

## Milk

I went out for a gallon of milk last night and met God.

My Thursday nights are typically set aside for pacing around my apartment, drinking beer and contemplating suicide. Last night was different.

After nearly fifteen years serving drinks to the same familiar people at the same stale bar in the same nowhere town, I had reached my breaking point. I was living in a perpetual state of liminality, drifting without emotion through an increasingly barren landscape as the youth moved away to start families elsewhere in the world, as the older generations withered and died. The factory around which the town had originally sprung was long abandoned, its decaying husk looming on the horizon, the skeleton of a once formidable titan. There was no future here.

I was already in a terrible mood when Ty had shown up at the bar. I hadn't seen him since high school when we were both post-punk skater rejects, smoking pot behind the gymnasium during lunchtime. After graduation I moved to another state to become a college dropout and a divorcee. I returned five years later to discover that Ty had gone off to Colorado to live with an aunt or a cousin or something. Neither of us had really bothered to keep in touch, so I was astonished to see what a dirty hippie he had become. He was like Jesus in a Pink Floyd shirt. In a bar full of aging rednecks with Tim McGraw blasting from the juke box, he truly resembled a prophet, an ambassador from some higher level of reality than the one I've been stranded in for most of my life. He sat at the bar for about an hour, during which I time I learned that he was in town to visit his mom, whose health was rapidly declining, and that he had opened a head shop in Colorado nearly a decade ago. Business was booming for him there.

Recognizing my misanthropic disposition, handed me a business card and offered me a job.

"That's one of my special cards," he said as he stood up to leave. "Enjoy, but take it slow

if it's been awhile. A little dab will do you. And give me a call when you're ready to take me up on that job."

I watched him leave before turning the card over to discover a small piece of paper taped to the back, just over an inch long and half an inch wide, wrapped in a small bit of cellophane. I looked around the bar. All of these automata driven by an ever diminishing will to reach the terminal end of obscurity, fading into history and leaving no more than a ghost whisper for a legacy. In a few short years, if I have not already been crushed by the weight of my own existence, I will be one of them.

My shift ended at seven and when my replacement arrived, I informed her that I would not be returning.

"What?" she said. "You're going to quit, just like that? No two weeks notice, no nothing?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

"What about the weekend? Who's going to close?"

I shrugged again. "Not my problem."

"What are you going to do for money?"

I thought about it for a second and realized that I had made my decision the moment I had looked at the back of Ty's card. "I think I'll move to Colorado."

# # #

When I arrived home, I instinctively went to the fridge for a beer, only to remember that I was nearly out of everything. I have been subsisting primarily on bar food and vitamins for awhile now. There was little more than half a gallon of milk and two partial boxes of cereal

available. I had surely intended to pick up beer on the way home, as per my routine, but the day had taken a peculiar turn and the idea had slipped my mind.

I re-examined Ty's business card.

TYSON COBBS: EXCREMEDITATION PROFESSIONAL, LLC

The logo had the word "Cobbs" formed into the shape of a bicycle with the C and the lower half of the second B forming the wheels. A bright green T represented the rider.

The blotter paper taped to the back had streaks of purple and green.

*Well, it's either this or a beer run.*

I opened the cellophane with a pair of tweezers and some needle nose plyers and separated a fifth of the paper with a razor blade, and that fifth in half.

*Take it slow if it's been awhile...*

I put the paper on my tongue and felt it dissolve.

*...a little dab will do you.*

And then nothing happened.

It was going to be awhile. I knew this already, but there was still a moment of anticlimactic letdown that made me really want beer. I returned to the fridge to stare at the milk again for a full minute before determining that I was in fact hungry and not thirsty. I opened the cabinet that served as my pantry and stared at my two partial boxes of cereal some more.

Nothing had changed. It was either this or a beer run, so fuck it, I had cereal.

The milk was bad. I didn't discover this until I had already put a spoonful of wet cereal into my mouth. It was like cold clam chowder and warm sour cream laced with something dead. I spit it into the trash can and dumped out the rest of the bowl.

*Fuck it, I'm having beer.*

I wasn't feeling anything from the acid. It would be awhile if it even happened at all—at least an hour, maybe two. So, I grabbed my keys. I needed milk anyway.

# # #

In a town full of domestic trucks, my thirty-year-old Volvo 340 stuck out like a sore thumb. On top of that, I had a headlight out. This needed to be a quick in and out kind of operation. If this stuff decided to kick in while a cop was writing me a ticket for the headlight there's no telling what might happen. I didn't need anything to set me back from the closest thing I've had to a plan in a very long time.

My single headlight cut through the night a butter knife, so I nearly missed the first stop sign. I skidded to a halt and looked around. No visible signs of life, a small-town advantage. The stop sign became a red smear across the dark neighborhood as I moved beyond it. I became hyper-aware of the existence of stop signs in an instant. I saw the next one from a block away and began deceleration proceedings. Everything slowed down until it all but stopped completely. The next stop sign was flying toward me from a great distance. I checked my mirrors for the police and was subsequently overcome by the riddle etched into the glass.

OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

*Sonofabitch! There's a stop sign back there, too!*

I remembered that I had almost missed it recently. Seemed like forever ago...

My hyper-awareness of stop signs never faltered, in fact it became more pronounced than before. But the riddle beneath the sign still perplexed me. The sign was closer than it appeared, yet it seemed to be getting smaller somehow. Also, how can something be closer than it appears to begin with? What sort of trickery is being played upon us by these car door mirrors?

Bathroom mirrors don't work this way. I'm pretty sure no mirrors work this way ever, with the possible exception of fun house mirrors, and maybe those convex mirrors they use in gas stations to spot shoplifters. But the rearview was flat. How was it any different than the mirror hanging from the windshield? I looked at that mirror to confirm my suspicion and was vindicated.

*Ha!*

There was no riddle etched upon the windshield mirror, and there was no discernable difference between the stop sign reflected in it and the one reflected in the door mirror. So, was the riddle etched on the car mirror stating a principle that was true of every rearview mirror in the car, or only itself? If the former, is this a principle which is true of all flat mirrors, including the one in my bathroom? Do objects reflected in that glass truly appear farther away than they are in reality? Has this always been the case and I just never noticed before? I moved my eyes back to the first mirror. No discernable difference between the size of the sign. It must be true. Unless of course all car mirrors are made with a special kind of glass meant to achieve this illusive effect. But if that was the case, then why? Why not make them out of the same glass as all other flat mirrors so they accurately reflect the truth? Why this deception?

As I scrutinized the evidence, I realized that the sign was getting smaller and smaller until it was the size of a pinhead knowing full well that if I turned around to look at it with my own naked eyes, it would surely be the size of a golf ball. This of course opened a new line of inquiry regarding size and distance. If the stop sign appears the size of a golf ball with my naked eye,

when in reality it is the size of a stop sign, then how can I truly trust my eyes? Are they playing the same trick on me as the mirrors? Before I could apply reason to these questions, I was hit by a blast of backwards momentum, like falling down a well. A third stop sign rushed toward me out of nowhere and I slammed on the breaks before it could hit me. It barely missed me as I slid into the empty intersection, tires screeching.

I looked around. The neighborhood was dead. Every house was a vague, porch-lit silhouette. There was nothing but an empty, shapeless void all around me. Even the stop signs had turned their backs on me. Just stop sign shaped silhouettes with the same immutable characteristic as every other stop sign—a perfect octagon. Otherwise, they were gray octangular monoliths floating in a square configuration all around me. Up ahead, about half a mile, give or take, I could see a dot of red that I immediately identified as another stop sign. It was a dot of red, nothing more, but somehow more of a stop sign than the rigid, unfeeling things that held me in their ritual grasp like an unwilling sacrifice. I placed my foot gently upon the accelerator and proceeded toward it, taking extra care to avoid the mirrors this time.

Memory and intuition informed me that the store was just beyond the next intersection, which was good news because this shit was starting to kick in.

I arrived at the next stop sign without incident and crossed the street in a perfectly normal way, landing the car safely and with great precision between the yellow parking lines. The lines glowed bright and I was careful not to step on them for fear of burning my shoes. The glass doors swung open for me as I approached them, and I was hit with a cold blast of air from above. Once on the other side of threshold everything changed. This was another world, vibrant and alive! I had transcended the world of shadows and arrived at the mouth of the cave.

The chess board floor and numbered rows of shelves were a testament to the math of this

place, where everything had perfect form. All the rest of the world—the dead neighborhood, my empty apartment, the bar full of automaton provincials—was nothing more than a pale reflection of this eternal realm. There were nine aisles—a trinity of trinities! I studied the list under each number, struggling to remember the original purpose of this excursion. The words were unintelligible, some sort of hieroglyphic-like pattern that kept rearranging itself.

A shrill voice pierced all my senses at once, shrieking from the void.

“Can I help you find something?”

I turned to see a girl, blonde hair pulled back into a pony tail, braces gleaming like ravenous knives. Her eyes were small burning oceans framed by thick black paint. In that moment, it was the most terrifying thing I had ever seen.

“Sir?” the creature said.

I was suddenly aware of the sour milk taste that had been lingering in my mouth all this time.

“Sir? Are you okay?”

I fumbled in my pockets for a mint or a piece of gum. To my surprise, I discovered that I had been prepared for this moment. I pulled out a single stick of gum, unwrapped it and shoved it into my mouth, chewing vigorously, never breaking eye contact with the girl.

“Sir? Do you need help?”

I was expecting a mint flavor, or at least something green or blue, but the gum tasted like paper and tin foil and the ghost of spoiled lactose only grew stronger.

“Milk,” I said.

Her face contorted into a horrible grin, baring her razor-sharp teeth. She lifted her arm in a grandiose gesture and shot a tangible line from her finger tip toward something behind me. I turned around to see the line dissipate as it touched the farthest aisle from the entrance.

“Number nine,” she said before floating away.

I made my way to the last aisle and found the milk. I was hit with another cold blast of air as I opened the door. Gallon upon gallon of the pure white liquid stared back at me, filling me with a sense of comfort and peace I had not experienced since childhood.

“Everything is going to be alright,” the milk said in a soothing tone. “You’re safe now.”

It felt like silk on my ear drums. I reached out for a gallon of my very own but froze the moment I was confronted by the math. One percent. Two percent. Whole. Whole milk contains about three and a half percent milk fat, so two percent milk is in fact nearly sixty percent of the total fat content of whole, while one percent is closer to thirty percent. Does that make two percent milk more, or less pure? Is skim milk the purest milk? Or is it purer the closer it is to its original state? What is True Milk?

“Me, you fool!” the whole milk said impatiently. “It’s me! I’m WHOLE. We don’t have time for this, we need to get out of here!”

Flabbergasted, I let the go of the door and as it slammed shut, I came face to face with a version of myself. I remembered an earlier version that was much smaller, with no facial hair and a naïve mush-brain. There was also a bitter old man with much less hair on his head and a lot more of it growing out of his ears and nose in there somewhere. A meat-coated skeleton driven by a ghost. What is the Whole form of Me?

It suddenly occurred to me that the dirty clump of paper I had been chewing on was not gum, but the rest of the ten-strip and a sense of urgency engulfed me.



*Holy shit, THE MILK!*

I opened the door again and grabbed the Whole Milk. I ran toward the register and slammed it down on the conveyor belt.

The girl from earlier was there, her oceanic eyes seemed a little duller somehow, her razor teeth concealed, her hair more of a dishwater blonde.

“Anything else for you?” she asked in a half-hearted voice.

“NO,” I said with determination.

“Okay, that’ll be three-fifty.”

*Of course, money!*

I reached for my wallet and to my relief it was there. I put a five down, grabbed the milk and made a break for the door, tripping over the threshold and falling face-first into infinity. I turned as I fell and landed on my shoulder, cradling Milk like a baby. Something bearing a loose resemblance to pain shot through my body for a moment, but quickly faded into the back of my consciousness as the pavement seized my attention.

Thousands of tiny rocks embedded into the black top reflected the green glow of the sign above the store like a field of neon stars. They sang out with one voice, beckoning to the empyrean above, deep calling to deep.

"Sir, are you okay?"

It was the girl again, standing at the glass doors, shrouded in the same green light as everything. She was a tutelary god—Guardian of the Realm of Milk and Math. Her voice emanated from her mouth of knives like a banshee's scream and betrayed the innocence of her false concern. I scrambled to my feet, tightening my protective hold on the milk, and fled into the night.

She continued to shriek unintelligible things as I ran, but her cries were the cries of doom and I refused to be overcome. I ran faster than I had ever run before. I ran until I could hear her no more, until the glow of the store was no longer visible. When I finally came to rest, I found myself standing in the center of the octangular monoliths once again. But something was very different this time. A lot of things were different in fact. I was different.

I had been successful in my quest for Milk. But at what cost?

The octagons held me within their ritual grasp as before, only now I was without my car. I tried to move, but my feet had somehow become embedded in the pavement. I looked down and saw that I was up to my ankles in road and sinking fast.

“You have to move,” Milk said. “We can’t stay here.”

“I can’t move,” I replied. “I’m stuck.”

The clump of paper was stuck to the inside of my lip. I spit it out and watched it scurry down the street which was now up to my knees.

The stop signs began to close in as I sank. They grew taller and leaned forward like a giant hand closing its fingers.

“This isn’t real,” Milk said. “None of this is real. It’s just an illusion. You can move.”

The road was up to my waste. I tried to shout, but my throat was full of sand. The lingering flavor of spoiled milk was thick on my tongue.

“Listen to me.”

Milk’s voice was like butter and my anxiety began to melt away as she whispered to me.

“You have been wrong about a great many things. Your perception of reality has been shaped by lies since your birth. You must shed these false beliefs in order to be free. Don’t trust your senses, they will deceive you. All of this could be nothing more than a dream. Grab ahold

of the one thing you cannot possibly deny, the one thing that must be true for anything to be true at all.”

The ground was up to my chest. I tried to speak, but only putrid milk came out.

“You exist. Even if you doubt your own existence, by that very act of doubting you prove yourself to be real. In order to doubt, you must first exist. But what is the Whole Form of you, beyond the material world? Your mind is not matter, just as I am not True Milk, but only an earthly representation. True Milk exists on a higher plane, intangible and invisible to our senses. The realm of ideas and numbers. You yourself exist on that plane in an eternal form, perfect and unfettered by the chains of this broken world. Become what you are! Drink of the True Milk and live forever!”

I wrenched the cap off the gallon and poured the fluid down my throat, washing away the sand and bad taste, purifying my soul. It flowed forever, running down my chin and spreading across the pavement. The ground dissolved and I was swept away by a sea of perfect cream. In the distance I saw a figure approaching, walking across the white surface. As he drew near, I could make out the long hair, the beard, the Floyd shirt.

“I told you to take it slow,” Ty said with laughter as he reached out his hand.

He pulled me up out the sea and I stood on the surface next to him.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’re safe now. There is nothing to fear.”

As he spoke, he was transfigured before me. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as the light. Together, we ascended into the heavens.