

The Beast with Six Backs

The approaching summer brought on conflicting sensations. Never any grey area. Sure, get me the fuck out of here and whatnot, but two decades on this planet is long enough to know that the grass will only be greener for so long. And then what? I crammed a duffle bag with some essentials. Five or six shirts, five or six pairs of boxers and socks, three pairs of shorts... laptop... a few books... and there we go. The less of this expired identity I took with me, the better. Radio silence as I walked out the door, as though I'd never been more sure of anything.

The long, autonomous drive home, however, gave me time to dissolve that clarity. I thought about the coming months over a cigarette. I thought about you over another. I thought about the LD50s of various compounds over a third. Chain-smoking has never suited me well.

Instead of having a fourth, I put on some music. The one thing I love about driving alone. Name another spot where you can just sit and pretend like you're Freddie-fucking-Mercury at full volume with no audience for as long as you want. The soulful rasp from the charred remnants of my vocal cords added a certain confidence to the notes I belted out. Off-key, I'm sure. *Don't. Stop. Me.*
NOOOOW!

Now *that* was a good feeling. I've got all sorts of love for this world – it's just a matter of making it last... of fitting the square block of pragmatism through the round hole of fulfillment.

Perhaps too soon, I arrived. The Podunk little town was just the way I left it, or maybe it wasn't. I knew this place like a mirror's gaze, and yet I was an outsider. Years had passed. Circumstances had changed. Lives had gone on indifferent to my absence.

The doubt was back.

Apparently I needed more time. Luckily, I suppose, I had neglected to mention to anyone that I was back. Time to scour the depths of Netflix and deflower a good few bottles of gut-rot to recharge. Good as therapy with a few drawbacks. Days tend to bleed together using this method. There was also always the off chance that my mind would drift to you – our recent decline, your betrayals, etcetera – these thoughts were indifferent to any amount of liquor.

It's hard to say how many days I spent this way. The only timeframe I can really offer is that it ended at some point during the third handle of bourbon and the fourth season of *River Monsters*. Goddamn those are some big ass scary fish.

A lengthy shower didn't wash away the misanthropic tendencies, but I sucked it up and phoned a friend anyway. My go-to guy around here.

"Dude, you're home? Get that fine ass over here. On the double."

Don seemed thrilled to hear from me. I was thrilled that he was thrilled. I hightailed it to his place. The drive through the center of town hadn't changed a bit – the supermarket where half of my high school now seemed to work, the

family owned pizza place that once got fucked by the law for selling cocaine with the pizza, the furniture store that was rumored to have run an underground porn studio in the basement after-hours – all still there. Memories. With all those illustrious landmarks behind me, I was soon pulling into Don's driveway. He was already there waiting.

We frolicked toward each other in slow motion, eyes wide and longing, feeding exponentially off the stupidity of the moment we were creating. What ensued was an enthusiastic bro-hug, the duration and passion of which may have been considered by some to be homoerotic. But you just don't know him like I do. That said, our friendship was a strange one indeed. Its foundations were cemented back in junior year of high school when we would chug cough syrup together after school. Degenerates, they called us. But they just hadn't given the old grip n' sip a proper chance. Since then, we'd grown to become the volatile duo whose antics weren't always funny or appropriate, but they were at the very least unpredictable. That didn't count for much on a large scale, but tended to appeal to a lovely crowd of certain like-minded folk.

"You're gonna be disappointed in me," I said, as I reached into my pocket and revealed my pack of cigarettes. I pulled one and brought it to my lips. We had both quit passionately around the same time last year.

He grinned, reaching into his cargo pants pocket, retrieving a pouch of loose tobacco and beginning to roll one for himself. I cracked a smile. At least we're killing ourselves together.

“Any of the kids around today?” I asked.

“Prolly. Let’s find out. We’ve got something to show you...”

“How *titillating*. And you can’t just show me now?”

“Just wait.”

Some calls were placed; few were answered. Nobody was available until later in the evening. That is, except for Kevin.

Kevin Dish was a character to say the least. Consistently the one with the darkest sense of humor, even in our crowd. His left arm bore a touching memorial tattoo of this raccoon he drowned one time. We were still in the driveway when he rolled up in his haggard maroon Taurus.

He leapt from the car with a shit-eating grin on his face. We immediately saw why. His white t-shirt featured a Charles Manson-esque character with the unignorable caption: “*SEE YOU IN HELL, MOM AND DAD.*” We couldn’t contain ourselves. How incredibly offensive. Nothing sacred. His parents were nice people.

Giggling like preteen girls at awful shit with my old high school comrades made home feel like home again. I redacted any previous notion of apprehension. How silly it was to have spent the better part of a week half-comatose soaking in useless information about German man-eating catfish.

“So can you guys, uh, let me in on this so-called big secret?”

They looked at each other, grinning maliciously.

“Not yet,” said Kevin.

“Come on,” I pleaded, “don’t make me wait another few hours for no goddamn reason.”

They looked at each other again.

“Alright,” they said, somewhat in unison.

Kev moved towards me. He put his arm around me, gesturing at the horizon so that we both gazed off into the distance.

“Many moons ago,” he said in his best Navajo shaman voice, “there was a great disturbance in our oneness with Mother Earth... a tear in the great weave that ties us so closely to Her warmth and affection. The harvests were meager. The nights were cold and unforgiving. Brother Fish and Sister Fox looked upon us with disgust. The elders knew at once what must be done. We journeyed deep into the forest, guided only by the faint whispers of Mother’s voice. We chewed the ethereal cactus and called out to her. She was indifferent to our pleas. Somehow, we had angered her...”

“Hold on. Are you seriously just coming up with this on the spot?”

“I think I have a personality disorder.” Hard to tell if he was kidding.

“Well. It’s a beautiful one. Go on...”

“We elders knew the only recourse. A sacrifice must be made. On a

grander scale than just a lamb, or a child even. We all had to appease Mother to return to her grace...

“Okay...” I had to interject again. I couldn’t stop laughing but I wanted real answers. “Sure. All that is good with me. But can you elaborate in the present-day on what this actually means to us?”

“You’ll see tonight”

Well fuck me.

That evening, I was looking forward to whatever sheet was to be pulled from my eyes. Maybe it was nothing special, but there was certainly enough buildup to keep the questions swarming my head. One by one, the usual suspects pulled into the driveway. First there was Emily – a sunny, petite little girl whose fiery gaze from time to time suggested something deeper... darker, and more volatile. The juxtaposition of such seemingly opposing qualities never failed to intrigue. Hard not to get caught up in the rippling patterns of that black dress as well. Soon after arrived Molly, Norm, and Caroline. If the faces had aged whatsoever, I didn’t notice. Who needed catching up? We were back.

Packed in a deformed circle in Don’s quaint little basement, we got to drinking, psyches potentiating one another like reacquainted puzzle pieces resurrected from a dusty attic. I remembered immediately that company like this isn’t something you can just go out and find. Bet I’d be happy if I could ball this up and take it with me, I thought. But now wasn’t the time to dwell. This atmosphere could’ve easily carried us through the night, and half of me wanted

nothing more. The other half was fixated on that cryptic soliloquy from earlier.

“So...” Emily addressed the crowd. “Anyone got a die?”

My ears perked up. By this point in the night, I had trained them to scan for anything remotely foreign and lock on with precision in hopes that I might get a clue about the big mystery.

There was silence, followed by a series of smirks. People searched their pockets, and Don rummaged through a junk drawer in the cabinet under the TV. I looked skeptically at Kevin, and then at Emily, and their identically ominous grins told all: the time had finally come.

Don struck gold in the cabinet, and tossed the bounty to Emily. Norm, Molly and I glanced at each other in confusion – apparently they were just as clueless. I guess it was some kind of game. We newcomers obviously needed a bit of an intro.

We were told that the central rule of the game is that the dice don't lie. By agreeing to play, you are submitting yourself to their power. If the die wills it, so it shall be. It grows on you, they told us. The gameplay is simple. You think of something you want to see happen, call out a number 1-6, and roll the die. It can be as tame or depraved as you want; after all, it's not in your control whether it happens or not.

I was a bit let down. Did I really get this worked up over some bastardized truth-or-dare knock off? But I tried to keep an open mind.

Emily was first to roll. “If I roll a two, shirt lottery.”

For us dice virgins, it was explained that if the dice willed it, we’d all take off our shirts and turn off the lights, placing them into a pile and shuffling. Blindly, we’d all have to pick a new shirt to wear for the night. Ooooh, *scary*. It was a four.

I was next up. New to the swing of things, I didn’t have much of an imagination.

“If I roll a three, we all take a shot.” Three! Not bad.

Don’s roll.

“Olive oil shot for the person two rolls to my left, on a one.” Luckily, it was a two.

Caroline’s roll. Factorial compliments on a six. Six it was.

How nice, I thought. Everyone compliments everyone, one by one. Most of us were just drunk enough to let the candid truth really shine through on this one. Good to know that not every roll had to be some kind of cheesy dare.

Norm and Molly passed on their rolls. Risky idea, we learned. As it turns out, when you pass, your odds stack to the next person. Two passes in a row immediately gave Kevin three numbers. Fifty-fifty odds for anything under the sun he wanted to make happen. He pondered for a bit, rolling the die around in his hands with an unsettling smirk on his face.

“If I roll evens...” He paused for dramatic effect. “Three to my right eats a

clump of their own hair. No water.”

It was a two. Great. So he rolled three more times. $3 + 2 + 4 = 9$. As luck would have it, nine to his right ...was me.

“Cooooome ooonn.” I was not into that.

I looked around. Everyone was silent, waiting patiently.

“Welp. Who’s got scissors...” I muttered. Don left the room and came back with a pair, sooner than I’d liked, and handed them to me. “How big is a clump?”

“Dealer’s choice,” he said with a grin.

“Big. At least the size of a die,” said Kev, not missing a beat. Fuck this game.

“Really?”

“Dice don’t lie.”

As I placed the nasty furball on my tongue, everyone smiled. The texture was repulsive. Now I know what cats go through. It took at least five minutes to swallow most of it. The rest would remain for god knows how long. As the urge to vomit subsided, I caught hold of a strange feeling. There was something noble about carrying out the dice’s wishes... about willfully debasing myself with honor. I had this revelation to myself, as the game had continued while I choked down that unholy ball of waste. I felt a sinful grin creeping onto my face. So this is what it was about.

After a few more rounds, the trend became clear. The longer you played, the more it would escalate. Last round's thrilling or humiliating was yawn-inspiring the next time around. Naturally, the hivemind would then work harder to keep itself entertained. There would be glue eating, inside-of-someone-else's-teeth-licking and unfortunate placement of unlucky genitals by the time we called it a night.

On the drive home, I was a bit shell-shocked. I'd seen a lot of weird shit in the past couple hours – some of which I had brought about, myself. My most successful roll of the night made two folks chosen at random (Don and Norm) touch ball-to-ball. Exactly what it sounds like. Norm was pretty mortified, and got real quiet after that. There was a little guilt on my part, but was that really necessary? After all, the Dice don't lie. The rearview mirror told me what I already knew: that devious spark that I had seen earlier in my friends' eyes was staring right back at me.

Soon, almost all of us carried a die at all times. Mine was green. We'd play every chance we got. Norm refused to play ever since the "ball incident" and eventually just stopped picking up the phone. The game was always ongoing. Each new round had us deeper. Those seductive little cubes were always testing our faith. In a few weeks' time we had eaten tacks, snorted Drano, and pinpointed our respective spots on the Kinsey scale to three decimal points, among other things. We'd shed blood for the Dice with a smile. You would've

hated it. To me, that was one of the best parts. I had a new reason to live now.

Not everyone was cut out to be children of the Dice. We learned this quickly in trying to expose others to their glory. One such mission trip took place at this kid Danny's party one night. Our gospel was not well received. Running scared after a few tame rounds, every last one of them. No, they'd rather play beer pong and talk about their majors in college. Yuck. Luckily, the Dice had a plan. An hour later we were "asked" to leave for waterboarding each other in the newly renovated master bath. Hey, don't blame us, man – Dice don't lie. Good luck finding that pepper grinder.

Kevin's family had this timeshare out by the beach up north. For the six of us heading up there, it was unanimous and unspoken that this would be a place to bring the game to a whole new level. 'Excited' was an understatement – just another notion that Dice had rendered meaningless, like 'embarrassing' or 'dangerous'.

We spent the first afternoon just walking the shoreline. It felt right to take a little break and meditate on how best to please the Dice. We walked out to the end of a jetty around dusk and drank cheap brandy as the sun set. With our backs turned to the rest of the crowd, Don reached into his bag and pulled out a tiny little baggie of capsules. Each was filled with a surprisingly small amount of off-white powder. He handed me one and mouthed, '*For later.*' With anyone else I would have asked what it was, but I trusted him and his taste on such matters. It would be more fun this way. I thanked him.

Making our way back to land drunk in the dark was comically difficult, especially without shoes. Too many spots to break an ankle, or fall in and split your jaw. Kevin and Molly, unironically the ones *with* shoes, took to running the trial by rocks like it was some ridiculous video game. Showoffs. The rest of us were stumbling around and scraping up our feet even at a snail's pace. Kev took a digger near the end of the course and fell right into shallow water. Pretty lucky considering the alternative. He'd be fine. I caressed the edges of the die through my pants in my front-right pocket and whispered, '*thanks.*' That's what he gets.

When we got back to the house, we started in on a box of wine. Franzia: *Crisp White*. Only the best. Don and I ducked out to gulp down our mystery capsules. It was time for the game to begin.

The first few rounds were benign and calculated. The potential significance of this game on this night demanded that it be played deliberately. We evoked some of our oldest Dice antics, like only handling the die with our mouths and only speaking in the past tense. The difficulty of doing both at the same time made me realize that I was starting to feel pretty strange. Ohp, my turn.

"If I had wolloed a fwee, den we wuud hav had to... thtop thpeakig in patht tenth, an eat a penny"

It was not a fwee.

There were a few more rolls before those irritating rules expired, but I couldn't understand any of them. There was a deep, ominous buzzing in my

head, and no one speaks well in the past tense with a die in their mouth. I zoned out for a bit, and by the time I was back it was already Don's roll. The antiquated floral wallpaper behind him was getting a bit feisty, but I figured he knew so I didn't bother to tell him.

"If I roll a five," he said, "we play the rest of the game on the beach."

Three. Awesome choice, but no luck. My roll.

"Pass. Stacking for beach." Molly's roll. She did the same.

"Beach on odds," said Emily.

Three. Perfect. So we made quick work of the 5-liter box, taking turns draining liquid from the silly spigot into our gullets, and went to the beach. Nobody to be found; our only companions were the crashing waves and, of course, the Dice. We sat in a circle around the dim glow of a camping lantern that someone was thoughtful enough to bring, trying to remember the order we had going before.

A few rounds went by, with the usual hilarity brought on by inebriated rolls. Nakedness, factorial French kissing and the like. It was great and all, but it became clear that we were all turning a blind eye to the elephant in the uh. Beach. Don and I caught eyes for a second and I knew we were on the same page. We gestured toward Emily, who seemed to unspokenly catch our drift as well. It was her roll.

"I'll stack"

“Stacking,” said Don.

I tried to keep my poker face, and failed miserably. “On evens,” I said, “we’re going for a swim.” I tossed it with vigor. It landed close to the lantern, but I threw it so high that it made a crater in the sand and settled directly between a three and a six.

“RE-ROLL!” spouted Emily. It seemed only fair. The other three just stared at us. I grabbed the die, and pulled a book from my backpack to roll on this time. No ambiguity. I dropped it gingerly over the *Tao te Ching*.

Two.

Dice don’t lie. We stripped down, and out we went. I imagined the water would be freezing cold, but if it was, I couldn’t feel it. No complaints from the others, either. We waded deeper, waves crashing over our knees. And then thighs. Chests. Soon the waves weren’t breaking on us anymore, just merely beginning to curl. We stopped. The shorter ones of us were already treading water. I was enamored with the way the waves would occasionally pick me up off my feet. Apparently still pretty high. I asked the group if they wanted to go back.

“Are you kidding?” Emily asked before going under, and popping up out further than anyone else. “This is the shit!”

“I’m going back,” said Caroline. It did kinda seem like time. “Let’s get back to the game.”

Emily let out a high-pitched scream and did a pencil dive in protest.

Asshole. We awaited her resurfacing with a whole bunch of '*fuck you*'s and '*don't joke about that*'s. She bobbed up slowly.

"Guys?"

"Okay seriously *fuck you*," and other related obscenities.

"No. R-really..." Her voice trembled.

"Shut the fuck up dude, it's not funny," and the like.

"Will you *fucking listen to me!!!*?" We went silent. It was like she wanted to scream it, but was afraid to. "They're... everywhere... all around us."

The rest of us were still waiting for her to burst into laughter. It didn't come. We stared at one another frantically, eyes wide like the cornered prey that we were. Molly let out a *real* scream. Don jumped at her and tried to cover her mouth. She bit him, and wouldn't stop screaming. They were splashing and flailing around.

"HEY!" No response. They were still struggling, both acting horribly on good intentions. "HEY!"

When we first saw it, we thought he was pushing her under to shut her up. First time I ever *hoped* a guy was assaulting a girl. But then he went under too, and with way too much force. That was *not* Molly. Kevin booked it for the shore; Caroline was already above waist-level, screaming at us to get out.

I had not one instinct to draw upon. The turbulence was within a few

strokes. I was paralyzed.

“LISTEN,” said Emily with a seriousness I’d never heard before, “if this is really *fucking* happening, there’s already blood in the water.”

“But we can’t just—”

“We can’t do *anything*. Except swim in. Slowly. Away from that spot. Now.”

“There’s no fucking way I’m doing that.”

“Listen *Aquaman*, do you want to know how many I saw down there? About a dozen. A FUCKING DOZEN. If you wanna try and punch them all in the nose and wrestle two corpses away from them, be my guest.” She was right. Holy shit.

“Okay.” At once, we made slow, deliberate strokes diagonally toward the shore. Maybe fifteen feet away, I felt something enormous and rough brush my leg. But it wasn’t a nose – clearly wasn’t a mouth. It felt like a fin, and the speed at which it crossed under us practically threw me aside. We weren’t what it wanted. For a split second, I looked back. Huge mistake. There was a circle of blood like a nuclear blast radius, and the second my ears left the water I heard the violence of the thrashing – fins on water and teeth on bone. From then on I pledged tunnel vision all the way to the shore. When we got there, there were no hugs, or words even. We just looked at each other in heartbroken disbelief.

Just Emily, Caroline, Kevin, and I.

We just sat there looking off into the abyss for a long time. Not saying

anything.

Kevin turned to me, finally breaking the silence. “D-do you think we should like, call someone?” That’s when I noticed his leg.

“Did you get bitten, man?”

“N... no, I don’t... I don’t think s-”

“Then do you wanna *explain* why your knee is covered in blood?”

The questions may as well have been rhetorical. Earlier, when he fell off the jetty. We all stood up. Caroline shoved him, hard, and he stumbled backward.

“You came swimming with us in the ocean... at night... with an *open fucking wound?*” she nearly screamed at him.

“I... it reopened! I don’t know! Fuck, I’m sorry okay?!”

“Yeah, ‘cause sorry’s gonna bring our friends back. And we’re supposed to believe the salt didn’t sting it or *anything?*” We were closing in on him.

“I... well, it d-... I d-didn’t know it was a big deal.”

Emily kicked him in his temple with force. Not his head. You know, the holy zone. He doubled over in pain. I had a sudden moment of clarity.

“WAIT,” I said, “Before this all gets too crazy...” I went over and reached into my bag, pulling out my favorite green die. I clutched it, staring through him.

“Stacking odds for feeding this *motherfucker* to the sharks.” I tossed it to

Caroline. She looked at him, then at the die. Then back at him.

“Stacking.” she said, and handed it to Emily, who did not break her glare away from him for even a second.

“Fish food on evens.” She tossed it.

It was a four.