

Along the Sidewalk

[Fiction]

Dane Graham

I'd never seen a decapitated head until yesterday. This was in the morning, after my jog, after my breakfast burrito with spicy chorizo, after I had read the Tuesday paper (stocks down again!), after I had walked Katie to school. I was strolling back through the dim fog that dampened my hearing like earmuffs and softened my footsteps like thick alpaca stockings, heading for the local café, when along the sidewalk I noticed what appeared to be, well, definitely *something* of general interest. It was tossed so perfectly amidst tufts of long grass and sticker-bushes that it could have easily been an empty bottle of malt liquor or a cowboy boot, but upon further inspection this piece of trash appeared to be organic in nature.

More specifically, a severed human head.

Oddly, looking at this head reminded me of my stylist's hair studio. Rita lines the perimeter of her windows with mannequin heads, all styled differently, eye makeup arranged in different aesthetics, staring placidly straight ahead, as if watching a public access painting program on television with the volume near mute. I like to imagine Rita arriving early in the morning, her hair in curlers atop a tired face untouched by makeup. She'd walk the perimeter of the window stroking each head with the back, and then the front, of her hand before calmly lifting the head she most closely identified with on that particular morning and set it in front of the mirror. She would lift her own head off with a *POP!*, set it back in front of the mirror and place that morning's style perfectly upon her shoulders.

When I saw this decapitated head I hoped that it would present that same tranquil stare so I could bring it with me over to Rita's, tell her to do something with that dreadful hair. But the overwhelming stench told me that this head was not as gracefully preserved as one of Rita's plastic heads and could never be perched on her shoulders.

I pushed back the brush carefully, so as to not cut myself on the brambles, and I could see that it had definitely been discontinued at the neck. The severance was dark, like a cut of steak that had set in the fridge for too long. The hair was long, a chocolate brown, with leaves and bits of twig mixed about it much like toffee nuggets. The dirt was worn and light brown under the bushes, must have been a trail leading to a transient encampment or a popular homosexual sex hideout (I say this because I could see the red and blue lumps of sleeping bags farther ahead, and before me there were countless condom wrappers strewn to and fro along with a few empty, tiny lubricating jelly tubes), but under the head the dirt was slightly darker. Cracks were forming in the dried mud like elephant skin. I couldn't see the face from this angle.

I pulled back the bramble to get a more complete view, but the face was turned down and away. One of the thorns caught my arm and I rubbed the scrape as it rose to a thick welt beneath a small tear in my shirt sleeve. "Blast!" I hollered.

I composed myself, and from a small sapling tree I ripped a skinny yet firm twig. Having turned the branch around, leaves brushing about my forearm, I poked the head with the broken end of the sapling branch. Heads are heavier than they appear and turning it was difficult, although it would have been much more difficult had the head been filled with fresh blood.

Oh dear, I thought, that woman's face has been blown cleanly off.

It's hard to imagine a severed head on its own, without having witnessed one in person. I'd compare it to the aftermath of an orange peeling, when the peel clings to the inner skin and rips into the orange flesh when it's pulled off, messy and pungent, vessels sticking all about. Of course, the vessels in this case were white maggots dancing about like the blind in a disco hall. It was more gruesome than I had imagined, discovering a severed head without a face (not that I imagine this sort of thing often), and my poor delicate stomach did not take to the sight, or the smell, not one bit. I'll spare you the details, but I'm afraid I vomited, right then and there in that bush.

Of course, what followed was the moral dilemma. What is the standard procedure? Does one burn it? Does one kick it further into the bush? Does one grab it by the hair and drop it on the front steps of the police station? It seems that, innocent or not, this moral dialectic arises in all of us, at least from how we see it in popular film and literature. Either report such findings to the authorities or, for some strange guilt that for no rational reason spawns in this panicked, disoriented state, have the urge—because we've touched it, or seen it—to push it away, disassociate ourselves from it, make sure that no one else see it. Well, being something of an amateur sociologist, I can see these patterns in social behavior, and I can see the incipient, sheep-like complacency of either option, and as an atheist (we too will all someday be eaten by maggots) I know

that this is natural and rather inconsequential. So this moral guilt did not manifest itself on my conscience. I pulled from my back pocket a notepad and from my front pocket a ballpoint pen. I wrote:

To Whom It May Concern:

It appears that this head has been separated from its body and the face from its head. I could not locate either, but I'm sure this lady, or chap, and his/her loved ones would love to know the whereabouts of either.

M.H.

Clearly, the person (or what was left) was dead and my actions, one way or another, would not make one iota difference. I just happened to happen upon it. Meanwhile, it was near 8:50. I was nearly fifteen minutes past my morning café latte, and my stomach was grumbling for coffee cake. I had to be on my way, and I didn't need the weight of a head (what, ten pounds?) intruding upon my daily morning rite.

"What a morning!" I said, quite boisterously actually, because it was one of the first crisp, misty mornings of the new fall season, and I walked with a loose stride underneath the branches of maples, each placed so carefully, so long ago, in cute little planter squares along the sidewalk.

"Make it the usual, Roger," I said to Roger. And Roger, with his patchy beard of mid-length brown and gray bristles, twiddled wonderfully with the espresso machine—you know the way they make it *shoosh!* and the lovely grinding noises and the pounding (like an iron smith banging away)—and after he poured the milk with a Parkinson's shiver, Roger carefully displayed for me his art, a lovely white foam heart set on a dreamy, creamy brown blanket. *Well done Roger, what a lovely heart!* I awarded his handiwork a generous (if I might say so myself) tip of three dollars. My mouth, still polluted by some *unpleasantness* from my earlier retching, was quickly remedied, comforted as if resting my cheek on Nana's bosom, and I was lifted up on a cloud of foam, so far into milky obscurity, in fact, that I forgot about my morning severed by a severed head, and I began to think about my afternoon with Katie.

I planned then and there, on my cloud, an afternoon of fudgy Sundays, coloring, and cutting crepe paper snowflakes.