

Ouroboros

The town centre was arranged like the network of blood vessels in some muscle. There was one big vein road, four lanes wide, straddled by most of the big businesses of the town. From this street flowed out smaller capillary streets, fanning wide, but without ever really meeting one another or intersecting. Where there was an intersection, it was more like an accidental quirk of construction, the price of land necessitating that two unrelated and unwilling avenues were forced together. In one of these intersections, the street dipped. It was named after some national hero or other, and renamed after the country rebranded - declaring its independence. Often a visitor to the town might say the name of the street, or 'what it was that week' (as the residents quipped) to a taxi driver, to be met with a puzzled look. Often they would repeat the name, tweaking the pronunciation back and forth. Everyone who lived there simply called it valley lane, because of the dip.

By virtue of the geography, all the shops there were perennially in shade. Gregory had one shop in his sights. It was a small one that, at first glance, resembled more closely one of the many abandoned businesses, a bare patch on top giving a tell-tale mark of hastily removed signage. A single window had been replaced with a wooden board several years ago and painted over in a cream colour. Beside it was a reddish-brown door, old and flimsy looking, with scuff marks along the bottom. There was a simple lock, just one, which fitted one of the more old-fashioned keys. The unobtrusive and frankly unappealing appearance obviated the need for any real security.

Gregory went in. It was a normal Tuesday for him. On the inside, there was a grey carpet with bristles, standard office flooring, and a corridor that appeared to lead to nowhere, ending in a wall. On the right was a small counter. At head height for most people,

Gregory included, there was a small portal, a square recess in the wall adorned with a thin fibreboard piece. Gregory knocked on it, as usual. The door slid aside clattering against supports above and below it in the process.

'Oh, hello Mr Barnes!' He said. It was unusual that the boss might be in. A man with curly grey hair, a thin, sallow pale face, and round rimmed glasses had his head leant out, crossing a few centimetres through the portal. 'Good morning, Greg.'

Gregory hated this abbreviation of his name, every time he came, he thought that he would correct whomever faced him from the portal, but every time he was actually there, it slipped his mind entirely. Perhaps it was the power asymmetry he felt looking up at them. He was always preoccupied by wondering what was going on up there. 'Were there others in the room? Was Barnes sitting or perhaps standing? Where was the floor anyway? How big was the room behind the portal? Did the workers live in the building somewhere? If so, how did they get in?'

These trivialities were usually what filled his mind at these moments. He hadn't much in the way of social airs or graces, but he knew it would be inappropriate to ask any of this. Further, he was always nervous and apprehensive here, and the acceptance of mysteries he would never fathom, no matter how trivial, gave him a sense of comfort and acceptance.

This usual reverie had taken him over for a little too long. He saw Barnes looking at him almost sternly, and he said 'well?'

This knocked Gregory off balance. Barnes noticed. By way of an apology, he said 'what can I do you for?' Inverting the phrase to show he meant no harm, accompanied with a small flicker of a smile.

'Serotonin.'

He left after Barnes had given him a small vial, to be consumed instantly. It was around 40 mL, plain glass with a black screw-top lid. On the side was etched a pattern, perhaps some kind of code. It looked a bit like a barcode, with varying numbers and thicknesses of lines in between the vertical lines. He shoved his hand into his coat pocket and spread his index finger and thumb and dropped the vial gently into the gap between. Desperate as he was to enjoy it, he beat a hurried path to a nicer climate, there was a small recess between two buildings where the sun had managed to creep through, and the owner had put a small bench flanked by patches of flowers. He sat down, fixing his eyes on the sky above, a muted blue, as his hands unscrewed the vial, then his mouth gulped the clear liquid down in one swallow. Craning his head to bathe his face in light, he looked up at the ivy, pipes and slates protruding above, as he breathed in and out, feeling the cool air tingle in his nostrils. He wanted to get lost in this time, between dose and response, because things felt fine enough.

A quantum of light welled up inside him, and he opened his mouth, drinking in the freshness around him. He fancied he felt his voice bouncing off the wall opposite and back over his head.

"I just want to, to seize the reins. To seize the reins! For too long I've sat back, letting things go one way or another. It's time to be free."

Wanting to make the most of the feeling (he wasn't sure how long it would last), he stood up quickly, and walked. Despite his newfound sense of endeavour, he just wanted to see where it took him. The shaded streets were a little brighter, the colours on shopfronts a little richer, like someone had turned up the contrast on his eyes.

His shoes mesmerised him. A metronomic pop of leather soles on tarmac, like racket hitting ball from a distant TV. The rhythm carried his mind away. He was in a club, surrounded by smiling, beautiful people. He was on a mountain, eyes welling up at a smorgasbord of light and shadow ticking lakes and valleys. He was whacking his arm down onto the strings of a heavily distorted guitar, a crowd of hundreds banging their heads in time with the impulse of that arm, the room shaking, a few stalwarts shouting along to the words he almost squeezed out in fits of breath. He was in bed with the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, her deep brown eyes utterly concentrated on his as they -

He realised that he'd made his way all through the bloodstream to the heart - the train station, all the while lulled by his vain fantasies. He felt as though his small town couldn't contain him, as he boarded a train to the city.

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Gregory walked up to the bar, ready to order.

"I'll have a latte please, with almond milk and an es- you know what make it a double espresso."

"What kind of beans do you want?" It was that kind of place.

"What do you have on special?"

"Guatemala."

"Sounds good."

"Coming right up, just go find yourself a seat and we'll bring it to you."

“Can I take those away, actually?”

He looked over, across sleek leather chairs and warm filament bulbs, and smiled at her. She was definitely conventionally beautiful, she reminded him of a 50s pin-up. Their eyes had met on the way off the train, and a spark passed between them. He let her off first, and they both just stood, stock-still on the platform, waiting for the moment to crystallise. The idea of coffee came spontaneously to both, and she had dragged him along to this place. Without even knowing each other's names, there was a bond, an intimacy, which had kindled up on the crowded street, as she grabbed his hand to keep him from floating away in the resistless current of commuters. Before he'd known it, they found themselves on a quieter street, level, but her hand still clasping his.

He looked at the hands, his eternally deranged by musical instruments and circuit boards, hers daintier, with long slender fingers and crimson fake nails. And he looked up at her. A shared acknowledgment passed between them, and as the blood rushed to her cheeks, they both laughed, quipping about being husband and wife. Her name was Sandrine, he discovered along the way.

As he looked over, he patted himself on the back, “I must have some kind of magnetism right now? This has never happened before, this is unbelievable, she's the sort of girl that you want to be *seen with*.” Was he attracted to her, in any sense beyond the *pro forma* physical desire he felt from the very beginning? He didn't know, it didn't seem to matter. But there was something about her, something too corporeal. Perhaps it was just the shadow cast by her attainability, but it was never like that with *her*. *She* seemed aloof, almost ethereal, whereas with Sandrine, it was like he could imagine her walking too much and getting blisters, or throwing up from the coffee, or rushing to the bathroom. He couldn't explain how it bothered him, but even her breath on his face felt somehow profane.

But there they were, he sidled up to her holding the coffees.

“To go?”

“Yeah, is that ok, just so crowded in here, and you know, the park is just over there, and, well, the day...”

“Just over there? It must be about 5 minutes away.”

“Yeah, yeah alright but it's worth it, I promise - pinkie promise?”

She cracked a smile. Her shoulder twitched, the bare reflection of a laugh, and off they went.

He hadn't been wrong about the day. And there was a back and forth between them, a flirty game, teasing each other, touching each other incidentally, conversation melting away into eye contact, with no purpose, just a palpable atmosphere, thick with tension. Until they finally left.

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Serotonin. Vials clogging up his bathroom bin, all his pockets. A conveyor belt spitting out vial after vial after vial. His head, like a flicker book, tilting further and further back to take in the liquid faster. The scratched markings on the vials being drawn in the air in front of him. Embedded in the background of his vision indefinitely. “Seize the reins” “Seize the reins” “SEIZE THE REINS!”

*

After 9pm, the tables bearing records were shunted into the back, and a band or a single artist would appear, toting a strange instrument or a strange sound. This night, you were seated around a table, with five others - two guys, three girls - the kind of people you'd envied for their comfort in flitting between social circles. In the pit - that's what they called the slightly dropped semi-circle where the artists set up, was a local band, *Suffering Jukeboxes*. You hadn't heard of them before but sat contentedly as they blasted away

their Avant-pop. It was pure energy, funk basslines sliding in, wheeled away by powerful riffs, bridges and catchy refrains dangling between more challenging, bare-knuckle moments. This was the kind of life you'd always wanted.

During one particularly euphoric song, you couldn't resist dancing, and three or four of you stepped forward to the area between your table and the pit - an improvisational dancefloor. "I just can't resist getting down to *this* one." You said, with a twist of irony that was hilarious in the moment, just right. Maybe you looked like a dick, who knows - were they smiles of appreciation or mockery? It hardly mattered, because you were just having fun. And you left with a girl. Laughing at nothing, smoking together on a stairwell, waking up together, heading out again the next day.

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"You know it isn't really serotonin?!"

He felt like digging a hole and hiding, he expected sympathy, not judgement.

"Yeah, maybe, so, so what?"

"So it's synthetic crap, who even knows what it's doing to your body, not to mention your mind."

"Wise up. Nightshade is natural, so is arsenic, strychnine. All-natural goodness. And what fucking business of yours anyway."

"This isn't the way to feel good. You're just putting a fake plaster over wounded vanity."

"Bye"

"Look Gregory, I'm just -"

"BYE"-

*

The light in his eyes had dimmed again. He was back on earth, but it was darker for the light before. He walked aimlessly, marking time in a long wait for the next train to take him home, where he could shut himself up for a day, a week, or whatever he needed.

He put up the hood on his jacket. He walked without a destination. He reached an intersection, unsure of what to do, then he looked for anything green and lifelike within sight and walked towards it. He continued this pattern over and over, and it led him in circles, triangles, zigzags, and all other kinds of patterns.

As he ruminated, he saw a girl in a beret, with rounded, rosy cheeks - Sandrine. In a split second, he tried to get across the road, sent into panic by need for social withdrawal. But she was too close, and his attempt to escape merely put him in her path. He whispered out a faint, "Hi" and stood frozen in place.

"Umm, hey, do I know you - OH, Greg - hey! Are you ok? You look...different..."

He couldn't figure out much to say. "I'm fine, thanks, how are you?"

"Great, I'm just on my way somewhere."

"I, eh, I was gonna text you, I saw this thing - that guy, what's his name?"

"It was nice runni-"

"Kandinsky!"

"Oh yeah, I do like him, yeah."

"They have a thing downtown, a retrospective."

"Sorry, I really have to go, I'll text you. T-take care of yourself Gregory."

She left him flapping his mouth like a fish.

He knew that he wouldn't be going home, not at once. He'd be going back to the same dilapidated, anonymous shop where he looked for solace when life felt strange and discomforting.

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He backed out of the concert hall. As excited as he'd been before, he just couldn't manage being cooped up. He had felt himself peaking as *O Fortuna* rang out - right on time. It was an out of body experience; he felt the words coursing through him - like his persona disintegrated, and he was merely a channel for the music.

But the performance continued after. His legs were shaking. He kept trying to talk to the couple beside him, only to be shushed and greeted with dirty looks. So the concert was behind him, and he was instead in the fresh air outside, desperate for a smoke.

"Could you spare me a cigarette, sir?" The man did not immediately react, perhaps in shock at being called sir.

"Sure. Here you go."

"Just wasn't feeling it in there."

"Oh, what was it in there?"

"A classical show...well, how are you doing anyway?"

"Not going to many classical shows, anyway, let's just say that. Sitting on the curb outside 'em if that's anything to brag about."

Gregory looked down at the man, really seeing him for the first time. He wore old Converse shoes with a visible gap between sole and the toes, a leather jacket that was coming apart. His beard was uneven, clumped and long, with grey streaks like something stuck in it. Gregory involuntarily shuddered, then thought better of it, and sat down.

“You from here mate?”

“It’s Terry - and no. But I’ve lived here for about 20 years, can’t seem to make it out.”

“What brought you here then?”

“My wife and I, we thought it would be a better place for a family, and there was a good job going for me in the public sector.”

“Like a streetcleaner?”

“Hahaha, that’s exactly it - I fell in love with the streets and haven’t made it off them ever since.”

“Hahaha - I’m sorry, I guess I just had the association, a lot of people do that I suppose.”

“Do what?”

“Just look at you build a picture from where you are now, I guess.”

“I don’t know, mostly people just walk past, or maybe tut if I get too close.”

“I’m sorry, I almost did the same honestly.”

“I noticed - but it’s ok.”

“You want something to eat or drink?”

“I’m actually alright, a bit of money maybe?”

“Sure - people say you guys will just spend it on drink - I can just buy you the drink?”

“No, you’re good. That’s the other thing - people think addiction got me out here, for me it came later.”

A strange looking woman came up, she looked as though she had been beautiful once, but there was something very broken on her face, someone whom the world has treated like a doormat.

“This is Karina, I guess you’d say we’re kind of an item.”

“Nice to meet you - Gregory.”

“Greg’s been seeing an orchestra.”

“Yeah, didn’t fancy it though, if it’s ok, I can hang with you guys for a bit?”

“Well, it’s not exactly private property!” Karina grinned.

“What do you guys do on a normal day? I guess you’ve nowhere to stay, but do you have a routine?”

“Can’t really get on without one, honestly, if you can get enough together it’s an ok life, and we have each other I guess.”

They walked around, taking turns with the shopping trolley. Gregory thought that the chain-smoking might be a way of covering the smell that seemed to surround them, or perhaps one is inured to one’s own atmosphere. He was enthralled by his new friends, laughter and jokes flying around - he felt immune to other peoples’ perceptions of him. As the day wore on, when he thought he saw someone respectable, he increasingly bent down, like he was straining over the weight of the trolley, before slowly straightening his back when they had passed. He resolved, each time, not to do it again..

Later on, sitting in a vacant house, Terry turned around to Gregory and fixed him with a serious look:

“I was a teacher - a history teacher.”

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He woke up - and here was the plan. Have breakfast, drink water, jam for a while on the guitar, shower, shave, and drink some serotonin on the train. But he stopped communicating with himself, went to his jacket. Nothing there. He looked on the kitchen

table, the bathroom cupboard, over and over until finding it behind the TV and guzzling it greedily. Like a blind being shut, a mood descended. He dropped to the floor. He was about to curl up, instead he dropped his head back, the back of his head on the sofa. He wanted to cry, to bawl, to let it all out, but it wouldn't come.

He felt the expected rush, and the tears burst out, they seemed to wash out his mind, anguish, shame, inspiration all gone. He flapped his arm back behind him, found the remote and turned on a trivia quiz show, contestants competing for 10,000 - a paltry sum really. But he focused his attention on this, before his phone almost subconsciously slipped out of his pocket, scrolling through various betting apps and scanning news sites without really reading. He looked up at the clock above his door - 21.47. The day was gone.

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He was pinned to the ground by his pain. He vaguely recalled being held by one man, with an arm taught just below his neck in a manner strangely like a hug. But that was no longer needed. His earlier instinct to run from the fight now felt more of an aspirational goal than a cowardly compromise. He tried to look up and see the face. His head felt like it was made of granite. He managed to turn it just in time to see the boot. Avoiding it was out of the question, but he managed to lift a shoulder.

"Please, I don't want this, I didn't do anything, but I'm sorry, please just stop" He tried to push out the words but only a low groan would come.

He wanted to hear something. He just couldn't understand. He had no memory of how it came to this, what had he said? Had he stolen something?! He wanted to hear justification or at least acknowledgement of his humanity. But his unintelligible remonstrations did little. It merely fanned the vitriolic flames.

“Shut the FUCK up. Fuck you, you shit, you worthless...fucking cunt.” Concurrent with this, kicks were hitting him in his torso, his ribs, all over, and the coup de gras, a stomp on his back that left him unable to breathe.

Then silence for a minute. Gregory started to whimper. It was over, or so he could only hope. “I hope you fucking die” said the voice, the anger was gone, but a sense of resigned loathing came across.

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“That's just the way it was, you know Gregory, sorry. But it doesn't need to be like that for you. Come, tea and a nice meal will fix it up for you.”

“I'm good. I'd best be going, got to get back home. I have a job interview tomorrow, got to get everything ironed.”

Al had a look of disappointment, and just stood absorbing the words.

“Really, though, I'll come back next week. How about I give you my watch, then I have to come back to get it?”

“I don't want your watch. You can't keep going like this, it's nothing to me, just I'm worried.”

Gregory was getting increasingly uncomfortable. His hands went into his pocket, and his thumb started to trace around the little ridges in the lid of the vial.

“You've no need to be, honestly.”

“When Aunt Kerry - sorry, when your mum calls me next time, what I'm I gonna say to her?”

“Well, just the truth, I’m doing well, she doesn’t know anything anyway - but I’m sober, I’m feeling better, I have something exciting on the horizon. Your money will be well spent - but we don’t need to tell her about the money, right?”

Heavy sigh. “I’ll see you back here soon, please. But not like this, Emma won’t stand for it, not with the kids around, and I can’t be turning family away.”

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You made it round the corner. The smile well and truly gone, grabbed a small bottle from your pocket, the taste was more bitter than before, your mouth and throat open to bypass the tastebuds. Coughing as it went down the wrong way, muffling the sound in case he was still outside, then walking with the longest strides you could muster when that gambit failed.

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He saw *her* across the street, and she looked brighter than ever. He went to greet her, saw her hands intertwined with someone he didn’t recognise, and turned 180 degrees, suddenly absorbed in an antiques shop front. They entered a terraced house, a light went on overhead, and there they were talking, hugging in the window.

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He felt white hot emotion, blasting away what he had felt before, he could now no longer vouch for the veracity of anything he saw. But tonight, it was perfect. The park was illuminated with all colours of lanterns, and he caught his reflection in the pond. There was a moment of the sheer bliss that comes in being with nature. He went back to the others. Where was the purpose in everything?

“It’s all a bit of nothing. But we can make that nothing a bleak drudgery or we can make it a joy - that is where our power lies.”

"I think you're right, but I don't know, all of this pleasure, doesn't it eat away at itself?"

"You have to pace yourself, I guess."

"That's just the thing, isn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the way I see it, looking for pleasure is all well and good, but if that's all we do, we just get bored, and we go more and more extreme and less and less satisfied."

"Not if you build it around something else."

"But then the pleasure-seeking is just like a garnish, the real meaning comes from everything else we do."

"Sure."

"Yeah, that makes sense, but it's what gives us meaning."

"No! What you've actually done, is just reinvented the wheel..."

"How so?"

"Not if you don't care what anyone thinks."

"But you have to care. We go, we work, we try and find a job that matters to us, we try and find, friends, a relationship, start a family,, we go on the weekends and get drunk, or watch sports, or take in an exhibition."

"That sounds just fine to me."

"But then you're just doing what everyone else is doing. The hedonism is just a snake eating itself...what's it called again?"

"Ouroboros."

"Yeah, a floroborous."

Everyone made eye contact, a muted smirk transmigrated the group, but no one was looking at Gregory anymore.

“But that’s not what that represents - it’s not meant to be nihilistic and self-repeating.”

“I’ll use it how I want. But that’s all it is, we talk about hedonism and absurd meaning, but really, we’re just finding our way back to the lives everyone else is living. it’s just consumerism for people who want to look edgy.”

“So what, though?”

He had nothing. He just put his head down until the conversation changed, and he floated away in his mind, light as a feather.

*

He sat in an empty house. He hadn’t noticed the dwindling of his possessions drop by drop until now. Things had come to a sort of end. He could only now fixate on the marks on the wall. The pictures were gone, leaving gaps in the plaster where the previous tenants’ posters had lived. His eyes drew lines between the different marks, some where the paint had been scraped off to kill the mould. He tried to find the shapes of animals, like a prehistoric proto-astrologer, identifying constellations in the marks, some of which were scuffs (he didn’t know how they made it up there).

There was no one to call. Those he hadn’t alienated, were those whom he knew he couldn’t stand to disappoint. They would see him again, clean, not chipper but resigned and resolved. Vigour would return, like the blood in his cheeks that would accumulate in the sweat of toil.

“I fit in this little town again.” He liked how his words echoed – bouncing and falling on top of one another.

He tried to focus on his breathing, especially since his nose had come unblocked, but some thoughts he couldn't shake came out - his manifesto, and they dominated the empty room.

"It's like when you cut open a tree. You can see how old it is by the rings on the inside. And if you looked at those rings you could learn all kinds of things. How barren was the season? You could see scars from forest fires. You could see how bright it was. And everything I've gone through will just be another of many rings, slowly being covered by a new one, resting within me, within me always, but receding. I will feel bad, but just for now. It's not a penance or a trial, or a voyage of discovery - I think I've learned that, if nothing else - it's just what has to happen. The shivers, the pains, and the sad voice droning on in my gut, they're here, but not to stay. They're not to be fought, but accepted, lived through, until something new - fresh and vivacious, grows around me."

There, ahead of him were marks in a triangle with one below the tip. He fancied he saw a snake.