

Critiques

He slumps in his chair and raises his hands alongside his cheeks. Jaw dropped, he stares at the screen with disbelief. Adjectives and adverbs: they're running wild in a forest of flowery pretension! Hardly a sentence goes by without an extraneous "then" or "that".

Who writes stuff like this?

He sighs and pushes on ... through dense tedium about sunbeams making patterns on the wood grain in the floorboards of an apartment where, three pages in, nothing has happened yet. Thesaurus-inspired words and overblown descriptions were apparently intended to compensate for the lack of anything interesting in this short story that's already too long.

He glances out the window and dives in again. The world becomes papier mâché. The characters are cardboard cutouts; the dialog reveals as much about the characters as a dog would by barking at a cat. Nowhere as believable as a dog, though.

How long does this go on, anyway? He scrolls the screen down. The page count is 17. *Oh god, I might have to get out the vodka and pour myself a stiff one.*

He's not that much into vodka, but he keeps it for emergencies. When there's good writing he likes to smoke some ganja. As he puts it, *The words jump off the page: "C'mon, let's go for a ride!" You're in the story, seeing the sights, hearing people say what they say, feeling what they feel. It's magic!*

The bad stuff is like that too, he adds, turning back to the screen with a sigh, *only exactly the opposite.*

He feels like he has been torn from the arms of Heaven and thrown with this story into hell. Although, truthfully, he doubts whether either is as extreme as they say. He's

skeptical of the putative perfection of Heaven on account of what some people say is the mandatory inclusion of people he ordinarily goes out of his way to avoid: televangelists and their followers. He deems having those people in his face for all eternity would be more like hell. *On earth you can get away from them, but being locked up for all eternity? No way, Jose!* He can't imagine Satan making his flames hot enough to compete with plastic-faced guys in expensive suits and slick haircuts dancing around on a stage waving leather-bound books above their heads, pulling microphones close to their money-begging lips and flailing their arms in the air about sin and sex and guilt ... but Jesus loved everybody.

Except the fags.

Visions of televangelists have scrambled his perception of the screen, so he follows his imaginative turn: *No, that's not it. "Hate the sin and love the sinner" is what they say. So the preacher goes, "My dear brother, I love you so much, and I just wish you would start putting your penis in vaginas so the Lord could accept you and you could accept the Lord and be one with Him for all eternity in the glory of His Kingdom. Otherwise, I'm afraid you're bound for the Big Furnace Down Below, just so you know."*

His fag stares at the wall. "Speaking of hell, why don't you go there."

He remembers the story. *This is a story from hell!* he mutters into his dark place while peering at the screen again with squinted eyes.

His thoughts return to Heaven, where people smile all the time, the music never gets nasty and everybody dances tastefully and modestly to the plucking of harps. He sees himself sitting with a cloud-mate watching a lovely scene of blissful play; he turns and says, "Do you know how this will end?" She says, "Of course I know, silly; they'll join in harmony to praise and glorify the Lord!"

And then they have sex for the zillionth time.

Or maybe not.

He's never been clear about sex in Heaven; there seem to be opposing schools of thought. He was not brought up as a Muslim, so all he knows about them is that after 9/11 they talked about the 72 virgins the terrorists would inherit as a reward for flying planes into buildings. Same as the ones who blow themselves up in crowded markets to kill infidels.

Pondering this, he admits that he has never seen it explained explicitly, but he is unable to imagine the point of the virgins if they weren't used as sex toys. *Heaven would be no place for their listless, sullen moods*, he muses, drawing on his experience of raising a couple of girls through their teenage years. *Maybe you could put up with it for a little while, but we're talking eternity here, so come on!* The ones in his house were never good about cleaning their rooms either, *So, really*, he concludes, *the virgins have to be sex toys.*

It appears to him that whoever manufactured that religion didn't think through the part about the virgins. He thinks of other issues too ... such as why 72? If you're dealing with an infinite amount of time, any finite number of virginal sex toys would be insufficient, but apparently this not only didn't occur to the guys that thought the religion up, it never occurs to the suicidal jihadists either. *Don't they ever even negotiate? Like, "I don't care what you paid the guys before, I ain't blowin' myself up for no 72 virgins!"* The imam says, *"How many do you want then?"* And the guy says, *"You're talkin' infinite time, I think we're talkin' infinite virgins."* The imam says, *"Infinite virgins, you got it, dude! We good to go then?"* The guy shrugs and straps on the bomb. *"Yeah, I guess so."*

He conjectures that you'd probably find other stupid stuff if you started digging around ... into any religion, for that matter.

He keeps his heretical ideas to himself, however, upholding the façade he maintains with his neighbors about sharing their beliefs in bizarre stories and nonsensical superstitions. Despite his loathing of politicians, he has imagined running for office someday, and he's well aware of the necessity to convince voters that the candidate they are considering shares their delusions. He wonders whether his neighbors could be faking religion for similar reasons, and he delights in imagining the Pope secretly not being Catholic or those dour-faced ayatollah dudes getting drunk on the sly and jacking off to porn videos they keep on an encrypted drive.

His thoughts return to the Muslims' sex toy idea, and he contrasts it with the Christians, who have always been mute on the subject of virginal sex toys in Heaven. Many have told him they'll have what they call "glorified bodies", the specific attributes of which they never spell out, but he has employed logic to deduce their lack of sex organs. He argues: *Obviously they won't have sex organs because, like all the non-imaginary body parts, they're heavier than air, so how can they float around on clouds, let alone make it all the way to the pearly gates, which I don't know where those are supposed to be but it's apparently too far for astronomers to see, and they can see billions of light years, so Einstein's speed-of-light limitation on anything having mass is the basic reason why they can't have sex organs ... if you want to get all sciencey about it.*

He reaches what seems to be an inexorable corollary inference: *Listen, anybody that thinks a sexless body is glorified has never had orgasms like mine. No orgasms, no loud music, no getting stoned, no thrusting my stuff and waving my hands above my head while I*

dance with hot women in seedy bars, no shooting pool while I'm so drunk I can't hardly see the ball? This ain't Heaven, folks. You call it whatever you want, but it ain't Heaven.

Hank Williams, Jr. got it right: "If Heaven ain't a lot like Dixie, I don't want to go".

He decides if he can't be in Heaven, that's all the more reason to believe this story is demonstrating his residence in hell. It probably started with Heaven's cloying, stultifying happiness, which evidently led to his applying for a permit to go do a study of the nether world. *Check in down below, see how things are going, don't you know. "Hey folks, you're looking terrible today! Don't you wish now you had come forward in church and accepted Christ into your heart as your personal savior and dedicated your life to Him? Burn, suckas!"*

Of course God, being omniscient, already knew you can't study hell without getting caught up in it, but He went ahead with the permitting process anyway because, in fact, He was powerless to refuse a permit since thwarting any desire would mean Heaven was no longer Heaven, and if there's no Heaven what the hell does God preside over? Being the Supreme Logician, God is believed to have had a meltdown from the logical dissonance of powerless omnipotence. At least that's the prevailing theory among those who keep track of Him and have noted His absence from the radar ever since.

Or Her, whatever. His thoughts turn to God's Penis and His Testicle-Bearing Scrotum. The Christians and Jews say God is a man, but they never explain away that problem about the speed of light, so our protagonist has grave doubts about God's Man Parts. He imagines God not being like a human at all, not even Charlton Heston or George Burns.

He remembers that Charlton Heston was Moses and feels embarrassed for having mistakenly thought of him. And he never saw George Burns' penis either, so, he realizes,

he knows nothing. *Maybe God is a jackass. Or a tortoise, or a squirrel, or a shark or even a tree. Doesn't matter what it is, worshipping it provides something to argue about and often causes terrible suffering through bondage and mutilation and wars and genocide.*

He acknowledges that this is all beside whatever the point is, but he doesn't care because the screen has come to resemble molten chocolate dripping down a brick wall, and multicolored spider webs are connecting everything to everything else.

The story is part of a contest where the rules said if he wanted his own work to be in the running he had to read seven others and rank them from 1 to 7, with 1 being the best and 7 the worst. *What if they're all #7? What if it's all complete rubbish? Ah, but all rubbish is not equal!* His thoughts turn to degrees of rubbish, how some can be put in the special recycling containers they have now, some can be shredded and used as garden mulch, coffee grounds can fertilize and aerate your soil, and so on. But some garbage does need to get hauled away because it's icky, it stinks and we don't want it around. Nor do the neighbors. The story on screen seems like that.

He still has to rank them, though. Which story will be seven-dot-one? *Not this one. This is seven-dot-seven, with no possibility of parole!* He is dismayed at the malconstructed sentences with misspelled words and the turgid allusions to nonsensicality in the name of entertainment for, he hopes, the author's benefit because, he assures himself, no one else could possibly get anything out of this monstrosity besides the need for a stiff drink.

The idea inspires him to consider ingesting more drugs. He reflects on how cannabis shuns ugliness and leads to crayons on paper, music on Pandora and him dancing naked in his stocking feet whereas alcohol is like Novocain on a toothache, numbing one until one reaches the point where there is no more pain; one can plunge in, read the unreadable and

commune with the mind that created what he has begun to call “this dreck”. However, further reflection elicits the memory that he can still spell and punctuate while drunk, so he withdraws the simile as it pertains to the communion, apologizes to himself about the faux pas and on general principles takes another sip from the low, wide tumbler next to his hand. It’s one of those plastic ones that look like glass, which probably means it contains BPA, the latest “absolutely safe and harmless” petrochemical shown to cause cancer and birth defects, but he’s so beyond that now. There are many, many other ways to die.

Returning to the story, he is astonished and thrilled to sniff some vapors of truth wafting up from the putrid broth. A believable description appears, some dialog sounds so true he begins to feel something ... *yes, an emotion stirred in there!* ... for a character who is not, it turns out, a cardboard cutout after all! The possibility of the story rising above #7 stirs excitement in his bosom. *Hold the vodka, let’s keep reading!* he says out loud.

It doesn’t get better but it doesn’t get worse either, and then the main character dies, which he believes was the point of the story. He could be wrong, though, because his kids have told him numerous times he’s obsessed with death. He doesn’t see that as a bad thing. He figures since death is where everything ends up it deserves a lot more attention than it gets. *Non-hysterical attention*, he qualifies.

While loading what will be the last story, he begins to speculate on how he’ll die. He hopes it’s unexpected. The last thing he wants is to get caught up in some long, drawn-out bedridden bullshit with a hospice nurse that comes around once a day and orderlies who change his diaper if and when they get around to it. Meanwhile, they relieve the boredom of their pathetic jobs by inflicting pain that they know won’t leave any marks, and he can’t

tell anybody on account of the paralysis from his stroke. They joke with each other while they watch him grimace, and they listen with giddy excitement to his screams and moans.

His preference leans more toward some guy in baggy pants and a hoodie pulling out a pistol, pointing it in his face and mumbling for him to hand over his money.

He imagines himself looking the mugger in the eye, chuckling and saying, “Or what? You’re gonna shoot me with that?”

“Don’t fuck around!” the mugger would say, huffing and waving the gun back and forth.

“Sorry,” he’d say with a big grin, “I like to fuck around.”

His lack of cowering would confuse our mugger. He would become disturbed about the unexpected behavior: it could easily send this minor caper into the shitter, get him busted and eventually get him butt-fucked in the slammer by a big fat guy with bleeding sores on his dick while two accomplices held him face down leaning over the edge of his bunk. The thought would send an impulse telling his sphincter to contract, and the tension and confusion of the moment would replicate the impulse in the nerves connected to his trigger finger, causing him to unintentionally send a metal projectile through our protagonist’s skull. This would explode into tiny shards that would go every which way, ripping apart all those intricate neuronal connections and causing the brain to stop functioning. The body would slump to the ground, and he’d be out of there. Meanwhile, the shit would hit the fan for the mugger. *But the mugging was his idea, so fuck him*, our protagonist adds, squirming, then settling in his chair.

As for the other death methods, he’s never been a big fan of drowning, although he obviously doesn’t really know because he’s still alive. When he holds his breath it gets

pretty intense right before he can't hold it any more, he knows that. Not a good feeling.

People say once you get past a certain point it gets very peaceful, but he wonders how they know.

He concedes the irrelevance of his aversion to drowning in the context of death methods over which he has no control, so he sets out to concoct a scenario deliberately involving drowning as its principal theme ... to create an aesthetically pleasing complement to the mugging and shooting and, most importantly, to stay amused while plodding through this last story which isn't, regrettably, particularly wonderful either. At least not so far.

He imagines somebody he pissed off once becoming a close adviser to the President and this spiteful person suggesting to el Presidente that he take advantage of the powers Congress granted him under the National Defense Authorization Act, decreeing without justification or the need for it our protagonist to be an "enemy combatant". This enables some CIA goons to follow him around in an unmarked, windowless van until they spot him carrying bags of groceries across a parking lot to his car. They pull up, throw a black hood over his head, shove him in the back door and take him to a secret location for waterboarding.

By coincidence, his attendants are both fans of college hoops, it's late March, and they have placed sizable wagers with their bookies about the "March Madness" games. The final, crucial playoff is on TV at exactly the time they're required to torture him, so, since there's nothing else to do while he's writhing and clinging desperately to life, they roll in a big screen to watch the game, putting the Tivo on pause during their repeated episodes of inflicting excruciating pain and returning him to the brink of death. That way they can fast forward through the commercials later, you know.

His thoughts turn to a study he did once of the mechanics of waterboarding. He imagines being strapped on his back to a board, his face covered with a cloth ... onto which they pour water, which shuts off his air. People often gag, and they can drown in their own vomit if the torturers aren't attentive. Sometimes they break their own bones in their life-and-death struggle against their shackles, which of course adds to the torturers' amusement. An experienced torture team can, if they maintain the pace just right, keep this going for hours and hours, inflicting damage not just to bones but to lungs and brain. No one will ever be the wiser though, because once this law starts being commonly used, the guidelines will require the dispatching and disposing of the victim at the termination of each work session. *Like in Argentina in the late '70s and early '80s*, he notes.

He recalls from his readings how if they keep up the process long enough, sleep deprivation enters the equation and how it's not uncommon for victims to beg to be killed, but the torturers don't until they're good and ready, chuckling to each other about their supreme power of life and death over this poor schmuck.

He thinks of the word "inhumane" and its implication that maltreatment of people is inimical to the human condition. He decides it's exactly backwards. He starts with the amusement he gets from watching people humiliate themselves in front of Judge Judy, multiplies it about ten thousand times and arrives at what he imagines to be a facsimile of the thrill these "technicians" get from killing people the slow way. He decides what they are doing is actually very humane; humans are by far the nastiest of animals ... present company excluded, of course. *Although who knows about the author of this story?* he asks rhetorically.

According to his technical readings, one of the critical skills is recognizing when to restore air to the victim's lungs ... staying alert for certain physical benchmarks such as peeing and shitting or a slight, no-longer-urgent twitching of what's left of the limbs. But if the game is tied and somebody is at the free throw line with only one second left on the clock, monitoring the victim's condition takes a back seat to watching the player bounce the ball a couple of times, position it in his hands just so, stare at the basket, flex his knees and take the shot that will either win the game or send it into overtime.

So our protagonist dies. Whatever. He was a bore anyway. Wheel the body up to the disposal room. The law didn't say they had to tell anybody when they abducted him, so he'll never "die"; he'll just be "disappeared". Or "desaparecidos", as they called it in Argentina.

His eyes focus again on the screen, but death recaptures his attention. He considers the irony of how this most noteworthy of life's occasions is the one few people are prepared for when it happens. He thinks of the line in the old bluegrass song ... *when I die, hallelujah by and by* ... and notes that, au contraire, it won't be "by and by"; it'll be just as now as now is now. He refreshes a mental note he has made repeatedly and always soon forgotten: to live each moment as if there will be no next one, as will surely happen. *Politicians, preachers and similar windbags and con men would probably turn into decent folks if they paid attention to that*, he surmises. He chuckles and adds: *Not that I'm gonna hold my breath. So to speak.*

His eyes focus again on the screen, skimming a few more paragraphs before his thoughts stray to the death penalty. He revisits his conviction that, rather than a penalty, being locked in a cage awaiting their decision to kill you is one dimension closer to the

ideal of controlling the end of your life. He recalls the argument he has put forward in conversations: *Sure, you don't have a choice over the time and method, but you know at least one in advance ... unlike the rest of us who are condemned to wallow in uncertainty and dread about both.*

He has a corollary hypothesis: by attempting to deny the death row denizens their final step up the ladder of self-determination, the oft-deployed “suicide watch” implicitly acknowledges his point about their advantaged status. *Apparently, the point is the pleasure we get out of killing them, and it would piss us off if they got the job done before we said it was time and did it the way we wanted ... with grim-faced family, reporters, jailers and lawyers watching through a window.*

He wonders if anybody has ever started singing as they were about to be executed. He imagines himself doing that. He imagines himself being a pretty good singer. He wonders if they would hold off until he finished his song. He wonders what would happen if he kept making up verses ... like Scheherazade, where she kept making up endless stories to keep the king from killing her. His fascination blooms into imagining a poignant news article:

“As the guards began strapping the prisoner into the execution chair, the onlookers caught the haunting strains of *Amazing Grace* coming through the speakers provided for the uttering of last words. The doomed man’s voice began softly, but it grew and became more confident as his rendition of the well-known hymn progressed. When he reached the middle of the third verse, ‘...’twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home ...’, not a dry eye was in the viewing chamber, and some choking voices had begun singing along in harmony. The chorus was still growing when bullets from the firing squad ripped through his heart and severed his spine. End of song.”

He wonders who decided that one of the universal life-bracketing events could be used as a “penalty”. He wonders whether there could also be a “birth penalty”. He tries to imagine one ... a pre-human jury listening to a prosecutor’s case: “This spermatozoon used

unfair trickery to swim past the rest and get to the ovum, and as for the ovum, her crime is just being there at all, displaying herself in lewd, lascivious ways.” (“Blame the victim”: it goes way back.) After hearing and weighing all the evidence they find them both guilty. In due course they sentence them to the loss of their separate identities; they will be sacrificed to form a zygote, which, if the jury’s instructions are followed properly, will go on to be implanted in the uterus and become an embryo and later a fetus. Still later, at the appropriate time, it will be born. The “birth penalty”: two life forms mercilessly executed to create a new entity that might grow up to be a lawyer or politician. The most horrific, ghastly punishment the pre-human judicial system can mete out.

He chuckles and stumbles off to bed.

The next day is much better. He wakes up early, so he has time to do his workout and shower before having breakfast and heading off to work. The obnoxious bastard two cubicles down isn’t there ... taking a sick day, everyone said ... so for at least one day he doesn’t have to abide any unfunny cracks about his baldness or listen to another iteration of how the asshole “would like to pork that skinny bitch down in reception”. For once the boss compliments him on a report he wrote too. An exceptionally good day.

When he gets home he scans through a second time. The horror is gone, and he doesn’t think about death, torture or politicians. *The work is what it is, and whether I like it or hate it doesn’t change it, so get over it.* He gets over it, calmly selecting numbers from 1 to 7 and pressing the Save button. He can’t think of anything to put in the optional “Comments” fields, so he leaves them blank.

On the third day he stops at a supermarket on his way home to pick up a cucumber and some bananas. The express lines are all closed, the self-serve lines aren’t working, and he’s

standing behind a woman with a full cart. She turns around and offers to let him go ahead. He thanks her, and she smiles and says, “Now it’s your turn.” It seems like a slightly odd thing to say, but he pays it no further mind because he’s occupied with pushing the cucumber and bananas down the belt which for some reason the cashier has elected not to turn on. Perhaps it’s her subtle way of chastising him for bothering her and the rest of the customers with only two items? Probably not; she’s probably just tired of her mcjob and is at the end of her shift. She’s overweight; her feet are probably killing her from standing for eight hours. Probably her face is tired from pretending to smile. Maybe she’s thinking about her husband waiting at home for another excuse to beat her up. *There’s always a lot more to people than they want you to see*, he thinks as he hands her the money.

After nuking a TV dinner he skims through the stories a third time. He decides there’s no reason to be so hard on these writers. *I love them, whoever and wherever they are, making stuff up and writing it down. So what if I don’t like how they wrote? They poured out their love, that’s what matters. Same as for music and art: some stuff I like, some I don’t. Or cars or computers or gadgets: people created them, but I don’t like them all. Food and clothes too, for that matter: I choose what I like, but anyone creating anything is my kind of people, that’s the main thing.*

He imagines a big divide. The creators are bringing comfort and enjoyment to people’s lives, and the destroyers are wrecking everything with guns and bombs. Sometimes the gunmen and bombers have badges and paperwork, other times not. *They’re supposedly fighting each other; I just wish they would leave the rest of us out of it.*

Lorde’s hit song, *Team* comes on Pandora, and when she sings the line in the refrain “... and you know, we’re on each other’s team”, it jumps out as if she meant it just for him.

I should encourage my writer team!

He imagines a team where the players perform acts of kindness and generosity. Sort of like street gangs where you have to paint graffiti to be accepted, except kindness will be this gang's entrance exam. *We'll help people without expecting anything in return, and if they thank us we'll encourage them to join the team by passing it along. We'll say: "Now it's your turn."*

Hey wait, that's what the supermarket woman said! In a flash of epiphany he decides the team Lorde sang about really exists! It's as big as the whole world, and the supermarket woman was inviting him to join! Inspired and excited, he considers the implications: his newfound team could grow exponentially if everyone realized its power! It wouldn't be powered with guns and bombs, it would disempower the people who use and promote them.

He struggles to think of an analogy. *Guns and bombs are a disease*, he tells himself. *It's incurable, but I bet it could be like when healthy people get tuberculosis and it doesn't matter because they lock it up safely in their lungs for the rest of their lives. If we can stay healthy and keep everyone healthy around us we can do the same thing with the guns and bombs. To get everyone healthy we just need to treat our neighbors with decency and dignity no matter how near or far they live. Share what we can and help whenever we see a chance, that's all it will take!*

The woman's words are still echoing in his brain so he goes back to his dashboard, and into all the Comments boxes he pastes: "Thank you for sharing your work of love. I've never seen anything quite like it. I appreciate the time and effort you put into making my life richer. Keep writing and I will too!"