

katzenjammer

It was quite possible, he thought, that he wasn't sprawled on the couch in his living room staring at a random point on the ceiling at all, but was simply a fragment of a thought that someone else – or *something* else – somewhere else, was having. He had been reading philosophy, but haphazardly, not sticking to the same book for long. It was a mish-mash of ideas that festered now in his mind.

He had been informed the previous Friday that his services were no longer required at work. He wasn't sure what happened next. He distinctly remembered tears (his own) and that he may have begun – positioned on his knees – to beg his boss to reconsider.

That was about as much of the incident that he was willing to recall.

Now, his newly-gone job was replaced with a self-tailored and thinly thought out strain of philosophy based on a day or two of vague reading, and he was almost certain that he didn't actually exist in any tangible way and that – if he did – there was no point in it.

The books belonged to his wife, who no longer lived with him. As far as he could make out she didn't exist either; nor did the books, for that matter. When he thought about it, his newfound belief in his own non-existence had occurred as the direct result of something that itself did not exist, and if that was the case, then... he wasn't really sure *what then*, but it all seemed overwhelmingly hopeless.

It was this state of confused malaise that led to him fleeing the city, so that just a few days later he found himself in a strange house in the countryside, within agonising earshot of

a donkey sanctuary, of all things, a refugee from everything in life that aggrieved him yet somehow feeling more aggrieved than ever.

He was in dire need of something, though he didn't quite know what. It was either this or a trip to some sort of private mental-health facility; the countryside seemed a more forgiving option.

His wife, to his considerable disappointment and rage, had approved of the idea. He hadn't wanted her approval, and had he suspected he might receive it he wouldn't have divulged his plans to her in the first place.

But he had.

'I think it's good,' she told him, her face full of either empty pity or calculated malice. 'It'll be good for you. You really need a break.'

He had hoped that on hearing news of his imminent departure to the countryside she would have been overcome by the possibility of finally losing him for good, that he would then have had the opportunity of telling her to *get fucked*, which is what he took her to really mean when she told him she approved.

He had arrived to the house the previous afternoon, heading straight for the kitchen and finding himself still there the following morning, on the floor, an almost-empty bottle of gin resting right in his eye-line. He spent the rest of the day floundering in the sounds next door, swimming in his own regret.

Throughout the day his mind was tormented by intruding images of his wife being writhed upon by some anonymous man, moaning with disgusting pleasure. Finally, he fled to the garden in hopes of respite, sitting at the weathered wooden table and opening a beer.

The owner of the house, whom he had organised the rental with by phone, had mentioned the garden, but – having just been made aware that his probably-soon-to-be ex-

wife didn't care if he disappeared away into the wilds or not – he hadn't quite absorbed whatever it was the man was saying.

Now, however, its beauty struck him.

As he surveyed it, he caught himself taking part in an imaginary conversation with his wife, one in which she was marvelling at his impressive description of the garden, a conversation which – in his head – was taking place in a large, romantic bed at some future time.

'Jesus,' he said in frustration, realising with horror what he was doing, acutely aware that by indulging this depressing fantasy he was debasing himself in some way, that doing so ran counter to the whole purpose of being in this house in the first place, with its perfect garden, with its long grass speckled with daffodils, with its twisting, bursting wall of intermingling trees, its subtly striking colours—

He stopped himself once more, realising that he was fantasising once again – before he had even finished admonishing himself for doing so in the first place.

'Jesus,' he said again, slapping his palms against the sides of his troubled head. He felt both emasculated and lonely. 'Get a hold of yourself, you fool!'

The situation, he decided, required more than just beer. He went back inside to fetch the remnants of the gin.

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The sound of donkeys woke him; it sounded like they were bickering over something, or being violated in some way. Wet and cold and confused, he felt their pain. After a few

moments he realised he was lying on the table in the garden; he realised it was dawn and that it was the country dew he was soaked by and thankfully not his own urine.

From where he lay he could see a huge branch silhouetted against the brightening violescence of the morning sky. As he began to raise his own stiffened limbs from the table he saw that the branch belonged to a giant oak tree. It loomed ominously over him and he stared at it, understanding suddenly with fright that the scene playing in his mind was being viewed from above, from the perspective of the tree itself; he saw swinging images of the ground below; he saw rope; he saw his own dangling, struggling feet; he saw his body from the neck down, suspended pendulum-like from the suddenly monstrous oak tree.

Instinctively, he reached for his neck, as if to check it was still there, then rubbed his eyes and blinked, attempting to banish the grotesque early-morning vision.

Sometime in the afternoon, sweating out the alcohol and groaning occasionally, he lay in bed analysing his situation, wondering how it was he had come to be in this strange house in the middle of nowhere on a Saturday afternoon, being serenaded by a grotesque cacophony and laid low with yet another hangover instead of being at home with his wife in the city, making love or doing the crossword.

On finding out about each other's affairs they had both reacted badly. He was unsure which emotion was stronger – guilt or anger. More importantly, he was unsure which of these emotions he should most express to his wife. They screamed at each other for a full weekend, alternately cursing the other for betraying them and apologising for their own betrayal.

It was all very complicated.

Each blamed the other's infidelity for their own, though it was unclear who had strayed first. Illogical arguments continued for a full two days, taking the form of shouting, crying, smashing things, until finally they reached a point where they were both too tired to fight and

ended up in bed together instead. Once this act was finished they fell asleep in each other's arms, and when they woke up it was Monday morning and time for them both to go to work. Following work they both returned home and – disregarding the previous night's intimacy – began to pore over the details of their respective affairs again, neither of them willing to surrender any morsel of information or remorse without assurances that the other would reciprocate. It was a long, unpleasant process, and he withheld most of the pertinent details, sure that she was doing the same.

Towards the end of this first week of revelations, following a drunken and particularly vicious diatribe concerning the slack morals of the female species – a tirade that surprised even himself – she packed an overnight bag and went to stay with her sister.

She didn't return.

He had been – and remained – consumed by thoughts and images of what he was sure were his wife's depraved sexual exploits with the other man. Though she told him that this affair (a fling, she called it) was over, he was unable to believe her. To make matters worse, his own fling had been ended by the other woman, who had become bored by his preoccupation with his wife's sex life. Not that the termination of this dalliance was in itself a significant blow, but he had wanted it to continue until he was sure his wife's was also finished, convinced that this would benefit him as some form of internal psychological leverage.

Now, having been told by his wife that she thought it was best to make the trial separation more permanent – 'I feel energised, I need this space to grow,' she told him, making him gag – and having failed in trying to force her into some sort of last-minute uncertainty by informing her that he was going away – indefinitely, he said, hoping this would terrify her – he no longer had a wife, or a mistress, or a job, and was stranded in the

countryside with only the depressing sound of a multitude of raucous donkeys to keep him company.

On top of all this, he was beginning to suspect that his recent travails were turning him into an alcoholic.

Over the following weeks his days were spent thinking about such things – his wife, his job, his life, his soul, the futility of existence – and the thoughts were washed down with a steady stream of whisky, beer and wine. Occasionally he read small passages of philosophy, and even consulted – mostly out of boredom, but with a hint of vague hope – a bible he had discovered in a kitchen drawer. He came to the conclusion that he did in fact exist, admitting begrudgingly that he didn't quite understand what he was reading. He regretted this realisation of existence; it made everything so much more difficult.

He felt he was sinking; heavy, breathless and wet.

And just how deep is the sea?

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One evening, several weeks into his stay, sitting at the kitchen table drinking endless cups of coffee, debating animatedly with himself whether or not to call his wife and, having dialled the number several times without letting it ring, he decided to call his mistress – now his ex-mistress – instead.

'Hello?' she answered.

When he heard her voice he remembered suddenly, stupidly, that he didn't even like the woman. The question of why he had carried on with her in the first place occurred to him

uselessly, and then next, almost instantly, he wondered what he was hoping to achieve by calling her now, but it was too late – there she was on the other end of the line.

‘Hi,’ he said eventually. There was a pause before she replied.

‘Oh, it’s you.’

Her tone was a mixture of disappointment and guarded suspicion. He thought of what to say next, regretting his caffeine-induced urge to call her.

‘Hi... I was just calling to, you know, say hello.’

‘Oh, ok. Well... Hello – how are you?’

Before he had a chance to think better of it, a torrent of words began to flow from his mouth. He was blabbering, telling her all about his wife, about donkeys, about philosophical trends of the early twentieth century, about Jesus... Even as he heard it, what he was saying made no sense. He tried to stop but couldn’t, continued until she sighed heavily.

‘Look, I’m not your therapist. Me and you – it’s over, ok? I’m not going to continue listening to this, and I don’t think you should call me again,’

He hung up then, knowing that anything else he tried to say – even goodbye – would lead to more ranting. He cringed at his own lack of control, at his own pathetic neediness, and poured whisky into his coffee, utterly defeated. It was then he realised he hadn’t spoken to anyone in several days, perhaps even weeks; and perhaps that was the problem. At least, he reasoned, his emotional ravings had been heard by his mistress – his *ex*-mistress – and not his wife.

After dialling his wife’s number several more times and hanging before it rang, he gave up and moved to the garden, now his nightly ritual. He sat at the wooden table, describing to his wife indulgently and in great detail the trees and grass and flowers, the crushingly beautiful neon-blue sky, imagining that he was doing so in a large bath somewhere, in some

luxurious hotel during a romantic getaway. She was there in the bath with him, their limbs intermingling, her eyes rapt with love and attention and lust.

The nightly chorus of the donkeys interrupted his fantasies and he sighed, feeling close to tears but resisting the temptation to cry, knowing that there could surely be few things sadder than a middle-aged man crying alone in a beautiful garden at sunset. Having resolved not to cry, he decided that perhaps crying would make him feel better, and he relaxed his whole body to let the tears flow.

They wouldn't.

He shook his head in disgust, feeling a little bit more of a failure now, thinking that the only thing more pathetic than a middle-aged man alone and crying in a beautiful garden at sunset was a middle-aged man alone in a beautiful garden at sunset who wanted to cry but couldn't.

He wanted to speak to her, to see her. It was slowly dawning on him that the mistakes he had made were somewhat more significant than they first seemed. Not that this insight was of any use now, he realised as soon as it occurred to him, because now he was in a self-imposed exile from his own life, pottering around someone else's house and sitting in someone else's garden, drinking to pass the time and to dull the noise of a herd of beasts next door.

The giant oak tree leaned darkly over both him and the house, a gloomy awning.

Sitting at the picnic table, he began pouring large mugs of whisky for himself, drinking as if locked in battle with the liquid itself, as if disposing of it would make him somehow victorious.

Rock bottom, he thought, feels far too familiar.

The following day he tried to piece together what happened next.

He could remember finishing the bottle, and he could remember opening another. He could remember sitting in the garden having loud one-way conversations – laughing and sobbing, quite possibly singing, too. After this, however, he could remember nothing more than a brief flash of being in his car, at the wheel, moving at speed on the motorway, weaving through lanes in the dark like a broken shopping cart sliding around an empty car park.

As he realised that this slither of memory was just that – a memory, and not (as he had hoped) a dream – he felt a new kind of defeat within him.

‘Sweet Jesus,’ he whispered to no one when he came across his car.

He found it discarded towards the bottom of the long, tree-lined driveway that twisted away from the house, its door open, some rogue detritus lodged in one of the front wheel wells, the rear axle resting – almost gracefully, it seemed – on the stump of one of the aforementioned trees, one which had been very recently beheaded and which was mounted, now, by his mud-smearred and dead-looking vehicle.

Further inspection revealed an empty whisky bottle on the passenger seat. When he tried the engine it rumbled to life, somehow undisturbed by the previous night’s vagaries. Momentarily the stereo lit up, his wife’s favourite CD playing full volume – a CD he had refused to return to her out of spite. Clearly, however, he had felt it necessary to make it the soundtrack to his drunken expedition.

Just what he was doing listening to Fleetwood Mac at full volume while driving drunk – so drunk he could barely remember doing so – along motorways and driveways, to god-only-knows where and back, he had no idea.

He left the car where it lay. It being lodged upon a tree he had little choice, but he didn't have the strength to deal with it anyway. He left the engine running, the music still playing, no one there to hear it but him.

I took my love

And I took it down

And I saw my reflection in the snow covered hills

Till the landslide brought me down

He tried to reassure himself that, given time, everything would seem better. There was no real harm done, he reasoned. He could chalk it all down to a once-off, hopefully non-recurring sort of whisky madness. He might attempt to call his wife again, attempt to fix things.

Or, he might not.

Despite his attempts at optimism, he felt a harsh and sickening sensation growing inside, steadily winning him over.

He tried, but found once again that he couldn't cry.

He made his way back towards the house, stopping at a distance from the giant oak tree and gazing wearily at its arching grey limbs. He found he couldn't look away.

He heard the final grunts of the donkeys before the sun disappeared, and as it did so he was almost able to see those sounds hanging in the day's thinning air, illuminated in the dusk alongside the feint eurythmic refrain wafting towards him from the driveway.

The music wasn't helping – he could hear his wife humming along to it.

A cruel realisation entered his mind: He could sink forever, an interminable descent into a bottomless sea, weighted by the heft of his own fears and failures, heavy and breathless and wet.

Knowing not what he would do next, knowing not what he *might* do – knowing only, now, that he had become a savage kind of caricature of a man circling the abyss, that there was no more light to guide him and no one waiting for him to resurface – he listened to the sounds floating around him, transfixed, a strange calmness creeping over him as the night began to bloom.