

Hank in Wonderland

“I *adore* my Peloton instructor.”

Hank stared at the back of the man’s expensive haircut, observing how its multiple close-cropped layers broadcasted his no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners attitude when it came to his workout schedule. “She pushes me like I’ve never been pushed before.” The man’s face turned slightly, as if shyly confessing that should the female before him hop into bed, she would experience a Herculean, paced-breath encounter. Dead on arrival, Hank thought, pleasantly recalling an old black-and-white movie of the same name.

Behind, another man waved his expensive new martini, the one with a Habanero pepper, and discussed his investment strategy to a second woman. “It’s not value, it’s quality. Get your hands on quality and hold ‘em.” The man, Hank intuited by the woman’s dulled face, would not be getting his hands on quality and holding them this night. On it went, their airline mileage status (“Diamond Medallion on Delta”), their marathon times, even their fantasy football lineups—Hank studied the facial casts of the many women in his life, standing at a bar, in front of the avocado and chips plate at a party, listening to man after man: faces congealed into pure womanly horror that this was not a lost hour, not a wasted evening, but a *forsaken entire life*

unspooling before them—and were as a beacon to Hank. Please rescue me and let's have happy sex, for God's sake. Once Hank realized that most women existed in a shell-shocked state of continuous boredom and desperation, their gratitude for conversation and sex became so abundant that he needed to hide from clubs, from museums, from galleries, from *grocery stores* to enjoy a few hours of rest and solitude.

A few strolls up and down Madison Avenue trained him to talk shoes and purses, even with a man's knowledge that shoes were pointless because once a man's view got to her knees, his mind was made up. Color, texture, styles, and brands. Hank was fluent in purses and shoes. He once tried perfumes, bringing up the extra dose of citrus in the Carolina Herrera, but no. American women didn't really care for perfume. He let them talk shoes and purses.

Four days of camping in Idaho was no deterrent to Sylvia, when her husband left for a business trip. She could get to rural Idaho from Beacon NY, there and back, with two days for pleasure. Hank gave up his fishing and pleased her, though truth be told, his penis finally became sore and he let his friend Tim stand in for a while, which was perfectly fine with Sylvia—the flight and rental car came to almost nine hundred bucks and she meant to garner all she could from it—and eventually all three of them lay entangled across one slender camping mattress, with feet and shoulders grinding into twigs protruding up from under the tent's plastic groundsheet.

Hank was not so coarse as to think of his many women acquaintances as his stable. He enjoyed talking with them. "Hello," was usually a great start—he understood that women had their half-second of recognition as well—possibility? Or no? When no, he cheerfully moved on. Otherwise, he loved the fragrance of their naked bodies—even the somewhat chubbier ones--as their nether regions wafted a saturated cloud of desire toward his face while his mouth fairly

gulped at the haze drifting upward from his tongue. Sliding his hands through their hair, across their skin, fingers mounding onto their delicious fat cells in all the right places, he loved the excitement in their liquidy eyes and the momentary glimpses of their faces, twisted and stretched with bared teeth as they groaned and saliva flew from their lips while he delivered orgasms blissfully removed from promise of forever. It was pure happy-go-lucky screwing and he loved them for it, loved watching a woman be happy, unburdened and lit up with appetite.

Hank grew up on a small midwestern farm and he considered life with a practical, materialistic eye. Sitting at coffee shops or in restaurants in Manhattan, he studied the passing crowds carefully: noticing the new brand of running shoe despite the poor running condition of the wearer, catching the elegant coloration of a bag dancing in a woman's hand as she hoped people noticed where she shopped, laughing at zippers on a jacket for a woman that made smirking eyes over her leather-obscured breasts, observing how people walked—sloppy with toes out, or controlled—how they spoke to strangers, to those in their own set. From what, he decided, is a kind of spirit world in which the throngs around him inhabited, he teased out that symbols made visible to elevate oneself above the mob is that which is human in us, and he drew new life from this essence. He grasped why a purse infused by a brand came to hold so much more power than exactly the same purse without the brand. And that the fuel for that relentless and evolving source demanded endless newer signs and symbols to outrun those lesser humans flagging behind.

Hank viewed the symbolic as an alien force, learning its power over the course of several torturous weeks back home. Their first argument was the engagement ring. Fifteen thousand bucks, when, in his view, zirconia surrounded by a thick gold swath, the same appearance

cruising in at a thousand bucks and lay the rest aside for a downpayment on a house. At the end, there was no house and no fiancé.

“Don’t put down style,” Xolani scolded him. “When you have the right purse, the right outfit, you glow inside. Your life is beautiful. Besides, you’re in finance,” she added mockingly. “Talk about living in a world of the occult and imaginative belief”—Xolani studied anthropology before she got her MBA in business—“nothing but strips of green-printed linen and cotton.”

“Less real, even, than printed paper,” Hank admitted. “Nothing but diodes on a screen. Little diodes turning on and off. Little glow bits.” He kissed her warm and ample lips. “But when many dots glow, you end up with a mile of steel jammed into a city block of concrete and up goes a skyscraper. Even a few dots....” She finished his thought, “...a spectacular meal in a beautiful setting serviced by a staff of forty.” Women, Hank recognized, presented a smokescreen of icy independence from the raw matter of the world, but connived as if they were practically Cro-Magnons; one to provide the calories and protection, the other the progeny, with the delightful modern addition of, but until we get to that, let’s have a lot of fun now because we’re young and hot and it’s a really good time to enjoy ourselves.

“Living in New York must kill someone like you, who looks at money as if it’s real,” Xolani reflected inside the cab as they rode downtown. “So expensive. Couldn’t you work from your computer back in whatever that state was you came from? Canada?”

“Canada is not one of our states,” Hank demurred.

“Well, something like Canada. Back there somewhere, where you chop wood to stoke a fire and live off road kill.”

Hank recalled the farm, what he might now term “subsistence” from his perch at the trading desk. A clothes line, flapping with linen and flannel. Canning jars lined up on basement

shelves. The duck pond, where he hunted among the cattails. Xolani had no idea how accurately she'd spoken. "Undeveloped," is what the county agent for the bank said when he appraised the farm. "We'll aggregate it with some other properties."

For Hank, New York City existed as a kind of imaginary cloud almost forever away, further than planets because what were planets except lumps that would take years to fly to and when you got to one, you had to find air and water and then wouldn't you have to start planting something? But New York—a forty-seven hour bus ride—where he understood the language, the taxes and the healthcare system!—life on the streets of New York dazed him, and he began to see a path to living outside the Hank of himself, to dream of himself away from the Hank of before, a Hank whose wet and muddy boots squished through the bleak March slush as it melted on upturned dirt.

"Unless you're getting rich," Xolani added with a broad smile. She crossed one skirted leg over the other and snuggled close, sliding his hand between the wide buttons of her skirt and guiding his forearm until fingers touched joyous locations.

"The glow dots on the screen," he allowed in a whisper, his lips grazing the soft expanse of her cheek, "they *do* feel like actual dollars in my hand." Hank pulled back as he explained as much to himself as to her. "It hurts when I transfer them to the next account. I feel goods and services evaporating out of me, like...a ghost departing." He draped an arm around her, where it lay relaxed across her shoulder as they jostled in the back seat of the cab as it changed lanes every block. He relaxed around women.

Hank sighed. "I don't even know what constitutes 'rich,'" he said, opening a bit of emotional space between himself and the beautiful Xolani.

“It’s like art versus pornography. You know rich when you see it.” She eased into his shoulders. “Start showing it,” she dared him, her fingers tapping his chest. “If you’ve got it. When you’re rich, you don’t have to hope. You live in the here and now. Drive up in a Lamborghini—how fun is that to ride in? Plus, you get to lord it over all your friends.”

His own place: spartan. Fourth floor with no elevator. A single bed, a small table for his 17” computer—big enough to avoid buying a separate, larger, TV—headphones and a library card. Two plastic pull-out drawers under the bed. Carefully chosen clothes and a small refrigerator took up the tiny closet. Nobody visited an abode in New York anyway. When he wanted to show luxury, he invited a woman to Miami or London. Woman liked staying where they could tell their friends, “They had a spa.”

He sat inside a coffee shop on Third, stirring up the leaf design on his latte, thinking about the phone call from Lenay, who had just hung up on him. She had learned to be frisky with Hank, but now she had moved on to other, better—probably younger—territory, and blamed it on Hank’s “unfaithfulness,” even though Lenay had always known there were others. She threw it in his face again and again, “unfaithful,” cynically bypassing his comment that he, in fact, had seen her with Kevin, not her husband, as well as the fact that, as Hank pointed out, “You’re married,” in what he hoped conveyed the right amount of injured bewilderment. She hung up on him. After fourteen years in the city, Hank was used to it.

He went in for a second latte—the barista was pretty and wore a blouse that revealed enough bosom to show she knew whence came tips. A middle-aged man in bright, loose pants and a golfing hat regaled her.

“It was a par three, but a long three. I had to use my seven iron and when the ball landed at the lip and rolled backwards and in—hole-in-one!—it was better than my wedding day! Hole-

in-one. I'll always have that. Marriages," he laughed, "come and go. Mine did." He named the course twice as if that provided the detail that spoke truth. "Awesome," she murmured. She poured another leaf into his latte. Hank winked at her. A blank nod acknowledged him as a customer but shut the door on interest. Hank could have been discussing his own handicap for all she cared.

The magic was broken. He returned to his seat. Seeing two women at the table near him, he asked, "May I ask your opinion?" The two women glanced up and he sensed irritation. He paused before pushing on. Not to save face—Hank felt himself almost facelessly anonymous—but because he was just alone enough to keep moving until stopped.

He slid a leather pouch out from under his jacket. "You're experienced critics of purses," he began. "I'm new to the whole man-purse thing. Do you think this is too outlandish for a man?" He had made it himself, starting with a wooden handle he cut from a thick juniper branch at the farm, stealing across the pasture and into the small stand of woods the shocking night his father died when the property was sold. Aggregated. The leather pouch was small, and on it he sewed heavy costume jewelry and glued bits of mosaic tile.

"Outlandish," the first woman judged, dismissing him.

"Different though. Actually, quite different," the second woman nodded appreciation. "Even brilliant." A glance lingered from the second woman. Soon—both women operated on that invisible female wavelength of sorting and retreat—the first woman departed and Hank sat down, immersing himself into that talk that offered the friendly second woman a hand, and her words reached back to him, taking him into her palm, easing their quiet terror and resignation. Another evening had begun.

Late that night, he sat upright in bed, his back against the unyielding wall, sipping wine in the dark with headphones pulled over his ears and his eyes closed, the chaos of his bones and flesh falling away as if he floated above the blue and green earth, listening to songs from long, long before.

[The end.]