

Curiosity Killed the Cat—Will Satisfaction Bring it Back?

A Personal Lyric Essay on Postmemory and Art Spiegelman's MAUS



Young children are curious creatures. They naturally yearn to explore. I like to think that the world, when first breached by babies unlocking consciousness, must seem like a bottomless menu at one of those JapaneseVietKoreanThaiFilo-American restaurants (AKA: “fusion,” titled: “*Namaste*”). You salivate over the options and simultaneously can’t even fathom where to begin. And as you get increasingly older—this part is important—you ignore

the fact that the place is run by a white man with a fixed grin and a cash-eating tongue that automates: “It’s all very reasonably priced. Three-piece crab rangoons are *supposed* to cost thirty dollars—this is America!”

Young children are also curious in the ontological sense. The Terrible Twos are denominated so because constantly tantruming two-year-olds have no perception that the act of extreme emotion is unmannered and inconveniencing (hence the constance). Young children are not civil, but they are *exceedingly, emblematically human*. Curious indeed.

In the photo above, I (or rather, my four-year-old self) am squinting through a tower viewer at a blazing Arizona landscape. I tug at the machine with a muscle-straining ferocity that can only be attributed to young children, though I recall the viewer being scorching to the touch. My knees, too, are tensely wired. I look ready to pounce through the binoculars and prowl feral on the distant mountaintops.

Later, I’m told plucking my fingers off the viewer was like playing whackamole; every time one digit was pulled off, another went down. There’s documented proof of my crankiness as a result (see below). But when I try to remember these moments now, try to picture what bewitched me so, I can’t conjure any particular image. Thirst just pounds—first at the base of my skull, then in the back of my throat. Eventually, it claws its way up to dessicate my mouth. I sense that my body remembers stronger than my mind.



Oftentimes, we as a society treat curiosity as a marker of intellectual prowess. But here, I remember that it really is just a feeling. Curiosity is the “*what if?*” whispering behind every other emotion that we mistakenly believe precipitates our most rash decisions. Curiosity is that insatiable thirst. We just prefer to believe there’s something more virtuous about the trait because it’s most exuberant and least tempered in young children, whom we view as the epitome of unblemished humanity. But curiosity can lead to anger, and anger can lead to war, and war is what ~~fled~~ led my family to America.

Ironically, in America, my family did everything they could to foster my inquisitiveness. For all of his trauma at the hands of intellectual curiosity, my father doesn’t

see how it could ever lead to anything but success and happiness here in the States. And for a lot of my life, I subscribed to that philosophy too. I suppose that's why I was so fearless in leaving Los Gatos at thirteen. There was only so much to explore out of a picturesque suburb, and more than that, there was a lack of people eager to explore. So I packed my bags and moved three thousand miles away to a place where we're taught to sharpen our curiosity and focus it on goodness.

My parents were extremely supportive of my decision. It was their greatest point of pride, to be able to say that they could afford to send their daughter to the most prestigious high school in America. So I worked hard to return the favour to them. But what I failed to remember is that you cannot control what piques your interest. Now this isn't to say that I wasn't staying focused on my studies; it was more so that a part of me became desensitised and then quenchlessly drawn to the unthinkable amount of wealth surrounding me. I was enamoured with all that our billion dollar endowment had to offer (think Addison Gallery receptions, free tickets to Celtics games, lobster dinners during trustee weekends, etc.), and, like any other teenage girl, I also took note of the kinds of clothes and accessories my peers wore. Only there was a major difference between them and the average high schooler: their everyday outfits, once calculated, could add up to tens of thousands of dollars—not counting the *basics* (i.e., multi-band Canada Goose winter puffers). I don't say this now to be critical, exaggeratory, or gluttony-accusing. It's simply the truth.

Disclaimer: I have grown up incredibly comfortable. And by that, I mean that I have always lived in a two-storey house with a pool and three cars. In other words, excessively comfortable. By some definitions, I grew up wealthy. It is another thing, though, to be surrounded by the children of billionaires, international figureheads, and American old money. Now this, of course, is a non-issue. To my parents, it is the advantage of all advantages. There are doors open for me by association alone. But a malleable

thirteen-year-old mind is easily infected with the daily comparison of, *“Do I look like I belong here?”*

My parents had never fathomed that this could even be a thought in my head. I had what they could never dream of. If I didn't belong, they weren't sure who could. They had worked so hard to assimilate, adorning every house we've ever lived in in neoclassical decor and finding hobbies as “American” as possible. But I had an awareness that no matter how Asian**American** my family became, we couldn't shake how present our past was.

See, both of my parents are South Vietnamese immigrants that were born at the tail of the Vietnam War and were raised in the ravaged, immediate post-war scene. My father wasn't joking when he said he had to walk five miles to school, barefoot, every day. His father before him had been placed in a “reeducation camp” directly after the war's end and stayed imprisoned for the majority of my father's childhood, leaving him to be raised by a half-blind mother and an older sister who never got to complete a tenth grade education. It is unsurprising that the few photos I have of my father's time in Vietnam always show an unsmiling, emaciated, stubborn-faced young boy.

That side of my family was sponsored to the States in 1993 on political asylum. At twenty-three then, my dad was mere months away from becoming a doctor in Vietnam; it was all he had ever dreamed of growing up in a mud and dirt house, reading by kerosene lamp, forging papers each year to study as a city student with no anti-Communist family history. And in the three days he had to decide whether or not to throw it all away and flee with his parents and siblings to America, he could have never imagined that he would spend his first two years in Louisiana detailing cars and stitching leather seats. It was rags to riches to rags again, and it wouldn't be riches for another decade and some.

These are the stories my father does not share with the innumerable friends in high places he has made since. These are the stories that do not align with the American life he has

built and the American family he has raised. These are the stories that bang up in my chest and squeeze my throat tight when I stray too far into the side of my curiosity that begs to know what it's like to be quintessentially Andover—to be quintessentially American.

The question, of course, is whether or not these are my stories to tell. When I write them down, guilt bubbles into nausea. But when I don't, guilt eats holes through my gut.¹ It's like I am straining to remember and record a history I was born into that my father is careless about leaving behind.² And that's the thing about my curiosity: it's intrinsically insatiable and exhaustingly contradictory. I vie to understand the embodiment of America *and* the entirety of where I come from. My curiosity is why I came to Andover, but also why I remain conflicted here. And with nearly four years at Phillips under my belt, I can now confidently say that I will come out "knowing" less than I did arriving. I'm grateful, though, that like me, my father is an avid photographer and portraitist, and I can look back at photos from over a

¹ Spiegelman visualises this feeling as something that both shrinks and grows him. Riddled by his own discomfiture and self-reproach following the success of *Maus I*, we see Artie's frantic cartoon contracting by the panel (Spiegelman 201-207). This illustrative choice conveys the sense that Artie is made small by the enormity and incomprehensibility of the history he is attempting to chronicle, and by the looming personal proximity and responsibility which he is laden with. I am faced with this same feeling of shrinking when reflecting on the incredibly fresh stories of my heritage. It is also exacerbated by the question of the kind of witness I am—or rather, the kind of witness I want to be.

² The final page of *Maus II* contains Vladek's closing testimony about the "happy, happy ever after" that he claims the couple experienced after reuniting in Sosnowiec (296)—an ending that the reader knows is not true as Anja would go on to commit suicide in America decades later. This panel is filled with black ink, highlighting Anja and Vladek's embrace with what appears to be a white spotlight. I am reminded of the portrait my father took of my brother and I, where we are also "spotlighted" as the only saturated subjects in an otherwise muted photograph. At face value, my father's portrait is of his two healthy, playfully cranky children. The image and its contents are so untarnished that we nearly negate the war my father survived. Taken together, these two spotlighted moments falsely evidenciate a "happy, happy ever after" that *almost* outshines truly complicated histories. And two panels after the couple's embrace, Vladek utters his last words to Artie's tape recorder: "I'm *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it's *enough* stories for now..." (296); directly below this lies an illustration of the Spiegelman tombstone with Anja and Vladek's names. The implied assertion that Vladek, with all of his medical troubles and old age, stayed alive just long enough to finish granting his one living son the stories he requests echoes my father's provision of stories to me, an action he does whilst simultaneously striving to get further away from his past. In grappling with these histories and stringing together two conflicting realities, Spiegelman and I both seem to keep our fathers in limbo between worlds.

decade ago and see that this is who I have always been. Grateful but curious—endeavouring towards satisfaction.

These days, I imagine myself still wired like four-year-old me, coiled to teleport to a hazy and unattainable horizon. I envision my body bent in the direction of a fork in the road that I am, against all odds, trying to push together. And at both four and sixteen, I am still *exceedingly, emblematically human* for believing that my will alone can ply together time, place, nature, creation, and history.³

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GnbSmC3nz9JXMDX4z6DWDwRhdsNhu1O8s1gxT3hwSiU/edit?usp=sharing>

³ I must return here to Spiegelman's decision to draw his character's dynamic shrinking and growing. Upon first viewing this visual element, the reader is likely to wonder why the artist chooses to depict his character as a size and age shifting entity. But there's an obviousness to this choice now that I see: in the face of his own impending fatherhood and the moral responsibilities resulting from *Maus I*'s success, Artie is drawn back to the origins of why he began the work that he did and Spiegelman depicts this in a physical format. In the panels where Artie is speaking to his therapist, Spiegelman draws his character shrinking inwards after stating, "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness,' ... On the other hand, he SAID it," (205). There is a childish element to this caveat, made obvious by the visual of Artie making himself smaller and folding his hands into his lap. In making this graphic and literary choice, Spiegelman begs the reader to consider the ways in which we as humans might revert to our inner child when confronted with moral ambiguity, or perhaps the ways in which parts of our inner child still endure in our present selves. I parallel this to the way in which I write about curiosity, an unchanging facet of myself from toddlerhood to adolescence. At age four, my curiosity was innocuously lasered towards pretty red mountains. At age sixteen, it draws me to morally grey, conflicting areas of my past and future. For Artie, he too is reverted to a childlike quality as he thinks about his upcoming fatherhood and what it might mean to let the past rest as he welcomes his firstborn. But by choosing to continue writing *Maus II*, Spiegelman asserts that following his curiosity and staying in that unstable, childlike form is necessary. I resonate with this in that I, too, have a youthful determination that it is both necessary to tell certain stories and possible to do so with respect to the testimonies of firsthand witnesses.

Works Cited

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. New York, Pantheon, 1996.