



REVELATORPRESS

chapbook no.001



**LINE
JESTER
AND OTHER STORIES**

Michael Duncan
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THE JESTER
AND OTHER STORIES

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ACT WITHOUT WORDS

As a Backdrop, a large screen lit with a blue glow.

The Stage is a shabby apartment, with a tattered recliner, rabbit-eared television, and takeout boxes, old books and papers scattered over the coffee table and everywhere else.

D. paints, wearing a paint-spattered coat over his dirty t-shirt. Fingerless gloves. Easel's back is facing audience. D. stares at screen, thinks, paints furiously.

Candles and oil lamps around the apartment provide light and warmth to D.

Doorbell. (Buzzer type)

D. opens door stage left, R. enters, just as dirty as D. Clearly friends, they shake hands and get backgammon board out from under trash on coffee table. They smile and play, gesturing as in friendly conversation.

R. points at easel. D. nods, rises, pulls canvas off, showing to R. Canvas is solid blue, the same color as Backdrop. D. gestures to his eyes, to the screen, to the painting. Pleased with his breakthrough. R. seems excited as well. R. claps. D. returns painting to easel.

They finish their game. They shake hands in friendly way. R. gestures at Backdrop and at painting, pointing at his head, marveling at the idea. R. exits.

D. returns to easel, touches it up. Smiles. Yawns, stretches, sits on tattered recliner. Eats noodles from takeout box. Turns on television, returns to seat.

R. is on the television, as we have just seen him, poorly dressed. Holding a solid blue painting. D. pauses, noodles hanging from open mouth. Spit take. R. shows painting proudly. Oprah claps. R. shows painting proudly. Conan claps. Wolf Blitzer speaks. R. shows painting.

D. furious, throws food, turns off television. Takes blue canvas off easel, throws it to the ground among piles of trash. Holds head in hands, kicks impotently at coffee table.

While D. broods, Backdrop turns from blue to red.

D. looks up. Sees Backdrop, is excited, springs to feet, puts on painting coat, paints frantically.

Doorbell.

D. goes to door, opens it.

R. enters, now in tuxedo, slicked back hair, with walking stick. D. gives him the finger. R. shrugs. D. gives him the finger with both hands. R. points at the easel. Offers money from pocket of tuxedo. D. gives whole series of offensive gestures.

R. approaches easel, D. tries to hold him back. They fight. R. is much stronger, knocks down D. R. pulls painting from easel. Painting is solid red canvas.

R. leaves, throwing money onto D's prone body as he passes.

D. awakens. Gathers money. Replaces painting on easel. Rubs head, turns on television.

Same tape as before, only R. showing a red painting. More television hosts. D. weeps further.

As D. weeps, Backdrop turns back from red to blue.

D. sees this. Returns to weeping. Temper tantrum, destruction of meager possessions. Then idea.

D. hurries over to easel, paints.

Doorbell.

D. answers door.

R. enters, now with top hat, smoking pipe. R. points at easel. D. hurries over, grabs painting, eagerly shows it to R.

Painting giant block letters. 'FUCK YOU'

D. gives R. the finger. R. has his dignity, bows and leaves. D. pumps his fist in victory, leaps about.

D. tires and sits. Begins to eat noodles. Turns on television.

R. on television. Shows Oprah, Conan, etc. 'FUCK YOU' painting. Even happier reactions from hosts. Standing ovations from audiences, weeping with joy.

D. stands. Reactionless. Television continues in an unending loop. D. walks over to easel, gently folds it up. Folds and hangs up painting coat. Sits back down. Watches television, eats noodles.

Doorbell.

Doorbell.

Doorbell.

CURTAIN

LINE JESTER

It was the year the trees in the mall kept dying. Small trees, only about eight feet high, they were regularly spaced with one before every fourth storefront, and squares of glass above supplied them with the necessary sunlight. The trees had been there as long as anyone could remember and had always required only minimal care, until they started dropping their leaves across the hallway. When it was clear that they were beyond recovery, they were sawed up, hauled out, and replaced by trees of the same size. The replacements had shown the same problems, and the mall staff now spent their days and nights cutting down trees, studying soil samples, searching for destructive bugs or parasites.

From the clothing store where I worked as a line jester, the chainsaws could nearly always be heard revving up, grinding through the trees, and falling briefly silent. I had incorporated into my act a bit where I mimicked their sounds, carrying on a conversation with the chainsaws outside the store. It was a performance that went over well with the more frustrated customers who enjoyed seeing their irritant acknowledged.

I had always used mimicry and mime as the base of my entertaining, simply because those were what I was best at, but to keep things fresh for both the customers and myself, I was spending my lunch breaks learning to juggle. The guitarist would come up and tap me on the shoulder and I would backflip away from those in line as they applauded my efforts. Once off the sales floor, I would go through one of the hidden doors that led to the cinderblock hallways that make up the bowels of the mall. The mall employees perpetually scurried to and fro, pushing carts full of

goods one direction and trash another, as I leaned against the wall and tossed handkerchiefs to perfect my technique.

On that day, I should have taken as a bad omen the glass box full of captured birds that they carried past. I assumed that the health of the trees was the reason for the birds' removal. The slow fall of the handkerchiefs allowed me to stare at the coffin-sized box filled with small chickadees. The birds, too many for the box, flew wildly into its glass walls and each other. There were several motionless on the bottom and I could not determine whether they were dead or just stunned.

I shoved the handkerchiefs into my pocket and walked back to the store. As I was approaching the sales floor, one of the cashiers handed me an envelope. All corporate correspondence was done anonymously through letters, so that any appearance of favoritism was avoided. None of the workers knew exactly who made the decisions about the operation of the store. I opened the letter, the first I had received since my earliest days in the store, and read:

Your work as a line jester has been much appreciated. We have employees disguised as customers, and they have always reported that your work was fair to good, and that the customers in your line are generally entertained and thus happier with their shopping experience. That said, we as a corporation have decided that the shopping experience is the most important thing we offer, more important even than the clothing, and thus must be perfected. This can partially be accomplished by the addition of more line jesters. We would like to stress that this is by no means a step toward your replacement, though if one line jester offers significantly more entertainment than another, we would be foolish to keep both. We hope that performing with another person will not inhibit your work, which we would like to state again is certainly somewhat above average.

I crumpled the note into a ball and threw it at the recycling bin, but quickly picked it up when it bounced onto the floor. I then stepped out to

my line of customers, where a short, thin man was performing. His dark hair and beard obscured his face. He was pretending that his hand had become possessed by an evil spirit and was out of his control. The hand's attacks and his narrow escapes delighted those in line. They all laughed and gasped at the appropriate times (though he showed no awareness of their reactions), until each customer came to the front of the line, where each would abruptly forget about the entertainment and purchase the clothing.

I wanted my new work environment to remain as pleasant as my old one, so I decided to be magnanimous and politely introduce myself to the new line jester, though I wasn't thrilled about his presence. I approached with my hand extended, and he saw me, though he had not shown any awareness of his surroundings before this. He turned and approached me with his hand also extended, imitating my stride. I began to say, "Hello, I'm . . .," but he, remarkably quickly I might add, echoed my "Hello, I'm . . ." I froze, and he froze, and I said, "Oh, I see," and he said the same thing a half beat behind me. The crowd was snickering and I decided to play along, making a show of being angry and striding away, which of course he did as well. I would turn occasionally and glare, to see him glaring. I have to admit that he was very talented. I had an idea for a suitable conclusion to the act; I raised my finger as if I had thought of something brilliant, and he mimicked my action. I then stood on my hands so that we faced each other upside down. I began to lean in one direction and flail my legs as if I was losing my balance, which of course he did as well, but at the last possible moment, I cartwheeled to my feet as he toppled theatrically to the floor. The applause was thunderous.

Even with the birds gone, the trees continued to die. The chainsaws were still constantly running, and Boris (as I learned the other line jester's name was) and I would often use my chainsaw imitation to entertain, with me playing the employee and Boris the tree that was being felled. We had grown used to working with one another and had developed a rapport that made improvisation both easy and exciting. I am not sure he respected me, however; I occasionally caught him frowning at me if I ac-

knowledgeed the audience or made a pandering joke. For his part, he never seemed focused on anything but the act, and seemed to get no pleasure out of the line's reaction.

One morning, I failed to catch Boris as he was performing a flip, and he fell and struck his head on the ground. The line gasped, but to his credit, Boris instantly rose and staggered about in a comically wild manner, as if it had all been part of the act. Once on break though, Boris rubbed his head and smoked as I leaned back against the hallway wall and began my customary juggling practice. I noticed his pain and apologized. "Boris, I'm sorry about that. I was distracted."

"That is why you can never be great, because you can be distracted."

"Well, that woman was going to drop her child. She was just staring at us with her mouth open. I thought I would have to catch the kid."

"No, you were supposed to catch me. And I didn't see her because I was performing. I don't see anyone, and neither should you."

I have met many line jesters, and they are a high-strung and exaggerating breed. I did not believe that Boris was blind to those in line, but instead of contradicting him, I remained silent. From that point on, though, our unity while performing began to dissipate. Boris became more selfish in his improvisations, leaving me to awkwardly work around his ideas as he collected all the laughs and applause, which he never acknowledged. Any of our acts that involved physical teamwork suffered from his new lack of trust in my support. His arm slightly extended for balance or the quick glance behind him before he fell spoiled the effect of both his fall and my catch.

I noticed the people in line were less responsive to our work, since I was still very aware of their reactions. Boris said to ignore this, and he was a better line jester than I, but I could not pretend that they were not right in front of me. And so I noticed that there was more boredom, more yawns, though I was still in no way prepared for the unthinkable that soon happened. An older woman shook her head as she watched our act, looked at her watch, and left the line, depositing her clothes on a bench as she left the store. This had never happened and I stood agape, while

Boris obliviously continued performing. He even used my sudden lack of movement as a cue, hanging string and handkerchiefs from my body.

In the concrete hallway during lunch, I explained to Boris the gravity of the situation, but he just bared his teeth and laughed. "Perhaps we should work alone again," he told me.

I crouched and ran my fingers through my hair. Surely there would be a note from management on our return from break. My vision began to blur, and in my worry that someone might see me, I realized that the hallway was completely empty instead of filled with mall employees as usual. I was about to comment on this when a single-file line of employees turned the corner, each with a tree over his shoulder. As they headed into the mall, I asked one of them if this was a new breed of tree. "Even better," he replied. "Plastic!" I supposed that this solved the problem, and was surprised that it had not been thought of earlier.

"See, there is no problem that is not fixable," Boris laughed. "The world is changing, improving. I will help you adjust to it. Don't worry, you'll see."

We returned to the sales floor and I was handed the expected note. I assumed it was my dismissal, but Boris took it from me before I could read it. We approached the line, the guitarist left, and we began to perform. First some simple acrobatics as a warm-up, and then Boris halted. I did as well, waiting to see what he was going to do. He assumed an expression of comical outrage, strode up to me, and slapped my face with a glove he pulled from his pocket. "Ladies and gentlemen, a duel," he shouted.

We stepped away from each other, and Boris began to move his arms as if he were warming up with a heavy sword. I did the same. He then turned to me and said, "En garde," theatrically rolling the 'r'. We began to fence with our invisible swords, and I could sense that the audience was entertained.

I'm sure that it looked like very convincing mime work, but it was not. When Boris swung his sword, I put mine up to block and felt a very real jarring in my forearms as the swords collided. He swung and I parried. As I lunged, he spun my sword with his, turning my arm in the pro-

cess. Perhaps I was just putting my all into the performance because of the stress from the note from management, though I checked my hands again to see that there was no sword in them. The line gasped at each attack, and when Boris cut the sleeve of my shirt, they exploded, amazed at the illusion. I was now afraid and fought vigorously, but Boris cut off my other sleeve and sliced my ear, which bled slightly. This amazed the audience even further and they cheered wildly. Even the salespeople had stopped to watch our duel. Finally after several weak lunges at Boris, he parried the sword out of my hands and I felt a tangible weight leave them. He looked me in the eye and pushed his invisible sword into my stomach, to gasps by all. I bled profusely and collapsed, my breaths becoming gurgles. Boris dragged me by the legs back into the hallway, and as we left, the cheers were thunderous, turning into a rhythmic stomping of feet.

Boris left me and returned to the sales floor. I could hear the applause he was receiving; the pain from my wounds was fading. I rested on the concrete, staring up at the fluorescent lights and watching the employees continue to carry in the new plastic trees. I had to admit that they did look real.

An indeterminate time later, Boris returned. He picked me up by the shoulders and leaned me against the wall. Giggling to himself, he put a clean shirt on me and whispered, "That was great. You did much better than I had hoped." I suddenly felt stronger, and Boris added, "Let's go." We walked back to the sales floor, and though I still saw those in line, I could no longer hear their movements or speech; every face was darkened and illegible. Even the chainsaws had stilled. Boris and I began to perform in an exquisite silence.

NAMELESSNESS

Every time the cat did something wrong, my brothers and I would call it by a different name. Our father, who so rarely moved from the stiff wooden chair he sat in that the painted wall faded around the shape of his shadow, would yell himself hoarse about the claw marks on the door-frame. We then let the cat, Joe as he was maybe called that week, outside until evening, when he would come in newly christened as Frank. The cat, orange and commonplace, though certainly identifiable, would be Frank until our father detected a scent of urine; the cat would then go outside again and return as Laurence. We soon forgot the cat's original name and my youngest brother became convinced along with my father that it was a new cat each time. He cried at the loss of Raymond or Charlie but took comfort in our new pet, Tab or Paulie.

Learning was seeping from all of us, not just my youngest brother. We no longer knew state capitals, multiplication tables, or spellings of difficult words. Since our mother's absence, no one ordered us to go to school. We had kept going for a week or a month, but the school day's length and monotony soon deterred us, particularly since there was a new freedom around the house that was more educational than any mimeograph, for good (the best method for cooking eggs) or bad (empty trash bags don't make effective parachutes when jumping off the roof).

We were young enough to intuit the permeability of labels, that the name of something can be both meaningless and all that people see. Thus we spent no energy considering how our mother's absence made us feel; whether we decided we were happy or upset was irrelevant, just a sub-

the kitchen where the bacon was now aflame, but I was quick to cover the pan and no harm was done.

I don't remember when events stopped having an order. It was after our mother left and before the house burned down; the period between those events was jumbled and random even as it happened. We ate when we were hungry and slept when we were tired, whether it was midnight or noon. The past and future ceased to be, leaving just a subsuming present. Since we did not all sleep at night, we stopped using the same beds every time, except for my youngest brother who still used his crib. One would suddenly feel tired and stumble to the nearest unoccupied bed. The months without a sense of how much time had passed and the lack of assigned places caused us to forget our names. We always knew the cat's new name, but its name was calculated and always shifting, which made it easier to remember than our own static names that we did not monitor and thus escaped.

Before, I would take baths regularly just to escape the clamor of the everyday worries of school and family. I would fill the tub with water just warm enough to seem temperatureless when I submerged myself in it. As I had grown several inches in the previous years, I had to curl into a fetal position in order to pull my entire body under the water's surface, where I would lay still, the occasional bubble emerging from my nose, and contemplate the silence as I stared at the dingy white tub. It was the nothingness of the bath that I looked forward to, for I was indifferent to cleanliness. I never took a bath after she left, nor even felt the urge to. The world had become as silent and empty as the tub, even through my brothers' cacophony. We all smelled like rotting fruit, but we never considered it since we only had contact with each other.

The webs around our father multiplied; soon the only part of him not attached to sticky thread was his head that swiveled regularly with his shouting at the cat, at us, even at the weather though he never left his chair. My brothers and I flinched at his screams and kept our distance as we passed, much as we would from a vociferous dog that was chained to a tree. A puddle of sweat had formed under his chair, and every so often

another bead would roll from his forehead, down his bound arm, and splash into the puddle. When in the house, I kept him in the corner of my eye, just in case he suddenly did something besides yell or doze or weep. Unlike some of my brothers, I didn't blame my father for anything. I loved him.

We began to move the explosions inside, where the reverberations made them sound louder and feel more dangerous, thrilling. We blew up plates, shampoo bottles, the vacuum, houseplants, books that we could no longer read, and, in what ended up taking three boxes of firecrackers, the dresser. It was great fun, though there were times that parts of the walls or floor caught fire and had to be doused with water we kept nearby when we destroyed things. There were black scars and debris scattered through the house, and our father would yell, but by now we knew that he would not move, and being so tightly bound to the chair, we were not sure he could.

My brothers became animals, not knowing of any place beyond their field of vision or any time but the present and not caring that they didn't. They began to defecate whenever the urge struck, even occasionally inside, though they would at least move to the corner when going in the house. Our father would scream loudest when this happened, but was easily ignored. Finally, after one of my brothers had shit in the corner and wiped himself with an old magazine, our father began to shout but cut himself off and just sobbed. There must have been a glimmer of human guilt left in my brother, because he took notice. He decided that our father, shackled though he may be, was the last barrier between us and total freedom. He called us into the living room and spoke of this in priestly tones, and my brothers were sent into rapture by his words. He finally suggested that we stop practicing with furniture and blow up our last tie to regulation, childhood, powerlessness.

I cried that they mustn't, look at him, he is broken, and that I would not allow them to do such a thing. Their many hands were on me instantly, and as they forced me out the door, it felt as if each had several powerful arms gripping me. I kicked and screeched, and when they released me,

tried to run back into the house. I heard them moving bookshelves and chairs in front of the door, though not before they threw my youngest brother out too, telling me I should watch him, he was always underfoot. As the windows were painted shut and the front and back door were barricaded, I was impotent to prevent their imminent actions. My youngest brother and I sat under a tree and waited, trying to ignore the sobs of my father and the barbaric laughter of my brothers. Soon there was a profound silence. They must have used the entire stash of fireworks, because the explosion that broke it was enormous. They had clearly either forgotten the water or not prepared enough, because the house was aflame as quickly as a match's head. I put my arm around my brother and we silently watched our home burn down.

When it was done, my brother and I talked and cried for the first time about our mother, and then our father and even our brothers. I told him that we would have to leave, that this part of our life was over, and that we would need names again. What would he like his name to be? He said Buzz, and I said that I chose Michael as my name. We walked toward town and the cat bounded up, and we named him too.

me to join.

“You are poor,” she said. This was true. “You are good at what you do, but not great, not by a long shot. I have created something that is becoming great. You will not be loved for it, for only those who are part of it love it. Some acclaim it, though they don’t love it. You, of course, are too late to even be personally acclaimed. A piece of dust in a sandstorm. But would you rather be lauded for your lonesome and threadbare mediocrity? And will you even achieve that?”

Everything she said was true, but I am a stubborn man. Even as a child I frustrated my parents, banging out a steady rhythm on the hand-cymbals that they had shortsightedly given me for my birthday, not ceasing for days. They claimed, though I have no way of verifying this, that I even continued while asleep, only with a slower tempo. Now the Baroness was making a reasonable case that I should end what I had spent my life doing, and while I clearly saw her point and was tempted by the secure life that she promised, the childish part of me was not willing to stop at anyone’s bidding. I told her this as we finished the main course of wasabi-encrusted salmon on a bed of roasted asparagus and rice pilaf. She understood, and said that I could still come to one of her parties as long as I would stay with her for dessert, talking of other things. I ordered the tiramisu.

The Baroness’s childhood had been an enchanted one. She had grown up at a time when her title still held sway, as opposed to now when only money impresses and influences. “Don’t worry, though,” she laughed. “I have plenty of that, too.” Artists at the time would give concerts for her family, paint their portraits, make clothes tailored to their bodies. The brightly colored world swept by at a dizzying, even nauseating, speed. She compared herself to a cat who grew up in an aviary and became lazy and disinterested in hunting, though I did not quite follow her extended metaphor. I in turn spoke of my family, who were more talented than I. She had, of course, heard of my sister, but was excited to hear that my father had been a photography professor who never set foot in the darkroom after his retirement. She paid the check and we kissed each other on the

cheek as we parted. Her skin felt parched and rough on my lips.

The loudest man at her party was wearing silk clothing that I took for pajamas. He said, wine in hand, "Art has been destroyed by its own bloated excess, its own ravenous consumption of every emotional resource, and now has the power to move no one." His wine sloshed in his glass as he gestured to the few interested people around him. "We are all enslaved by our own personal language that no one else speaks, that no one else cares for, and if we muzzle all the artists, true art will spring spontaneously from the communal culture, like a folk song or fairy tale." His feverish eyes locked briefly with mine. "This, right now, is the moment when all musicians must renounce music, all sculptors their clay, all novelists the printing press. After the exquisite hush of the new silent era, perhaps after our death even, an innocent joy will accompany even the most primitive rhythms, sketch-like figures, predictable rhymes!" At this point he was so demonstrative that he spilled his wine on the carpet. The Baroness's maid began scrubbing at his feet while he thundered on obliviously. I was still hungry and wandered back to the olive tray.

The Baroness's apartment seemed opulent when you first entered it, but its omissions soon became apparent. The furniture and flooring were all of the highest quality, but there was nothing on the walls but mirrors in gold-leaf frames. A beautiful mahogany grand piano in the sitting room made no noise when you struck its keys; when you lifted the lid, you saw that all the strings had been removed. The abundance of fresh flowers, mainly calla lilies, helped fill your eye. The bustle of all her beneficiaries at the party eased the rest of the blank space, though when I considered how the apartment must look when empty, I felt sad for the woman.

I had not seen the Baroness at the party yet, which was a blessing because I was still wavering over her offer. Many of the guests looked carefree, drunkenly speaking of the movement between mouthfuls. To speak truthfully, I was not an irreplaceable part of the city's music; I would be a small entry in the indexes of only the most complete music histories, and probably just be part of long lists within those books. Yet I loved my instrument, average as I may be at using it. I stepped out onto the large

balcony to consider my course of action further, and the chill was sharp. Spring was late in its arrival this year.

A group of five men whispered in a tight huddle under the stars, their inaudible words visible only to me as puffs of breath that floated above them. Two of them turned and glanced at me the way dogs would if they had dug up the yard. They all wore tailored suits and their plates were full of half-eaten hors d'oeuvres. "I haven't seen you here before. Are you one of the Baroness's new converts?" the tallest man asked me.

"I don't know yet. She's still trying to convince me."

"Don't let her. The Baroness is old; she will die soon. We were all poor, so we accepted her offer. But we are unhappy." The other men nodded. "Our next concert, we are going to uncap our instruments, break our silence, and play. It is going to be an event, man! Think of it this way, before you decide. Who will pay for the movement if she dies? We will not sacrifice any longer, not without a guaranteed paycheck," he said, guzzling down the rest of his champagne.

The group re-huddled, and I felt intrusive and took my leave. The Baroness had still not made an appearance, but no one spoke of her absence. I got the idea that she was often away during these events. I wanted to speak with her further, to negotiate the price of my silence and the goals of the movement, so I asked a man playing billiards in one of the back rooms if she was usually out this long. He leaned down over his next shot without removing his cigar and shook his head, though whether to indicate his answer or his frustration with my interruption, I don't know. I returned to the main room and sat on an antique couch, determined to wait as long as necessary.

Whenever I sit still, I think of my bass. I never dream of accolades, of women, of times past, but only of the weight of the large wooden instrument as it leans against my shoulder. I think of how I will use jagged leaps to enliven even a simple chord structure, how to construct a counter-melody that will carry even a weak soloist, how to build complexity with the drummer. This singlemindedness has helped me overcome my lack of incredible natural ability, as my teachers said it would, though they

were surely less consuming ways to live. I strummed the final chord as the drummer slapped his cymbal, and walked off stage before the skimpy applause died out.

The Baroness's funeral was such an orgy of flowers that the air was visibly thicker with their scent. Her son gave a eulogy that did not mention her patronage and many of the artists wept, either out of grief or desperation. I sat silently at the back of the hall, and thus I saw the quintet from the balcony enter, count to four, raise their horns to their lips, and play a hymn whose slow tempo overcame its major key to sound like a dirge. They played beautifully; I wondered whether the Baroness would have been offended or touched. The cadences at the Amen echoed through the hall, and after a hesitant moment, the many mourners burst into an indecipherable blend of applause and hisses of anger and joy. The quintet bowed to this noise and exited, and some of the crowd joined them. I stayed, and the remainder of the funeral proceeded in a predictable way.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DOWNED WIRE

Before I slept, the sky was clear and dark, and when I woke, the sky was clear and blue, but between there must have been a moment when nature said, 'Let there be snow,' because surely this much snow could not have fallen from the sky. The television reception was affected, and so I did not know the exact measurement of the snowfall, but it was enough to blot out any human evidence except houses and telephone poles, and any natural evidence except trees and the occasional scarlet or cerulean bird, brighter for its white background. It is silent after a snowstorm, and I drank my coffee and listened.

The phone rang; I had wondered whether it would. Taking another sip, I considered ignoring the call. I could claim that there was a problem with my telephone line, though of course they knew what was functioning and what was not, that was their business. Still I hesitated. I suppose I picked up the receiver just to silence the buzz of the ringer.

"Hello?"

"Corner of Wirth and Davis. We'll get there when we can."

"That's a ways out. Will it be long?"

"I don't know. There are lots of lines down. I have a whole lot of other calls."

"Okay, thanks."

I replaced the receiver and wondered why I had hoped not to be called. Obviously with this much snow, there would be power lines down. Someone had to be present to ensure safety until their repair.

I filled a thermos with coffee and made three large sandwiches, since

they had originally told me to make sure that I was prepared. I then dressed for the cold, putting on three shirts under my coat and long johns under my flannel-lined pants. I was unsure whether I was expected to hurry, so I did. I trudged out to the van they had given me and cleared the snow from around the tires and off the windows, which was not an easy job.

I was forced to drive slowly; the stillness of everything around made it seem even slower. I felt disconcerted, as I had many years ago when I had snuck into an empty football stadium. I kept scanning the houses for people, only to see chairs and lamps. There was no one in the driveways either; perhaps there was no reason to shovel since everything was closed, perhaps by chance I did not see the people who were awake. In either case, I felt alone.

The closer I came to Wirth and Davis, the further apart the houses were spaced. When I stopped my car at the corner, I could no longer see any houses at all. There were a few scattered pines and a warehouse the city used for storage. It was clear that the warehouse was the only reason these roads existed, and that I was the only person or animal in sight. I turned off the engine and stepped out of the van.

A black power line that had been suspended between two poles now rested on the white ground between them. The thick cable was still, it did not writhe like an unattended fire hose, it did not emit sparks, there was no smoke or crackle. It just sat motionless on the ground and could have been mistaken for a long stick. As I climbed back into the van, I half-remembered a saying of my father's that involved the devil and masks. I was not sure it was applicable.

The radio did not pick up much, and I was not particularly upset; the silence was pleasant, though not as enjoyable as when I was inside my house. I sat and waited. I should have brought a newspaper or a book, but in my hurry I had forgotten. The sun moved higher into the cloudless sky. Looking across the snow-covered field, I wondered what was kept in the warehouse. My reflections did not kill as much time as I had hoped, though, because all I could imagine being kept there was unused land-



scaping equipment or the city's Christmas decorations. Certainly nothing of any value. A plain building with uninteresting contents. I reclined my seat so that I was looking at the ceiling of the van. The blinding whiteness of the snow had given me the germ of a headache, and this adjustment dimmed my field of view.

The sun continued its slow ascent, and I decided that after its next noticeable change of position, I would eat one of the sandwiches I had packed. When I began to unwrap it, I was not sure if the sun had traveled any further or not. The movement was so gradual that it was hard to tell. Perhaps, perhaps not, but I was hungry. The sandwich tasted strange, I would have to check the date on the mayonnaise jar. As I chewed, I imagined what would happen if someone did come near. I supposed that the person would drive by and stop for some incomprehensible reason. He would probably stop to see why I had stopped. This made me laugh, since I was there to make sure that no one got too close. He would get out of the car and approach my window, which I would roll down.

"Be careful, there's a power line down," I would say, and point at the motionless wire.

He would stare in the direction I pointed. Nodding, he would say, "Okay. Why are you out here?"

"The power company sent me out here to make sure that no one gets hurt."

He would nod, and then make small talk for a minute, two at the most, and then get in his car and drive off. That would be the whole of it; other things could possibly occur, but most likely would not.

I wiped my mouth and felt the urge to urinate. I didn't really have to, but the van was shrinking around me and unnecessary urination was a temporary escape. I opened the door and crunched several steps away from the van. The visible trees were too far away to walk to, so I had no privacy; no matter which way I faced, I would be pissing into empty white space. I decided to turn away from the downed cable, just to be safe. The air was cold on my penis and the snow steamed as it yellowed, and then I was done and there was little to do. I climbed back into the van.

I spent time looking carefully around. On the speedometer, the mark corresponding to 55 mph was orange, while the rest of the speeds were marked white. The right side mirror said that objects were closer than they may appear, but the left side mirror did not; the radio's volume knob was not round but decagonal. My headache was becoming more insistent, though that did not stop me from wishing that I had something to read with me. I even checked to see if the van's manual was in the glove compartment, but someone must have removed it. I took a large swig of coffee from the thermos and rubbed my cheek. I realized that I had not shaved and would surely be itchy in several hours. I hoped I would be home by then.

Time continued to pass, even as it was observed. Each minute I would calculate how many minutes I had been at this abandoned corner, and what percentage of the time I had already passed for several different possible arrival times of the repair crew. But they had already missed my most optimistic estimates and so some of my percentages were moot. I flipped through the radio dial again and found a station, where if the volume was maximized, I could make out the occasional word. Under the now-deafening static, I heard, "Eighteen . . . possible . . . into the . . . most since . . . pressure," and so on. I turned the radio back off, convinced that I would have been bored by the station even if audible. I tried to create an interesting narrative out of the fragments I heard, but I knew that it was a weather report, and to pretend otherwise seemed silly. Silence again.

I looked at the sky. A solitary cloud had appeared in the west, and I watched it slowly float by. I concentrated on its edges, seeing it amor- phously change, seeing if I could detect some sort of pattern in the way it changed shape. I was hypnotized by it for an hour, starting the engine and turning the van around so that I could continue to watch it as it disap- peared. Eventually it was too small to observe and I was again alone.

Where were the repairmen? I had never done this before, and I did not know how long I was going to wait. What if they had forgotten? They have not forgotten, I told myself, I was just getting restless with soli- tude. What can one do with no objects around, with no people to converse

turned slowly as he drove. And he was past, just two red lights fading into the distance, merging into one small light and disappearing.

I sat, fiddled again with the unworking radio, urinated again, ate half a sandwich, attempted to sleep, could not, attempted to remember past-memorized poems, could not, looked at the downed wire and fell into that final recourse of the sad and lonely, thought.

The sun is rising and I am cold, though just my feet really, I should have not stepped outside to piss, though I should not have stepped outside to be here at all, because this place should not exist, it doesn't exist except for me. And that other driver, I suppose, though he could have been an imagining, just driving by, why did he not stop or wave or anything, though I would probably not have waved back, I would have been grateful for his stopping for about two sentences and then I would have grown irritated by his small talk, because it is all always small talk, that is all that exists, I'm sick of it, I miss it, I hate it, I'd rather be alone, though alone is what's causing my misery now. It is so wordlessly white here, except the black wires and yellow spots over there, the only way I am sure that I am not a ghost is those yellow spots, which is pretty funny, or would be if I wasn't so sad, though I guess it's funny anyway. Why am I here, not in the cosmic sense, but right here on this forgotten corner, there are several billion other places I could be, and somehow I am here. I could change it of course, I could just leave, but I am needed here, though not really, but if I am, I have to be here, I am the last line of defense between people I don't know and am not sure exist and their death, though they would surely avoid the power line anyway, I mean, really? Where is the repair crew? Where where where? He said on the phone there were many others he had to call, and now they are sitting on secret roads, perhaps every road that is empty actually has one of us on it, perhaps there is no one but us on the roads because everyone is maintaining order, standing guard on his own road, perhaps we are all as alone as I am, all alone together. Perhaps not. I am alone and waiting, waiting, so tired of thinking the same things, but if there is nothing to see but the snow, there is nothing to think eventually, all becomes stasis, from the outside in, if I had

only brought a book or a tape, but if I am here forever, which I fear, there is no book that can't be finished, there is no music that does not grow tiresome, there is eventually no escape from the external, and the external is nothing here, purely nothing unadulteratedly white. An unbearable thing, to imagine I am forgotten. How long would I wait until I left the place I was assigned to be? How long would any lingering sense of responsibility, no matter how silly, force me to remain in a place that is torturous? Forever? I don't know, and I won't have to know because they will come, they will come. Maybe. Enough thought, I'm tired of it and this fucking van, I want out, I want to escape, get out, turn the handle, move, run around the van, one two three four five six, out of breath, thinking of breathing, nothing else, not the wire just sitting, beckoning, no no no, run further into the field, the van is getting smaller, I can't even read the logo on the side anymore, but now I am very tired, maybe I can go to sleep, run back, open the handle, you're tired, sleep, sleep, my feet are cold again.

I slept and woke to a tapping on my window. I rolled it down and saw a man in orange wearing a hard hat. He was speaking through a scarf: I could only see his eyes.

"Sorry we're late. There was a problem at one of the other downs," he told me.

"That's okay."

A moment of silence as we stared at each other. His eyes were blood-shot, and he looked as if he had been outside all day.

"We're here. You're all done," he finally said.

I considered asking him if I could help with the repairs but thought better of it. He didn't seem friendly. I started the van and drove into town. As I pulled into my driveway, I saw my neighbor salting his sidewalk. I contemplated talking to him before I went in to bed.

CONSTANTINOPLE

While their wives had the thrill of toddlers' Easter dresses and their children had the inauguration of neighborhood-wide games of tag, the only rite of spring that the men of Constantinople, Oregon, had to look forward to was the unveiling of Jonas B's new lawnmower. Jonas B (and it was testament to the abiding respect they had for him that none of the men dared asked what the B stood for) had a garage full of lawnmowers, each with features that muted the men, winnowed their communication to approving slow nods and jealous shakes of the head. The arms race the others had participated in previous to his arrival ended when they realized that Jonas B had some sort of family connection and bought mowers that were years away from the dealership. Their envy was less virulent than one would expect, as his knowledge and eloquence quickly won them over. Though he owned several and approved their use for specific tasks, Jonas B sermonized that to prefer riding mowers to push mowers was tantamount to being unable to grasp the universals of lawn care. He preached to the gathered men about which times of year to bag and which to mulch, why the lesser foot traffic made Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday the best days to mow, leaving the weekend for edging work.

Once, a teenage boy, uninitiated in the subtle ways the men spoke when the new lawnmower's features were introduced, turned to Jonas B and said incredulously, "But you have dozens of lawnmowers! Why do you need this one, when surely last year's could do the job?!"

The men held their breath, and looked away as if someone had spoken ill of a dead man or blasphemed on the parish steps.

Jonas B smiled as a chess player smiles at a novice's foolish move. "The grass grows faster every year, son," he said simply. The men thought this was a wise answer and exhaled. The vanquished boy was not seen at the gatherings again, and last anyone knew, he was living in New York and exhibiting sculptures created from the scraps left over from other sculptors' works.

The mass of dandelions and crabgrass that had passed for a lawn when the previous owner lived there made the putting green length and consistency Jonas B obtained even more impressive. "A shameful thicket," he said on first sight, and started work on it well before he closed on the house. Herbicides named with unlikely letter combinations and repeated mowings and edgings even in the same day had cleaned up the canvas on which Jonas B tended his masterpiece. It was not long before the other men became curious about his methods and thus discovered his astonishing mowers. Before they were courageous enough to approach him, mower spotting became a popular pastime for the other men. The sides of bathroom stalls throughout town were etched with dates and descriptions, sometimes sketches and model numbers, of the mowers Jonas B used. These restroom communiqués became the center of male life in Constantinople, and many of the men would drink coffee and eat muffins to allow themselves ample time to decipher the observations.

A Friday it was, late summer, the air pregnant with a coming thunderstorm. One could hear the purr of the 8600, the previous year's showpiece, still effective for the tight mowing that Fridays required. Jonas B was halfway through the first perpendicular diagonal across the yard. It being a routine mowing, no neighbor was staring from the sidewalk, though cars still slowed as they passed. Jonas B had his eyes half closed and the color of his face and curled mouth gave him the look of one in a sexual exhilaration. There are eight million squirrels in the state of Oregon, approximately eighty per square mile, over 2 squirrels for every human, and of this teeming mass of squirrel, not all can be expected to act sensibly. Unfrightened by the quiet hum of the 8600, one ran into Jonas B's unwatchful path and froze. This squirrel's lack of consideration could

only be described as ominous.

Jonas B, oblivious, neither increased his speed to startle the squirrel into action nor slowed to avoid it. He did not break stride until a quick shudder of the handle broke his reverie. The mower, true to its pedigree, had the blade speed and sharpness to make short work of anything in its path, and the entrails that he slipped on before stopping were barely recognizable as squirrel. Human ears would have registered the moments after Jonas B released the handle as silence, but of course the neighborhood was actually far from silent. On a windless day, distant birds still whip through the air and hidden mammals still breathe. The trees and grass grow, and even photosynthesis has a microscopic sound. Deaf to this minute cacophony, he squatted to look at the tattered corpse, his face shining with a light sweat. Jonas B had never heard the words *Xenopsylla cheopis*, but the flea that leapt from fur to his arm did not care, and he never felt its landing. He hurried to the garage for a shovel, hoping to have time to bury the squirrel before the rainstorm.

The men of Constantinople knew that something was wrong several days later, when the grass of Jonas B's lawn began to lean over the sidewalk like a hobo's beard over his chapped lips. There were even, and this is what made them truly afraid, the buds of dandelions beginning to show. No one spoke about Jonas B, not even saying his name, like he was a ship out on a stormy sea. But every mind was consumed with him, causing certain hiccups in the town's routine. Both Mr. Steele and Mr. Wheatley forgot to fill their cars with gas and caused a minor traffic snarl downtown. The town's pastor did not prepare a new sermon but reread an old one that contained a reference to Iran-Contra, and high school football practice was interrupted when the coach became literally sick with worry behind the blocking sleds.

The grass kept growing, of course. The laser-straight lines that marked Jonas's lawn disappeared into grass that was nearing ankle-height, and his house was portentously still. The garage that contained the town's pride and dominion remained unopened. People began taking alternate routes home from work to avoid driving past the unkempt lawn. Jonas B's neigh-

bors stopped mowing their own lawns as well, for, they had to admit, it felt unseemly, at least until he had reappeared. Constantinople held its collective breath, and when someone rearranged the letters on the sign that advertised the gas station's specials to say 'WHERE IS JONAS B,' the owner silently pulled all of the letters down and tucked them away.

Jonas B had been admitted into the Portland Catholic Hospital. He had driven there when he had begun to feel ill. He had a high fever and his lymph nodes were swollen. Jonas B was rarely sick, so he immediately sought the best doctors he knew of, and left Constantinople, which he regarded as a town full of hicks, incompetent, even ape-like people. The doctor was unsure of the diagnosis, even when Jonas B began to turn a deep shade of purple and the symptoms clearly pointed to one specific disease. He consulted, double-checked, and consulted again, and told Jonas B that what he had contracted, probably from a flea, was certainly rare, but that Jonas had certainly heard of it, for it had killed over two-thirds of Europe several centuries ago. The doctor nervously gave the scientific name, before stuttering over the common name. Jonas B nodded. Throughout the day, he turned a deeper and deeper shade of purple, until parts of him were the color of twilight. He died the next day, a Tuesday, the day he usually did no mowing or edging anyway.

The men of the town never knew how Jonas B died. An announcement appeared in the paper, and an auction of his belongings was scheduled. Some of the men spent thousands of dollars on his lawnmowers. The family who moved into his house kept a nice, if unspectacular, lawn. They remarked how overgrown the lawn was when they purchased the house, and the men nodded, glad to see the world falling back into shape. One might think that in his darkest moments, each man contemplated Jonas B and his death, but it would not be true. Life goes on, there is much to think about. Spring is coming again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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