

Flash! Fiction 5

The background of the cover is a mosaic-style illustration. At the top, a woman with long dark hair is shown in profile, holding a large, glowing, reddish-orange orb. Below her, a group of about ten people are depicted in various poses, some looking towards the orb. The entire scene is rendered in a textured, mosaic-like style with a color palette dominated by blues, greens, and reds, set against a light, textured background.

by Peter McMillan
with Adam Mac

Books by the Authors

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Adam Mac

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Table of Contents

Philosophically Speaking 1

Fishy 3

The Tunnel is Closed 5

A Fly On The Wall by Adam Mac 8

Nucleosaur of the Frigid Lace by Adam Mac 10

The Intersection 12

Getting Even 14

The Script..... 17

Boundaries..... 19

The Concert 24

The Ward 27

Mr. Clean by Adam Mac 29

Dr. Sangfroid..... 32

The Traveller..... 34

The Uncertainty of Being Earnest 37

Philosophically Speaking

This morning as I was sorting through the wall of books that wraps around my one-room apartment, I re-discovered in an obscure critique of Kant an irregularly folded page of handwritten text. It wasn't dated but it seemed to be in the same hand that had inscribed "George Glover / Knox College, 1923" inside the cover. I remember that the first time I read it I decided I must keep the book if for no other reason than to protect this artifact.

As far as I was able to determine this was George Glover's only achievement in philosophy.

In our highly evolved being we have become objective, remote, and godlike. Having reached our evolutionary apex, we reflect back on ourselves as if looking at something beneath or behind us. While we know ourselves as the being that thinks and feels and desires, we forget that the object of our attention is us. We have become the anthropologist who fills with copious notes his notebooks, memo pads [sic] and miscellaneous scraps of paper. Who sees but is not seen. Who questions but is not questioned. Who judges but is not judged. We have exposed the eclectic superstitions of our primitive selves and replaced them with an incorrigible system of truth. We have removed the nearsighted empathy of the human animal and have substituted for it the omniscient perspective of absolute mind. We have become our own gods.

Many, many years ago I liked that kind of writing. To my then rebellious and unsated mind, it seemed to get beneath the surface tension of everyday life and to grab hold of the large and the eternal.

Now, I just can't stomach the stuff. It comes back up half-chewed, leaving a burning rawness in the back of my throat.

#

The buzzer interrupts my packing. I shout "Fred?" into the intercom, and Fred shouts back "Yeah." I buzz the door open so that Fred can come up. Fred is my friend. He's helping me sell off the contents of my little room. Fred can't read, so I number the boxes. Fred told me once—out of the blue—that he's never had indigestion.

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Fishy

Fishy was a betta—bright, beautiful, and blue. He lived in a little, round fishbowl with a 360-degree view. The water was always clear and clean and every day the food came from above. That was in the beginning.

Only rarely, but then it became more often, the food didn't arrive, and Fishy had to wait. Fishy got to thinking. There would be food several—three, four, even as many as ten or eleven—days in a row, then one day it wouldn't come. There was no pattern. Then there were periods when the food wouldn't show up for days at a time. It was completely random.

Fishy started to pay closer attention to the world outside the fishbowl. He'd become good at judging the passage of time from the changes in lighting. That was how he'd come to count the days in the first place. But then he began to watch for movements. There was the cat, but it didn't matter as long as it kept its paws out of the fishbowl. There was also a person, a shadow that used to stop and look in but now zipped past.

Something had changed. Something about the food. He wondered what had brought about the change and why it had to be that way. He became anxious and sad.

One morning he awoke and looked up to find a pellet on the surface. Starving from a week without food he quickly swam to the top and gobbled it down. He became hopeful again.

The next morning he surveyed the surface from his perch on the bottom but there was no food. He waited anyway. Nothing came. He gave it one more day. Another day. And another. Then one day a morsel appeared.

How to make sense of this. Once the food had been as regular as clockwork. Then it became unpredictable and finally it disappeared altogether. And suddenly, out of the blue it had returned again.

He reset his internal clock so that he could be awake and see when the food came. He woke up earlier and earlier but never could catch the moment when it was dropped into the fishbowl. In the meantime, he tried to enjoy it when it came and not worry about when it would come again.

But that was easier said than done. As soon as he swallowed one piece of food, he started thinking about the next one. The pleasure was fleeting, and even with all the mental energy he could summon, he couldn't prolong it. For days and weeks he lived in anticipation.

Fishy was sad, though on the bright side, he wasn't going hungry as often AND he had begun to acquire knowledge.

First published in Quail Bell Magazine, February 8, 2015.

The Tunnel is Closed

We'd already begun our descent into the tunnel when everything suddenly came to a stop. We were all stopped. Of course, I had to be the one to go through the tunnel. There was absolutely no movement in the traffic. Ahead there were brake lights and behind headlights, three lanes of them. The guy in the scruffy beard and super-sized pickup truck had his window rolled down, head stuck out, yelling at someone or maybe just the situation. The SUV in front was watching a kid's movie. A cabbie in the rear had just gotten out and was standing beside his taxi, arms propped on the roof. Everyone else seemed frozen in their cars, not reacting.

My window was rolled down part way even though the fumes were bad. Someone further down inside the tunnel screamed, then someone else did and others joined in. There was no fire or smoke, no sign of an emergency, but people were getting out of their cars, and they were walking kind of funny, because, as I later realized, they were trudging through knee-deep water. I opened the door of my van and water rushed in as a small wave passed, covering the brake and the accelerator pedals. Instinctively, I reached for my pocket and quickly closed the door. Even though the van was on a fairly steep slant, it was probably still a foot deep at the back of the van where I had to exit. People were splashing past to get to higher ground, leaving their cars stuck and flooding in the tunnel.

I couldn't see it from where I was but I imagined that the electronic billboard at the entrance to the tunnel now simply and cryptically read "The Tunnel is Closed." It wouldn't say why because of the panic that would cause, although it had to be increasingly obvious as more people escaped and related what they'd seen that an enormous disaster was developing under

the river. Judging by the huge cracks forming in the walls of the tunnel and the ceiling at the edge of the tunnel, it was going to get a whole lot worse. I only saw 40 or 50 people from cars in front of me get out and get to safety—the cars around me were already empty—and I knew there had to be lots more still inside. After all, the tunnel is a mile long.

It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes, but it seemed a lot longer for help to arrive. Several divers went straightaway into the tunnel, disappearing into the flickering light. I imagined a Godzilla from one of those old Japanese science fiction movies wading through the river and stepping on the tunnel and crushing it. It would have immediately filled with water, and up here, some 50 feet higher, there would have been a small wave like the one I saw when I opened my van door.

It was slowly starting to sink in that I was a handicapped man caught square in the middle of a major urban disaster. How ironic. I'd finally caught a break and now this. I knew I could get out, as long as the electrical system in the van worked and the ramp lowered. But I didn't know whether I could steady my wheelchair and navigate it through the water for 100 yards. I figured people would stop to help if they saw me, but it was chaos. Would they notice? I had to keep the wheelchair from toppling over into the water or I'd certainly be missed.

And if someone did stop to help, they don't get why I can be so stubborn. It has nothing to do with them and their good intentions. It's strictly about me. I'm not a lump and I won't be treated that way. Besides, I really don't like being touched. Period.

Once out of the tunnel I would have different worries. Most people have trouble touching us. Paramedics, on the other hand, don't care. Nothing's off limits for their prying hands. As I'm in good health, as long as they stick to checking my vitals, everything should be fine. Since I'm conscious and in no distress there's no need for them to pat me down and go through my pockets (for meds and identification) and find that little cloth bag with the stones. I'm so glad I told the other guys to split up, because if any one of us had got stuck in the tunnel, we'd all be done for. I just wish I hadn't offered to take the tunnel.

First published in Down in the Dirt, November/December 2015, vol. 133.

A Fly On The Wall by Adam Mac

I had lived a sheltered life. Windows always open, wholesome fragrances everywhere, and I buzzed in and out of the house at will. Best were the apple pies that cooled on the kitchen table. The madam playfully swatted at me and chased me around knowing full well she'd never get me in a room with 10-foot ceilings.

Then one day, horror struck. I found my family strung up on one of those sticky strips, stuck there unmoving in gruesome, contorted positions. I'd never noticed it before, but my younger brother had seven legs.

I hopped the first outsider who was going far away—I hoped. Turns out, he only made it to the first stop on the interstate before he had to relieve himself. I was tired and disoriented, so I just buzzed around his cap, but when he made to leave I was prevented by a strong downdraft of air at the door. We parted ways and I got to know my new surroundings.

People, always men, came in waves. When it was slack, young boys would come in and horse around. "I can hit it from way back here," one would say, and the other would wager a small bet. Most of the time, men would stand as far apart as possible, but sometimes you'd get a guy who'd come a little too close. I watched and listened.

It took getting used to what I thought was my punishment for having survived. (I'd learned all about guilt in Sunday School.) The smells weren't like momma's apple pie, but they were strangely attractive in a primal sort of way, and I felt a side of me emerge which might have frightened me once. Towards dark—the crickets told me—a large fellow in a black Lynyrd

Skynyrd t-shirt barreled into a stall. I followed. I didn't come out for hours. If this was purgatory, I could skip heaven.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications: Flim-Flam Games, May 18, 2015.

Nucleosaur of the Frigid Lace by Adam Mac

A long way away—1.185185 quadrillion light years, give or take a billion or two—on an asteroid belt nicknamed the Frigid Lace, the world was populated by nucleosaurs and electrosaur. [NB: Protosaurs are a strictly human construct as proved by Poodlesky. Ed.]

One such nucleosaur was Stanley Nucleosaurus, Esq. As a nucleosaur, Stanley had a following, so to speak—in his orbit, so to speak again. They were called electrosaur, or *electrosaurus cum minimus negativus*, and basically they were servants, but for Stanley they were primarily snacks.

Stanley constantly snacked on his electrosaur. This had the predictable consequence of Stanley often turning himself into something else. After a couple of electrosaur, he'd take on the properties of, say, *Strontium saurus* or *Plutonium saurus* or something more exotic. A dozen once transformed him into a flatugenic facsimile of himself and a double double turned him inside out into *Defecatorium saurus*.

You'd think this would all come to a quick end what with Stanley's infinite appetite and his finite number of electrosaur, but it didn't. So far, we've only mentioned his internal consumption, but for every electrosaur he gobbled he consumed two nucleosaurs. This raised Stanley's electrosaur count to dangerously high levels and challenged scientists to scramble for names, like *Ican'tbelievelatethewholethingium* or *Yikeslthinklgotabandoneonium*.

All this took its toll on the Frigid Lace. Stanley munched his way from one end of the asteroid belt to the other, devouring everything in sight and leaving behind great clumps of antimatter and

clouds of noxious quasar gas. So much had Stanley grown—*Giganticus Infinitus Pacmanicus*—that astronomers could track his movements as he galumphed across the asteroids as if they were stones in a stream.

Eventually, as the external supply of consumables was depleted, Stanley had to turn exclusively to consuming his own electrosaurs. Long predicted by dark-cloud scientists, Stanley then achieved the first documented interstellar case of absolute subjective annihilation. *Id est*, he ate himself up.

First published in Garden Gnome Publications' Flim-Flam Games, June 1, 2015.

The Intersection

Day and night Ernest watched the intersection with vigilance. He was retired, had no hobbies, and couldn't sleep at night what with all the medication he'd been prescribed.

Most of the cars and drivers he had come to recognize, and he even knew how often and when they passed. Some were harder to pick out than others. The partly bald guys in their zippy little BMWs, the hockey-then-soccer moms in their gargantuan SUVs, the shiny new pickups driven just as often by young women as men, and the low-slung, loud muffled rides of the working class twenty-somethings were the easiest to identify.

They happened—the traffic violations—year-round, but only in summer was it especially dangerous for pedestrians since that's when people enjoyed getting out and walking. Because there were no sidewalks, they had to walk on the road. The intersection was a T, and only one direction had a stop sign, although it wasn't apparent that anyone exercised any less right of way than anybody else.

Two hundred and eighty-seven in one hour was the record for the number of traffic violations Ernest had witnessed. He told a police officer who said he'd look into it, but nothing ever happened. He tried again with the police, this time separating the pedestrian population into senior, young adult, middle age, and school children. Same result. He went to the city. He was told it was a police matter. The police, he was assured, would look into it.

Meanwhile an accident occurred down the street. Just a block away, an eight-year-old girl on her brand-new bicycle was struck by a Lexus SUV. Fortunately, the SUV was nearly stopped, and it bumped rather than hit the child. The bike didn't

even get a scratch, and the little girl only suffered a small scrape on her elbow where she fell down on the pavement. She needed a band aid to calm her, but it didn't stay on very long as she recounted what had happened, arms waving in the air, to anyone who would listen.

The next day, Ernest erected a large and highly-visible sign at his intersection, righteously proclaiming it a "Zero Accident Zone." At the bottom of the sign, there was a picture of a camera. He credited himself with being a genius and a saviour, too. However, by the end of the day, his town councillor came by and informed him that the sign had to go.

He continued to monitor the traffic. Drawing on his former expertise, he plotted data in three dimensions, constructed elaborate graphs and colourful charts, and developed complicated forecasting models to demonstrate the real and projected dangers at the intersection.

He wrote a letter to the newspaper editor, but, due to a backlog, so he was told, it wasn't printed until after Christmas by which time most of the pedestrians were safely indoors for the season.

The following year Ernest moved into a condo. There was no view of the street. That had been a condition.

He started weaning himself off his meds on a trial basis but resumed his full dosage upon discovering that there was a children's daycare in the apartment above him.

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Getting Even

Bruce threw a huge rock at the parking enforcement robot and knocked it to the ground. Seeing the robot go down in a heap of clattering metal and sparks was almost worth the \$500 ticket.

The fine was ridiculous—excessive and unfair. Overnight parking at the train station was not allowed between 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., but he'd only been in violation for one minute, if that. The ticket said 5:59; however his watch read 6:04. Besides, his Ford wasn't even worth \$500.

Why not ticket the DeLorean or the Porsche or even the Ferrari in the first row. They were here before he was. And they were the latest 2115 hydro models and could easily afford to pay the fine. It wasn't his fault the robot didn't complete its tour in time to see they had parked before 6:00 a.m.

It wasn't fair but there was really no point contesting it, because these robots had impeccable memories for details and their bodies were hardened to protect the data. Data tampering had plagued earlier models. The data storage was actually protected by greater security measures than was the on-board computer. The computer was essentially just a common circuit board available online and for drone delivery at most big box technology stores. The replacement process was so straightforward that parking enforcement robots were capable of auto-installing their own circuit boards.

It wasn't clear whether he'd done any real damage to the robot, so he walked over to the supine pile of metal. It gurgled and made a number of unintelligible sounds. Their English is generally high school level, so clearly some damage had been caused to the language centre. The midsection, which housed

the incriminating data, was still intact though. That was a concern.

Looking around among all the cars and trucks in the parking lot, Bruce found one of those giant tow trucks that are used to tow big trucks and buses. Making sure that no one was paying attention—and everyone was running for the train anyway—he dragged the slurring robot and shoved it up under the rear double tires of the tow truck, ensuring it could only be seen by someone stooping down to look underneath.

He had to be certain that it worked. The damage had to be done and it had to be severe enough to remove all traces of the evidence against him. He could sit in his car and wait for the tow truck to back up or he could go off to work and have faith that the tow truck would finish off the robot.

He decided to wait. He could also call in sick. So he waited. Finally, the driver of the tow truck arrived. The driver checked all the sides but didn't bother looking underneath. When he backed up, incredibly he didn't notice the bump. The tow truck crushed the robot effortlessly and with no bounce whatsoever. Amazingly, the tow truck driver drove off without the slightest idea he'd just flattened a parking enforcement robot.

Bruce was ecstatic. Everything had worked to plan. But just to be sure, he got out of his car to confirm that the robot's torso region had been satisfactorily destroyed. Indeed it had and the robot was no longer gurgling pre-language sounds, so it had to be out of commission—completely out of order. He went back to his car and got in and drove away to enjoy the rest of his sick day.

What Bruce had forgot to consider was the surveillance canopy, the high-tech CCTV net, which continually recorded every square inch of the train station, the parking lot, and the adjoining construction site for the new station. Feeds from the canopy were routinely scanned at head office by parking enforcement robots with desk jobs.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, October 1, 2015.

The Script

In the script, a young man makes his way through a desolate landscape of waist-high weeds and scrap metal to the towering city of steel and glass. It is a story of youth and quests and adversity and ultimately triumph.

The script needed a main character, so the author held auditions.

A, an experienced character, liked the script and said he would be committed to following it verbatim. This pleased the author. B, young and starry-eyed, recommended a different setting—a desert with the only prop being a parachute. The author politely dismissed B, having long ago failed in his own use a similar device in a short story. C suggested that an already successful character, like himself, who comes home to discover his vulnerability and his emptiness, would make the script more sophisticated and mature. The author advised that a different script might be more appropriate for him.

The author accepted A, and A maintained his pliable facade during the early going. Up to a point, A was very enthusiastic about the setting and the plot. Nevertheless, the setting which he re-described as a post-apocalyptic wasteland should be THE setting. In the distance, there could still be a magnificent, bright city on a hill, but it had to be unattainable and so always in the backdrop. The main character would endlessly seek to reach the city but would be prevented by one setback after another. Unable to leave the outer region, he would come to recognize that he was one of its denizens, forever imprisoned to live in the foreground of a future he would never enjoy.

Meanwhile, the author reluctantly gave in to the demands of A. He was resigned but insisted on preserving at least the outlines of his story. But the outlines blurred to extinction when A hooked up with a band of marauding outlaws. The author then entered into secret negotiations with C who called in a few favours and managed to get A removed. With the author's gratitude, C proceeded to make his way to the city, though by a more straightforward approach. Altered script in hand, C arrived in a private plane.

News of a stock market crash was reverberating through the city, but C, calm and unflappable, was not detoured from the parties, galas and fundraisers that were his obligation. However, it started coming unravelled when the district attorney filed fraud charges. That's when the author perked up and took notice. Then came the allegations of sexual debauchery, murder, and even human trafficking. That was it. The author took over the script and wrote C out, begging B to come to the rescue.

A substantial amount of re-work was required to accommodate B's script rewrites and scene changes. As a goodwill gesture, the author invited A and C to join in for the opening scene. It was staged on a mile-high mesa a hundred miles from the nearest town. With all three characters together, the author deleted the parachute.

First published in Danse Macabre DM 94 Orangerie.

Boundaries

I'd been on station for two months and didn't have a good feeling about it. It's very different from Earth and even the ship that brought me here. My tour with Space Corps is for two years and I'm not liking my chances of settling in. I'm here, under the radar, so to speak, to investigate longstanding allegations of abuse and mistreatment.

We sleep in pods arranged like the long, flat safety deposit boxes you find in old-fashioned Earth banks. Just large enough to flex your muscles but not enough to turn over. It doesn't matter though because we all take meds to help us sleep, and there is next to no waking time in the pods.

We eat all our meals in the canteen, which is standing room only. Along the walls, the canteen is outfitted with dozens of tubes. We connect these to our upper abdominal ports. The feeding takes 15 minutes. There is no variety, just a uniform mixture of basic nutrients. Here too it doesn't matter since we bypass taste, smell, and texture. I learned this after trying several different tubes.

Sometimes when you get a tube it will still be dripping and you have to drain it and sterilize it. That's happened to me several times. Some people are so careless and what little bit of personal space there is they violate. It's not so much that there is the danger of infection—so we're told. It's the very idea of ingesting someone else's backflow, which is thoroughly disgusting!

The other bodily functions are managed through the lower abdominal port, which requires the same attention to personal space and sanitation. The facilities are adjacent to the can-

teen and are equipped with larger plastic hoses that are supposed to be sterilized after each use. Just to be on the safe side, I sterilize the hose before and after use, no matter how long the line-up.

Physical contact is prohibited and every effort is made to ensure that it won't happen accidentally or intentionally. At our workstations, we're suited up and strapped in for 15 hours. You can't even tap your neighbour on the shoulder to ask a question. The range of motion won't permit it. Nonverbal communication is not allowed. You have to go through the chat line to communicate, and it's constantly monitored.

Chats are public, so sometimes people use code, but this is risky. The penalty for being caught is one month solitary detention in the Space Chamber where there is no light, no sounds or smells, and perpetual weightlessness. People are never the same when they return. I got to know the guy from pod 11471-AF before they sent him away. He was a vegetable when he got back, but he didn't stay long before they packed him off to Terra Chamber, a dead end for nonconformists.

One night I couldn't sleep. I hadn't deliberately refused the meds but I think they must have given me something else. I kept having paranoid thoughts that 11471-AF had informed on me. It also felt like bugs were crawling on me, and I couldn't reach them to scratch. I worried that the ingestion and excretion tubes were contaminated and that all sorts of nasty germs were affecting my body and my brain.

Without warning and with no explanation, I was pulled out of my pod and rushed to the Magistrate's Chamber.

“Mr. 14319-ZB, you know this is a Stage 5 classified station and everything that goes on here is top secret and that conspiring against the station's authority is a criminal offense?” asked the magistrate.

“Yes sir,” I answered.

“Mr. 14319-ZB, where are your notes?”

It was my notes they were after, not realizing that I possess an eidetic memory—a prerequisite for my line of work—which I meticulously layer with unrelated and misdirecting memories.

“I haven't taken any notes. I don't have access—“

“You've been observed meeting with 11471-AF and others in the tube stations. What do you have to say about that?”

“I befriended 11471-AF because we're from the same Earth city, Providence.”

“Now sir, no doubt you've heard what has happened to 11471-AF. Unless you cooperate—”

“I am ... I'm trying—“

“Then what did you do with your notes? Your cooperation may be taken into consideration during sentencing, but—“

“OK, I used the chat line, but the reason your experts haven't been able to find my notes is that I encrypted them with an auto-delete feature.”

“You're saying, then, that the chats, er, the notes have been deleted? But we have real-time backups.”

“And each time you access my chats from a backup, the auto-delete feature activates.”

“So you're saying there's no way to access your notes?”

“That's right. Even I can't get to them because of the encrypted fail-safe that triggers the delete function.”

“Well, we'll see about that. Let's help you try to remember.”

That's when they severed my head and stuck my brain in a vat of chemicals.

I hadn't seen that coming.

“Now Mr. 14319-ZB, how did you encrypt your chats? What algorithm did you use?”

The magistrate turned the questioning over to a cryptographer. Each time I was evasive I received a multi-sensory shock. Several hours into the interrogation, they switched to a different strategy. After making a number of recalibrations, they directly probed my memory centre. All they learned was that my memories were inaccessible and interwoven with vivid recollections of urine- and feces-contaminated hoses and vomit-filled feeding tubes.

Now disembodied, it was clear I'd never return to Earth, and it didn't appear likely that any of my findings would ever make it back either. Essentially, my mission was a failure. However, if my record is discovered one day, it will be a damning indict-

ment of the station's human rights violations. But from here in the vat, it seems that discovery will never be made.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, February 25, 2016.

The Concert

Until today, it hadn't rained in a month with temperatures in the low 100s. Now all of sudden it was pouring, flooding the scorched grass and dripping off the wilted leaves of the trees and manicured shrubs. The band shell was barely visible from where Ethan sat in his deck chair covered in a bright yellow poncho. He was the last member of the audience—all the rest having fled to dry safety. The orchestra continued playing "Ride of the Valkyries" through the summer rainstorm—as long as there was no lightning. On stage the conductor kept his eye on his audience, not wanting to give up the show if even one person remained.

Then, just as suddenly as it came the rain went and the clouds broke open to let the late afternoon sunlight through. The air was 10 degrees cooler but still hot and muggy. With the return of the sun, the audience took up their places again, having only been waiting nearby in their cars for the downpour to end. The ground was nearly dry again, the rainwater greedily soaked up. Meanwhile, the conductor led the orchestra through one piece after another.

After an hour and a half, the concert was concluded. Once again the folding chairs were packed up but this time for the evening. Several members of the audience approached the band shell to talk with the conductor or one of the musicians. Ethan remained seated while all the rest moved their belongings to their cars.

Gradually, the stage started to clear as the musicians wiped down their instruments and packed them away. The sun was still shining and would continue for another two hours before

sunset. Ethan made his way to the band shell and up onto the stage where he headed towards the conductor.

“Andrew!”

The conductor turned around to face a large bearded man in a yellow poncho.

“I see you’re still squandering your opportunities,” said Ethan in a challenging voice.

“Who are you?” asked Andrew.

“Ethan, you remember me don’t you?”

“Yes, but you—”

“Lost at sea. That was staged for the sake of my creditors. You should know a thing or two about staging things.”

“But how—”

“How is what I’d like to know after all these years. Let’s start with how you sabotaged my performance of Dvořák’s New World Symphony in Berlin—”

“I didn’t sabotage anything,” said Andrew, remembering the concert now. “It was your decision to go onstage with a high fever.”

“Pshaw! The entire strings section was off and the 4th movement was a debacle. The acoustics were awful as if there had been a draft across—God! It’s a wretched hall to play.”

“Still the same old Ethan—ever evading responsibility.”

“So, how in the world did you come by this local ensemble of amateur musicians? Last I heard you were replacing me in New York.”

“It’s a long story.”

“So’s mine, but I’m putting an end to it.”

With that Ethan pulled a large knife out from underneath his poncho and stabbed Andrew in the belly. He dropped the knife, stripped off the poncho, and hurried to the stage stairs.

Three musicians ran to Andrew’s side, and two more ran Ethan down and took him in hand. The bloody knife lay next to Andrew who had apparently not been fatally stabbed.

“You never could finish anything, Ethan,” he half-shouted before groaning and passing out from the loss of blood.

“We’ll see about that,” said Ethan as he bucked loose from his handlers and reached down for the knife.

Before anyone could stop him, he had plunged the knife deep into his own chest. He collapsed and landed on top of the unconscious Andrew.

The paramedics arrived and separated the two men. Down in front of the stage, a handful of young boys played soccer on the grass.

First published in Down in the Dirt, April 1, 2017.

The Ward

Ward 4-2, the mental health ward, was quiet this time of night. Dinner, the only meal of the day worth waiting for, had already been served, group sessions were over (it was mindfulness tonight), and the TV room was long empty. All the doors were closed, both those secured by card reader locks – the lights all red – and the residents' doors which were always left unlocked for the nurses.

It was good to walk the floor alone, to not have to have conversations (good or bad), to feel the open space of the wide corridors, to experience the muscles tensing and stretching and the breathing getting deeper and faster, to be in the moment.

The floors on the ward were polished to such a sheen that in the distance waves of brightness rose up like highway mirages. The floors were well taken care of like the rest of the \$2.2 billion hospital. The floors were buffed twice a day by a small, wrinkled old man who expertly guided his massive, humming machine around the ward eight times, each strip twice.

The best part of the walking was when the thoughts fled leaving behind a vague awareness of the body in motion, and since there was no chance of interruption, this could go on for an hour or more. The nurses had just completed their rounds and were busy doing paperwork at their stations, while all the residents, even the bad apples, were safely tucked away in their private rooms with their benzodiazepines, anti-psychotics and whatever other overnight medication was required.

Occasionally, a negative thought would return and block out all the other senses, but on good days, these thoughts were short-lived. With a great effort of thought, they would eventually

starve for lack of attention, shrivel up, and blow away, and then that elusive sense of the body in motion would settle in again even for a little while.

After an hour or so, the body was finally exhausted. No anti-anxiety sleep aids were necessary. A good thing because the nurses didn't like to dispense 'as needed' meds. Time to say good-bye to another day. It had only been a week, but it seemed like a month. Some of us weren't allowed to leave the ward and that was tough. The days dragged by. When I first arrived I called it the cuckoo's nest, but I was teaching myself to suppress such negative thoughts. Besides, the facility was different in almost every possible way. It was a hospital not an insane asylum, and it was new, modern, and well-appointed.

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Mr. Clean by Adam Mac

Lonnie's problem is that he has OCD, and he has intense anxiety working with human waste. Every day is like exposure therapy. He wears personal protective equipment from head to toe to prevent infection from biohazards and airborne particulate matter. At the end of each day, he showers in the company change room, then goes home and takes a long shower with a fresh bar of Ivory soap. He keeps a quart-sized container of hand sanitizer in his truck and a smaller bottle in his pocket.

The worst part of the job is vacuuming the waste out of the toilets into the truck's waste disposal tank, because the four-inch hose often gets clogged, and he has to clear the blockage. He gets five disposable tyvek suits each week and is reimbursed for each one he returns unused. He's never returned one.

It's an unpleasant job, but there are no other available jobs he's qualified for that pay as well.

Today he had a catastrophic accident. The pump siphoning the waste reversed flow and spewed raw sewage over a 2,500 square foot area including the management and engineering trailers. "What the hell have you done, you idiot!" yelled one of the engineers peering out of one of the brown-stained trailers. Lonnie, not knowing how it had happened, answered "I didn't do anything. It must have been a faulty valve or a malfunction in the pump motor."

This was the biggest spill Lonnie had ever seen, and he threw up several times before he could collect himself and call his supervisor. He taped off the area and told the guys in the trailers to stay put until the area could be cleaned and decontaminated. In this kind of emergency, Lonnie acquired a great deal of im-

portance, because he knew the protocols better than anyone. Even his supervisor let him run the show, repeating "it's your disaster Lonnie. You make the call."

It took three trucks till past midnight to vacuum up the waste, sanitize the ground and buildings, and deodorize the worksite.

When he got home, his grandmother, who lived with him, asked, "Why are you so late tonight?" He said, "There was an accident, Nana, and I had to supervise the cleanup."

"Supervise?" she asked. "Since when are you a supervisor."

"Well, I was already on site and knew what had to be done."

"So, what does this mean? Are you going to get a promotion or a raise or something?"

"Well, the regional manager showed up just as we were finishing, and he thanked me for doing such a fine job coordinating everything. He said "We need more supervisors like you. There's an opening in the new subdivision on the east side. Would you be interested?""

"What did you say?"

"What else could I say? I said ""Sure. Do I get a company car?""

"Will you have to wear those clothes and that mask thing?"

"No, being a supervisor is hands-off. Oh, remind me to book a hepatitis shot with Dr. Graham's office. I'm going to take a shower and go straight to bed. It's been a long day."

After he'd showered and dressed for bed, he started ruminating about how the sewage flow could have been reversed. Then he remembered. But he could never admit to that. Come to think of it, there was this guy hanging around the truck. Maybe— It's possible. It happened to one of their trucks out west a few years back. A tree-hugger had sabotaged the truck at the construction site of a ritzy condominium where acres of old forest had been cleared. That could have happened here, too. After all, there were protestors in the early days. One of them must have come back and tampered with the truck equipment, switching the mode from vacuuming to pumping. That's what happened. Now, could he sleep?

Dr. Sangfroid

Dr. Sangfroid wasn't his real name, but it was the one we gave him because of his cold-blooded manner and his stubborn reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis. He was one of those people who took pleasure in instilling fear in others, but even more he enjoyed inflicting pain on others. Unfortunately for Dr. Sangfroid, as his reputation spread, people stopped coming to him and went online to relate their stories. As a result, Dr. Sangfroid's effectiveness was limited to people who didn't know him, which is why he moved from city to city.

Social media were filled with terrible stories about Dr. Sangfroid. But not just that. They also gave detailed descriptions of his appearance, the latest make, model and colour of the BMW or Jaguar he was driving, and in which building his office was located.

From their Facebook accounts, some patients wrote about how Dr. Sangfroid typically started with psychoanalysis about 15 minutes into the 30-minute session. According to one patient, "He asked about my childhood (third time) and ended one session by asking when my father started and stopped molesting me. I was depressed for weeks."

Another patient tweeted that Dr. Sangfroid "wrote a scrip for an anti-anxiety med. caused cognitive impairment, ST memory loss & over-sedation. next session, said give it 3-4 more weeks. meantime, lost my job."

A suicidal patient was told at the reception desk on a Friday afternoon that "there's not enough time for your session today, and since you're probably just seeking attention anyway, you should just go home and sleep it off. And for God's sake, don't

cut yourself again. It's so messy." Yet, regardless how the sessions went, he always closed by saying "Enjoy life a little."

Complaints were filed and malpractice lawsuits were initiated, but basically people just stopped making appointments, and the office would have to close down. When he moved, Dr. Sangfroid got to where he didn't even unpack his boxes anymore other than the DSM-5 manual which always lay open on his desk—as if he consulted it. Even other psychiatrists in what is usually a closed circle refused to rise to his defence when his patients came to them and complained. And his own therapist stopped returning his calls.

No formal disciplinary action was ever taken against the Dr., but unable to make a comfortable living, he had to move south to practice psychiatry in a more "congenial and tropical environment." What he hadn't counted on was the flexibility of police enforcement when the local cartel's daughter was given medication which caused severe adverse reactions and nearly killed her, something that her family doctor said should have been foreseen from her medical history.

Dr. Sangfroid spent the next two years in the local jail. Never one to give up, he wrote his mostly fictional memoirs and had them published in six languages – bestsellers in two. After his literary success, the cartel boss forgave the Dr. and made him a travel guide in one of the beachside hotels.

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The Traveller

Wendall enjoyed life here as a carefree traveller, unburdened and unchained by anything this-worldly. There was just one problem. He had been recalled to complete his two-year compulsory service on the frontier of NGC9860. Because his father was a prominent admiral in the war against the rebels, Wendall couldn't avoid the draft. His departure date was two days away, and there was so much he hadn't seen, having spent all his time in North America.

Brigitte was his new love. He met her late morning at the Gulf station in Pittsburg, when he was thumbing a ride on Highway 3 in northern New Hampshire hoping to disappear in Canada. Just past the park forest, he told her he didn't have any papers. "No problem. You can ride in the trunk. Won't be more than 15 minutes. My uncle is Canada Border Services. He'll wave me through." Wendall looked at the Subaru and tried to convince himself it would be worth it. That wasn't when he fell in love with her. That came later. But he did start thinking she might be a help.

At lunch over rabbit stew and poutine, he told her his problem. Unfazed, Brigitte said, "Well, we'll just have to find someone to go back for you. Now finish up and we'll drive over to Quebec City for the night." He'd never told his story to a human before, and he knew how most humans felt about aliens, so he was pleased and surprised that she took in every bit. That evening over dinner, Brigitte laid out her plan. She'd obviously given it some thought.

They needed a passive host who could be easily managed. "I have chloroform. I use it to euthanize mangled animals caught in vicious traps laid by trappers." That was when he fell in love

with her. He was so relieved to have a plan the contradictions escaped him.

The next morning, they crossed the St. Lawrence and drove to L'Anse-au-Griffon at the far end of the Gaspé Peninsula. They waited until dark and spent the evening in a local inn. It was after 2:30 in the morning before they spotted him. The old man was blind drunk.

They followed him outside where he stumbled along the road. Once out of sight from the inn, Brigitte walked up beside him and stuck her leg out to trip him. He went down with a thud and an "Umph." She then chloroformed him. "Get the scalpel in my purse," she said. He knew what to do next. "The chip is set to malfunction mid-transport causing a fatal accident. There will be nothing left of me," Wendall said with a laugh.

Suddenly the drunk awakened and began to fight back. In the struggle, Wendall stabbed him in the eye and blood poured, but the drunk continued to resist. Brigitte stepped in to hold him, but he was too strong. He kicked them both away and lurched and shuffled back to the inn, screaming "Mon Dieu! My eye. I can't see. He stabbed me in my eye." "Let him go," said Brigitte.

"If I'm not back in five Earth hours, a search and rescue team will be dispatched," said Wendall, "but right now we should be worried that the Sûreté will be after us very soon."

"That's not your biggest worry," said Brigitte. "Wendall, I've really enjoyed your company, but I'm not from Earth. I'm with the Resistance, and you have to come with me. The Empire will pay a high price to get the great Admiral's son back. Let's go. Without our decoy, we've got less time."

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The Uncertainty of Being Earnest

Earnest was not your garden variety pessimist. Like his former idol, N., he was not satisfied just complaining. He had to destroy everything he found that was hopeful or good. Hope was an emotion and could not be trusted, and goodness was for the weak who needed directions on how to live. N. had also rejected all religions as variations on the same theme of creating purpose and the evidence to support it. And it wasn't just the inflamed radicals with deadly political objectives. It was also the ordinary believers who observed Ramadan, Easter, Yom Kippur, Vesak, or Diwali but were otherwise unremarkable. Drawing from a common belief in hope and goodness, they were all misguided.

N.'s problem had been that he was so successful, in his mind, that he lost the fire and enthusiasm that first drove him to demolish these hollow belief systems. Once done, Earnest recalled, N. became bored and turned pessimism against itself. Ironically, N. was converted to his new quest. He constructed his own elaborate philosophy and became guardedly optimistic—hopeful and in tune with goodness. In Earnest's view, N. had betrayed pessimism.

Earnest vowed to avoid the performative contradictions that had undermined N.'s later philosophy. For that to happen, he had to avoid N.'s mistake of challenging his own beliefs. He had to take as given that critique, destruction and pessimism were the essence of the eternally real. Because it was not belief but instead the very foundation upon which belief was built, it could not be logically removed without self-contradiction. To disconfirm is as much an affirmation as any belief, and pessimism is an attitude towards or belief about something. Yet something persists that is more fundamental than pessimism,

and that is doubt. Unlike pessimism, doubt can be infinitely regressed. That was Earnest's contribution which he felt completed N.'s work.

Theoretical scepticism and practical scepticism were two different things, Earnest discovered. He ended up believing in nothing, not even doubt. He couldn't be sure that he trusted anything, and so he decided to accept that everything could be confirmed and denied, good and bad, right and wrong, believed and doubted. To live or to die, to love or not to love, to be successful or to fail were equally good and bad. Nothing was fixed. Even his bed might not be his bed, his apartment downtown might not be his apartment and might not even be downtown. Furthermore, nothing was his—not the bicycle, the book collection, the clock on the bedside table, the toothbrush on the bathroom sink. All of these things might not even belong to him. But what was most disturbing was the possibility that his very thoughts were unreal and were not about real things and that they only appeared to be the thoughts of a person who might not even exist.

Earnest felt but stopped thinking. He was cold, lonely, depressed, and confused, and having no home to go to or identity to fall back on, he wandered the streets and slept where he fell. But this couldn't last indefinitely, and it didn't. He was picked up by the police, interrogated, and placed in a psychiatric hospital where thanks to an aggressive chemical intervention regime he discovered a new side of himself—the gullible buffoon.

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