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The Perfectly Ordinary Life

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Prolog

This is a story about the United States caught in a fabulated, on-going present that began some time ago. A time when some assemblage of things (technologies, sensibilities, flows of power and money, daydreams, institutions, ways of experiencing time and space, battles, dramas, bodily states. . .) started to articulate (and disarticulate) into (and out of) what we have come to call things like neo-liberalism, advanced consumer capitalism, and global empire. But these terms, and the five or seven or ten characteristics now routinely used to define them, do not begin to describe this long, still unfolding, moment we find ourselves in. There are the innumerable other things that are happening that remain unrecognized and ungathered by the concepts. And there is the active generativity of all things in a state of emergence that makes them fugitive, shifting, opportunistic, polymorphous, indiscriminate, aggressive, dreamy, unsteady, practical, and unfinished in their very surge to create ways and spaces for realization. Even as we pay them homage as the new really real and claim to know them, they are drifting into other realms and rubbing shoulders with other practices, seduced by any hint of movement. They go to eccentric or marginal or otherwise animated places where something is not yet captured by business as usual. This is certainly not to say that these things don't have real power; rather, it is to say that power, or force, is constituted by its impacts in all their particularity.

The story is written as a cabinet of curiosities designed to incite. Rather than seek an explanation for things presumed to be known, it proposes a form of cultural and political critique that side steps and drifts, looking for rogue vitalities in bodily agitations, modes of free-floating fascination, the secret life of the senses, and any other sites of collective excitation that emerge momentarily into view from the seemingly insignificant and unrelated practices of ordinary living. Its obsession is with the state of emergence itself and its moments of blockage, retreat, ambivalence, or exhaustion. It tracks lines of force as they emerge in moments of shock, or become resonant in everyday sensibilities, or come to roost in a stilled scene of recluse or hiding. It asks how people, individually and collectively, are quite literally charged up by the sheer surge of things in the making. It presumes a "we" - the impacted subjects of a wild and twisting assemblage of

influences - but it also takes difference to be both far more fundamental to cultural life and far more fluid than models of positioned subjects have been able to suggest.

The objects of the story, then, are emergent vitalities of all kinds that raise their heads, or dissipate, or get submerged on the charged border between the public and the private and turn the very border itself into a strange dance of spaces in flux. They are not the kind of things you can get your hands on, or wrap your mind around, but things that have to be literally tracked across seemingly disparate domains of bodies, discourses, laws, loves, and labors. They are what Sian Ngai (2001) calls bad examples: not perfect representations of an ideology or structure at work in the real world, but actual sites where forces have gathered to a point of impact to instantiate something. They are not things gathered under the sign of meanings or types but radical singularities with particular texture and density, hybridized mixes of things, flirtations along the outer edges of a phenomenon, or extreme cases that suggest where a trajectory might lead if it went unchecked. They are not representations at all but constitutive events and acts that animate and literally make sense of cultural forces at the point of their affective and material emergence. More directly compelling than ideologies, and more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than representations, they are moving targets.

This story, then, is not an exercise in representation, or a critique of representation, but an effort to do something else instead. It is not trying to present a final, or good enough, story of U.S. culture but instead to evoke the vitality of things. It tries to drag things into view, to follow lines of association, and to mimic felt impacts and half-known effects as if the writing were itself a form of life. It talks to the reader not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the perfect links between theoretical categories and the real world but as a subject caught in the powerful tension between what can be known and told and what remains obscure or unspeakable. It is not in search of an answer; its thoughts are speculative and its questions the most basic: what's going on?; what floating influences now travel through public routes of circulation and come to roost in the seemingly private domains of hearts, homes, and dreams?; what forces are becoming sensate as forms, styles, desires, and practices?; what does it mean to say that particular events, strands of affect, and lines of intensity generate impacts?

It is not normative. It does not try to evaluate things as finally good or bad and far from presuming that meanings or values run the world, it is drawn to the place where "meaning" per se collapses and we are left with acts and gestures and immanent possibilities. Rather than try to pinpoint the beating heart of its beast, it tracks the pulses of things that cross each other, come together, fragment, and recombine in some new surge. It tries to cull attention to the affects that arise in the course of the perfectly ordinary life as the promise, or threat, that something is happening - something capable of impact. Whether such affects are feared or slavishly romanticized, subdued or unleashed, they point to the generative immanence lodged in things. In them, images touch matter. Far from the named "feelings" or "emotions"

invented in discourses of morals, ideals, and known subjectivities (leave that to Hallmark and The Family Channel), they take on a shape in the surge of intensity itself. They give pause, if only for a moment.

This is a story about public circulations in moments of vital impact.

Ordinary Life

We were busy.

Home filled with the grounding details of getting the rent money together, getting or keeping the job, getting sick, getting well, looking for love, trying to get out of something you'd gotten yourself into, eating in and working out, raising kids and walking dogs, home-remodeling and shopping. There were distractions, denials, shape-shifting forms of violence, practical solutions and real despair. For some, one wrong move was all it took. Worries swirled around the bodies in the dark. People bottomed out watching daytime television. Credit cards were maxed out. There was downsizing and unemployment. There was competition to get the kids in a decent school, to keep their grades up; schedules had to be constantly juggled to keep up with dance classes or a lay off. Dizzying layers of tasks filled in the space of a day.

People took walks in their neighborhood, peering into windows by night and murmuring over beautiful flowerbeds by day. Or we scrambled to find a way to get to work and back on unreliable buses that quit running at night. We baked birthday cakes, or ordered them from the supermarket decorated with Tigger or a golf course. We flipped off other drivers, read the luscious novels and sobering memoirs, disappeared into the net, shopped at Wal-Mart and the other mega stores because they were cheap, or convenient, or new, and they had slogans like "Getting it Together" and "Go Home a Hero."

Positions were taken, habits loved and hated, dreams launched and wounded. There was pleasure in a clever or funny image. Or in being able to see right through things. Some people claimed they could rise above the flow, walk on water. Others wore their irony like an accessory that gave them room to maneuver. There were all the dreams of purity, martyrdom, a return to nature, getting real, having an edge, beating the system.

Just about everyone was part of the secret conspiracy of ordinary life to get what you could out of it. There were the dirty pleasures of holing up to watch your secret bad TV show or the trip to the mall or the spinning classes at the gym or the nights on the Internet or the music played loud in the car on the way to the supermarket.

Odd Moments

At odd moments in the course of the day, you might raise your head in surprise or alarm at the uncanny sensation of a half-known influence.

Private lives and the public world had gotten their wires crossed. Any hint of private movement would be sniffed out and thrown up on public stages and people now took their cues so directly from circulating sensibilities that the term "hard wired" became a short-hand for the state of things.

Public specters had grown intimate. The imaginary had grown concrete on public stages. All those bodies lined up on the talk shows, outing their loved ones for this or that monstrous act. Or the reality TV shows where the camera would bust in on intimate dramas of whole families addicted to sniffing paint right out of the can. We would zoom in to linger, almost lovingly, on the gallon-sized lids scattered around on the living room carpet and then pan out to focus on the faces of the parents, and even the little kids, with big rings of white paint encircling their cheeks and chins like some kind of self-inflicted stigmata.

The Public

Public culture in the United States ricocheted from one piece of wildness to the next. Time was punctuated by moments of rupture that held a charge as if they were divining rods. They seemed to articulate something. But what? Things were always happening that made no sense at all. The talking heads had no idea what was going on.

Public opinion became some kind of phantom you might see in silhouette reflected on a drawn window shade. The public was a foreign body: something unfathomably weak and unsteady like a flickering candle or eyes blinking uncontrollably in unbearably bright sunlight. Meanwhile, a prolific public culture mushroomed out of everyday practices and identities. Diffuse structures of feeling lodged themselves in frustrated public sensibilities, and even counter publics, with lives of their own. We dreamed of community and a public voice while uncounted numbers of publics emerged every day as the subjects of trauma or pleasure, only to sink again, and then pop up again somewhere else, in some new form. These things were springing up like blades of grass. A lot of them were for fun. They all had a vitality, at least for a while. They were deliberate. They were important, though that was not recognized. They were at once familiar and entirely uncharted, roosting here and there in strange and ordinary moments of impact and emergent affect.

People talked about the future of the planet and despaired at the corruption of politics or the conspiracy of big business or the idiotic flourishes of viciousness marking difference as a threat. Resentment simmered up at the least provocation; it bloomed in sleepless hearts. Then a tiny act of human kindness, or a moment of shared sardonic humor in public, could set things right again with a great sigh of satisfaction at the sheer release of unwanted tension. Goodness attached itself ever more firmly (in a gauzy kind of way) to the image of being off the grid in some kind of face-to-face encounter with the really real.

Fragments

For her, the need to react had started early. Because she was a girl. Because her family, like all families, had lines of trauma and fracture that had started generations and centuries back. Because she grew up in a big extended family full of people who told stories about what happened to everyone over the years - the ends they came to. Which, of course, were never good.

Some mix of countless strands of influence had somehow tuned her in to the misery and sweetness in the world and the way those two things mixed with a vertiginous intensity and sometimes - a lot of the time, truth be told - the two actually got mixed up.

Of course, by now the charged habit of registering impacts wasn't just coming from her. It was all over the place.

But for years now her early childhood had been coming back to her as fragments of trauma and beauty.

Her kindergarten class walking back from Woolworth's, carrying a box of fuzzy yellow chicks; the smell of red tulips standing upright in her mother's garden married to the taste of found raspberries and tart rhubarb ripped out of the ground when no one was looking and eaten with a spoonful of dirt.

Her mother dressing to go out in a beautiful black dress and red lipstick cut to the brilliant blood exploding from the face of the boy next door when he fell from a cliff and landed face down on the cement in front of her and then to the rhythm of shocks, days later, as her father and the other men tore the cliff apart boulder by boulder and each giant rock hit the ground, and shook the glasses in the quiet, shaded pantry with an impact that seemed transformative.

There was a spectral scene of her little brother hunched over something in the pine trees that hugged the house as she passed him on her way to school and then, on her way back for lunch, the sight of the house in flames and the driveway full of fire trucks with flashing red lights. The phrase "playing with matches" seemed to be written across the blue sky in giant white cloud letters.

Or there was the day when all of her grandparents came to visit and they were floating up the treacherous driveway in a big wide car. Then the wheels were sliding off the icy edge and the big car lurched to the verge of the cliff and hung suspended. The white heads in the back seat sat very still while she ran, yelling for help.

There were fingers crushed in doors, screams stifled in a panic to keep the secret of the rabbits running around the cellar in their wild confinement.

Sunday drives were ice cream cones dripping down sticky fingers in the back seat and then the wordless theft of the baby's cone, silent tears running down fat cheeks.

There were dreamy performances like the one at the VFW hall. Her sister was the "can can" girl covered in clanking cans and she was the

"balloon girl" dancing in floating plastic spheres to the lyrics of "the itsy bitsy, teeny weeny, yellow polka dot bikini" while everyone laughed.

Later, there were Saturday mornings spent fidgeting at her grandmother's table while the women told graphic stories of alcoholism, accidents, violence, and cancers prompted by the seemingly simple work of remembering kinship ties and married names. And there were the nights walking the streets with her mother, peering into picture windows to catch a dreamy glimpse of scenes at rest or a tell-tale detail out of place. A lamp by a reading chair or a shelf of knickknacks on the wall, a chair overturned.

So still, like a postcard.

A Still

1. A state of calm or a lull in action.
2. A machine that distills spirits into potency through heat, vapor, and condensation and is usually hidden in the woods and operates by night.

Still Life

Still life 1. A collection of inanimate objects gathered, in their sensory beauty, into a scene at rest.

Still life 2. The genre of painting that captures fruit, flowers, and bowls in an intimacy charged with the density of things like desire, decay, loss, sweet and melancholic memory and with the hope of holding time still, just for a minute, and fixing it in oil.

Things

Things have a double trajectory. They move to become solid and still and they transform, dissipate, or flee. The still life holds the two poles in a state of arrest. Fixing its sights on the watery line between what is and what might be, it makes things luminous with the promise that ephemeral qualities can be distilled and latent sensibilities can be given form, draped in luxurious textures, and consumed. It has the fluid force of the fetish, displacing desire at the same time that it inflames it. Hitchcock was a master of the still in film production. A simple pause of the moving camera to focus on a door or a telephone could produce an excruciating suspense.

Ordinary life, too, draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest. We go along with ways of sensing and feeling, of relating and exercising power, of suffering impacts and claiming agency. Then something happens to cull things into a form both more potent and suddenly tentative. Then things get vague and diffuse again or drop back onto a track that makes particular, unhesitating, sense of them.

The something that happens can be something big or nothing more than a pause.

There are the odd moments of spacing out when a strange malaise might come over you and you scan your brain for something that happened or might be about to happen.

There are the still lifes of pleasure collected by the life of privilege like marbles: the writing desk with flowers illuminated by a warm ray of sun in a profoundly still and secluded interior.

There are the still lifes of a vitality satisfied, an energy spent: the living room strewn with ribbons and wine glasses after a party, the kids or dogs asleep in the back seat of the car after a great day at the lake, the collection of sticks and rocks resting on the dash board after a hike in the mountains.

The still life can make a fetish of ordinary life - a daydream of static, finished happiness captured in a scene. But it can also give pause to consider what we call in cliché "the simple things in life": the unexpected discovery of something moving within the ordinary, or a still center lodged in the smallest of things.

It fixes on the fluid space where emerging and submerging forces continuously meet.

But there is still life. In cliché, "life goes on." The still life drifts back into the open disguise of things so ordinary that they can't be seen for what they are. Or it lingers in the elusive, shadowy, haunting realms of promise and threat to become the continuous possibility that a moment of intensity will emerge out of the ordinary - a stopping driven by the desires it pursues and makes, still.

Home Alone

Affect swelled and flexed its muscles in longings for optimism and interiority. The dream of an unhaunted home was laid out on the carpet like a beautiful fetish it was OK to love.

Home is where the heart is. You could get inside and slam the door. Home could harbor secrets. Ordinary things collected on a dresser top in the course of passing days could become the place holders of a normal life: loose change, pens, receipts, books, scattered jewelry, knickknacks, a kid's drawing, a long-discarded list of urgent things to do.

A quiet corner with a small wooden table by a window could resonate with the dream of a profoundly secluded interior set apart from the degrading fray of things and laid to rest in a queenly retreat.

Home is where the heart is. But take one foot out of the frame and things got sketchy fast. We were in the habit of watching for shock while looking for recluse. At the unwanted knock on the door, or the sudden ring of the phone at night, you could feel the uncanny resemblance between the dazed state of trauma and the cocooning we now called home.

There was the shock that came when something happened; some people lived in a mode of constant crisis. (A lot of people, truth be told.) Or there were the shocks inscribed in the very regimes designed to guard against them: surveillance, cocooning, self-help, insurance. The fear of burst bubbles bred disciplines (the healthy diet, the tended lawn, the daily lottery ticket) and compulsions (the scanning for news, the need for the new and improved, fetishisms of all kinds).

Having a (private) life was a serious game. If you wanted to stay in the game, you had three choices: you could go on anxiously peering out the window and peeking at the news for the latest health tips and horror shows, you could get busy shoveling force into matter (body building, home remodeling, joining groups), or you could do a disappearing act. Or you could try to follow all three trajectories at once. Or follow one to a point of exhaustion and then veer off onto one of the others. That's what most people ended up doing.

That's if you were in the game to begin with.

Being in the game meant being a consumer perched on the hinge where private intensities appeared as images on public stages and the public representations we used to lay claim to the things we called self, family, lifestyle, happiness, country, speed, and escape were made sensate with intimate force. If you were in the game, you didn't have to think about it. It was just a matter of keeping busy, staying afloat, being able to get your hands on things and to get your head into them. It was a sink and swim thing. There was the sinking feeling of numbness, addiction, deflation, exhaustion, confusion. And the swimming sensation of keeping busy, keeping moving, being in the middle of something happening. The sinking and the swimming cohabited and colluded, drawn to each other like magnets. They rubbed elbows and bred in the intimate nook we called home and then drew us out on the net, weaving themselves into a system of social needs.

We were aware of this doubling in things, this sense that emerging things could go either way. But we talked, at least in public, as if the still of a middle ground would hold, would make us safe and real. Here, the little tasks and pleasures would be firmly hooked to the big picture - the enabling circuitry of circulation itself. There were big projects like remodeling. Or daily projects like shopping, or making lists, keeping a diary, or taking pictures. The quick jumps from the ideal to the material and back were both automatic, it seemed, and a desperate goal - all that mattered.

The home held the charge of the cocoon, fusing the actual to the possible and setting the two realms in motion. It lived in a vital state - open, emergent, vulnerable. It grew paranoid and perfectionist; it was about potential and readiness. Martha Stewart had beautifully prepared hors d'oeuvres ready in her freezer should anyone stop by to visit. Her fans had Martha: a daily hit of her competent and successful company and an artsy but practical tip to imagine putting into practice. Cooking shows had become wildly popular; they were concrete, calm, comforting, funny; they were always on and watching them was like doing something beautiful and useful, or at least learning how.

Today Martha's making real Mexican salsa. She says if you chop the vegetables in a blender you're not making real Mexican salsa. She has a chef with her and he's chopping the tomatoes and onions expertly, professionally, as you and I never could. Except in the dreamy little resolutions that watching the show could incite.

The American dream hitched its wagon to the forces of privatization, sensible accumulation, family values, the utopia of colorful decor, the latest styles in circulation, the constant stimulation of the senses through synaesthetic images, sounds, touches and smells, and the consumption of the big, beautiful, basic, intensely sensate commodity-to-live-in like the country farmhouse get-away or the picture-perfect bathroom done in the textures of old stone and precious metals.

It took the form of a still life. The little family stood beside their SUV in the driveway, looking up. Stock portfolios in hand, everything insured, payments up to date, yards kept trim and tended, fat free diet under their belts, Community Watch systems in place. Martha Stewart offered advice on the finishing touches. For a minute, it was like a snapshot hung suspended in the air while we watched, wide-eyed. But then someone would chortle loudly. The crowd, snapping back to their senses, would show that they were wide awake by laughing and sneering, throwing rocks at clouds. Or they would take offense at the crowd reaction and start defending the beautiful snapshot in all its paper-thin fragility.

But even if left to its own devices, the dream of a private life at rest could grow haunted by its own excesses. The OK middle ground had to be constantly enacted in the manicured lawn, the picket fences and the self-governing, responsible subject in tune with the times. It could implode under the weight of its own literal embodiment as it played itself out. The picture-perfect living room could take on the anxious charge of an overdone style, like it was trying too hard. The desire for security became, for some, an addiction or a game of aggression or trickery. Some built their gates bigger and sturdier and whole housing developments ended up with tiny little simulacra of fences, like a joke. Lawn signs announced home security systems whether or not there were actual systems in place while stickers appeared on the windows of little ranch houses and trailers that said things like "This Place Protected by a Smith and Wesson Three Nights a Week. Guess Which Nights." In the gated community, the rules of community order soon reached a tottering point open to parody and endless legal contestation: garage doors had to be kept shut at all times, drapes in neutral colors only, no digging in the yard without permission, no clotheslines in the yard, no pick up trucks in the driveway, no planting without permission, no grandchildren visiting in a senior compound. No exceptions.

The Perfectly Ordinary Life

A taste for the miniature, a passion for secrets,
a place where desires float free.
Life seized in the sidelong glance.
And in that glance, the glimpse of something brooding,
inexplicable, beautiful.

The hunch that everything might become clear if we just keep watching for the faces in the trees.

Still Watching

When the planes crashed into the World Trade Center they said everything had changed. But to her it seemed more like something had snapped into place that had been building for a long time. And things would snap out of it too. It wasn't like shock was anything new. Here was the same rude awakening from an already fitful sleep. Then the double-barreled reactions of ponderous commentary and brash action. Then the dream of some kind of return to innocent slumber.

In the first days, she would go down to the neighborhood coffee shop in Santa Fe to get the paper and rub shoulders with strangers. But the brilliant yellow chamisas and blue asters hurt her eyes and the neighborhood still lifes blurred against the buzzing of her inner ear. People were alive with stunned eye contact and tousled hair. But there was an undercurrent of deflation like something buoyant had been beached. Her inner mantra "pay attention!" was out in public and this did not feel like a good thing. What was it we were supposed to be noticing now?

She remembered the time in Vegas when her trailer was burglarized in plain daylight. Someone hurled a brick through a window on the driveway side, rifled through everything, stole a worthless old stereo, and stuck a note stuck into the living room wall with a large pair of scissors - "Yeah, boy." A few days later, a special community meeting was called to announce that the management had put a stop to all the break ins. The manager claimed he knew who it was - some bad kids from the more run-down trailer park next door. That made her mad so she raised her hand and said "no, they're still going on" and told her story. A line of stern looking, bulky young military men leaning against the back wall of the Quonset hut started to shift their weight from one foot to the other and murmur something about how they would put a stop to it once and for all. Then, when everyone was filing out, one of these guys caught her eye with a hard look she couldn't quite read. Over the next two weeks people started noticing a late model, brightly colored party jeep patrolling up and down the streets at all hours of the night with its lights off. One night when she woke to the sound of it slowly passing, she looked out and saw the dark shapes of four or five men hanging off the sides of the jeep with semi-automatic guns and spotlights in their hands. It was as if some loosely floating ideals of "community" and "action" had suddenly become visceral in some literal form, merging with the graphic repetitions of reality TV to script the everyday with public/private scenes of meetings and darkened jeeps drifting by in the night. As if a violence had erupted out of the need to create a reassuring scene of respectability and responsibility. As if, in the absence of real community discussion at the meeting, consciousness itself had drifted over some line into a state of free-fall.

Things had gotten out of hand.

She and some of the others had to call another emergency meeting to get them to stop before they shot somebody's teenager.

Now things had suddenly begun to feel like that again. She was agitated. She held her breath whenever small talk came her way. She chained herself to the grid, mainlining the details. But staying tuned in turned into just another obsession shadowing her. She floated on the surface tension of the over-charged ordinary. She did the disappearing act. She dreamed. She and her friend were fighting bad American men in a big field and suddenly one of the bad men cut off her friend's head. She only realized what had happened when the dream action froze into a scene for emphasis. Pay attention. There was her friend's body standing in the field but that thing on the ground next to her was her head. It was sitting there upright as if it had burst up out of the ground and her friend's eyes were moving back and forth in dark surprise like a silent voice released through the wound.

Days passed like this. Then she took a day trip to Taos Pueblo's annual Saint's day celebration. There were vivid fields of high grasses softly hovering in the breeze, dogs and horses framed in quiet poses against blue mountains. The pueblo was full of grinning visitors watching the native people performing. It felt good to not have to know exactly what was happening. It was secret. Their business. Men made up in body paint and loin cloths were running around hilariously terrorizing the native vendors, snatching the round loaf of bread, or the thin, beaded necklace that had been carefully laid out for them on top of the blankets covering the more valuable things. They ran into pueblo houses and kidnapped babies, carrying them to the river to swing them, squealing, through the cold water. They splashed the spectators with buckets of water. We lurched back into the crowd when they came near, frantically giggling at the threat of eye contact. Then things settled back into eating and shopping and milling around.

Later, the clowns went inside the ceremonial circle where the religious leaders were waiting. It had begun to storm. There was thunder and lightning, a cold rain and a fierce wind. In the center of the circle, a sixty foot rough-hewn pole towered over us. At the top, lashed to cross ties that made the pole look like a huge crucifix, was a slaughtered sheep and two big, brilliantly colored cloth sacks full of offerings - one orange, one yellow. Thirty foot streamers flapped wildly in the wind. Two strong men made the climb, straining under their own force. Then one of them stood precariously on the top of the pole, untied an American flag from the back of his loin cloth and held it in the wind over his head for a long moment, lightning flashing in the sky around him. It was amazing. She was transfixed. When he dropped the flag, one of the religious specialists snatched it out of the wind before it hit the ground. Who knew what it all meant?

A fantasy crossed her mind of staying here. Being whatever this place was. A free-floating mystery charged with drama and beauty.

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