

THE MANCHESTER

New prose by:

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- (ii.) *Nicholas Jackson*,
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I The Handicapped Stall

◆ *Christopher J. Cassetta*

Howard stared blankly at the sweaty glass in front of him, filled only with cola-tinged ice cubes. In the background he could hear the faint and monotonous whine that was his sister, Amy, complaining about the latest wrong perpetrated by her latest boyfriend, but his concentration was enveloped by the sharp, yet familiar pain growing in his lower abdomen. He had to pee.

"So...what do you think I should *do*, Howie?" his sister said in a tone, which he knew meant that she really wasn't going to take into consideration whatever he said next; only that her throat was dry from all that talking and she needed to pause for a sip of soda.

Howard opened his mouth as if to say something. He didn't know why, as he had no idea where the conversation was at this point, nor what an appropriate response would be to his sister's question. Luckily, at just that moment their over-enthusiastic waitress joined them.

"Is there anything else I could get for you folks? A refill on sodas maybe!" The waitress almost cheered. Howard could feel his bladder flip at the mention of soda.

"I think I'm fine," Howard said, "Amy, get a dessert or something if you want, I've got to use the restroom." Howard tried to get up from his chair and head off nonchalantly, yet with some haste as he could feel that embarrassment

Howard quickly realized that he was trapped. He couldn't leave now because then this handicapped man would see that he was in no way handicapped. And he couldn't stay in the stall because it was the only handicapped accessible stall in the restroom, the handicapped man would certainly wait for him to vacate this stall rather than attempt any of the other means of bodily waste deposit available in the bathroom. Howard could hear the tacky sound of the wheelchair approaching his stall door.

The stall door shook slightly as the handicapped man knocked.

"Occupied!" Howard instinctively responded, then clasped his hand over his mouth, amazed at his own actions. Now the handicapped man knew he was in there. Howard looked around the stall for some hints at a possibility of escape. He looked around to find an air duct that he could escape through, but there were none to be found. He thought about shimmying under the side of the stall into a neighboring stall, but he was wearing his favorite sweater and those floors were wet and probably covered in millions of species of bacteria. Perhaps he could take off his sweater and shirt and slide, bareback, under the side of the stall. However, Howard had just used up the last of his sick days last month and this would be a bad time to contract bubonic plague. He decided that the only thing to do was to wait it out.

Years passed by, which were probably only minutes, and Howard could still see the handicapped man's wheels from under the stall door. He also figured his sister had probably left by now, and he would be getting an earful from his mother about abandoning his little sister in her time of need, and leaving her with the check no less. Another knock came from the stall door.

"Hey buddy," the handicapped man said. "You alright in there...you need me to call somebody?"

"Nope, doing just fine." Howard responded, not knowing what else to do. He realized that if he had said nothing the handicapped man might have attempted to get him help. He wouldn't be able to handle that embarrassment.

"Well, hurry up, guy. I really gotta take a leak here," the handicapped man whined.

Another hundred years passed on like an eternity for Howard and brought with them another knock on the door. This time the knock was much more forceful. Howard began to wring his hands nervously. The only other time he had been this close to confrontation was in the third grade when Amy tried to pet a strange dog on their way home from the bus stop. The dog growled at his sister,

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was imminent.

Howard dodged his way past waiters balancing trays of drinks and entrées, children strapped in high-chairs at the ends of tables, flailing their arms and shaking their tear-stained faces, patrons shoving arms into outstretched sleeves, as if they were about to exit the restaurant into some kind of arctic tundra. Howard was relieved to find the wooden door with the little blue sign with the little white stick figure, which read MEN.

Howard walked inside the restroom and surveyed the damage. It wasn't a particularly dirty bathroom, but it did give off the sense that the employees hosed the room down at the end of the day rather than clean it. Howard looked into one of the stalls. The seat of the toilet was covered in soaking wet pieces of toilet paper that looked as if they had once been some kind of makeshift toilet seat cover. Howard wasn't about to tackle that disaster. He approached the bank of urinals. They were all wet as well, but this didn't bother Howard as much, as he would not be making skin to porcelain contact with them.

Howard stood in front of the urinal for some time, trying to relax, trying to concentrate on the task at hand, but he just couldn't do it. He couldn't get comfortable. Ever since he was a child, Howard had never been able to pee standing up. He suspected that it was because his mother raised him and his sister alone. Without a father around, Howard had never learned how to do it.

and Howard punched it in the head. Then they both ran home, Howard grinning overconfidently. He couldn't remember if the dog chased them or not.

"I don't know what kind of game you're trying to play here," said the handicapped man, "I bet you're not even handicapped. I am *so* sick of you people using our stalls. There's a handicapped sign on the door for a reason!"

The handicapped man was shouting now. His banging on the door was growing more and more intense. "If I find out that you're not handicapped when you come out of that stall, I'm gonna make you handicapped myself!"

Howard watched, motionless with fear, as the door rattled with violent banging. He could feel the screws twisting slowly out of their hinges with every rap on that stall door. He knew that in just a few minutes that stall door would come crashing down on him. He wondered what it would be like to be handicapped. ■

II Sometimes, Late at Night

◆ *Nicholas Jackson*

*We're going to go to heaven from this room;
The Gates will open up when they see it's me and you.*
—R. Kelly

*Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee;
As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be.*
—J. Donne



Sometimes, late at night, when he was all alone, Perry turned into a R&B singer. Really. He grew four inches, and finely groomed hairs sprouted above his lip and along his jaw line. His t-shirt vanished, and in its place were sculpted abs, glistening.

The doorbell rang, and Perry sashayed through the hall. Now he donned a vest—made of sable, or mink—and at the door, a voluptuous, half-dressed woman jumped into his arms. She whispered all the things she wanted him to do to her as he carried her inside. By the time they got to the living room, the place was packed.

It was a crazy party.

Music was blasting out of loudspeakers, vibrating the windows. Bright lights flashed and sparkled. Marijuana was smoked. Champagne was popped.

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Looking around the bathroom one last time, Howard noticed an option he hadn't considered before: the handicapped stall. Whenever he would use a public bathroom, Howard always avoided the handicapped stall. Although he had never seen an actual handicapped person use the handicapped stall, he figured they had exclusive rights to it. But these were desperate times, and he could feel the cola from his latest meal lapping up against the back of his tonsils.

When he entered the stall, he could see that the place was pristine. The toilet seat shimmered, and the linoleum was immaculate. Howard couldn't have asked for anything more from a public restroom. For a moment he felt a pang of guilt, then quickly squelched that guilt with the rationalization that every other time he had entered a bathroom and the handicapped stall had been occupied, it had not been occupied by a handicapped man. With a sense of true contentedness, he pulled down his pants, sat down on the toilet, and experienced a sensation he imagined was much like the one a bathtub might get when the plug is pulled from its drain. As Howard continued to relieve himself, he heard the sound of the door to the bathroom swing open followed by a familiar sound which he couldn't put his finger on. There were no footsteps, he realized, only this sound. It was like rubber rolling over a sticky floor. A look of horror began to stretch itself across Howard's face as he realized that it was the sound of a wheelchair.

Everyone was there for Perry. The party was in his honor. They wanted him to perform. "Sing! Sing! Sing!" they chanted. A sort of stage was constructed, hastily, from the coffee table and the nightstand, and he was thrust on top of it.

There was a microphone. He grabbed it, spun around so his back faced the crowd, and, before hitting the first note, took a deep breath.

Now, of course, Perry probably didn't *really* turn into a R&B singer. Sometimes he'd wake up and find his apartment totally and inexplicably trashed, sure, but there was no proof he had undergone some magnificent transformation the night before. It was just *one* explanation for what had happened.

In reality, and perhaps coincidentally, Perry wasn't anything like a R&B singer. He was twenty-four and beginning to lose his hair. He was shy, spoke clumsily, had unkempt fingernail cuticles, and, no matter what, clothes always fit him awkwardly. Almost all of his meals were initially frozen and ultimately microwaved. He had no guy friends, and his girlfriend of three years, Marie, mostly controlled their relationship. They only ever slept at her place, and she never let him touch her thighs when they made love. No, Perry was nothing like a R&B singer.

Perry never told Marie that, on the nights he slept alone, he would sometimes wake up the next morning and find everything inexplicably trashed. It was something mysterious and personal, and he had decided, until he better understood what it meant, she should be left in the dark.

Late one night, during the hottest stretch of summer, they both lay in her bed.

"I feel like we're growing apart," Marie said quietly. She had the sheets pulled up to her chin. The air conditioner was turned up full blast, and with the ceiling fan going, too, it was unnaturally cold in her bedroom.

"Growing apart?" Perry asked.

During the brief silence that followed, he began to reflect on what she had said. *Shrinking* would probably be a more accurate description, he decided.

"I'm not sure whether or not I know you anymore." She lay her head back on the pillow and half closed her eyes.

Perry didn't say anything. What was there to say?

Truth be told, this is what he was thinking: no sex tonight.

But, please, try not to hold it against him. It had been a long time, and before he realized his mind was wandering,

she had already fallen asleep.

Unable to sleep himself, Perry tip-toed to her bookshelf and, from the glow of his cell phone, perused the selection. Marie wasn't much of a reader—just books from literature classes she had taken in college and a few fashion magazines. After some deliberation, he settled on a collection of English Renaissance poetry and brought it with him to the little table in the kitchen.

As he stumbled over the overly complex verse, Perry tried imagining himself a Renaissance poet: flamboyant accent, long curly hair, frilly collar, maybe a sword. Were Renaissance poets the center-of-attention at extravagant royal court dinners, with a line of mistresses waiting for a moment alone with them? He wasn't sure. The scene never fully materialized in his mind.

By the time Perry got out of bed the next day, it was half past noon. Marie was gone. She worked, incredibly early in the morning, at the front desk of an office building downtown. Perry, in between jobs, brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. Then he called his mom.

"Did I ever sleep walk when I was a little kid?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "You did have a problem wetting the bed though. Remember?" She laughed.

Slightly embarrassed, Perry said, "Thanks, Mom," and hung up before she had the chance to ask him how things had been going lately.

From the contents of Marie's fridge, he made a sandwich (smoked turkey, sprouts, chipotle mayonaisse) and heated up a second cup of coffee in the microwave. The summer sun was burning through the windows. Perry ate the sandwich.

After lunch, he stayed in the kitchen. There was nothing else to do.

He had investigated, examined, and philosophized. But the more he had tried to discover the truth about what had been, sometimes, happening to his apartment, the more muddled it all became. Really. He was no detective.

The police didn't believe his story. His neighbors, after taking a step back from him, excused themselves, and had since given him sideways looks when they passed in the street. "So your place has been periodically, completely trashed: furnishings destroyed, record collection rearranged, dirty dishes left in the sink (they didn't mention the broken glass under the rug, or the cigarette butts crushed into the carpet, or the empty toilet paper roll left on the dispenser with a new roll strewn sloppily on top of it). But you haven't

heard or seen anyone—you've never even woken up?"

For proof, Perry had tried setting up a video camera and leaving it in the living room, but it never caught anything. Instead, the kitchen got trashed. He bought another camera for the kitchen, but then the bathroom got trashed. He emptied his savings account and bought a third camera for the bathroom, then Marie—one night she picked him up for a date—saw it. "I won't even ask," she said, and they went out for dinner.

Perry was still at the kitchen table when Marie got home, kicking off her heels, smiling, early from work. It hadn't occurred to him before: It was Friday.

"You should move in with me," she said, still smiling. She was wearing gold earrings he had never noticed before.

"Move in?"

"Yeah. It makes sense. You'll save money on rent. When was the last time you slept there anyway?" she asked, obviously attaching a different meaning to it than he did. "And it'll bring us closer together."

Perry said, "Okay," without much hesitation. "Sure, let's do it."

Marie jumped into his arms, cooed in his ears, and wrapped her legs around his waist. She kissed him.

But later that night Perry was sitting up in bed while she slept. Probably because of a bad dream, or because the fan wasn't turned on and it was stuffy, she kicked off the sheets. Now she stretched out on her side facing him. She was wearing low-cut cotton panties and a thin white t-shirt. She still had on the earrings from before, too, and, because of the reflection of moon light, they seemed to illuminate her entire body. Perry could make out the outline of her nipples in acute detail. Really. It had been a *long* time.

Anxious, regretful, and partially erect, he got out of bed and dressed.

A cool rain fell on the hot asphalt as Perry walked the mile or so back to his apartment. He was reminded of the sound a pan makes when you run it under the faucet after frying an egg. Marie said it was bad for the pan, the rapid change from hot to cold. The molecules went into shock and fused together. That's why all of his pans were warped and had loose handles. As he walked through the rain, that is what he was thinking about.

Yes, he was planning on leaving her.

That is, until he got to his apartment, went to the kitchen (he was craving a fried egg) and discovered not only did he not have any eggs or any butter, but his pans were a lot

worse off than he remembered (yes, the handles had fallen off). Had they always been this bad, or had they just recently been destroyed? Not only that, his entire place was a lot worse off than he remembered. It was so bad that performing even the most basic of tasks, or enjoying the simplest of pleasures, was impossible. Really. His silverware, toaster oven, sofa and adjoining abdomen. His dresser, desk, bath towels, pencil and toothbrush holders. They were all cheap and mismatched and, increasingly, trashed. Really. Marie had nicer, functional, color-coordinated versions of all of them.

At that moment, Perry decided to throw everything in his apartment away and, really, move in with Marie.

The sun was rising, and the alley was overflowing with boxes and garbage bags stuffed with Perry's stuff. Sitting on the floor of his emptied apartment, Perry almost felt like he himself had been emptied. But then he reconsidered and decided it was ludicrous to be so attached to one's physical possessions (especially when one's physical possessions left so much to be desired).

At least, finally, he'd be able to sleep. Even if, somehow, he transformed into a R&B singer over night, or a Renaissance poet for that matter, there was nothing left of his apartment to trash. Also, he felt, the chances of such a transformation occurring once he lived at Marie's was very unlikely. ■

iii You Get the Best of My Love Nate Waggoner

In the living room of a three-story A-frame house, built 1995, recycled wood-chip-wood and vinyl siding, virtually indistinguishable from the other houses in the labyrinthine neighborhood in which it stood (on Elder Spruce Ct., to be exact, parallel to Elder Ct., tangential to Spruce Dr.), except by shade and save for the backyard, which grew patches of grass in uneven clumps next to inexplicably disturbed dirt, chicken wire, an amateurishly-built shack, attempted gardens of dead roses, lounged thirteen-year-old Destiny Jefferson and seventeen-year-old Virginia Lovelock, on a leather couch, situated in front of a teevee. The walls of the room had wood paneling, and there was no carpet on the floor. The teevee was set, as it had been for the past three days, to news reports about Virginia's recent disappearance.

Between the teevee and the girls stood a glass table with a copy of the Bible: New International Version, and a Star Trek: The Next Generation VHS box set resting atop it. There is Jesus shit all over the walls, some holographic, and some miscellaneous not-too-offensive-smelling garbage around the corners of the room.

Destiny wears form-fitting yellow shorts and a tank top. Virginia still wears her uncomfortable work clothes from three days ago, and has just recently taken to donning a large flannel jacket she found draped over a chair in the room.

The room is locked from the outside. Occasionally the door will open just slightly, still latched, and a hand will place two meals inside the room, usually some McDonald's. The hand has also deposited a few changes of clothes. Destiny has taken the opportunity to wear them, making Virginia close her eyes when she changes, but Virginia has scarcely examined the clothes. This element of anonymous hospitality has, however, made Virginia associate her abductor with the Beast from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* [1991]. Destiny knows better.

Destiny had kissed two boys in her life and had intercourse with one, the latter she did not kiss and whose name was Ray. He was her cousin's boy out of Philly, and had come to visit once last fall, and apparently decided he was trying to fuck Destiny. She put up little resistance, and the experience was something like what she had expected—painful at first, but sort of sublime overall, in retrospect, confusing and scary but not wholly unpleasant, she guesses because it was in her room and the dusk was especially temperate and blue, and at a certain point it occurred to her that Ray was maybe as scared as she was. Ray had come in her and mumbled something afterwards, seeming slightly disappointed. The two had spoken a few congenial, if formal and meaningless, times since. She had no plans to fuck anyone again until marriage.

On their refrigerator at home, Destiny's Moms, with her infinite penchant for tacky commemoration, had hung a home-printed 8 1/2" x 11" glossy photograph of Destiny, with differently-lit flowers of an impossible size MS-painted over her, all too stretched out with the pixels too big and shit. Clipped-out photocopied Bible passages and plastic Sesame Street characters with the round flat magnets in their back scattered to the sides of the front of the fridge to make room for Destiny's picture, like townsfolk from a monster.

Virginia had slept with twelve guys in the past three years. Her first boyfriend was thirty-two. She once gave her

friend an H.J. on the bus on the way back from an eighth-grade field trip. That friend turned gay just recently.

On Virginia's refrigerator in her apartment is a magnet with a typical happy 1950's patriarch and adjacent letters in quotes which read, "I'm here for the blowjob!" a paper from Central Virginia Community College on feminism in the *Twilight* [2005-8] series she got a B on, a recipe for chicken pot pie printed off the internet, a magnetic ribbon that reads, "Save the Ta-Tas!" a grinning cartoon bunny with a malevolent word balloon, and a picture, cut out from a magazine, of Barack Obama shirtless, emerging from the water.

"Man, if fuckin' Rudy from the damn Cosby kids went missing, that shit'd be on teevee," Destiny ejaculates after some time of silence.

"Or even that bitch Olivia, remember?" Virginia laughs. This comment sends Destiny into a fit of what could only be called bitter giggling, doubled over on the sofa.

Virginia's mom is on the teevee, her head floating in one of three boxes that share the screen. The other two heads are those of the show's host and the Billy-Crystal, VA Chief of Police, Randy Monroe.

"Where's the rest of the force? How many people do you have on the case?"

"We have about a quarter of the force working—"

"Where's everybody else? What are they doing? WHY HAVEN'T YOU FOUND MY BABY GIRL?" Mrs. Lovelock's voice cracks and, as if on cue, a single drop of violet begins barreling down her right cheek, eroding all foundation in its wake.

"Ma'am, it's unprecedented in this town to have an entire police force looking for a single girl."

"TWO GIRLS, GOD DAMMIT." Destiny shouts at the screen. She smirks but her eyes are a little red.

"I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is, ma'am. Just tonight—lemme finish, please. Just tonight while I've been entertaining you fine folks we've had, lemme just look at my BlackBerry here, we've had two break-ins—"

"Well maybe—"

"Two break-ins, several reports of domestic abuse, and a rash of mailbox-desecrations."

"Well maybe you should spend less time on your *BlackBerry*, officer, and more time looking for my BABY GIRL." Mrs. Lovelock leans back smugly and brings her right hand to her face, as if awaiting applause from some invisible audience.

Virginia stretches out feline against the couch, the buttons of her white shirt tugging against the holes. She gives

a lop-sided grin and sniffs. "My mom kicked me out of the house about a year ago," she says.

Destiny, who is very obviously crying now, chuckles.

Out back in the shed, the Beast is bellowing in his meandering baritone and accompanying himself on a Casio 425C. He is bald, with a long, nappy beard of dark brown and grey. Behind him is a huge stack of demo tapes that he has recorded. Steam escapes his mouth as he sings, like a physical realization of the maximum reverb on the P.A. that amplifies his voice. Rain comes down in small drops all around, syncopated with the horizontal staccato jangle of the keyboard. The night seems to billow up and around in purple plumes. A pre-recorded track of drum and fairly amelodic bass plays a simple 3/4, and a 4-track records the supplemental music, like think of the Boss's "Drive All Night" for instance, only the keyboard is set to emit a shrill organish clatter, like the breaking of stained glass, the salt-shaker jinglebell sound as from a teevee Christmas special like the artificial snowflakes that fall so too do the notes and the insignificant raindrops and his voice transcending it all like some velveteen wraith.

You

I'll be your prince [drum fill, one measure]

Toniiiiight

I walk alone

He stops playing, turns off the rhythm track, sits down. He keeps the microphone close and the 4-track on RECORD.

Who knows it or not. Ought to. I am me, creator. *This* creator of *this* don't worry. A reflection. An Enterprise of thought and mouth. Make music of it all. That's the PROBLEM. Circuitous. I gotta know you, I got to know you, I had a little baby, I know, mm-mm, what. C# lightning times. Crimes. Orphans. Crumbling. Over and over. There will always be they there and me here and the teevee. Whatever bodies or heads. Changes of organs. Processed from there to here. At least I intend to marry. At least I care about both. I'm not going to disregard the one and get the other one—defiled! All over! Parallel. Perpendicular. I think that this is hugely important, brothers.

I do not engage in pornography like they do. Don't you know I'm only doing what you're doing, you're all doing. I transform. I can change. I am all around me. Inside, all over, it's you, it's me, it's God, in the water there's Drano, there's amoxicillin, liquid nitrite, acetaminophen, methylchloroisothiazolinone, methylisothiazolinone, there's little babies, there's stars, God will punish 'em, I will, I will.

“So—what do you think he wants from us?” Virginia ventures.

“I hope it ain’t the same thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just before he came and got you, he told me he needed brides, and he was going to go find a woman for himself.”

“And you don’t think you’d be one of those brides.”

“He’s my *dad*.”

“...”

On screen, the anchorwoman is giving a lurid description of what could well be happening to Virginia right now locked away in the sex dungeon of some depraved fiend, some pervert. “This innocent girl,” she reiterates, “just out of high school...” A photo of Virginia in which she is coyly, drunkenly tilting her head away from the camera, pouting, materializes on the screen, the city a black and tan blur behind her. Rescue me, the girl in the photo now seems to say, I only have eyes for you the viewer, my savior, and then you can do whatever you want with me. An equally drunk female friend moving towards Virginia in a suggestive embrace has been cropped out, along with the red plastic cup in Virginia’s hand.

“Well it must be nice to be gettin’ all this attention.”

Virginia turns her head slowly in disbelief at Destiny’s remark.

“It must be nice to not have to worry about getting raped!”

Both girls turn away from each other, fetal.

Something goes wrong and the program pauses abruptly before cutting to commercial, lingering on a still frame of the anchorwoman’s face, in between the “a” and the “c” in “be right back.” Her head is tilted down and so her eyes look slightly upwards at the camera. Her mouth hangs open like that of a hungry animal. A shadow has formed across the right half of her face and her canines are visible. From outside, the Beast strums a minor chord, plaintive but insistent. In the reflection of the teevee, the girls can see outside, into the shed. Two neon rectangles of mistake, gleaming fuzzy like linen with sunlight coming through, one green and horizontal, one mauve and vertical hang above and in front of, respectively, the anchorwoman’s face for the moment she is frozen like that. A few other video blotches, less discernible shapes, distort the image as well, especially in her hair and in the studio around her. As soon as this image goes away, it is replaced by letters moving across blackness, then lights, then a woman’s face, turning, appearing, disappear-

makes less sense than saying slow and agonizing deaths are part of God’s plan, but where does that leave you? Are you an atheist?

Ricky: Well, I didn’t say that either, I may not believe in God, but I believe in *Something* you know? Something is out there, there has to be, some sort of energy or something.

Ronnie: So you don’t believe in God, but you believe in Something? But if you believe that everything happens for a reason, then this Something you claim to believe in is still an awful lot like God, no?

Ricky: How so?

Ronnie: Well, if nothing else, this Something still has to be something conscious and something which creates intentionally, that is, something which creates with an end in mind, around which a plan is then created for the sake of achieving it. So if Andre really was supposed to lie there dying for hours on end, then there was a reason why that happened, and if there’s a reason, then the Something which you claim to believe in was still the creator of the plan in which his death played some role.

Ricky: Ok, fine. For the sake of argument, say that you’re right. What’s so bad about that anyway?

Ronnie: Well, you might have me there, but from my perspective, I think an equally illuminating question is: What’s so good about that?

Ricky: Now I really don’t know what you’re talking about.

Ronnie: What I’m saying is that it’s important to question what we have to gain by stipulating metaphysical claims such as the one you’re making. You say there’s Something out there, that there even has to be, but why? Is it possible that there ‘has to be’ something out there simply so that we don’t go insane? Doesn’t it worry you that people stipulate the existence of this Something much the same way they do with God, namely to ensure meaningfulness for themselves? Don’t you worry that believing in this Something is but living in the shadow of God, simply not being able to let go of the need for rock solid foundations? Not being able to handle living without a stable footing in which meaning and purpose are rooted?

ing, all accompanied by V/O: Flawless skin? Old news. 100% poreless perfection has arrived. New Dream Liquid Mousse Foundation from Maybelline New York. A new liquid sensation that’s air whipped for 100% poreless perfection. (*Prove it!*)

Destiny and Virginia do not look at each other, but Destiny’s hand grabs hold of Virginia’s.

Others sink and exaggerate pores. Our foundation cushions as it blends. Pores vanish, skin looks smoother, perfect! (Like it’s been airbrushed.) Go beyond flawless to 100% poreless perfection. New Dream Liquid Mousse Foundation. Maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s Maybelline. ■

IV. An Enquiry Concerning Purpose: Living Beyond “Supposed to Happen” Ryan Grumberg

The town of Whittington is a town like they don’t make towns anymore. Where everybody really does know your name, and where you get your meat from the butcher, whose name, for what it’s worth, is Karl. The best part about the worst day in Whittington’s recent history, is that although Andre, the beekeeper, died in a horrific work related accident, everybody is so close that the whole town gathered at Andre’s mother’s house, where everyone consoled her and helped to make arrangements for his funeral. Three days later, the town gathered again, this time to lay Andre to rest. Among those in attendance were Ronnie, the town’s bike mechanic, and Ricky, the clerk of the local health food store. Neither were interested in the somber nature of a funeral, so the two kept each other busy by wondering how Andre, one of the town’s kindest citizens, could have suffered such a terrible fate. For it wasn’t when Andre slipped and hit his head on the corner of one of the hives that he actually died, but rather, after having been immobilized, the unimaginable onslaught of hundreds of bee stings, after many agonizing hours, caused his muscles to breakdown and his kidneys to fail.



Ricky: Man, I’ve never even been stung by a bee, can you imagine that being what does you in, dying from hundreds of bee stings?

Ricky: Ok, slow down man, what makes you so sure there isn’t Something out there. You seem to be saying that I can’t get the existence of this Something for free, but you can’t just waltz in here and be granted its non-existence for free either.

Ronnie: Absolutely. You’re right about there being no free lunches, but it’s tough for you to deny that you don’t have more to gain from your postulate than I do mine. Cause if you’re right, you get everything! You get the reassurance that there is a reason for everything, that there is absolute meaning, and that you’re not constantly struggling for nothing in everything you do.

Ricky: But what effect does that have on truth?

Ronnie: Well, fine, none necessarily, but my point is that we aren’t unbiased observers here. Humans have always longed for psychological reassurance of purpose in their lives, a foundation of sorts, an answer to the question of why we exist, and the Something in which you believe fills this need, and, to me at least, it seems that’s at least a strike against its likelihood, no?

Ricky: Yea, well, either way you’re two strikes short.

Ronnie: Sure, but what about the fact that this is all so human, and all too human at that!

Ricky: You’re such an asshole.

Ronnie: Well, yea, but what I was getting ready to say is that your divine Something is an awful lot like us, a conscious being who thinks, creates, and plans, something which has goals, and which employs certain means, like Andre’s prolonged death, to achieve them. Doesn’t the fact that the universe’s almighty purpose-giving entity resembles us so much make it seem even more created?

Ricky: Not necessarily.

Ronnie: Fine, not necessarily, but probably. Cause even if there were Something out there, what are the odds that it would have traits so similar to our own, traits so similar to but one animal that happens to inhabit the pale blue dot otherwise known as Earth? Are we so significant that the underlying creating force of the universe would be so much like us? Or is it more likely to attribute this similar-

Ronnie: I don’t think anybody can really. Dying a slow death always used to be one of my biggest fears.

Ricky: Well, at least it’s over now, and although I’m really going to miss Andre, I take refuge in the fact that I know this was somehow *supposed* to happen.

Ronnie: Supposed to happen?

Ricky: Sure.

Ronnie: What do you mean?

Ricky: I mean, you know, kinda like everything happens for a reason, that although it might not make sense to us, Andre wouldn’t have had to go through that for nothing.

Ronnie: So what decides what’s supposed to happen then?

Ricky: Now I don’t know what *you* mean.

Ronnie: Well, I mean, ‘supposed to happen’ seems to imply some sort of preconceived plan, right? So that some event, in this case Andre’s death, only happens if it’s part of that plan. Isn’t that what it means for something to happen because it’s ‘supposed to happen?’ Nothing random ever happens because it’s ‘supposed to,’ right? Because random is sort of the opposite of ‘supposed to?’

Ricky: Yea, I guess that sounds right.

Ronnie: Ok, so what I’m asking then is what the directing force of the plan which brought about Andre’s death is, in other words, what created the plan in which Andre’s slow death was an integral part?

Ricky: What *created* the plan?

Ronnie: Yea, have you ever heard of a plan that doesn’t have a creator? Every plan has some end in sight, some specific goal that everything contained therein is aiming at, a reason, no? Where else would that come from?

Ricky: I don’t know what you’re getting at man, cause it sounds like you want me to say that God is behind this, but I don’t believe in God, so you’ve got nothing.

Ronnie: Ok, well, that’s good at least, because nothing

ity to the fact that we project ourselves and our own attributes onto that which we study and observe?

Ricky: You’re being too cynical, isn’t it possible that we, as the proverbial plants of the universe, simply still have remnants of the originating seed in us?

Ronnie: Of course it’s possible, and believe me when I say I don’t claim to be infallible here, but I think it’s necessary to call into question any such metaphysical meta-narrative in which the universe’s mysteries all get so neatly dealt with. After all, the universe doesn’t owe us any favors, and thus there need not be some rationally attainable answer to the question of ‘why’ ingrained into it. The universe doesn’t need something more, but we so often do. After all, we’re the meaning-giving, dot-connecting beings here, and because of that it seems that no matter what pile of meaningless coincidences we’re handed, that we’d still come out with some unifying ‘reason’ behind it.

Ricky: I just don’t know why you’re so opposed to the existence of something more. Your outlook seems so cold.

Ronnie: I’m not opposed to the idea as such, I just don’t think it’s true. But beyond that, I don’t think what you’re saying is totally fair either. It’s assumed that because I don’t think there is any ultimate purpose in the universe, that I’m the one who is somehow unromantic. But that couldn’t be further from the truth! Einstein once said there are but two ways to live your life, to believe that everything is a miracle, or to believe that nothing is. But if everything happens for a reason, if everything that happens is supposed to happen because it was part of our creator’s plan, then there can be no miracles! However if there is no guiding force, and if everything that happens is a mere result of rolling the cosmic dice, then everything is a miracle!

Ricky: I guess I never thought of it that way.

Ronnie: That’s why having an explanation for everything is a double-edged sword, it’s somehow reassuring, but it’s wholly demystifying as well, to have an answer to the question of ‘why’ might make us feel safe, but it puts us squarely into the nothing’s-a-miracle camp, and what could be less romantic than that! If I grant you the existence of your Something, then my existence and my life’s events were all presumably contained in the blueprint which this Something had for the world before it was created. In other words, if Andre’s death was ‘supposed to happen,’ then it

was never not going to happen, and for all eternity that's how it had to happen. In a world without anything more, with no God, no Something, or any other meaning giving creative force, chance plays a real role, and though that may seem scary, there can be no miracles without chance.

Ricky: Ok, fine, but what makes you so sure chance can't play a role in the universe even if it is created?

Ronnie: Well, yea, that's certainly a fair question, but remember we're talking about events that are 'supposed to happen,' so while it seems fair to grant that God, Something, or anything else could create a world in which chance is real, it seems 'supposed to happen' has to get tossed as a result, and after all, that's what we've been talking about from the start. Not to mention the fact that if 'supposed to happen' gets tossed, the reassurance of meaning you seek probably gets tossed too.

Ricky: Why's that?

Ronnie: Well, because chance is opposed to reason, if something happens by chance, it makes no sense to say that it happened for a reason, and if nothing happens for a reason, then we get no reassurance from knowing that we're part of something bigger.

Ricky: But doesn't that scare the shit out of you! Why the fuck are you so nonchalant about all this? Don't you want to know that we're not all doing what we do for nothing, that the struggle of life is the price to pay for something more, whatever it may be, and that the horrible things which happen are justified and offset by the fact that it was part of a greater picture?

Ronnie: Well, you see, that's part of the beauty of letting it all go. When you're first faced with the death of God, you freak out, and you think there's no reason left to live, because there's no reason at all, but then you start to laugh, first at the fact that you ever thought God was what was keeping your life together in the first place, but then at everything else. When God goes, you realize that you can laugh at all the things you couldn't laugh at before, a new found feeling of lightheartedness sets in, and when you realize that it doesn't matter if you die right now or in 80 years, you laugh in the face of death too...†

† In that strange way in which these things happen, it wasn't a second later when, out of a seemingly clear sky, Whittington was hit with its second 'tragedy' in but a few days. If Ronnie was serious about what he preached, then that single lightning bolt was sure going to test his worth. Of course we'll never know exactly why he went right then and right there, not to mention like *that*, however he did manage to leave those attending the first funeral with a few last words, spoken up from what was soon to be his smoldering corpse, namely a shout out to Michel Poiccard.

V. The Other Side Amaka Anikwe

When I opened my eyes, I was back in my old bedroom, crammed into a twin bed. The walls were still lined with posters of early eighties singers. In many of them, Michael was wearing a white suit against a dark background or red suits with a white glove. I felt around. I still had my pudgy thirty-two-year-old body that had been through a marriage, two pregnancies, and the drinking that came soon after. My head was killing me, but when a sweet smell drifted into the room, I got up and followed my stomach to the kitchen.

I entered to see my mother turn from the open oven and set a tray of fresh blueberry muffins on the counter to cool.

"Oh, there you are. I was wondering when you would get here," she said. She was wearing her favorite bright yellow sun dress and matching pearls. She looked exactly the same as before, but there was something odd about how words came out of her mouth. And something else: She was wearing hospital shoes that were soiled with dirt.

"I've been baking all week waiting for you to show up and now—" she came across the room and gave me a hug.

"I don't understand," I said.

"What's there to understand. You got sick last week, and now you're here." She reached for a muffin and passed it to me.

"Where's here?" I asked, looking around the kitchen at the cracked paint and peeling linoleum tiles. As I chewed on the muffin, I tried to decide whether I was in heaven or hell.

"I'm not sure really... It's a lot like there, only different."

My head was getting numb. I walked to the pantry where she kept the Grey Goose. I opened the doors only to be greeted by empty shelves.

"Oh, there's no alcohol here; there's no alcohol anywhere," she said.

miss that. I took a running head start, jumped over a few pipes, and leaped off the roof. As I made my way down, the windows of the surrounding buildings started to blend into long horizontal lines leading me to my destination. Before I hit the pavement, everything went black.

The first noise I heard was the sound of something crunching. I turned over on the sidewalk to see Paul staring down at me, eating my apple.

"If you're done trying to re-kill yourself, I think it's time I took you home."

"How long was I out?" I asked.

"I'd say about five seconds."

I got up slowly, leaning against the side of the building. Everything ached.

"Why didn't it work? I had a life," I said.

"We all did."

When we got back, my mother was in the living room watching TV. On the screen was the image of a little boy. He had curly hair and was lying sideways on a couch. There was a remote in his hand. Tears came into my eyes as I stared at my son.

"How?"

"That's the other thing about this place: Whenever there's a TV on over there, we can see them here," Paul said. "There's no sound, but it's something."

"Poor boy's been like that for a week now. That's how I knew you were coming; he never did anything without you," my mother said.

I sunk down next to her and watched him until he fell asleep. ■

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"I am in hell."

"Watch your language," she said, passing me a glass of water. "Now drink up. You don't want to be late on your first day back."

"Where am I going?"

"To work, of course."

"Work?" I almost laughed the words out. I turned from the pantry. "I'm not...I mean, I'm just. Look, I'm sorry Mom, but I can't stay. I have to get back."

"Honey, you can't go back," she said gently. A chill ran through me. I grabbed my chest for reassurance, but there was no pulse.

"Now go upstairs and get ready."

"Why would I go to work?"

"Well, what else are you going to do?"

I walked down the street clutching the lunch she had packed for me. I wanted to go home. I needed to be back in the world where I was on the fast track to becoming the youngest junior executive on the board. There was going to be a party thrown in my honor, and I was getting a plaque. But this place, it was odd. I mean, it seemed the same; it had a sun and a nine to five workday, but I soon discovered that sounds were on a five second time delay. I kept hearing the echoes of previous footsteps and the hum of cars slightly after they had passed.

At my job, I was stuck doing entry-level work. Everyone who had once died, and thereby paved the way for me to move up, was back performing their old jobs with the grace and ease of someone who had never left. I sat behind the receptionist booth and stared out, imagining the world I had been so close to conquering. I had to find a way out.

I spent my lunch sitting in one of the many outdoor restaurants that circled the park. Across from me was Paul Thompson, a guy I spent most of my middle school years daydreaming about.

"So, I called your mom this morning and she told me what happened. Tough break. I figured the least I could do was take you out to lunch," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I opened my paper bag and removed a sandwich and an apple.

"Yeah, well, your mom's been great. When I got here about a year ago, she was the first person I talked to. We would sit for hours, and I would describe the details of her funeral to her; Oh, she really liked the floral arrangement you picked out," he said, sounding as cheerful as ever.

"I didn't know you died."

Contributors

Amaka Anikwe is watching Star Trek for the third time in 24 hours.

Christopher J. Cassetta is currently worrying about weather he uses his semicolons correctly; or not. He hates desserts and loves oceans.

Ryan Grumberg is questioning what color his shirts are when the closet door is closed.

Nicholas Jackson would rather be rich than famous.

Nate Waggoner will invariably forget about a piece of food he bought if he leaves it in the crisper. He loves Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

Colophon

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