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Essay #1

### **I, Kathleen**

I met Kathleen at the beach. She kissed Erin that time. I met her three times in all that summer. Every time was at the beach and the water never got warmer. Kathleen always liked to stay until she became tired, which was when the sun set and the city skyline separated Us from It. I like to think she'd ask the sun to melt when she wanted to be taken home and that the sun sat around all day waiting for her to ask. Kathleen doesn't know how to make words, just the noises you'd expect a brook to have. So we speak for her and she makes us better people for that reason. But she does know how to kiss. Or she knows how to give. And she knows how to kiss.

Kathleen was born on October 16, 1997 to a gentle couple in Rogers Park, Chicago. I don't know the logistics, but I assume her mother felt a good deal of pain, like lightning I've heard some say, before the doctor displayed a beautiful baby girl. I also assume it was then that a doctor approached her parents and kindly explained that Kathleen most likely had severe intellectual retardation. Eleven years would pass and Kathleen would remain undiagnosed with any known syndrome. She would, however, be diagnosed with speech aparaxia and a seizure disorder that basically makes her a 2-year-old with an 11-year-old body. It goes to say her mother never forgets to her call beautiful before turning off the light every night.

Prior to meeting Kathleen, I had little to no personal experience with any special needs children. My parents raised me rightly to not judge and to trust God had a reason for everything, that *they* didn't feel pain and that I shouldn't worry for *them*. But that didn't stop me from worrying, mostly for the parents of these children, especially when people turned to make sure

the parents of that boy at church saw their turned faces when he shook like a small engine and sputtered about, leaking oil all over the pews. All those faces evenly said, "Take care of your little machine, you made it." I'd turn too.

I was part of a majority whose lives never asked you to value a life so radically different. I didn't understand why there needed to even be a *them*. God, clearly, was so good at making things correctly, why would He have done something different when he made the girl who really didn't like whistles or the boy who always butchered 'Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye' in the back of class even though he sang it all day without stopping? The books in church said demons were funny little devils, to which I agreed, and that Jesus made everything right for those lucky enough to meet Him, wherein I hoped I would have impressed him as well. The women with big hair in school that smelled like department stores would never answer my questions and suggested in a voice light as feathers that I ask my parents, to which my parents rightly said, in fact, not to worry about it. Some years later, in regards to understanding this fact of life, I would be a 9-year-old with a 20-year-old body. I still turned my head in church.

I moved my 20-year-old body to Chicago for the summer two weeks after my sophomore year in college ended. I went home for those two weeks to recharge but only desired to leave. Home is Hudson, OH. The small town keeps quiet and warm in the northeast Ohio neighborhoods scattered about river valleys. This is where the people turned their heads in church and the boy leaked oil and the pathological singer sang and the mechanical, haired women deferred and I was young. Bold and brick but silenced by years and years of changing seasons, my house sits on a hill behind a farm, plump at the end of a cal-de-sac. My parents moved here after I was born in Chicago, they settled and had four more children. I wanted to leave as soon as I got there not because of my family, they are wonderful and merry people, but

because I felt listless and I hoped the big city would tire me or at least shame me and send me home pink and vulnerable, reminding me to trust the value I found in my usual ways. That's who I was in life when I met Kathleen. Kathleen would laugh at this if she knew it was funny.

That didn't happen. I was foolish to wish that upon myself. The people in Chicago were too friendly and the weather too welcoming, so I too was friendly and welcoming. I became primed to no longer be a skinny teenager but human with experience. I moved in with my high school best friend Gordon and we shared a beautiful old apartment with hardwood floors that creaked when you walked and trees outside the windows that rustled until you fell asleep. In my first week there, I got a job with I.B.M. writing small deal contracts and Gordon's girlfriend Erin moved in with us. Erin reminds me of a roman candle when lit with a matchbox chest to small for her heart. Gordon loves Erin and keeps her chest from catching fire. Erin is also Kathleen's teacher. Paid by the government, Erin works with Kathleen several times a week to help her with motor skills, like moving a spoon to her mouth with her own hand or walking up a flight of steps, or recall, like remembering to put a toy back where it came from or simple affirmative and negative gestures to express want, desire, need. Erin explained all this to me, and seeing my interest in the subject, suggested we take Kathleen to the beach for an afternoon. I agreed and so I met Kathleen.

Meeting Kathleen was the best first introduction I've ever had. When I arrived at the beach, Kathleen was sitting in the wake and Erin was standing over her and both looked like small figures of driftwood against the openness of endless Lake Michigan water and sky. Erin told Kathleen she'd like her to meet me and Kathleen took her hand out of her mouth and carefully put it back in the water where she clearly thought it belonged. I told Erin it was good to see her and went to fall asleep on the beach.

I woke up and saw the two girls in the same frame exactly as they were. I watched them and tried to take in Kathleen. Older and around a special needs child for the first time in years, I surprised myself with the curiosity I had to understand who she was. I realized what she wasn't. She wasn't a boy. Her short, curly brown hair and skinny build makes her look like a boy from afar. She certainly wasn't an angel amusing herself in our cute affairs or some genius trapped in a broken body. I can see how it's easy and sometimes better to believe this about special needs children, especially if someone is incapable of moving past harbored sorrowfulness for the child.

I am most certainly guilty of this. When I was younger, I went as far as to support my belief in God because of it. I rationalized God must exist because only certain parents could be capable of raising such a child and natural selection did not have the partiality necessary to make that judgment. But, now, Kathleen doesn't make me believe in God, I believe in God for other reasons. I also knew to believe Kathleen wasn't going to ever wake up from her condition or slowly lose it over time. Kathleen also wasn't going to sit in the surf all day. She turned to Erin and held out her arms. Erin helped her to her feet and I saw Kathleen stand for the first time. She seemed bent and old, rheumatic and rusty, but also looked firm and rooted like she knew to push down with her feet as the earth pushed up. She peered up at Erin, who knew to kneel, and kissed her, as if to clean a small spot on the nape of her neck and then waited to be taken home.

Three Sundays later, we went to the beach again. Gordon, too. Along the way, we passed people that took the time to stare. Kathleen mumbled some unknown code into her hand at a very high frequency, trying to make radio contact with someone or something but only drew the undivided attention of those around her. Kathleen was young enough and we were old enough to make it look as though Kathleen was our child. The expressions varied from confusion to compassion to "That makes sense." For the first time ever, I felt the desire to seriously protect

someone and quickly realized I wanted to protect a girl that was completely immune to the judgments of others. That afternoon, I thought about what Kathleen can do.

Kathleen can draw a love pure out of people. Many of us can't even do this when trying so we sell and trade and purchase one another love. I, again, had the opportunity to watch Kathleen do her best with Erin and Gordon. She started by sitting in the sand and having a seizure. This isn't violent, in fact, it's her way of timing out, cooling and recharging. She makes spit bubbles with her mouth and stares ahead until she is ready to resurface. Some people step away to have a cigarette, others count one, two, three, breath. Kathleen seizures. Often and without reserve.

When she came to, Gordon sat down next to her and carefully built her a sandcastle with detail she would never notice. He'd speak to her and have her hold a shovel while he used the bucket or have her keep the bucket when he needed to use the shovel. Kathleen would watch his hands and keep hers folded neatly in her lap. He would tell her whatever story he had on the top of his mind. She loves the deep tones of a male voice and would often pull his chest to her ear like a music box. If she did this, Gordon would stop and sing. Rhythm from any deep voice sedates her like sirens. She could listen to the simplest hum all day and not notice another care in the world. So Gordon gave Kathleen every moment of this. And when she released his chest, he would build. When she grabbed it again, he would sing. When he hit a low enough note, Kathleen would burst into laughter that sounded truer than a white bell. All the while, Erin sat nearby glowing. Here was the person she lived to love singing to whom she loved for a living. Kathleen did nothing, that is, directly but sit and watch Gordon, who simply played affectionately with her. Without knowing him it, I saw this made Erin look at Gordon, whom she loved, and know what there is to love, how she loves, and why she loves in, about, around,

for, by Gordon—language shatters into traces and Kathleen articulates every word for us as easily as we count one. two. three. This is what she could do by doing nothing. Kathleen, satisfied with the day, crawled over to Gordon, placed his head in her hands, as though careful not to let it weigh more than she would let it, and kissed his ear, as if to let him she understands why he has music to make. She folded back in herself and smiled. The sun sunk and we walked home.

The last time I met Kathleen, we were at the beach and I realized what Kathleen could do for me. Gordon, Erin, Kathleen, and I sat in the surf. Two times meeting her was all it took for me to come to the third and realize meeting this child allowed me to feel more identity than 20 years could wish to cultivate. For the same reasons I turn my head in church, for the same reasons others turn their heads on the street, we, as a species, constantly search for identity, both individually and communally. Be it compassion, be it curiosity, we turn because we don't understand what identity might mean removed of its limits—societies simplifiers of race, gender, religion, etc., and we can't remove our limits because we can't *give* the way Kathleen does.

There, before me, was Kathleen, washed ashore in the surf we placed her in, cold and wet, but an identity pure because she never needed to do anything but give without words, give without desire. So we fill her with what we have to say, what we may desire for her. Because we are capable of recognizing that she infinitely gives nothing but love, we only wish to speak the truest words and provide the purest desires for her. It's our natural inclinations to provide these things for her and for this reason she highlights the best in us, even if just for a moment, she makes us better people—until kingdom comes. As if to always be saying, "I will live in my own kingdom now because I don't folly with the desire to have a kingdom I am incapable of creating on my own," Kathleen speaks in her silence. Here I realize my identity is not what

external influences make me but what influences I can provide. And like Kathleen, I wish to burn, burn, burn with this love and say free from vice, “Watch me unlive this life, from the inside out and not the outside in.” So is she loved, because of what she shows, what she symbolizes, taken not upon herself, but by a colorful idea of soul painted for her, a seersucker smile unable to make words at the risk of falling short to be. I fall short to be. I cannot give uninflected by personal desire or vanity the way she does. This is part of my identity, our identity.

Understanding that identity is defined best by what we are able to give, I will continue to turn my head in church, on the street, but in light of this new understanding and respect. I have to work at my identity. Kathleen doesn't. I hope the subconscious desire to know this difference and not any other is why we turn in the first place. But I know this can only be a hope. That evening, Kathleen leaned over and kissed me above the eye. The sun swelled and sank and we walked her home.