

## Where Is Home, My Child?

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As I sink into the mattress, I can hardly keep my eyes open. Yet, my mind is racing. The sudden realization that I will be going home in a week keeps me wide-awake. My breathing becomes more labored. The acidity that is attacking my throat burns my mouth. I keep my lips closed tightly, because I fear that if I open them, fire will come out. The pressure in my chest is rapidly increasing. I feel a hole trying to rupture through my stomach by the hammering force of a hot poker pushing from within. So, I turn onto my side, in a fetal-like position. This helps, but as soon as I feel a little comfort in my stomach, I begin to experience sharp pain in my heart. *Why do I feel crushed and stabbed when I think about going home?!* With this thought, an electric sensation rises up from my nostrils to my eyes, filling them with moisture. There are so many tears, but only one manages to escape. *Great!* Now, to make matters worse, I have difficulty swallowing. It feels like I have a whole apple stuck in my throat! This is the sensation that I get when I fight to block my emotions—the anger and guilt that I carry within from a childhood gripped by chaos. I wipe that single tear, but doing so makes me feel so vulnerable and lonely. Nobody has ever cleared a tear from my cheek. Repressing a sob, I hug my pillow, hoping that sleep will soon come. It does—the sob shakes my body, until it manages to flee.

I don't know how I got here. All of a sudden, I'm standing in front of Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. I squint, intently looking at the desperate human figure in the middle of the canvas. I'm not sure what to make of it: *Does it represent life or death?* But I see myself in it, reflected in the anguish of the slender, young body which entombs emotional decay. Before this realization sinks in, I'm helplessly grabbed by a force and pulled into the painting. I'm transported through the turbulent dark orange sky and the blue waves of the water behind the agonizing image. I enter the deep world of my own buried experience. The artist's mythical strokes that form the landscape are alive. They change shapes. The water and sky begin to merge and take the form of a walnut. I'm confused, but my struggle to survive this madness overwhelms my curiosity. While in midair, I try to anchor myself. I urgently grab the tip of an object that is flying by, perhaps the brush of the painter. But, I don't slow down, as I had wished. Instead, I continue to move at an even greater speed in the direction of the walnut, which is now fully formed. When I near it, I see its ridges come into focus, but when I get considerably closer, these formations begin to appear more and more like robust palpating veins. Yet, it's not until I'm about

to crash into it that I realize I'm looking at a brain. Just as I expect the impact, it opens, and I'm dropped right into the middle of it. When I land, I'm struck by the awareness that *I'm inside MY own brain!* As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I peer at my surroundings in fear and incredulity. The energy that has been transporting me subsides, and I begin to feel gravity weight me down. Astonished, I learn that I'm not alone. I see a little girl a few steps from me. From head to toe, this child's appearance communicates agonizing pain. As soon as I see her, the figure in the painting quickly comes to mind. All of a sudden, I feel a sense of displacement. I wonder if the image on the canvas has morphed into this little girl. But as I watch her, I realize that, like me, she is also surrounded by the undulating silhouettes of my brain. This helps me feel a strange sense of connection to her, which motivates me to study her carefully. She's wearing a very worn out, knee length, sleeveless white dress. These poor rags, almost transparent, lay limp against her stiff body. Her feet are dirty and bare. It's evident that she has suffered greatly, for she looks more dead than alive. I would've expected to find her in a refugee camp and not, as it is the case, locked up inside me. I notice her neglected little face, thin and framed by her long, black, lifeless hair. Her gaze, peering out of grieving eyes, pierces me to the core. She is looking sternly at me and has probably been doing so for a while. Feeling great anguish, I ask myself, *Is this some sort of spirit trying to haunt me?* Suddenly, a feeling of desolation and a great, dark void envelops me. Yet, the innocent, undernourished, and ghostly figure stands there, unmoved by my distress. I think to myself, *maybe she is trying to tell me something.* I can no longer bear the suffering and admonishment of her gaze, but I cannot look away either. Her heavy stare has rooted every part of me to the cold ground. I feel trapped, unable to even breathe the stale air. Exasperated, trying to find a resolution to the situation, I ask her a question, «What do you want?!» I can tell that she has been expecting me to ask this, for as soon as I do, she opens her mouth wide, and screams a word that seems to have been waiting for a long time to be released, «FREEDOM!» I don't understand what she means. So, she emphatically repeats, «I WANT FREEDOM!» Aghast, I stand there, looking straight at her, listening to her raging words, yet still very confused about their meaning. Her message seems foreign and undecipherable. However, I feel a tinge of comfort upon hearing her clear voice, for my heart has affirmed her as part of me.

I wake up, sweating profusely. Although it feels like a nightmare, I know that the little girl is still there, in front of me, standing by the side of my armoire—watching.