

The Year that Reagan Died

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This is something that happened one year; 1988, I think.

In that year, like all others, nothing exciting ever seemed to happen to me. Perhaps a lot of things happened, and I just didn't notice. Well, I'm sure a few countries were founded, a few countries broke apart, and several politico-socio-economic systems rose and declined all in that year. But, who cares? I certainly didn't seem to... not that I noticed anything, you know, but I wouldn't have cared if I did.

Okay, so nothing *exciting* really happened that year, but a few things did happen that I remember. I was living in this dinky little apartment—"studio," they called it, but that's all relative—on a busy street. Cars went by all the time, even late at night. One of those city streets. Every workday I got up in the morning, walked down a couple of blocks, bought some things for breakfast... I went through phases where I would eat Ding-Dongs, or an apple and a banana, or a day-old bagel or two, or, even, Cinnamon Oat Crunch... Whatever it was, I started eating as I was waiting in line to pay for the stuff. It was always the same old lady at the register, but she never remarked on the changes in my diet. She never remarked on *me*. Then, I would walk a few more blocks to work, still eating even as I walked up the stairs.

Who cares what kind of job it was? It was close to home and I survived, and, all things being equal, that's all that mattered. I must've had that job for years. Maybe I still work there... I don't remember liking the job, but I don't remember hating it. No stress. No remarkable incidents. No problems with co-workers or the boss, if I had any. No sense of being blatantly exploited, no sense of a world-wide conspiracy to stuff a three-gallon Rubbermaid down my throat. I do remember that on this particular year I got sick a lot, but not badly enough to skip work. I just dragged myself to work, coughing or drooling or something, munching on my bagel or plain pita or whatever, feeling partly miserable, but often with a little sense of achievement and self-pride. Yes, I dragged my sickly, miserable self to work... ain't I so magnificent?

I never brought lunch to work. I never walked back home for lunch, either. I must've eaten at one of those places around work. A couple of pizza places, I think. Salad bars, too. Some ethnic restaurant whose owner changed every year... each with a different "cuisine" but the same look all the time. Same prices all the time.

After work, sometimes I would go to different parts of town to check out some show or eat or whatever... but, let's face it, I rarely did this. I usually walked straight home, popped some pre-made stuff into the oven, and watched TV till I fell asleep. The TV watched itself after I fell asleep. The TV also woke me up in the morning.

One of those times I was going to work, I noticed something different about myself. It wasn't just that I was eating something different that day. It had to do with the way I was walking. I

do get a little self-conscious about my bodily movements once in a while, looking at myself on shop windows or checking the hair in the reflections on the cars, so I knew what I looked like. Or, so I thought. To be blunt, I have an aura of a "city loser." You know, one of those people you see on the streets who are wearing clothes that are supposed to be decent, but look a little odd. Wrong fit or something. Legs swinging around uneasily. Arms feeling very awkward wherever it is placed. A scared look on the face with a touch of indifference... or an indifferent expression with a touch of nervousness. Unidentifiable accent. That's me.

Not on that day, though. I wouldn't say it was confidence... that would be too much for me to handle. It was more like acceptance. Agreement with my life. I was still that loser I knew myself to be, but I seemed more content with my loserhood. I knew I was a loser. I knew my place in the world... nowhere, that is. I had finally fallen, and I intended to stay right there.

This was the strangest thing that ever happened to me. I had always been aware that I was desolate. I was poor, to be sure. I had no goal in life. I oscillated between eating junk and the most expensive healthy stuff. I wore different clothes every day. Yet, it never occurred to me that I was a miserable loser, really, until that day. Do you get that? If anyone had asked me, before that day, "are you a miserable wreck no one ever cares about?" I would have said "yes" with confidence. But, the thing was, nobody had asked that... nobody cared enough to ask. Not even me. So I didn't know I'd been a miserable wreck.

After this mysterious day of acceptance, I looked at myself, felt myself, smelled myself, talked to myself, just to figure out this "new" me... or this me that I finally became consciously aware of. Of course, once you start staring at yourself all the way to the grocery store, you start looking at other people, too. With the same gazing, inquiring eyes. How do those people think of themselves? Where do they think their life is? Where in their life do they think they are? Who is that confident-looking jerk?

I started doing this even watching the TV. At first, it was just those characters in the SitComs and sappy serieses and miniseriesses and such... "fictitious" characters. Then, it was the people appearing in talk shows, interviews, newsclips... "real" people. Then, the commercials...

Now, this was the problem. When you watch commercials, you figure out what they are trying to sell and decide whether you like the person who came up with that commercial. If you do, you buy the stuff. If you don't, you find something you don't like about the stuff... or, maybe, Heaven forbid, you decide you don't really need it. You don't sit there and psychoanalyse some poor model who just got a lucky break that will keep him alive for the next few days with the money he got for eating some gunk he wouldn't touch with his haircomb. Worse yet, you don't sit there thinking whether those partying jerks, holding cans of beer in their hand, are actually supposed to be having fun, and, if so, doing exactly what. Wait. I'm confused here... Okay, so, sometimes I analyse the actor or the model or whatever, and sometimes I analyse the character. That's why this gets even stranger.

Why is this relevant? Well, if you fall asleep thinking yourself to death about some stupid visual communication once in one way and once in another way, and often in both ways, your brain starts getting used to working that way. Or so it seemed to me.

All I did was to look at myself more closely one day, and, all in the period of a couple of weeks, I was looking at people like they were some figure in TV commercials. Ever imagine what it's like to see someone jamming down the street and think he's Michael Jordan selling Nike? Ever imagine what it's like to see a biker in Lycra and fear that he's gonna pull out a Chiquita banana from his pocket and throw it on to your face... Ever imagine what it's like to cross a street, see someone driving a BMW, and treat her the same way you'd treat Mr. Peanut? Who is she really? Is she doing this for a living, or is she just so important that they pay her thousands to sell extra-strength aspirin products? Is she acting for real, or is this some computer-manipulated super-imposed image? Now, is she supposed to look like a confident ladder-climbing executive or a rebellious daughter of a billionaire? Is the BMW supposed to be a status symbol, or is it a necessity? Am I supposed to think she is an ideal person, or is she a despicable despot from whom some other heroic person snatches away her white waistcoat and the car keys?

On a completely different subject, though, more importantly, I noticed someone that year. She was about my age. She bought food at that corner store where I bought breakfast. I noticed her one day on my way back home from work... but I must've noticed her before because otherwise I wouldn't have noticed her that day; I noticed her as having been there before.

Anyway, the first time I noticed her, she was looking at the grapefruits stacked right outside the door, next to the oranges. Or, the oranges next to the grapefruits, whichever.

Over the next few weeks—during which I overheard her name once, heard her speak some foreign language, almost bumped into her once, noticed what she was wearing a few times, etc., etc.—I must have analysed her at least a couple of times, as I watched her pick through the wooden crates for a fair bunch of parseley or whatever she was getting.

Our eyes had never met, but when I ran into her in the other section of the town, after I watched some cheap movie and felt like I could do a better job if I had the same script... um... oh, yeah, when I ran into her there—unexpectedly, of course—I was almost ready to say, "Hi." She didn't really notice me. She was with a couple of other women and a fine looking man, all dressed somewhat nicely. There was another woman walking behind them, but I couldn't tell if she was with them or not.

The very next day, I saw her at the corner store in the morning. Actually, I didn't see her until she walked past me mumbling something to herself. I don't know what weird subconscious stuff was going on, but that was the first time our eyes met... as she reached for a box of crackers I was looking at for breakfast. I pulled back, still looking into her eyes. She pulled out the box—looking at the box, of course—looked at me again, and walked away. I moved on to the next part of the isle and grabbed something else.

For the next couple of weeks, I didn't see her at all. Maybe I did, but didn't notice. I did see a woman in the background of a soap commercial that looked a little bit like her, except many years younger and wearing practically nothing. Another day, I thought I saw someone on the street who walked like her, but he was a bit chubbier than she was.

The next time I saw her, we were practically staring at each other from the opposite ends of the video store aisle, and it was obvious that we were both trying to decide whether we "knew each other" or not. Apparently, we were looking for the same kind of movie, and we ended up walking up to each other.

It just came out of me naturally: "Hi."

"Hi," she said in return, reading the back of a tape box.

"Looking for a movie?" I asked, browsing through the rack.

She didn't say anything. Her expression didn't even change. She put the box back in, and put her finger on another. I found what I was looking for, and pulled it out.

As I walked away, she made some grunting noise. I turned around. She was looking at me over the shoulder.

"Enjoy," she said, and got back to looking at the tape rack.

"Yup," I said.

As I left the store, I looked at myself on the store window like I always do—to see if I was that same loser I had found myself to be. There was no mistake about that. She was still looking at the same shelf, or so it seemed. I didn't really look. I just felt her in the corner of my eye as I turned away.

I still see her once in a while. We never spoke to each other again. Seeing her became a part of my ordinary life, like seeing a Yugo on the street or something. The video store is gone now, of course.

Oh, yeah. That was also the year that Reagan died.