

## INCOMING

Sometimes, the hardest thing in the world is not knowing what to call something. Or, if one were to speculate further: when that ‘something’ doesn’t belong. Instead, too many things are referred to by the same word. The English language can be a very daunting place, especially if it’s the only one you speak ...

Heteronyms ... A man *may* not get time off in the month of *May*. His son, a young adolescent voices a *blunt* refusal to go on vacation with his parents much later, in December instead. He wobbles away slowly because he hurt his knee while snowboarding, falling on a *blunt* object. The youngster wants an *alternate* plan, and won’t *alternate* himself. His mother stops cutting the *bass* for dinner in the kitchen, lets her husband do the reprimanding more effectively using his *bass* voice. The son wants to *close* his door, but his father is already up-*close*. His father judges the temporarily *invalid* son’s reasons *invalid*. The late vacation at the end of the year will be his *present*, the son is told ...

But the son, Jeremy, now six months later, can't confine himself to the *present*. He's in Indonesia ... thousands of miles away from home and snow. He really likes snow. That's why he wanted his family to go on vacation at the end of May, to someplace cold, when the weather would start getting warmer back home. He wanted to escape the dive into hot, muggy, sweltering pool parties and barbecues and parades. Instead, meditate on a snowboard, ascend into Nirvana by rushing down a hill of snow. He didn't. And now, when winter was painting his hometown in an abundance of white, of bliss ... his parents took him away from that heaven. Unnaturally descended into hell again; held prisoner on a resort; where the sand may be white also, but far from snow. The sand is, like everything else here: irritating. It gets stuck in his ears, mosquito bites bleed with scratching and in turn attract more onslaught from the parasites, salty water is forcefully gulped with each unexpected wave, half naked lazy sunburnt bodies surround him: everything is excruciatingly irritating.

'Jeremy!' his father waves his sixth pina colada at him; nearly half inclined on a bench, nearly fully drunk.

Back home, Jeremy's father is a respectable executive in a suit. Now, out here, in his palm tree shorts mimicking acres of them in the nearby hills, he looks like a *fish out of the water*. No. Wait. That's a stupid expression Jeremy retracts instantly. And thinks again. His father looks like a ...

'Wana go snorkeling and see some fish tomorrow?' his father hiccups.

'Fish are stupid.'

'You know the earth is made up of 7/10 ocean, right?' father embarrasses Jeremy ,

not because Jeremy doesn't know that ( he learnt the fact 6 years ago when he was 7), but because now there are 7 year old girls right in front of Jeremy, building a sandcastle by the shore. They've overheard Jeremy's father, and pause their labor, turn to Jeremy. 'You didn't know that?' they squeak, amazed. 'You must be stupid.'

Mocking laughter fills into the grainy West tower that the girls finish carving out determinedly.

Jeremy, still sitting with arms around raised knees (the entendre pose of boredom, or contemplation) doesn't flinch.

The little girls combined efforts in slogging over the castle all afternoon is commendable. It's nearly complete. Just a few cosmetic contortions are required; patting with the spade here, a dollop of wet sand there and viola; within the hour, they'll be able to pose with their creation, lock in that Kodak moment forever.

Jeremy wants to stomp all over the sand castle. Kick it to the ground. But he doesn't. Because he's not 7 years old anymore, like his new enemies.

'Hey!' he calls out.

Their little bodies turn to him.

'The tide's gonna come in, in less than hour, and wipe out your castle. I suggest you work faster.'

Getting older has it's perks. A 13 year old boy thinks before he acts.

Jeremy gets up and heads back toward the hotel, leaving behind fresh footprints and tears of 7 year old girls. Both will soon fade away. Everything does.

'Jeremy!' his father cries out from the hammock one last time. 'Snor

...snork...ling....fff ....fish!' his now empty glass draining his speech too.

Jeremy doesn't turn around. Pretends not to hear him. If he can't be in cold weather, he can certainly act it.

After an audaciously long trek because management has spent money for you to see what they've spent it on, through mesmerizing hallways and arches that the brochure of the resort swears has been constructed from reclaimed wood; encountering and returning the *bows* of staff members in pristine white uniforms, whose own ancestors probably defended barren lands like this with *bows* and arrows from the likes of Jeremy's ancestors, he finally makes it into the room.

But his sanctuary from the heat is not as he left it; the air-conditioner has been turned off. For hours.

'Mom!' Jeremy yells at what looks like a blonde haired sea lion made out of a duvet cover. His mother is scrunched up on the sofa, with the thin printed duvet wrapped around her body, twice. Only her hair and some of her head is visible.

'What?' she cannot scream because she's sniffing.

'It's a furnace in here. What's wrong with you?'

'I have a cold. Not that you or your good for nothing father care.'

He shuts up. She's right. He'd forgotten that she complained she wasn't feeling well in the morning. But he's 13; he justifies to himself. He can afford to be forgetful and insensitive. Jeremy's dad is a lot older than 13. But he's got many more excuses than Jeremy; Lucky seven in fact. All pina coladas today.

Jeremy feels bad; but not enough. Instead of wiping a tear, he wipes the sweat

under his brow and leaves the sauna temperature'd room. As he closes the door behind him, he hears his mother sniffing more incessantly; and hopes that she really does have a cold; that the sniffing are not tears.

Earlier in the day, he thought his mother might be faking the cold to spend time by herself; away from his father. She's faked allergies before for days for the same purpose.

The coffee shop is brimming with really old people; that is, much older than Jeremy's parents even. They're all sitting on cane chairs, chatting around expensive looking round tables, drinking tea. Tea is an old person's drink Jeremy deduces. It's like honey to them. But he hates honey he reminds himself. He'll come up with a suitable analogy later.

He sits by the bar, which allows 13 year olds like himself to turn on the swiveling bar stools during the day time. At night; this amusement ride is strictly for adults who've had too much, and seen too little.

Many years ago, his father sat in a bar; not as nice as this *bar*, and drank himself to sleep after failing the *bar* exam, again. Jeremy, thankfully doesn't know this story or even what a *bar* exam is.

He orders a Mountain Dew; because the ads on TV back home show snowboarders drinking it. He takes a large sip, closes his eyes purposefully and opens them again: the large painting on the wall above the bar in front of him hasn't turned into one of a snowcapped mountain. It's still a painting of a beach. Jeremy grudgingly admits to himself that the Mountain Dew does not grant him 'cool' super powers.

He doesn't indulge in the swiveling mechanics of the chair; would rather face the

painting than the sitting floral shirts and skirts behind him. At-least the painting of the beach doesn't shout out deceptive words like 'Paradise' every 3 seconds. No wonder everyone thinks old people are crazy. They're the only lot who'd call this sand and ocean hell a paradise. And most likely to indulge in it; now that they're retired, with cash and broken *ties* with their own kin to spare. But Jeremy doesn't know this last bit about their familial bankruptcy. Just like he doesn't know how to *tie* a *tie*.

'This place sucks!' someone plonks onto the stool next to him.

Jeremy doesn't care if a talking shark has miraculously turned both amphibious and vocal, and alcoholic too; jumped out of the water, taken a long walk on it's sharp scaly fins, through the laborious resort, just to make it here, to this bar, to grab a drink and speak those words: 'This place sucks!' He doesn't care if the shark will devour him in one bite. It will be a privilege to be eaten by one who thinks alike; even if it is a stupid fish.

Jeremy's chair creeks as he turns to face the speaker because it hasn't been oiled by *maintenance*. *Maintenance* of things is important; or they fall apart; like his parents marriage.

He is both surprised and relieved to know it isn't a shark that has just sat down next to him.

'What are you looking at?' She's about his age and height, but snaps like she really is going to chomp him up in one bite.

'Not..nothing,' Jeremy stops rhyming in his head.

'Nothing?' she yells again; pulling back her frizzy blonde hair, her deep angry blue

eyes poke him, 'Is that what I am to you? Nothing?'

Some wrinkled skin Floral shirts and skirts nearby stop sipping their teas; turn to stare at the commotion. Upon noticing that it's just two young playmates having a disagreement at the bar; they dismiss it. Return to paradise.

'Back off! I don't even know you!' Jeremy fights back; not to bully her; to survive.

'Well ... I'm Christine,' she smiles, extends a hand from a long limbed arm to shake his.

This girl's crazy Jeremy confirms in his head. There has to be a mental institution nearby from where she escaped. A shark would have been easier to handle. He needs to get away from her immediately.

'Hi,' Jeremy takes her hand and shakes it.

A 13 year old boy acts the way his body tells him to, despite thinking otherwise.

A couple of hours later; they know all that they need to know about each other to want to get to know each other more. Jeremy still hasn't figured out if it's Kristine with a K or Christine with a C. He thinks it impolite to ask; has confused it with the inquiry of a female's age. Which he has confirmed to be the same as his.

They're still too young to want to think about going into one of their rooms to be alone and too old to want to build sand castles. Even if they did, the tide now covers most of the beach that was available before.

So they *plant* themselves on a bench next to some *plant*, located in a part of the resort that keeps them away from the romantic couples strolling along with the sunset on the beach on one side and their respective caretakers back in the hotel building.

‘What are your parents like?’ Christine ( keep it simple- C comes much before K) asks.

‘Not divorced yet.’

She doesn’t hold Jeremy back on his answer. Is ahead of him. ‘Mine are already. I’m here with my grandparents.’

One of the tea flower sets are her grandparents? Guess some ties don’t break. Just skip over a generation.

English isn’t her first language; she has grown up in a place called Stockholm; Jeremy knew the word for the capital city of Sweden before he knew the country itself. After a loud fight between his parents; he overheard one of his mother’s friends on the phone using the expression ‘Stockholm syndrome’. He thought it was a disease and was scared stiff: wanted to find out if it could be passed down from mother to son, but then his father took him ice skating and he forgot all about it.

Christine speaks English as well as Jeremy. Just sounds very different. Like a foreign language, actually.

Jeremy is curious and asks, ‘Do you have heteronyms in your language too?’

‘Hej?’

She has no idea what he’s talking about.

Staring at her blonde hair and blue eyes that look like they were constructed on a snow peak, misinterpreting her native reply, and deceiving his own being ... Jeremy’s mind, body and soul, all for different reasons, have decided that he’s going to learn Swedish.



Later at night when he's back in the room with the air-conditioner finally turned on (though his mother continues the sea lion persona on the sofa) and his father passed out on the bed - alone, Jeremy switches channels on the TV. He lies on the reclaimed wood floor, reclaiming his life from back home in the familiar images on the screen.

On a sports channel; a snowboarding event in Sweden. He sits up to *watch* the program in its entirety. Doesn't look at his own *watch* even once, which would remind him he's not in jet-lag mode anymore. This is his third night on the resort. And the first day that he doesn't regret having come here. Because he's met Christine.

He's mesmerized by the stunts on the screen, the locales of the place ... but they're more exciting now, because of his meeting with her earlier. He replays the remainder of their evening together sitting by the plant.

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'Do you snowboard?' Jeremy asked her.

'Yeah. Of course. I think everyone in Sweden has to like either snowboarding or skiing, or both.'

'Do you miss it?'

'Couldn't you tell earlier in the coffee shop? My grandparents and I arrived here just today. And already I was so bored with the sand, the same stupid waves, the kiddie life. But I have to pretend to be happy when I'm next to them. They're very depressed about my parents divorcing.'

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His father snoring around a daunting cloud of booze, his mother wrapping herself in

the blanket on the sofa, like a package waiting to be mailed out ... both his parents distancing themselves from each other in that hotel suite, with only sand and sea knocking on the door besides room service, Jeremy has plenty of his own personal reasons to be unhappy, but Christine's words, 'pretend to be happy,' loop like a sermon in his head. The current flickering of snow on the TV helps at burying the unhappiness, most of all with anticipation ... of meeting Christine tomorrow

'We could Ski there,' Christine points her long thin finger the next day at the highest hill, which looks closer than it is to the resort.

'Are you crazy?' Jeremy rejects. 'There's no snow, duh!'

'So what?' she marches ahead of him. 'Last year, my grandparents took me to Dubai. It's all desert there you know. And I went skiing in the dunes.'

Jeremy doesn't know where Dubai is. 'Well, what about all those palm trees then?'

'Obstacle course!'

Watching Christine ahead of him, on this beach, populated with naked shells and costumed ones; including his father who is now back on the same hammock with a new drink, Jeremy can't help but feel things he doesn't know how to. These feelings are strong, confusing ... delightful. His board-shorts balloon unexpectedly (this has happened a few times before, but never with such little clothing on) and he runs into the water to conceal his embarrassment.

'Wait! I'll race you,' Christine yells out, but Jeremy has already dived in. The water is cold, distracting, working ... his concern fades away.

A *wave* hits Jeremy from behind just as his father puts his hand up to *wave* at a

passing waiter.

Jeremy's feet bounce off the surface: this is how drowning begins. Even though his head is submerged deep inside the salty water, a *tear* forms in his eye, but just then, he can also feel a *tear* in his board-shorts. Christine has yanked him out to safety. The damage to his swimming attire is minimal; and in a non-alarming section behind his thigh.

'What's wrong with you?' Christine scolds him *back* on the beach, while she thumps his *back*, removing water from his lungs. 'Didn't you see the big wave?'

Jeremy doesn't answer. Half his face is stuck to the sand and he smiles with the other half.

Nearby, the 7 year old construction workers are back again, earlier today; having heeded Jeremy's scorn as advice. But they do not thank him. Instead, mock him in his compromised position.

'Look at the stupid freak! He almost drowned.'

'Too bad his girlfriend saved him.'

As they giggle and sneer, Jeremy feels better, not because he can breathe freely now, but because the world 'girlfriend' feels like snow. The little devils have committed the act of aged priests by christening his relationship with Christine.

'I'm alright,' Jeremy gestures for her to stop beating him and he rises up.

Christine doesn't smile. 'You're so weak.' The words are too familiar. His mother has spoken them many times ... to his father.

She isn't originally from America either, but a place where they speak 'real

English' even though it doesn't sound anything like it. Maybe that's why Jeremy's parents don't get along; because they don't understand each other.

Jeremy knows he understands Christine, wants to ... but does she understand him? No matter. 'Can you teach me Swedish?' he resolves. He wants this to work; wants them to be different from his own parents, from hers ... wants them to be like the old floral shirts and skirts in the coffee shop.

'Oh my god!'

The voice that notices first distracts everyone. There is a pause ... and then only screams, because feet running in the sand don't make a noise. Some, like Christine & Jeremy, do not run. The sight is too amazing ... a few hundred meters ahead in the water, becoming closer every second, is a wave that seems to be touching the sky.

The 7 year olds have abandoned their half finished efforts, guests and staff stop what they are doing and congregate in a symphony of panic as the wave draws closer, becomes larger, like a moving movie screen. Only Jeremy's father remains steadfast; sucking down on his last drink, whose name Jeremy will never know.

Christine, like nearly everyone else who isn't running away, remains frozen, astounded by the wave. Jeremy is the only one who isn't moving and not looking at the incoming doom. Instead, he looks at her, grabs her hand, and squeezes hard. All he can think about; is being up on a snowcapped peak with her. Safe.

Neither of them speaks Japanese; the news will blast the word 'Tsunami' all across the globe. It is the only word that will be common in many translations, among many accents of reporters. It is in such events that Television can educate. Where the

absurdities of languages don't matter. The etymology of the word is too deep in Eastern history for it to have evolved. Waiting for the inevitable, Jeremy still thinks of a suitable word to call his father.

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