the onyx horizon outside his window, the smell of last week's bagels wafting past his classroom's door. Soon, the jarring tune of teenage cacophony permeated the vacant hallways, coupled with the clamoring of dew-soaked boots, clanging keys, slamming lockers, and jocularity amuck. On the board behind him the man wrote the agenda for the day, week, and then some.

First period, Test.

Second, Prep.

Third, Test, Fourth, Test, Fifth, Test, Lunch.

Sixth, Read, Seventh, __, Eighth, Test, Bye!!! and a smiley face.

Tuesday through Friday, Repeat.

Next Week, The Same.

He straightened his framed diploma and stared at the bottom of last year's "Winter gift," a generic coffee mug probably bought in bulk from one of those kiosks in the mall that specialized in personalized flasks and kitschy wall decor. He could still detect the faint aroma of last Friday's breakfast blend coffee lining the rim. The mug featured four bold, capitalized letters—O, C, H, and S—all printed in a pretentious font encasing a vibrant apple with a cartoon worm crawling out of it. The worm was wearing a mortar board and smiling and something about the hanging tassel made the teacher's mouth taste like chalk.

His watch seemed slow but his clock was broken and he didn't have time to get either fixed. By the mix of copier frenzy, Jake and McKenzie begging for More Time, and Mr. Jensen setting up for early morning dissections across the hall, he guessed he had about ten minutes left before class officially commenced. Give or take a late arrival. Or eight.

He checked for a message from Kate, his wife, but the baby still hadn't come. When the phone in his pocket would finally go off, he'd drop what he's doing and leave; but for now, he'd have to play teacher.

The warning bell rang—five minutes till class—and the man closed his eyes, took a breath, grabbed his mug, and darted for a refill down the hall.

It was in five states by the time Jonah Gaits first read about it over coffee in the teacher's lounge.

Mostly found in smaller towns where germs can spread with ease. It hadn't made it to the cities yet, but they had their own problems. Some colleges were infected though. A few offices here

and there where grownups worked and what not, but mostly only kids got sick. Kids and college kids. And a few adults here and there.

It came without warning and always started in the head. It was contagious enough to infect entire schools, districts, and towns without so much as a rash, scratch, or rise in temperature. One principal up north came back from a conference, the paper said, and within a week, six teachers, the athletic director, school nurse, and guidance counselor had all come down with It. Soon the entire third grade took sick. Then the whole student body.

It hit the younger kids worst of all. At first, their memories would go: names and dates they used to know would be replaced with squints and shoulder shrugs. They'd sweat and rub their elbows after an hour and after three or four wouldn't be able to raise their hands anymore. Their eyes would glaze in a matter of days, with their gaits retarding to ambles. They'd lose their voices next and find themselves laughing and perplexed by the queer minutia of everyday life. Chipmunks falling out of trees, dogs peeing, balls to the crotch and the like. They'd cry as banshees do at the tiniest of triggers, or shiver at scowls or loud tones. After a week or so, their veins would show—their skin would thin, their hair recede, and spines would cripple under the weight of unknown burdens.

Their bones would just, like, melt.

Their tongues, now immobile and budless, would hang from their slack-jawed mouths agape. They'd drool. Like pack hunters, they thrived in large groups and grew violent if ever alone for a second. Howls would ensue, unexpected spews of fright or pain or love or triumph.

Some kids left school and never came back. Others would stay as their parents fought for a way for their children to be taught right, despite their ears being filled with this pus-like stuff no one ever saw before. In rare cases, some would lose their hearing altogether. It usually took about a month for the peripherals to shut down completely, save for the occasional fleeting flash or floater

to the side which, of course, would last only seconds before retreating to the margins. A few reported loss of feeling in their finger tips and palms, with the ridges between their prints smoothing to a thin layer of digital homogeny. Others took their meals through straws because their throats would constrict so much that it seemed like only air could travel freely. Doctors on the scene thought it may be hereditary, but the juries were literally still out on that one.

No one knew if It was airborne or what. A virus? Attack? Some bodily backlash to the crap we put on corn? Was It in the water? The dirt? No one knew if It hurt, but it had to, right? Did It discriminate, or was there something common at Its core? They knew It didn't kill, but still, people were freaking all over the country, saying the End was near, the Point of No Return, when we would just start over. Fresh beginnings and clean slates. But brains were actually shrinking, a few cocky, annoying doctors were thinking.

Some thought we could still find a cure, or a stop, or something else instead. Apocalypse was premature, one writer said; *it's not like they're dead!* This could be for the better in the long run, sung a Suit from a state next door, preaching from his office corridor, standing straight against his white walls, perched on some hill with protocols, laws, and metal detectors.

But Jonah knew different. His kids had been changing for weeks. And they were probably all waiting on him by now.

Bound by the moment, he sat and combed through horror stories and gory details of what It was doing to kids all over. Good kids. Happy kids. The ones who played soccer and had braces and dreamt of visiting far off places once they knocked graduation off the list. Kids who smiled for the camera without being asked to because they trusted and knew that things would be fine. Those images told the truth in their eyes of the lies they all believed. Their pictures were in the paper next to prayers for recovery offered by strangers Jonah would never meet. The freckled, bespectacled

faces of Then and Before. Jonah didn't know these kids any more than he knew the child he'd meet any day, *any day* now, but...but—he thought he felt his leg vibrate. He checked.

No new messages.

He sighed and flipped to last night's scores, right before his boss came in and tried to bite him in the throat.

It simply sucked the life out of kids; not evil, just empty vessels thought full. Adults, Jonah now learned, It turned demonic and vile. And really, really freaking fast.

Dr. Legree lunged at Jonah from across the room, clearing seven feet with his initial bound, fresh globs of sappy crimson dripping from his weathered chin: the crooked, bony fingers on his outstretched arms jabbing for the sockets of the humble teacher's eyes. An oppressing snarl escaped from somewhere in the cavities of the beast's nose, which, since last Friday's faculty meeting, had been ripped from his now-scourged face. Jonah dodged the flailing administrator, tripping on a chair as he sidestepped the advance but somehow managing to elevate and escape the lounge unscathed. He slammed the door behind him and entered the din of the hazy hall which, in his brief solace, had devolved into a scene akin, he thought, to Pandemonium or Hell itself.

Shelves stacked two, three high piled in the center of the main walkway, unbridled flames erupting from the pages and pages of charred insights. Monsters in teacherdress cackled to the ceiling while heaving full cans of mess against their peeling walls. Dozens of overturned desks shielded hordes of students—themselves apathetic and gray—from barrages of beakers and gradebooks and tacks hurled at them by the shells of Jonah's former colleagues, now Gone. The others, still human, though few and far between, armed only with tablets and scissors, charged their zombied counterparts with full force. Those who survived this minor surge, regrouped in the corner by the janitor's closet; then, with mops-turned-spears, fought back their tears to go, once more, unto the breach.

Some kids were able to take shelter in lockers; others under tables, crouched like babes just yearning to be stable. Despite the screaming of fire alarms, a few kids didn't seem to notice the hair on their arms singed at the ends as the world kept burning around them. They just sat on the floor and drew pictures on their knees with lipstick. Jonah swore he saw one smile. Then a flaming piece of ceiling tile fell on her.

Smoke from melting monitors began to burn Jonah's eyes. He cowered and crawled under thickening ash, over disembodied limbs of CPR dummies and sheets containing login passwords—between foregone inclusion reports and amongst the rubble of broken trophies, plaques, and signage—in the direction of that exit by the locker rooms. Above the curdling cries of youthful demise, he considered, for a second, that maybe This was all a test to which he neglected teaching. After all, there was something oddly standard about this whole mess. And he still wasn't sure his objective.

It's here, he thought amidst the fray. It's happening here.

His eyes still closed and watery, he slinked his way through the melee until he cracked his head against a solid surface. *A wall? A door?* Extending his arm above his bleeding head, he sensed the coldness of glass against his palm. A window! He pulled himself up to rest his chin upon the dusty sill and cracked his eyes to peer upon the dawn of the world beyond his impending destruction. He couldn't believe the horizon.

No police. No firefighters. No choppers or tanks or paratroopers. No national guard or Red Cross or even the press to scoop the loss of innocents. Instead, beneath the mock promise of a rising sun, he saw rows upon rows of what looked like giant yellow missiles, rolling to a halt like crayons on a desktop slant.

The buses were still coming. Lines of them. Filling the lot in front of the school. Opening their doors to usher hundreds of unsuspecting children to their infernal demise. They don't know any better, he thought. *We did this to them.* It's all on us, on me.

As the last few teachers succumbed to their fate in the wreckage behind him, he thought of his wife and the son she'd soon bear. Of the world his child would inherit and the peace that may not lie within. The sprinklers were going off now, nearly drowning Jonah as he feared for the life of his boy: not of the loss of life, but of the futility of a hollow one. Dr. Legree was trapped in a teacher's lounge down the hall; he'd somehow beaten death, but this was no way to live.

From his fetal position, Jonah's memories flashed to images of himself sitting aboard bus #9 as a child: a younger, dumber, cleaner version of himself that never quite existed yet somehow still persisted in his longing for a life that his life never allowed. He remembered when teachers were human and schools were places that children survived. He didn't always like school and sometimes hated some of his teachers. But none of them ever tried to bite his head off.

He pictured himself aboard those buses, sitting cramped in a taped-up seat with crusty boogers plastered on it, next to a smelly peach-fuzzed kid with filthy nails and morning on his breath. Not all learning needs to be fun, he knew. Sometimes school is boring. But these kids deserved better than This. The bus should be the means to an end, not the end itself. Nostalgia is a lie; schools should be for the living. Jonah would die before he let those kids in. Saving them meant saving himself. And vice versa. He needed to protect himself from the reality of his present moment: that the only thing he'd learned today was keep your eyes down, your mouth shut, and get the hell out.

Jonah decided to make his mark heavy and dark.

He needed to reach the students, to somehow break the pane and make it to the main entrance before they came through—stop them from entering the school, protect them all from It.

He still had time. The pave from the lot to the door was long and he knew the kids walked slower these days. If he could get through the frame he had a chance.

For a second, he imagined his son riding one of the buses and started to cry. Then he stopped because the body of a History teacher threw a fish tank out the window.

Here was his opening. With his remaining strength and weakened legs he propelled himself out the window and onto the damp lawn outside. Before he noticed the frenzied charcoaled arms trying to pull him back in, he was on his feet sprinting to the school's main entrance, desperate to cut off the flow of incoming traffic.

He stopped at the front of his rotten building. All was lost around him, and all dark and empty in the morning sunshine. His world ended overnight it seemed. As he sped towards the buses and passed up the straight white walk, he saw a flutter of backpacks and grins; the kids, looking hungry and tired and pure, stepping down from their transport to meet him. At the bottom of the steps he stood waiting, with a sigh of resigned nostalgia, an air of matchless fatigue and defeat. Oh, how sickly they'd soon be! The sorrow he felt, the pang of regret and malignance of guilt. With cautious arms he sprung forward as members of his faculty—the quick and the dying—grabbed him from behind and tossed him to the ground like a sack of human waste.

As they came upon him, he heard a deafening siren from beyond the creatures' hold; a piercing, harrowing pound upon the drums of his ears; a warning screech all about him with a sound like a whining infant—then all was fluorescent and slams.

Jonah Gaits is alive; his body, with a chalky mouth and broken watch, drifts aimlessly from row to row between the students of Owl Creek High School, taking their tests, and chilled by a foreign cold.

Then came the tremor on his leg.