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Free Speech

Ronald Ramage

School is filled with more strangers than one could ever meet.

You find that you float on a sea of unacquainted acquaintances. People you keep seeing over and over again. People you get a registered "click" from every time you see them.

Most often you will float over that sea of familiar strangers, past those casual encounters, insulated by your routine. Those familiar strangers will remain people you recognize but don't know.

There is no categorizing this fraction of your life. It depends on who you are and who they are; on what attracts or repels you; on the circumstances in which you came to notice and recognize each of those strangers.

But every once in a while you find yourself face to face with one of those familiar strangers. You two are the only people waiting for the same bus. Or opening the same door to wait in the same room for the same reason. Or crossing paths in some strange territory.

WHO says hi?
Who says it, and all its attendant messages? Who crosses the bridge first? Which of these two people, yourself or the other, feels whatever it takes to move across that bridge, and nod, and say hi?

Beware of that nod, it's a killer. Beware of letting your guard down long enough to be taken by surprise. For what happens next? Do you nod in the hallways the next time you pass, or pretend you don't notice? Do you nod in the hallways, but never converse? Do you converse but never talk? Do you talk, and exchange phone numbers, and invitations, and addresses, and visits and become close good friends? Do you fall in love? Do you fuck?

Who says hi? Sometimes I do. Sometimes you do. Sometimes we never do.

Sometimes I would say the first hi, but I'm too tired or too stoned, or too scared of rejection to risk it. Once I said hi all the time and I still wonder at my naivety.

And sometimes...
Yes sometimes. For everything must happen to somebody sometime, or we couldn't dream or dread it happening in our own life.

There is no denying that you will be attracted to some of those people out there. If the needs of human comfort aren't being met

in your life, then you are naturally going to try to meet those needs among the strangers and familiar strangers you float over each day.

As school starts, there are those two or so weeks of flurry and excitement, and sorting things out until the routine asserts itself. Then the boundaries and pressures become sharply defined—any changes are subtly negotiated.

For the first few days after the Christmas holidays, the same sort of hysteria occurs, but quickly fades. You and others are telling yourselves that it's half over, and nothing has happened yet. If you are aware enough, you can notice some longer held glances, some more direct looks.

But wait until after Reading Week. After Reading Week, the end of school is imminent. If IT—having a dream fuck, falling in love, having your life completely changed or cemented on course—hasn't happened yet, then IT isn't going to happen unless IT happens right NOW! The looks become hungrier, harder, and more demanding until the last day of school, and you're back home and starting a job, or travelling or whatever—building up a different set of familiar strangers.

Who says hi?
Sometimes I would say the first hi, but I'm too tired or too stoned, or too scared of rejection to risk it. Once I said hi all the time and I still wonder at my naivety.

Nobody gives lessons on when to say hi, or how long to wait, or what to wait for. Nobody even lets you know that it's a decision you will face. It's an unspoken lie from one of the great myths of adolescence: *Life will get easier as you get older.* It doesn't. It becomes more of the same. Some people handle decisions easily, some don't.

Once, I asked someone, "How do you make love happen?" After some thought, my friend replied "Show genuine interest in the people you see daily." That remains the best advice I've had on the subject. The strangers will always be there. Things go well, or end badly, and life goes on. Don't sweat it.

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