

“Golliwogg’s Cakewalk” - Claude Debussy

I used to hide under the blankets. Close my eyes. Count to ten... slowly. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Release my breath. I closed my mouth because I had watched a Chinese drama with a demon that sucked out sleeping people’s souls through their mouths. I would keep the nightlight on its highest brightness to ward off the monsters of the night. But then the flies and ladybugs would rendezvous noisily by the light and I would imagine them sucking at my skin when I slept, so that I would pull my blankets tighter around me. I would suffocate as I hid from those insects.

And this was before the nightmares.

It wasn’t that I had a terrible childhood. It’s that I was spoiled enough to believe that I had a terrible childhood. I was born and raised into the upper-middle-class and a stable financial footing. I grew up into a household of music, of athleticism, and of academics. I was trilingual, had an endless thirst to learn programming and advanced mathematics, and could bowl and play soccer reasonably well. My grades were upkept, and I really had little to worry about. I was free.

And that’s when the fear came.

I became so intensely afraid of death at the time. I assumed this would be a passing phase of childhood, like an obsession with cars or with being an astronaut. Everybody has to confront the *idea* of death, even if they are not to confront *it* itself for many years. I thought about what it would be like to forever leave this world, to cease to exist, to fall into an unending blackness. How did it feel to not exist? I assumed it would be something like the fourth dimension, something unfathomable and terrible. By then my mind began to explore further, to situate itself by the coffins of loved ones, and I couldn’t take it anymore...

So I used different methods to distract myself. Counting, holding off the darkness to force myself to believe that the dangers did not exist. But the monsters and the shadows kept returning to my mind, night after night after night. It stretched into weeks and then months. In school and in public, I was a normal child. In bed, Death was killing me. I thought that I was too young to die or even to think about dying, but I had no power over this obsession.

I was paranoid. From nothing.

It was about this time that I began to learn the song Golliwogg’s Cakewalk by Claude Debussy for the piano. I don’t remember exactly how it happened, but Death had infected it. That song became a roller coaster not only of my hands and my emotional stability.

The opening line of the song was a question, was that brief moment before a person’s true death, that moment in limbo when a person still just enough strength to utter his last words. Already months into this pre-teen crisis, the song pushed me to new psychologically depressing depths. *What good is anything that I do in life if it is only to be destroyed later? What are the values in the trivialities of life?* The colorful activities I had found so much interest in — bowling, programming, soccer, and piano especially — all turned a shade of grey. At the same time, my social relationships went downhill as I became ever more secluded and confused. The problems at night didn’t help.

What was worse were the taunts. The song’s style was a mix of Impressionism and Classical music, a jeeringly playful sense. It wasn’t so clear-cut as one or the other— not as dramatic as most Impressionist music nor as structured as Classical music. There were short, bizarre noises that I interpreted to mean someone’s death. The multitude of shrill trills changed the mood of the song to that of a horror movie. When nearing the dark, low, ominous sections of the song I imagined the world

imploding in spheres of tyranny and terror to the sound of sadistically playful elevator music. And the optimistic section after those low notes felt to me like some maniacal dance party for the zombies after said apocalypse.

This song felt like everything I was not: confident, playful, popular. It felt like an exaggeration of all of my insecurities.

Ha! To be jealous of a song!

It's as ridiculous as being afraid of the monsters of the night.

The power of hindsight is incredible.

A little time ago, I heard Golliwogg's Cakewalk on YouTube in a piano music playlist. And for once, after being detached for so long and being graced with a fresh ear, I thought that the song could, perhaps, be simply playful and lighthearted. I looked up the song again and listened to it, paying attention to it carefully, and I saw the potential darkness in the low notes and irregular rhythm. I discovered that it was written for Debussy's daughter as part of his "Children's Suite" and meant to embody, unsurprisingly, a type of early-20th century toy called a "golliwog" and a common dance known as the "cakewalk."

The golliwogs were black-colored dolls with crazy red hair; the cakewalk was a crazy dance mostly performed by African Americans with a fervor reminiscent of the days of the Roaring 20's. Sure, this might seem crazy and even a bit racist, but this was the culture of the early 20th century, much like our even-crazier 21st century fads of "fidget cubes" or "silly bands." The kids a century ago just wanted to have fun, and they did.

And then I dug up the old recording of myself playing the song in a recital a few years back. It was set at a library, like many of my other recitals. I was shaky — probably somewhat from the stage fright, but also from the fear of the song. And when I played, the song was dead. Sure, the musical elements were present, but everything felt as if it culminated towards death rather than the liveliness of music. When I stood back up to mediocre applause, my face showed no emotion.

A little child's toy, dancing.

And to think I was scared. Scared of death and zombie apocalypses. What was I thinking? What was wrong with me?

Perhaps the music was so foreign — a different culture, almost — and so free from the suspicion and tension that I exhibited that it confused me and led me to these deranged thoughts. Child's play that I had long lost to a busy and mindless life. It was so innocently childish and happy, like a toddler running around a meadow of blooming sunflowers. It deserving little of the mental deconstruction that I had done to torture, unravel, construe it so maliciously. A far cry from zombies and a dystopian world. I had interpreted the freedom and experimental style of the song as anarchic. The deep base notes as evil. But in real life, it was meant to be nothing of the sort — I had only imposed upon it my troublesome will of jealousy and pessimism.

Dada-daduh-da-dada-dadum. The opening line, revisited. Taken out of context, they are simply a series of notes. It *does* sound playful.

Oh, how it feels to be a child! I wish I could free myself of all of these worldly problems and finally, *finally*, get a good night's sleep.