

ONE DAY, LETTER FROM GHOST LEG

I have a videotape. I watch this videotape over and over again, every night, by myself. I make coffee, which never comes out right. Achievement, as a concept, weighs on me incessantly. The coffee, too dark or not dark enough, thinned and hazy with nonfat milk, or turned pale-white with heavy cream; it's never perfect. I have tried to find consistency in this drink, tried too hard at what has become the impossible, and I have failed miserably. Perseverance in the face of adversity can yield achievement. Beauty for its own sake, entirely. A perfect cup of coffee could signify a degree of over-achievement. I drink my bad coffee and watch my video tape.

I have had this dream since I was eleven; every night, mostly, the same dream. It's about becoming whole. I feel there's an alien aspect to my body. I take steps to improve this in the dream, steps that any normal person would understand to be extreme. There is a persistent itch in the index finger of my right hand. I stare at the finger twitching uncontrollably, almost imperceptibly, for hours in my dream. I watch the finger for weeks at a time: I have lost countless jobs in this dream, in these dreams, because I spend all my time watching the finger. Then I hack it off. It is a wonderment how much effort it requires to do the banal: to scratch the itch, you might say—but there it is—the effort, and the release. It is done, the finger

gone. With this solution in place, a mild collapse ensues. Eventually, even the most bland installment of a handshake with a stranger becomes my victory.

Medical researchers have identified three groups within the larger community of people obsessed with amputation:

- 1.) *“Pretenders” use wheelchairs, crutches and other devices to make people think they are disabled.*
- 2.) *“Devotees” are sexually attracted to people with amputations and disabled people, and will often search for them on the Internet.*
- 3.) *“Wannabees,” who get the most attention, live for the removal of their healthy limbs.*

My world exists beneath a wet blanket of sorts, damp-muted, slightly hazy and mostly gone gray. It is morning. I pace the apartment, recounting the same dream from the night before, dragging my feet across the carpet, which is trying hard to still look chocolate brown. After years of weekly spills cleaned up with bleach, the rug looks more yellow or olive drab than chocolate, slowly entering the realm of brown camouflage. Between my toes a dampness—the echo of a spill that has not entirely dried. I fake-hobble around, clutching my right leg behind me like

a pirate. The feeling of my curled foot in my hand. There is a stain in the rug in front of the bathroom that looks like a dead jellyfish, a blobby mass sunken into the carpet with entrails curling off in another direction. Today is not unlike any other day; there is always the opportunity for achievement, there is always pleasure to be found in the idea of asymmetry. Beauty for beauty's sake: perhaps it is what the world needs. In the bathroom, I brush my teeth, rinse, spit, and towel off my tingling mouth. I stand in the mirror with my teeth clenched until I can hardly recognize myself anymore, cheeks hardened and white in the middle, small apples turned inside-out, eyes bulging, froggish. Several seconds go by. Maybe minutes. I ask the toothbrush why this has just happened. What could it mean to be a person alone, holding my breath in the mirror? I hear the toothbrush mumbling something incoherent. I never bother to clarify.

Statistics and Hearsay Concerning Amputation

Healthy people seeking amputations are nowhere near as rare as one might think. In May of 1998, a seventy-nine-year-old man from New York traveled to Mexico and paid \$10,000 for a black-market leg amputation; he died of gangrene in a motel. In October of 1999, a mentally competent man in Milwaukee severed his arm with a homemade guillotine, and then threatened to sever it again if surgeons reattached it. That same month a legal investigator for the California State Bar, after being refused a hospital amputation, tied off her legs with tourniquets

and began to pack them in ice, hoping that gangrene would set in, necessitating an amputation. She passed out and ultimately gave up. Now she says she will probably have to lie under a train, or shoot her legs off with a shotgun.

Every morning, I drink my bad coffee, think about my dream from the night before, and replay in my head the dubious aspects of my childhood, which I believe to be directly responsible for my present condition, interjecting within this steady stream of mental images some of my fonder memories from my video. I sit, tentatively, on my couch in the living room. This morning is quiet, feels older, moves slower and less awkwardly. It is not gawky and reckless like other mornings; instead, it is more pubescent teenager in appearance. I notice the window to my left is open. The broken blinds near the top of the window frame always look like a bundle of tied-up sticks. To protect the room from the glare of the sun would be a miracle in their present condition. A miracle represents the opposite of achievement, and thus I deem it uninteresting. With a miracle, there is reward without effort, an impossible answer given with no time spent struggling with the question. The morning air is chilled, tinged with foggy haze, and moves past the window too fast. Occasionally, bits of fog appear in the room with me, blown in through the opening near the bottom of the window. They take shape, remain uncompromised in their clusters of frosted white, making it difficult to see from one side of the room to the other at times. Add to this, the steam from my coffee,

far too creamy this morning, with more the pre-fab smell of Twinkies than the actual taste of coffee.

I have thought through the circumstances of my childhood relentlessly. Perhaps I have been too hard on myself. I place numerous restrictions on my diet. I cleanse my liver with milk thistle and oil of clove; detoxify my spleen and kidneys with mixtures of honey, cayenne pepper, and apple vinegar; grind lime skins with raw garlic for my intestines. I conduct copious amounts of research on anesthesia and wound control. I take steps to educate myself in the field of occupational prosthetics at the local college. I go to great lengths to transfer my condition to a more socially viable and acceptable form, offering countless hours of volunteer work with the handicapped. I have had several uncomfortable conversations with psychologists and surgeons known to be specialists in the care of pre-surgical and post-operative transsexuals. Mine is not an aesthetic need; this visceral compunction towards functional asymmetry is *who I am*....

A Clinical Definition of Apotemnophilia:

From the Greek, literally meaning “amputation love.” Succinctly, apotemnophilia defines the condition of self-demand amputation, which is believed to be related to the eroticization of the stump and to overachievement despite a handicap. The apotemnophilic obsession represents an *idée fixe* rather than a paranoid delusion. These persons, unlike

paranoiacs, recognize that other people do not accept their own ideas concerning self-amputation. Symptoms are induced for the sake of becoming an amputee, and for the sake of erotic arousal, and seldom is self-injury repeated. The precise etiology of the condition is not known, and there is no agreed-upon method of treatment. —*quoted and adapted from documents written by John Money, PhD*

A Possible Chronology of Responsible Events from Early and Late Childhood:

—At **birth**: I am born with a moderately deformed right foot, which looks a bit like a knobby cluster of rotted oranges wrapped in soggy wet cardboard, and not like anything human. I see Polaroid images of the foot, images hidden in a small envelope in the bottom drawer of my father's bureau when I am twelve, and cry. They are trophies of his disdain for me. The foot causes me to walk funny, slightly leaning to my left side and shuffling unevenly forward. My father yells at me for walking funny, until I undergo surgery to fix my deformity at age fourteen. There is no mention of the clubbed foot thereafter.

—Domestic accident at **three years old**: When a boiling hot cast iron pot full of oatmeal capsizes from the stove, I am scalded on my right leg from the knee to the foot. It will take several months for this to heal, and I am rendered unable to walk (even poorly), for fourteen months.

—Near age **five**: Mom lights up a second cigar with a tiki torch from the backyard while she is mowing the lawn, and while dipping the torch down to her mouth for the light, spills propane fuel from the torch onto her leg, which immediately catches fire. She suffers third-degree burns and is bed-ridden for eight months.

—Ages **six** to **seventeen**: Mom begins answering all my calls, monitoring all my mail, and driving around in the car with the “mom seatbelt arm” on my chest at all times.

—Age **twelve**: I have my first thought that it might be nicer if I were a girl, the impulse of which I understand immediately to be overwhelmingly forbidden by my father. I transfer any and all trans-gender fantasies to my idea of a healthy limb removal. I break my leg on purpose when I force-fall off a horse at a pony riding carnival attraction, and enjoy the acts of cast, crutches, and the modified means of mobility.

—Age **thirteen**: My fascination with the apparatus of the guillotine as a machine of healing (and not of punishment) begins. I read many books on the subject, and attempt to make a miniature one of my own after a few months of research with small scraps of wood, a five-pound weight, and several razor blades. I only succeed in cutting off the most marginal amount of my left pinky finger, and feel dissatisfied with the process. Though the cut is small, I wear a band-aid with a tiny red bloodstain in the middle (shaped like a Peony flower) for months.

—Age **fifteen**: I find my father's shotgun in the laundry pantry inside the service porch, hidden behind several piles of clean old rags and a dust broom. I hold it, smell the raw wood of the stock, and aim it at my knee without pulling the trigger. I put it away, telling myself that I now know where it is when I need it.

Slack space between knowing who I am and exactly what needs to be done next, and then finding the wherewithal to get there. Slack space, colored gray. Gray is an underexploited space; this I have decided. Gray, the color of my world, seen through tiny slits when I crunch down my eyelids. Gray stands for impossible things: skyscrapers, entire cities, comic book gloom, stench. I am taking a shower. Dunking my head beneath the faucet, smoke smell from my hair rushes out into the wet space with me, musty like old luggage: the smell of gray space. I look down at my right leg. I am thinking about my video from the last time I watched it. Last night, I bound up the limb six inches above the knee with surgical tape and cyclone fencing tie wire, numbing the reddening band of skin on both sides of the tourniquet with Novocain that I stole from the dentist's office and several bags of frozen peas. There are bruises on the inside and outside of my thigh the color of eggplant, continuing down toward my calf in a shape that resembles

the gulf coast of Florida. After nearly four hours, the pain was unbearable, practically impossible. The leg, hovering near rot, remains paranoid of what will happen next. Looking with fear in the direction of the healthy leg, the intact partner, it has no other choice. My video loops the 100-yard dash event at the Special Olympics. This is the hallmark of achievement in the face of adversity.

And then one day, a letter with no return address arrives...

To the rest of him, who faithfully remains intact,

I once overheard a wise man saying the following: “You don’t know how to love the ones you love until they disappear abruptly.”¹ With the passing of our union, now I know this to be indeed true. I need to tell you a few things; please indulge me for a paragraph or perhaps two...

I don’t really know where to start. I have tried to sit down with this, beyond tears, in order to get somewhere using logic, tried to use something rooted in emotion, but also something that makes more sense out of the reality of the moment we are experiencing. Emotions usually run at a clip not nearly modest enough to allow a calm sincerity to

1 From: DeLillo, Don. *The Body Artist*. New York: Scribner: 2001. Page 116.
While others struggle with it, sharing is something we always took for granted. It was something we just did, the thing we were good at—you went, then I went.

guide one's thoughts and words. You must understand how much all of this has hurt me. I want to believe that this has little or nothing to do with you not wanting me: I know I have done nothing wrong, to be sure.

For several years, we have been together. There has been an acquired autopilot intensity to our shared commitment. Our physical separation now clarifies that situation as having ended, though remnants of what we had before still linger, and most likely, always will. Trust me, slowly I will get this all out. I am trying to understand that simply, our lives, once parallel, must have struck a gap. I know that resistance to what seems to have been the inevitable can only produce sadness and pain. To give in to pain will yield only suffering; *that*, I believe, is not necessary.

And so for the logic of it: I understand that there was a dire separation somewhere, likely induced by personal growth on your part, which led you to this point of cut-off, this endgame. I feel as though there is this truth: a person must become what he is, work on himself to the end, commit to one's destiny, follow through and be whole or compromise and be nothing; make one's mark on history if he so desires, or alternately relish the quiet that one can find. Do you see what I am talking about? I am telling you that I understand why this has happened. If I look at it through the memories of our past, I can see nothing but all the painful times we shared together, living as one body might live: completely. If I look at it through the plans we had made for our future together, all of those hopes I

thought we once shared are dashed, grounded, no longer; there is only bitterness left. I must stay present in this. I dutifully remain loyal, with conviction, in this moment. I am hurt, but I know that you let me go because I was not what you needed; I couldn't begin to understand who you are without me, perhaps someone I wouldn't even recognize anymore.

Let this memory haunt you forever, and know that it is me who makes your stump itch,

Sincerely,

Ghost Leg