

THIRTY Reasons

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I

I ask a man how to get to the botanical gardens. Having some time to spare, I think I will enjoy seeing something truly living. "Nobody goes there," he says. There is a small town nearby with shops and restaurants. I could go there, he says. I could also see a baseball game, seeing how I'll never be in this city again, he says. And promises me an experience I'll never forget. He confirms my fare is \$1.25 and pulls out of the stop. The seats are large and nearly all facing sideways. There's rough fabric on them. A few advertisements cover the walls. A large woman at the back is applying a white cream to her ample frame, grimacing. Her straw hat casting a small shadow over her face. Her rubbing becomes more frantic as the cream refuses to be absorbed. It is beyond saturation. I am somewhere close to beyond belief. I wonder, just then, whether these people are really brave.

II

I ask the hotel clerk where I could find food, seeing how everything is closed at 10pm around here. He confirms that everything in the hotel is indeed closed. I remarked earlier that there was really only one place in the hotel to eat. He says, yes, everything in the hotel is closed. I ask him whether there is a pub or small restaurant nearby where I could get food. He thinks. Maybe for the first time. He suggests that I exit the hotel, turn right and then proposes the suspicion that there must be something nearby. I am nearly stricken by his enthusiasm to help me. I assist him in telling him that, indeed, there are restaurants nearby but that I am looking for something small and affordable. I suggest that he point me to a pub. Again. He hears me for the first time. There's a pub about a mile away, he says, but just as he does so realizes that it's too far. He's likely overwhelmed by my requests. I wonder, just then, whether these people are really free.

III

I meet one of my colleagues in the morning and suggest that we have breakfast before starting the day. His agreement strengthens my faith in these people. He walks with me to a small nearby place. On the way he asks whether a pastry and coffee are sufficient for me. I look at him, reluctant to imagine the size of the pastry that would provide an adequate morning meal. We enter the small café before these thoughts grow to immeasurable proportions. He looks around, sees cakes and a few small and not-so-round bagels. There are packaged cookies and a lot of items on the menu that don't seem to be visible anywhere. Perhaps in the back. Perhaps. He sees my reluctance to stay and suggests another place. My faith lingers. My hunger persists. I agree. We walk to another place. Luckily nearby.

IV

I feel strangely indifferent about firing the gun. A pop. A kick. The black figure moves a little as the bullet pierces it. It's too easy. It has become all too easy. The last bullet leaves quickly. The experience feels dry. I want to get excited. I find solace in the fact that I can't.

V

It is a cheap Chinese restaurant. My half order is a size-and-a-half. I am sitting with four other people. One of them insists on calling me Marvin. His memory is not so good, he says, in a self-effacing and abrasive fashion. He starts by putting just enough energy to make his words understood. And then a little less than that. He is repeating something about an orange meat dish. Everything is \$3.95. I point to the "Orange chicken" on the menu. I doubt whether either of the words in the dish describes a fruit. He is certain that there's something else that is orange. I look down at my food. Surprisingly, I find myself in agreement. My straw drowned in my soft drink some time ago. The ice cubes clink assuredly, providing their own flavour. I spy some writing on the bottom of my plate. Never finishing my food, I discover only a few symbols. I imagine it says something patriotic. There are no fortune cookies here. Obligatory indifference to fate keeps the place going. The food is handed out of a small cutout in the wall. I imagine it a place to collect your belongings after a 20 year sentence. In a plastic bag. The food is similarly aged. Those at my table have distinct roles. One man says nothing, agreeing with everything and finding meaning in it. One man heartily laughs. Even in the end I cannot predict when this will happen. The third man provides himself as the victim for the last man, who insists on calling me Marvin. I eat more rice and watch. The fourth man overpowers the table with his cynically sociopathic monologues. He's half-eating a curled up object which has made good friends with a lot of frying oil in the recent past. Or distant past. I am suddenly faced with the possibility of repeating this experience. My appetite coincidentally disappears. I hope never to eat again.

VI

Upon entering the bakery, immediately the atmosphere strikes me as that of army barracks. The kind that has little sourdough loaves for decoration. There's extreme orderliness here. People behind counters are very authoritarian. They bark at people. Their jobs taken seriously. Their wage probably sufficient to afford them a large coffee. One per hour. He comments that this place is a favourite of students, being so affordable. I wonder. I look at the menu not for a second, before I am ordered to make a choice with a sharp "May I help you sir" from a counter woman. I notice that everyone serving is black. I notice that everyone eating is white. The equality of the inequality is stark. She looks at me, without trust. I cannot stand here and think to choose. I blurt out. Wanting a bagel with some plain cream cheese. A man behind her walks over to the bagel bin. Without turning around he yells "Kind?" Not at me, but at the bagels. I wait for the bagels to respond. Silent dough. "Whole wheat" I say. I cannot take the time to check whether this kind is actually available. The woman's stare is too much. "9 Grain?" He's not asking. He's strongly suggesting an alternative. The woman's eyes order me to agree. "Ok" I say. He picks up a bagel and throws it into a small steel machine with an opening. There's a sharp sound and two halves fall out. Clunk. Clunk. He walks over to a small fridge. He says something but I cannot understand. "Excuse me?" I ask. The woman's look becomes frightening. I get the feeling I've been here forever. "Plain or regular?" I don't understand but choose plain. Later I find I just chose the cream cheese type as I find a small plastic tub, painfully sealed, with "plain" carefully written on it. I look at the woman, she is waiting. Very likely for me. Or possibly for her patience to run out. "Oh, and a coffee" I add. Hoping to give her something to do and to keep myself up through the day. Already a roaring start. She says something incomprehensible. "Excuse me?" I repeat this phrase often later on. "Is that all, sir?" I wonder how many people don't finish their orders with the coffee item. I do get the feeling things are different here. "That's all" I say. I pay and move myself to a table where my colleague is sitting. He's ordered a scone. A coffee and pastry. I spread my plain cream cheese over a the bagel. I count only 5 grains and a lot of air. At that point I realize I haven't yet seen everything in life and so I resist going back and getting another bagel. I try to extract as much pleasure from my missing 4 grains. We chat in a bland and amiable way as I find myself looking at a sourdough bread award on the wall. I wonder who was frightened into giving this place that. It strikes me that nobody else had my experience.

VII

My plane is about to take off. Still at the gate. I am already in my seat. Some time ago I wish I were asleep. A woman on the small screens in front of the passengers is singing country music. There's sound but I don't know where it's coming from. I have no headphones. I imagine myself one of the two survivors after the crash. The other being the singing woman. Somehow the sound still works. I cannot move. There's not even smoke to obstruct the small flickering screen. It seems closer now than ever. My attention is diverted to a small bag with the word "Snack" thrust enthusiastically into my hand by a well-aged flight attendant. The word in bold, assuring me it is not a meal. Her bright red lipstick forms a thin line on her face, in contrast to the vertical streaks provided by days past. She smiles dryly. "Maybe you'll find something in there you'll like, sonny." She doesn't say. I open the bag. A small box of cereal. A small container of milk, painfully sealed. A small container of yogurt. An apple fallen from the generous tree of some airline. I eat the apple and try to understand how one can remove all water from a fruit, while preserving its shape. Coughing fiber, I close the bag. I suffer through the yogurt later. Leaving the plane I think of my abandoned cereal and milk, which rolled under the seat. I am asked two dollars for headphones. Suddenly I realize there hasn't been any sound coming from the screen above me. I look up at the smiling flight attendant. Her offer peeks through a plastic sterilized bag. I look at the screen. A woman is singing country music. I consider my money well spent as a down payment on a root canal and refuse her offer. She moves on. Someone behind pays and I hear their breathing grow more shallow. It's not clear to me how the comfort of other passengers is assured by my keeping my seatbelt fastened. The voice over the intercom assures me of this fact and I keep my faith. It is only later in the trip that I find myself losing it. With my head pressed against the hard wall, I ask for a pillow. I am handed a small object the size of a fair pin cushion. It is soft. Too soft. It is small. Too small. I don't know whether to lean my head on it or steep in for tea. My gut wrenches at the tough of the taste of the brew.

VIII

I am at what appears to be a student bar. There are people talking and some reading. Smoke hangs in the air. Luckily, a medical school near by. Expert care. My order is taken by a Hispanic woman. Everyone eating here is white. The contrast too bright. The water tastes like coffee. The smoke is like milk. I am again addressed as "Sir" which makes me order some cheesecake. I eat it with a plastic fork. The place loses itself with me in a short time. A man beside me is sitting and waving to everyone who enters. In a desperate way. He is ignored and leaves, replaced by a man in his late twenties, frantically smoking with a shaky hand reading the paper. A little too eager to read it. He starts at the back. Pressing the cigarette into his mouth as if someone is pulling back on his hand. Two people join him and I hear talk of internet companies. Dollar figures are dropped. Latest news. Current priorities. Future regrets.

IX

My colleague drives me to my destination. His dark red Lexus contrasts the streets. He comments on his current cold and moves our meeting back. He points to a distant popular monument and suggests that I must visit there before leaving. I wonder how many lives in the metro I will pass on my way there. Going to other places. Perhaps nowhere. The street seems strangely wide and without people. The tall, square buildings suffer their small windows, spaced all equally. Suddenly I feel that the windows of the car have turned translucent and we're driving through milk. He sees nothing. Driving straight. It strikes me that none of the blind here have canes or dogs. I ask about a distant building. Many windows, very tall and with a pointed top. It is an old hotel, now offering all the luxuries of city apartments. No doubt a living pyramid scheme.

X

As I enter the plane I pass a small box with bags with the word "Snack" on them. My suspicion is immediately stirred. I pick one up and carry it. Judging its contents by the weight. I decide that eating the bun from the bag was not a good idea. At the bottom of the bag I find a crumb that later turns out to be a small chocolate bar. It's equally dry. The extracted water is later served in a bottle. The accompanying brown cookie abandoned. I share the upright fate of my seat tray for the rest of my flight. The seat refuses to recline. No doubt, the flotation device would refuse to inflate. The flight attendants refuse to attend. Nobody even asks me for money for headphones anymore. An old television hangs from the ceiling of the plane. Nobody can reach the knobs to turn it on. One of the vents above me is broken and pointed directly at me. The turn-cap is missing and a dark hole blows air. I wonder whether I could see the stars through there. There are several adults in the rows ahead patronizing a precocious little girl about buying a hamster. She comments on returning from her grandparents. Perhaps a trip long enough to allow the parents to work out the finalities of the divorce. Perhaps of the marriage.

XI

I wonder how it could be that I flew, in so little time, to a place so far away. Just then I think of the shadows on my wall at night. The dream passes. I look around and wonder what casts the shadows that I see are people here. They move as the light source moves. The master magician in the back. The illusion almost perfect. For none to see.

XII

I return to the award winning bakery. I am committed. I tuck in my differences. I stand sufficiently far away from the menu board to be left alone to choose. No one looks at me for five minutes. I am indifferent and invisible. I take a step forward. I am yelled at to place my order at the cash. I choose a sandwich and am briskly informed that they will not be ready until 10am. I ask which ones will be. I am told all the other ones. What where the chances? I chose another sandwich. I have reached the patience of the service woman behind the counter. She tells me, in a matter which reflects her repetition, that they will not be ready until 10am. I ask which ones will be ready. She says "All the other ones". I choose another sandwich as far away on the menu from the two that take two hours to prepare. I wait. Words like "baby carrots", "petite green peas" and "pearl onions" on the wall menu contrast the tired employees, none of them babies, none of them petite, none of them pearly white. They are squirming words at one another. I don't know if I could be back here.

XIII

I am in a new model BMW. The driver tells me that we're 20 minutes away from a place where he would not want to be in this car. He jokes about us getting shot. I smile and watch the dark houses pass us by. We are looking for a street. One lost among passages of despair that we seem to be crossing endlessly. A fried chicken place advertises a 5 piece (dark) meal for \$2.99. A hamburger stand, still open, is recessed into a dark parking lot. Three people are making conversation outside. They look around. One block has houses with lights. Most do not. We pass various convents and churches. We stop at a gas station and ask a large man for directions. He sighs heavily and begins to think, very loudly. His manner of giving directions is based on the principle that if he tells us about enough places not to go to, we will have no choice but land at our desired destination. He delineates an imaginary space which we cannot leave without being certainly off our mark. We pull away without gaining trust. As we drive, I feel the car slow down. My window rolls down and my driver asks the man in the slow car beside us, window open, for our street. He looks at us once and accelerates. We speed to match him. Ask again. Immediately the man veers off to the right into a side street. I am lucky he felt he didn't have time to reload. We continue lost. At least towards lit parts. I am told that rent in this city is expensive. Yes, I think, only not in terms of money.

XIV

The matte black gun feels heavy and onerous in my hand. The bullets shine. Their bronze atop gold jackets. A silver belt. They slide into the magazine easily. One after another. Customers in line. Children waiting for the bell outside a school. Coffins in a funeral procession. The gun reflects very almost no light. Featureless. A void of distinction in my hand. I am intolerably aware of the difference before and after the magazine slipped into the handle. Click. All at once, a wrought metal piece can steal a hope. Or many. A dream. Or many. A future. Or possibilities. It can be an end. To some. A beginning. To others. I think it's like holding a drill in your hand. To put up a picture. Except this is different. This blackness can take down. I point the gun at the black man, he's 25 yards away. Silly, he doesn't move. Indifferent. Offering himself. A target sheet. Presenting his form to my death-hole I am pointing at him. I sense a distinct scent of light oil in the air. Things narrow down to the three aligned dots in front of my eyes. My sight to gun sight.

XV

I always seem to sleep early. This isn't a good place to be awake.

XVI

I return to my room and sit on the floor. The hotel around me. I unwrap my meal. Hardly won. From the time of wrapping it has built character and individuality. Things have gone astray. A pickle on the way out. An onion entwined with lettuce. Pepper touching tomatoes. Some kind of oil everywhere. I find delight in this unexpected disorder. The television in front of me is in a cabinet. I look up at it from my place on the floor, like a child. I have an urge to look at the door with the expectation of my parents coming home anytime. I realize this is a silly thought. I don't have a memory of my parents coming home together at all. A manufactured cliché. A life not lived. I resign to a channel. An aggressive voice and large lettering implores to call if your infant is unusually large, 50 or 60 pounds. Preferably more. Another bite of the food takes away any substance. The carpet smells of cigarette ashes. My food runs out. But not before other hopes.

XVII

I pass a cafe with people sitting on the patio. Candles light the inside. Small metal tables adorn the streets. It looks inviting and warm. Passing, I make note of a middle age man sitting with three women. He's leaning over a plate of finished food. I catch luckily only a glimpse of the conversation. "...Microsoft is off the ball. They have their pants down." Here he animates pulling down his pants without getting up. No doubt plenty of practice. "And they're getting spanked from behind." He swooshes his hand through the air, from the direction of one of the women towards his ample cushion. I wonder which one of his companions will take turns tonight. They seem to be enthusiastically listening. His animated state suggests anticipation. Perhaps an anxiety. Other things wait for him. I pass by.

XVIII

The rough walls of my room sharply bounce off the city sounds of the night. There's a hum outside my window. I look out and see cranes. Red lights flashing. An empty parking lot. Dark. A few cars under my window. I can't tell if it's the same ones from yesterday. The trees seem man-made. Soon after imagining staying here for much longer I close my eyes. It smells here like old smoke. In the walls. Under the flat carpet. I catch myself staying awake. I think of the dry food in the closed restaurant two floors below me. A soft drink machine buzzes somewhere on my floor. I haven't heard anyone pass my door. I try to motivate the second hand of my watch to move. I feel its tiredness. Its positions indistinguishable from one another. I am afraid to forget green.

XIX

Only a few steps away from exiting the car, I see something shiny on the parking lot gravel. A spent bullet casing lazes in the sun, having released its gift. It looks fresh. Most of the buildings around seem deserted. A few cars pass by. I marvel at the fortune of it not being night. I find some comfort in the presence of my companion. Not a small man, with a naturally shaved head. A man with time on his hands, he is under the impression that everybody is "busy killin".

XX

The Subway is very bright. Also very yellow. The light burns the paint into the wall. I try to keep my eyes closed while I order. I feel as if encased by a giant lemon, against my will. I am here because everything else is closed, just as this place should be. A vision of identical Subway buns in a small oven fills my sight. Twenty to a shelf. Twenty shelves. A lot of buns. The smallest are the whole wheat ones. Tiny as crumbs. This must be the reason why it is taking so long for her to locate one. She looks into the oven. Huffs. Puffs. Unpleasant with the unlikely event of someone wanting something that's not white. And plain. Her hand emerges victorious. The sadness of the bread requires the torment of war to describe. Things are shoved in it. Sprinkled. Peppered. Layered. Sprayed. Squeezed. Then cut. Wrapped and served. She assumes that the food is "to go", not offering me a choice. This is a place where nobody wants to stay. "Take the food and leave." the silence says. "Just run." The many yellow seats suffer their loneliness. Sitting across one another.

XXI

I always seem to wake early. This isn't a good place to be dreaming.

XXII

My companion's cell rings. Short words later, he informs that a friend has changed his mind about shooting a gun today. In this place, that means that he's decided to shoot. We're brought into the company of a large man in a red shirt, and a holster. He tells us that noons are busy. "People like to come in on their lunch hours, you know," he states blankly. "And shoot." To think I've just been having coffee all this time. He gives a short speech, just in case we didn't know, not to waste too much money on your "first semi-automatic". Of course not. How silly of me. I realize I didn't know what I was thinking. There are stuffed animals propped up on walls. A whole wolf. A part of the a deer: the head. No doubt shot. Some fish with gaping mouths, as if yawning forcefully. No doubt shot. Or frightened to death with a gun. In one of the alleys there is a girl, perhaps 15, shooting. In another a man with his young son. In another, a man alone. He didn't get custody, I think. He limps to the alley. His finger soon working. The place is full of dry obsession. Silent anger. Tortured discontent. Humanity deprived on too many levels, needing an external implant of metal near its body to feel empowered.

XXIII

The idea of returning to my room tastes bad. Damp music pouring out of the speaker above my head urges me on. I will open the door and with a click become caged. My oneness made obvious by the other bed, empty, in the room. Even if the curtain weren't drawn, I doubt even the light would want to come in and join me.

XXIV

The people at the airport gate oppress the air. Their looks feel heavy, their days seem long fabrics of coarse grey burlap. A garbled voice appears over our heads. Something about a delay. The entire process has the the nonchalant feel of preparation equivalent to renting a small car. This is nobody's final destination. Another stop. Another pause. A train station centered nowhere. The muggy spring air reminds me I am too far from water. A coast. The ocean. The only hum is the combined efforts of people and piping running through the halls and in walls. Overalled men outside are poking the airplane, as if expecting it to come alive. Its tranquilized metal body sitting silently. Resigned to take on the heaviness of more transients. Up. Up. Away. Down. Repeat.

XXV

I wake to flashes of light. The sky is burrowing in the ground. Nature. Lambant attempts to remind us. For some long instant that night, my importance ceases. I get a hint of feeling at home. But not because of this place. Rather, next to the lightning. The thunder reassures me, drowning out the city noise for just a while. When I consider how my time is spent, waking to a storm are minutes well lived. I am returning soon, to regain those things of me that I left behind. The things invaluable. The things delicate. The things forever.

XXVI

I am at the bakery again. My order is fumbled and dropped. The server woman, so sure yesterday, suffers her apologies. They're quick, matter-of-fact, cold things that she says. I feel avenged. I stand to wait for my order. A woman comes up. "Order right there, sir." pointing to the cash. I am left saying that I've already ordered. Another apology. No warmer. I preferred it the other way. With the yelling. I wouldn't have returned here tomorrow to do it all right. Seems like a fantasy, anyway. I save my dreams for later and some other place.

XXVII

A curious thought. Nearly two hundred bags, labeled "Snack", hurtling through space. High above clouds. Each accompanied by a person. Seems like a waste. Contents withdrawn, until exhausted. Then discarded. They'll be more.

XXVIII

For a short time I forget where I am. The music reminds me of darkness outside a bus window. White flecks of snow pass by. Or we pass them. Reflections of inside overlay cold light and shadow of trees. The sky glows slightly, the glow of a thousand homes reflected in winter clouds. Everything feels simple and sharp. The thread holding the days held tight. Hours, days, and weeks click by. A snow piece sticks to the window. Starts to melt, loses shape and slowly slides down. Transformed. Now liquid. It shakes, finding a path along the glass surface. Spreading thin. Periodically joined by others, losing itself. I think of my own window. My own changes. My own losing. I cannot guard constantly, the endless watch against the tides from all directions is tiring me. Notes pour into my head. Renascent memories. Emotionally I am starting to remember. What part of that is now me?

XXIX

Across the street is a large building for sale. Looks like an old hotel. A dilapidated plaque signals the presence of a deli inside. The for-sale-sign promises 200 rooms. And a restaurant. I imagine what it would be like to spend each night in a different room. Never returning. I'm struck with the horrible possibility of doing just that. Moving from one room to another. Each one horribly identical. Not knowing whether you've been in this one. Or that one. If you've slept here. Or there. I consider all the lives which were cycled through this place. Each individuality forced into identical boxes. Crushed. Overwhelmed. Perhaps people tried to add themselves to their stays. By way of a photo on a desk, a shirt draped over a chair, the distinct smell of a woman's perfume in the hallway, growing stronger towards one door out of many. The zero of indifference battling with the mind of one, or minds of many. I imagine dressing creaselessly. Being welcomed to sit. Being served. Eating. Not speaking. Looking past. Nullifying moments spent. Ignoring those moments now at my elbow. Fearing those not yet come. A face sits across me. Familiar and strange. Eyes focussed somewhere else. Mind forced to steer away. All parts of me are slightly further than my body. Just then, the hotel passes out of my sight. Luckily, not moments later.

XXX

I think it's not who you are. Or the things around you. It's the small space in between. The way that the two fit together. The interface between all the things that you are not and all the things you are. The thinnest layer. The smallest, most important distance in a life. To bridge it: its purpose.

XXX + I

I now realize where I am. In the land of the brave. In the land of the free. And what do you know? I am leaving.



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