

Derrick Baber

Maslow's Reform Center

Another student was dead. The 9th to die in experimental trials this semester.

“Today we are gathered to mourn, and more importantly, to reflect on the ultimate, undeniable force of death. A force that has a drastic effect on my pursuit of scientific knowledge. We have lost a subject, subject number 2384 to be more exact, to this inevitable and perpetual force. This frustratingly unconquerable force. Although, there is a small degree of solace in the fact that he was only a Level One student, making him expendable from the moment he arrived here. Therefore, rather than simply conducting a fruitless trial, we have compromised with nature through the sacrifice of our simplest being. Fate will surely reward us with experimental prosperity. I hope you all learn something from his death. But because I cannot empirically measure your understanding, I will tell you exactly what you should learn from this subject's death and more importantly a lost trial: Death wins. Death outnumbers. Death permeates. Death ruins my experimental trials. Death turns men into mice running through mazes. I hate death. And until we discover the elusive yet existing resources needed to protect our subjects from death, our experimental trials will remain in vain.”

As I sat alone in the Level Five student section, I discovered this distorted funeral service supplied me with several irritations.

First and most trivial, I couldn't, despite my best phonetic efforts, orchestrate the perfect tone of sarcasm while replaying our Headmaster's remarks in my head. I just needed practice. Given only a few minutes I could satirize this monster's tone to suggest the destructive beliefs and idiotic ideologies he holds. I'll practice after. I can get it.

Next, the subject's name is Brandon. Call him by his name. This service is not a sounding board for your fruitless aspirations to “conquer death.” Nor is it a memorial for your failed experiments. It is about Brandon. Brandon. Brandon. Break from your chain of order. Call a Level One student by his name. Just this once. The occasion calls for it, Headmaster. You inhumane, stagnant being. Brandon. Brandon. Brandon.

Brandon was not useless. He was alive. He breathed. He walked. He talked. Isn't that all it requires to qualify a life? Isn't that all you are, Headmaster? Call him Brandon.

My last and most innate frustration came at the Headmaster's profession to hate death when his trials caused it. We live in a paradoxical world, one in which only strong polarizations exist. No one that is impartial survives. If you possess a qualm, you must transform it to animosity. If you value something, you must profess love to keep it. There is no rest for the lukewarm soul. Those that reach any worth within this ethereal measuring

system do so by freezing those around them or burning them to the ground. The Headmaster, by calling on the principle of hatred, even hatred of death, gave his statements life. The man who incites death is able to avoid retribution with simple, insincere declarations of stance.

The service ended and we were dismissed by Level to our quarters. I am the only Level Five student here, so I travel everywhere by myself. Sometimes it's lonely. I often stare at the vast amount of Level One subjects with a glaze of jealousy. But not on this day. This day I used the walk to reflect on my experience with funerals. I have been to several, both my grandparents, an uncle I barely knew, we even had a funeral for my dog when I was 5 or so. All these funerals were different but their feeling the same. They jolted me into dreariness if that makes any sense. Everything slowed down, and I was overcome with a conglomeration of emotions. Funerals always made me feel elusive, like I could suspend time's grasp for just a little while and experience real, true melancholy. A genuine sense of despair is important every now and then. That's why I cried at great uncle Charles' funeral. Not because I loved him, because I wanted to pretend there was an emotional vacuum that allowed me to be sensitive in a hard, time-contingent reality.

The funeral led by Headmaster didn't have this redemptive quality. He never broke from the feeling of time and space that accompany daily drudgery. Rather he, by standing tall and firm in a time of despair and frailty, reminded the students of the dystopia that was now our reality.

I was distracted from my current analyses when I passed the Maslow's pyramid statue in the main quadrangle of campus. Headmaster says it is located in the center of the campus because its principles are the center of our culture. The five Levels, color-coded and imposing, read: Physiological, Safety, Belonging, Esteem, Self-Actualization.

As I stared at this baleful geometric structure, I thought of my first day here, nearly two years ago. I was only 15, but ambitious and courageous. I remembered how confused I had been upon learning students were defined by unclear, stringent Levels. And different Levels were allowed no interaction. Level one students didn't even have names.

My introduction involved Headmaster coldly informing me as to the function of Maslow's Reform School.

"This wonderful center exists because human-beings aren't wonderful," he said as I was taken in for debriefing.

"You see Maslow was a brilliant man. He created these Levels of developmental qualities that can help us predict down to a science the state of a person." He never looked at me when he talked; at the time I thought he was just trying to intimidate me.

"I love science, and I love order" Headmaster mumbled. "So it's only natural I would hate something that disrespects these ultimate ideals. Does that make sense, uhhhh, Thomas Wilkes?"

My parents gave me this family name in hopes of dignifying me. I sometimes enjoy recalling their disappointment as I turned out to be a delinquent.

I hesitated for a few moments as I stared at the broad part of his back. His body turned, his head downward reading my name and information from what seemed to be a large collection of handwritten notes.

“Answer me, you swine!” He snarled, shocking me into an answer.

“Yes...Yes sir” I muttered back at him. I hated saying ‘sir,’ ever since my parents told me I had to.

“That’s why I started this school. Because misfits like you disobey the predictability of action in pursuit of fruitless rebellions. But don’t you worry your naively dissident mind, I don’t assign students to Levels through some arbitrary method of qualifying abilities. No! Like I said, I’m a man of science and order. I use quantitative data. Education, finances, health, family structure, geographic location, race, language-these are all measurements used to sort the criminals of culture that are left at the doorstep of this institution. And let me assure you, they are equally proficient in predicting the state of a human being.” He seemed to gain a childlike giddiness as he described this process. “You Mr. Wilkes are our first ever Level 5 delinquent!”

With this statement he turned around to peer directly into my eyes. He was a short man, but still very imposing. He was stocky and firm in stature while his face was weathered and his skin coarse. His hair was greying with tinges of brown left on the side. He wore thick, almost protective glasses and his tie was tied uncomfortably tight around his wrinkled neck. I couldn’t help but think Headmaster maintained a shocking resemblance to a former soldier. Someone whose body was depleted and mind appeared to be tortured, but still somehow radiated a forceful sense of purpose.

My arrival to the dormitory building coincided with the abrupt disappearance of the day’s remaining sunlight. It was winter here, so darkness arrived earlier and earlier with each consequent day. Nighttime rarely brought rest, however, as our experimental trials occurred promptly at 9 p.m. Headmaster believes we are here because there is something innately wrong with us. Our unpredictability stems from a fundamental flaw that can be fixed with research and science. Therefore, he places us in experimental trials to find the “missing capacity needed for necessary conformity.” These trials focus on a quality found in Headmaster’s pyramid and consequently recording our responses. If we fail the trial, Headmaster assigns us additional practice regarding the deficient quality. His overarching idea is that with enough improvement in the essential pyramid qualities we can be corrected and contribute to society in the predictable, healthy fashion that is most desirable. Brandon died in a trial. No one really cares though. Most people don’t even know his name. Headmaster knew his name. He chose not to use it. He refused to use it out of disrespect. I can understand ignorance. I can’t tolerate disrespect. It’s infuriating.

I had a little time to waste before trials. I flung my door open and plopped down by my desk. I didn't have a roommate of course. They don't allow different Levels to share rooms. I didn't mind it though. I kind of liked the privacy. I don't know why I valued this privacy so much. There wasn't anything too personal in my room. Just an unmade bed, some clothes on the floor, and a desk supporting a few papers and a flickering lamp. The only trace of personality in the entire room was a small picture of my family thumbtacked to the wall above my desk. The picture was old and folding on the edges. It had begun to accumulate dust. The dust was a funny artistic statement I always thought. Dead skin cells and hair accumulating on a motionless picture. I never noticed dust until I got here. Maybe this meant I was kind of dead too. Or maybe just morbid.

The picture was from our yearly yacht trip. I always felt squeamish when I looked at it. It reeked of wealth. My father donned an immaculate white sweater exposing the top half of a patterned ascot. He always had a way of dress not borne out of necessity or comfort, but from an innate desire to look established. I remember when I read *The Great Gatsby* in my first year of high school. My father reminded me of Jay, except I never could discover whom he so desperately wanted to impress. My mother's smile was crooked and homely. I always believed she used to be beautiful. I don't know why I did though. I think its because she must have been beautiful to attract my father. He wasn't going to associate with someone that couldn't at least appear elegant. Elegant. That's a better way to describe her. I guess I would call my mother elegant. Not necessarily beautiful, but elegant. She could dress nicely and carry herself with tact and dignity, but she never really spoke. She didn't lean in close to my father during pictures either. There was a stringent, professional distance between them at all times. I never saw them kiss or even hold hands. They seemed more like business partners than lovers. They worked together for the common goal of elegance. Yeah. Elegance. I like that word. It's rather shallow. I think my parents were kind of shallow. I'll never understand why they cared so much about this idea of elegance. But then again I'm not so sure they knew either. The only endearing part of this photograph was the presence of my little brother Henry. Henry seemed to be far more alive than my parents, and his toothy smile echoed this. We interacted humanely because he shared my love for reading. My parents consistently referred to him as an "Ivy League Man." His favorite was Harvard. I hope he is granted acceptance. My father always said that opportunities were given to those who worked the hardest. I never believed him. But Henry did. All Henry did was work. He was the perfect schoolboy. It was almost robotic. My parents really enjoyed it. Oh, Well, I hope he goes to an Ivy School. I think it would make him happy. Whatever that means.

Just then a loud voice boomed over the intercom system into my room: “MR. WILKES, PLEASE REPORT TO THE LAB FOR TESTING.” I grabbed my coat and jogged down the stairs.

When I arrived at the testing center Headmaster greeted me with a sarcastic, fleeting smile. “Mr. Wilkes! Today we will be testing your problem-solving abilities! These abilities are found in the highest level of the pyramid, so someone of your financial and scholarly background should have no problem! This certainly couldn’t be the test to reveal what is wrong with you. It is far too easy. I hope you enjoy it because I certainly will.”

I didn’t have a good feeling about this test. All of my trials at the center had been extremely cerebral. My thought processes and mentalities were under constant examination. My trials took this trajectory because I refused the elite level of schooling my parents forced upon me.

I was sent to Maslow’s Reform Center the spring of my second year of boarding school because I was failing all of my classes. At this time I had become addicted to literature. Just not the contrived literature assigned by my authoritarian teachers. I began to study figures in history that I deemed exceptionally brilliant. Martin Luther, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln. They all had self-improved. They overcame the societal limitations pressed upon them. They exceeded class, expectation, and that which Headmaster values the most, scientific predictability. They shared a thirst for knowledge and quenched it through their own intellectual voracity. They chose to disobey mind numbing school systems. Their example inspired my newfound fascination and obsession with becoming an autodidact. I wanted to understand the world around me. Not because of my resources, but rather in spite of them. I skipped classes to actually study. To study that which would improve me. I strove to be a self-made scholar. I wanted to escape all the assets thrust onto me at birth and formulate my validity from nothing. By the semester’s close I was failing school, yet I felt so intrinsically alive. It was addicting to break monotonies. My vocabulary was enriched. My knowledge more deep. My perspective more inclusive. I learned the sooner I escaped academia the quicker I became a scholar. The only real lesson I learned in boarding school was the futility with which education operates. I would phone home weekly. Partially out of obligation. Partially to verbalize all the wisdom I had amassed. Our talks would cover philosophy, history, religion, race, mathematics, really anything a naïve ear would assume I studied at school. Except my opinions were strong and absolute. I began to threaten my mother and father. I could sense it. They resented me as an individual. I was supposed to be like Henry. I was expected to put my nose in a book, disappear from thought, and forfeit creativity for a flawless transcript. Without orderliness, I could never be elegant. It came as no surprise that, when the school informed them of my “academic negligence,” my parents swiftly moved me to Maslow’s Reform Center. They cloaked their embarrassment to claim an uneducated son under the pretense that they wanted to help me. With

some treatment and discipline my fervor could be redirected towards a more socially beneficial purpose. So now I participate in trials at a reform center that proclaims I'm insane. So much for the American Dream.

Because I had such value to Headmaster's experiments as a Level Five student, most of my trials were risk free. I was less expendable than my counterparts. Most students who had died were Level One or Two. However, my lack of compliance in these trials was beginning to frustrate Headmaster. In the last experiment I successfully solved a puzzle without any of their prompts or suggestions, therefore rendering the observations useless in terms of defining my "tormented state of rebellion." The trial before that was a Rorschach exam. Of course I provided misleading, dishonest answers. The conductors of the test blissfully recorded my responses, nodding moronically under the false inference that these results would somehow lead to insight. Headmaster wasn't fooled. While he was an inherently demonic and fixated man, Headmaster was extremely observant and interrogatively brilliant. He knew from the moment I answered the first question that I was belittling his experiment. He was waiting to rid himself and Maslow's Reform Center of my rebellious tendencies. He knew he couldn't fix me with discipline. He knew my behavior was instinctive. Headmaster wouldn't accept another experimental failure at the hands of my intellect. Previously students had died because the trials were treacherous and barbaric. That wasn't the case with mine. He was going to deliberately generate a dangerous trial. I've been around him long enough to know he was sincere in his diabolical motivations to fix society's rejects. At all costs. Prior to my arrival he was only someone that didn't allow death to stop his pursuits. But now I had turned him into a cold-blooded killer. Headmaster was going to use this trial to kill me.

I was led into a windowless room with three white walls reaching a ceiling approximately ten feet high along with a class divider as the fourth wall. I took two steps forward, and the doors behind me slammed shut. There was nothing in the room besides what appeared to be a fire hose plugged into the wall farthest from me. The intercom bell rang as Headmaster's robotic voice echoed through the room.

"Mr. Wilkes. I am glad to inform you that this trial will not only assess your problem-solving skills. You proved to be a truly unique participant throughout your tenure here. Along with being our coveted Level-Five subject you have shown an unflinching desire to circumvent the integrity of our efforts. It is clear you find my scientific approach and strict classification of subjects both immoral and unproductive. I will use this test to temporarily empathize with your objections. Therefore, we will synchronously test your problem solving skills with another commonly held Level Five capability most relevant to you: Morality. So here's the problem...there is a Level Three student on the other side of the glass divider."

I peered across the divider to see a small girl standing exactly where I was in the other identical room.

“Right now I pumping a flammable substance into your room. In just a few more moments I will light the room on fire.”

My breathing quickened. My gravest expectations for this trial were nowhere near the cruelty of my current situation.

“But remember Mr. Wilkes, I am a man of science and practicality. I would never put you in harms way without including a safe solution. If you will look just beyond your right shoulder there is a completely functional fire hose. Feel free to utilize it extinguish the fire and consequently preserve your shallow existence.”

I obediently reached for the handle of the fire hose.

“But wait! Aren’t you curious as to how I plan to test your fleeting sense of morality?” Headmaster barked.

His voice dripped with very the animosity I had learned to disregard. Something was extraordinary in this moment though. Every bit of his voice arrived with abnormal clarity. It was as if all of my senses sharpened. The white of the walls even seemed more vibrant. I was experiencing the sensations felt when one is but an inch away from death, yet I was only facing the threat of it. I felt debilitated by the lack of emotional strength I possessed.

“For every drop of water you use to save yourself, I will pour the same amount into Level Three student’s room. The proposition is very simple Mr. Wilkes. If you save yourself the girl will drown. If you chose the path of valiance, your dedication to self-improvement will incinerate with you. Don’t disappoint me.”

The intercom faded out and the room seemed to become smaller. I felt claustrophobic. I was paralyzed by fear as the emotional toll of imminent, inescapable pain was upon me. Before I had any more time to dwell on my predicament a small flame illuminated the corner of the room. I panicked. Hoping to buy myself time I grabbed the hose and sprayed the fire down. A calming sensation came over me as the fire disappeared and the consequences of this trial were temporarily suspended. My brief flash of composure vanished as I noticed the girl in the other room. Water had accumulated to around her knees. My momentary lapse of thought had caused me to forget what happened each time I used the hose. When I saw the girl however, something different happened: She looked back at me. She now knew I was responsible for her life. She understood the concept of this trial and began to weep. There was no humanity in her cry. She was sobbing uncontrollably. I could almost hear her. I could positively feel what she was feeling.

However my resulting emotion was that of pure anger. Anger fueled from a white-hot sense of defeat. I was finally confronted by the injustice of this world and the infallibility of Headmaster’s power. I could no longer pacify disparities with my intellect or ambition. I was being forced to adhere to the demands of this dismal, cannibalistic hierarchy. I must play their

game. I must obey. What did I value more: An innocent Level-Three student or the surrender of intellect my death would entail.

Another flame ignited in the same spot as the previous fire. I knew one more shower of the hose would not yet drown the girl. I quickly doused the fire and bought myself a few more seconds of introspection.

This time, however, killing the fire did something to me. I knew what I had to do. I knew that I had to die. I had to die because I was not like Headmaster. I was bound by morality. I was bound by justice. And I was bound by an awareness of human rights. I considered my pursuits important, but not nearly as important as a human life. And that is what separated me from Headmaster. I would not let science, or order, or adherence to some hierarchy dehumanize my fellow man. I was going to die today.

Another set of flames appeared, only this time bigger than the previous two. I had the hose in my hand, but didn't use it to extinguish them. I searched for the girl one last time. I wanted her to know everything was going to be ok. I couldn't find her eyes through the flames though. This angered me. I wanted to receive gratitude for what I planned to do. I guess any true altruistic action goes unnoticed at this center.

The flames were growing so that one hit the bottom of my hand. I felt an excruciating level of pain coupled with a despairing sense of regret. I looked up to the intercom where I knew there was a camera and screamed: "You haven't won Headmaster! You will never win! Intellect and creativity and rebellion will always be on this earth! Everyone deserves their own dream! We aren't your subjects!"

In desperation and an effort to remove myself from any chance of extinguishing the flames I threw the fire hose as hard as I possible could into the glass divider.

I could sense the flames growing as the room heated but for some reason they hadn't come any closer to me. In my confusion I realized the hose had shattered the window and the fire was spreading into the other test room. I ran to pry the doors in the other room. Another set of hands grabbed the seam of the door. I looked up to see the Level Three girl with tears still in her eyes. We were able to open the doors enough to jolt ourselves out of the room. As we escaped the flames followed us. We ran down the hall as the entire building was going up in flames.

As we reached the final door leading outside I could see the control room where the intercom operated. The room was completely on fire with the small viewing window on the door cracked showing an attempted exit. It was apparent no one could have escaped in time. Headmaster and the trial operators had been locked in and inevitably burned to death.

The fire brought considerable media attention to the center. Reporters and police officers gave us the opportunity to speak about the injustices and life-threatening trials we were subjected too. A week after the fire, Maslow's Reform Center was shut down. We were all sent home to be with our families.

Some students were relieved. Some disappointed. Most with no families to go to. I personally dreaded confronting my father and mother again. Hopefully they will have sympathy for me. Maybe even a little respect. I am the hero after all, and I didn't even graduate from boarding school.

But with all these uncertainties pervading my thoughts I could rely on a few outcomes. Headmaster burned with his school. He was declared a criminal. And he would have no funeral. Fitting justice to a self-assumed eulogist who never gave proper respects. I thought of Brandon. And I smiled.