

## MARIONETTES

Today was just an ordinary day. Michael had again spent it in the city job hunting and returned home by bus. He made dinner for himself (which tonight consisted of two butt-ends of Wonder bread slathered with Jiffy peanut butter and laid out on the plastic bread bag as if it were a plate), poked the television to life, and collapsed with a grunt into a thread-bare recliner situated in the middle of his single room apartment. Just out of reach, a sink full of what appeared to be the fossilized remains of abandoned biology experiments, and a modern art piece made from a waste basket overflowing with crushed pizza boxes and energy bar wrappers, silently yearned for Michael's attention like forgotten pets; he could feel the weight of their expectations.

He coaxed two pills the size of caskets from a caramel-colored prescription bottle into his palm, curled at the edges to form a little bowl, catapulted them like stones into his mouth as if it were a castle gate and he was laying siege to his face, and promptly flooded the whole kingdom with water from a coffee cup—still carrying the faint wooden tang of Folgers' finest—in an effort to quench the fires of the infernal pain in his right leg. Another day conquered, he dropped his eyelids like curtains on the whole show and eased back until he was prone and ultimately unresponsive.

What was not so ordinary about today, other than the fact that it was his birthday, was that today Michael Varnay, a 42-year-old non-custodial father of two girls and unemployed janitor from Spokane, Washington, born on this day in 1969 to George and Elizabeth Varnay (the former of which he would never meet), decided to conclude his day by chasing his four pill end-day ritual dose of prescription painkillers down with fifty or so extra.

The morning had begun uneventfully enough: Michael had awakened as he had every morning since leaving his job nearly two years prior—promptly at the crack of ten or so—and resurrected himself with a groan from the spring-filled sack he endured as a mattress. From there, he rifled down

his usual breakfast consisting of anti-depressants along with the customary side of pain killers, then washed the entire feast down with a glass of tepid water. *The breakfast of chumpians*, he thought to himself with a flat chuckle.

The only variety in Michael's daily routine was whether or not he showered. Today, he decided, would be a no-shower day. It was his big day, after all, why should he bother?

Michael pulled on a clean white T-shirt which was permanently discolored beneath the arms and a dull, gray sweater that perpetually held the faint scent of body odor. He then dropped himself into a pair of faded blue-jeans which had begun to fray at the cuffs. After that, he took turns stabbing his stocking feet into brown shoes which crouched by the door like a pair of frightened guinea-pigs. On his way out, Michael plucked a book from the dresser by the door and passed his free hand over his wallet like a magician and made it disappear into his back pocket. With another turn of hand his keys were gone as well and he exited, stage left—no applause, just the single lonesome clap of a closing door lost against the relentless drone of an empty refrigerator.

Hobbling out onto the sidewalk, Michael made his way to the bus stop on the corner, mechanically throwing his good leg in front of his bad and puffing white breath into the air like a locomotive as he chugged along. Though it was cold, a combination of sunlight and friction had melted enough snow to make the road appear as if it had been slicked with grease. Tires sizzled like bacon on its surface as a steady flow of automobiles slowly motored by.

As if Mother Nature had decided that the cold wouldn't punish Michael enough, she had made it a particularly windy morning, and by the time the bus finally arrived Michael's occupied hand had turned purple; he could hardly feel the little paperback through the dull ache in his fingers. He paid the discomfort no mind. As the bus squealed to a stop, he dragged his sheltered hand from its nest in his coat pocket and it instinctively dove into his pants pocket, pecking at the change on the bottom until Michael felt satisfied that enough coins had been plucked from the lint to warrant a retrieval: \$1.30—a

nickel too much. He threw the extra coin back as if it were an underdeveloped catch.

The bus pulled away from the curb with a growl, slowly winding down into a deep-throated purr as its speed leveled off. Michael looked around at the other passengers' slack, gray faces. They could have been mannequins for their lack of expression.

The bus arrived in the city and Michael stepped out into a crowd of people. He worked his way toward the shopping district and, on the way, noticed a woman he had once met in college who, judging by the torment on her face, was about to lose a wrestling match with the case of water she was carrying. Michael surmised that she must have been taking the water to the nearby theater, as their daughters were both performing in a school production there that evening, and he moved in with the intention of offering to carry the package the remaining fifty or so feet. As she approached he smiled, "Hello," but the woman only glared back, disgusted, looking upon him as if he were an addict about to make a pitch for change. She walked on without saying a word. *Suffer, then*, Michael thought shaking his head and chuckling despite the skin shrinking embarrassment he felt. He resumed his journey.

At the coffee shop, Michael claimed his usual spot by the window, his usual muffin/coffee combo in hand. His swollen belly pressed against the counter, steadying his bulk as he mounted the stool like a gorilla climbing into a saddle on the world's smallest pony. Once settled, he tore a bit from the muffin and heaved it into his mouth. He looked down, noticing how the cranberries had stained the inside red. *Aw, shit...* he thought, *I killed it*. He smirked at the carnage and took a hit off his coffee.

From his perch, he watched through the window as the people outside drifted along the street like dolls floating down a stream. Occasionally they'd collide, becoming loosely entangled in an automated rhetoric, rehearsed and refined since childhood and carefully punctuated by a well placed farewell as the current gently pulled them back apart.

It all seemed unreal, as if he could use a rag to wipe away the backdrop from the window and see something completely different beyond the glass. He imagined God back there, a kind, eccentric old puppeteer working feverishly at marionette strings, grinning and chuckling between whimpers and sighs while tugging his creations to life. Michael often imagined God as this—the last or only of his kind, an immortal gone mad from the eternal loneliness of a singular existence, lost in the imaginary lives of his toys like an only child left unattended.

He imagined strings attached to the limbs of the wandering puppets outside, tugging them this way and that and stretching up far out of sight, their lengths lost in the milky blue heights of Heaven. He watched them pull the hands of men upward and jiggle them just so as their fingers locked fast on one another's rigid palms. He watched the gossamer strands pull the arms of women wide and, as their bodies collided, draw their limbs in again tight to squeeze their breasts gently but firmly together for just a moment.

Michael pitched the last of the muffin into his mouth and washed it down. He opened the book he had brought along and watched for awhile as letters skittered about inside like roaches brought into the light. Three pages in he quit, frustrated by his inability to decipher their purpose. He would try again later.

By mid-afternoon, Michael's bad leg had begun to complain. He had been walking the city for hours with the intent of applying for employment at any of the various businesses which lined the busy streets. At each he stopped, peering through windows at the bustling people inside, each set about some unseen purpose. Michael struggled to remember his. As he watched, he listed in his mind all of the reasons why he wouldn't be adequate to perform the duties associated with a position at any of the businesses and moved on. He did this daily—same businesses, same reasoning—remembering only vaguely the previous day's conclusions.

The day grew late and Michael's limbs had become drenched with fatigue. Coming about, he navigated back towards the bus stop. Arriving at an intersection, he watched the traffic light intently for the little white dummy to illuminate and signal to all of the other little white dummies below that it was safe to cross. After a few moments, the traffic light flashed green and, as always, the urge to step off of the curb overtook him momentarily and he rocked onto the balls of his feet before he felt a gentle tug in his mind and realized that he had been duped again. The woman next to him, however, had no such realization and launched into the street like she wanted the lead in a power-walking competition. Michael watched her strings grow taut as she strode out into traffic and wondered if she had meant to do it—if she had decided to cross despite the rule—or if the dummy had fooled her with its life and death version of Simon Says the way it had almost done him. “Don't do it, lady,” someone said in a hushed, sing-song voice and as he heard this, cars from across the intersection lunged forward as if the woman had dropped a checkered flag. Michael could hear the fibers that held her strain as she worked against their warning. Judging by her expression (and the fact that she leaped back to the curb like a startled cat), Michael concluded that she had not meant to challenge the rule.

Michael managed to reach the bus stop with no further excitement and waited patiently with others of the down-and-out caste to return home, defeated once again. He watched as the destitute engaged in their own auto-babble, and noted the difference in their use of language, tone, and posture to those outside the coffee shop window, it said: *I'm going to play it cool, because it looks like you and me are in the same boat. But don't fuck with me, and God damn-it don't you act like you're better than me or I'll open your fucking head up with the heel of my shoe.* But what actually came out of their mouths was, “Hey, what's up? Got a smoke?” Their lines had been drawn tight compared to those in the shopping district despite the lack of any sign of impending danger, but not so tight as to unravel the strands.

From across the street a man dragged broken strings along with him as he rolled into the flow of

traffic like a thunderstorm, a black cloud flashing with white bursts of lightning, and he rumbled towards the bus stop. Only one thread remained, stretching up from the top of his head, drawn tight as piano wire and with so many fibers snapped that it appeared to be covered with sparse fur. Horns blared like baying mules. Profanity leaped from the man's mouth and he shot at the irate drivers with .38 caliber tall-fingers like he was slinging six-guns.

The man jumped up onto the curb howling like a stray dog and Michael could see the other peoples' lines begin to tug them away from the maniac, as if celestial fishermen were working in tandem to reel them in before a shark could steal their catch. Michael's stomach twisted a little and he was careful not to make eye contact as the man ranted. He looked at his cell phone—five more minutes—five too many for Michael's liking.

Moments later, a bus pulled up to the curb which was traveling in the opposite direction than the one Michael was headed in. He was relieved when the man clawed his way aboard and, as it rolled away, he wondered who the man would choose to help him relieve a bit of the unbearable anguish of his perpetual fury. He also wondered what would happen when the final strand broke.

Michael's bus finally arrived and he rode home as the sunlight began to wane, draining color from the landscape. The other passengers looked even more gray and lifeless than they had before, and Michael wondered if he looked the same to the people behind the coffee shop's glass. He imagined he did.

After the short stroll from the bus stop, Michael reached his door, fumbled his key into the lock, and stepped inside as cautiously as one would step onto a train.

Now, Michael lay in his room upon his tired armchair, the last of the day's dim light glowing murkily through filthy windows. Before he finally fades into oblivion, he notices the frayed remains of severed silver threads spilling from his chair and smiles, tears abandoning his face as if it is a sinking

ship and he locks his lids tight, taking any remaining would-be evacuees down with him.

He awakes in darkness, shifting his mass to look about, the battered recliner groaning like the weary parent of an infant that will not be laid to bed. Close by, standing within the pale glow of an unseen stage light, a disheveled old Gepetto wearing a thread-bare burgundy cardigan worn-through at the elbows, navy-blue slacks that show more patch than pant, and brown leather shoes that would cause a cobbler to faint, stares back at Michael with a kind smile but despondent eyes. From a cross clenched in his fist hangs a bundle of strings that have begun to unravel at the ends—strings that could once have held a child's marionette.