

a novella by  
**JOSEPH GABRIEL**



**AN  
ACCOUNT OF  
MR.  
CONTA  
GIOUS**

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**CUSTOM GAUGE 2220  
NICKEL WOUND MADE  
GUITAR STRINGS IN USA**



**PART III  
FULL DISCLOSURE**

**A tale of delusion, disease, and sordid sacrifice**

**Joseph Gabriel**

# **An Account of Mr. Contagious**

**Illustrated by rGold**



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### **PART III: FULL DISCLOSURE**



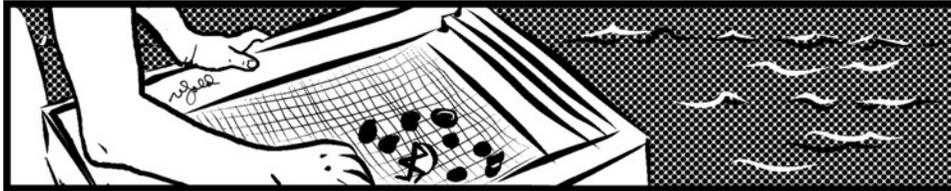
## Time After Time – After Time

So a bunch of time passed in a wisp of consistency. And in all the monotony it's really difficult to say what happened and when it happened – relative to other happenings, anyway. I mean, I remember many of the facts, just not where they fall in the linear joke.

But even in the haze of madness there are some causal chains that can't be broken.

Immersed in the work, my life became so routinized things just happened, as they say, like clockwork – excepting, of course, later, when they didn't. And gradually from the numb, unwitting relief consuming me and my day-to-day affairs emerged the worst depravity of them all: normalcy. That stern, uncompromising wash seemed to dissolve all ancillary issues slowing the work; and later on, when my body strained from the torment, only those brief moments of improvement could compel my tortured body to endure yet more.

I was sifting grains of gold from river sands, and the rush waned.



It was only those glowing, temporal nuggets, revealed by experience and actuated not by luxury but by nickel and zinc, which formed a future for sound. A power vested in, and to be exerted over, the ears of man.

And it seemed so different from the movies, where love and hate or revenge and hope make the protagonist do something great. Only those extreme emotions and an iron mind might beget greatness and compose the hero of an age.

But that itself was a wash.

The work was all that concerned me. My daily lunch, consumed, looking toward The Epic; constrict, push that shit out before leaving work – push – so I wasted their time rather than my own; my Mom, begged into doing the weekly grocery shopping for several years under threat of going without, forced breath so I could work another day; and all the while, I slept less and less, sometimes not at all.

The Epic.

I thought about it day-in and day-out: morning, walk, job, lunch, job, walk, work, sleep (maybe), and repeat. This was the concrete routine I developed to maximize time dedicated to the work – or at least it was the best I could come up with.

I was reinventing the circle, not the next fashionable way to brush your teeth or wipe your ass.

While I regurgitated each line-after-disingenuous-line at my day job, randomly being monitored for quality assurance; agreeing to dish out paltry, bold-print bullshit refunds and rebates; and getting addresses so meting consumer justice might court favor with the principal and silence yet another, I was but an agent offering insincere apologies on behalf of the entity in some meta-rhetaritic scheme beyond a pale comprehension. No one knew what the grand scheme was and no one really cared enough to question the process. Still, despite any insight I might have had, I sat in a makeshift Lego-like cubicle only out and about for the work – The Epic – and what I might do to finish it.

People would call complaining about this or that, and I couldn't care less. A woman on the phone uttering in a broken urban tongue, needing more: "I ain' ax'in for a han'out. Yea... you people need 'a unnastan' wot you done! Yea! Ah need plenty a dat but I alzo wan' a lots'a dis."

Sure, lady, I'll give you *dis* and *dat*, just get off the damn phone.

Complaints of quality or manufacturing defects, or their general dissatisfaction of this or that – excuse me, *dis* or *dat* – wanting some kind of recompense, and all I could I think about was the work:

*Sure, I get it! Your drink was flat. One of the bottles exploded in your hand. You're kidding! The 'born on' date wasn't clearly legible? How appalling! A bottle was slippery with condensation and fell on your toe... Let me get you to the supervisor so he can send a referral over to legal. Yes, ma'am, yes, I understand.*

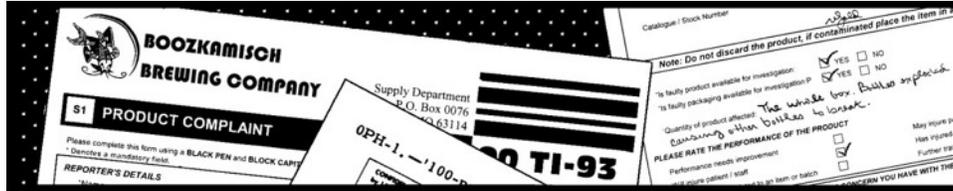
*I get it... I really do. But...*

*Do you think I should include a bass drum pick-up on the second phrase of the third thematic variation – you know, where a pan flute adds color and emphasis to the melody?*

*Or is it too much?*

*Perhaps we could discuss it more over a little of dis and a lot of dat?*

Between each immaterial TI-93 form filled out, and all the reams of meaningless paperwork filling in-and-out boxes all over the office; between each and every point of Zeno's arrow, the work.



It was confusing – the paradox, that is.

I want to say it's been... hmmm, well, around eight years since I began the work and it was, oh... four, maybe five years total... give or take at that point. I was about three years in when I first met Doc and after that, time just... passed after itself.

There's really nothing else to be said about it because I'm not too terribly sure. I wasn't exacting when it came to measuring days and weeks. In fact, solar time, in a soft unnoticeable way, became as foreign and arbitrary a measurement as yards and miles. Where most find themselves staring down the clock waiting for five and marking "Xs" on a calendar counting down to vacation (and later retirement), I was lost in decisions defining seven minutes, six seconds: my days were measured in terms of the work and nothing else.

Decisions, decisions.

And over this period, I made real progress. The structure was fully developed and finalized; the time signatures and changes were set in stone; the thematic developments and dynamic changes were there, though the lead instruments were still being cleaned, and additions and emphases were being tested and inserted; the rhythms and percussive elements were largely present, though, again, further emphases were being considered; and choral parts were developed, refined, and solidified. Finishing the piece had now come down to a peculiar subjective inquiry of taste.

Well, that and finding time after time – after time.

I still recorded frequently, testing out different instruments, different tones, different effects, different mixes... I'd framed in all into an exercise of molding and shaping the sound *itself*, in the amalgam – no longer needing to define notes and structure.

All that remained to be seen was the elusive Hendrixian element, that amorphous uncertainty that stood between me and perfection. The greatest of dualisms, the precipice of absurdity: making the subjective objective. Hendrix died before he could achieve the same.

It sounds pompous, I know, but once it was completed the work would define the nature of sound in only seven minutes, six seconds. Only *in toto* was its genius apparent, and only in its completion would true character emanate, not some disingenuous three minute quickie. It had to be completed.

But you can't have your cake and eat it too. It's a shame no one told Marie Antoinette. Too much wisdom in too few words, I suppose. But if everyone's a critic, then it stands to reason that no one's ever done it right.

#### Mi Tandem: The Work; the Old Itch-Burn

With so many axioms to wade through on a daily basis, it's easy to simply agree or disagree with whatever's said. That's what most do without a second thought. But I've found wisdom in the conclusion that all the magic phrases and sayings, and all those shortcuts that keep us in proper social order, lack substance and should be summarily dismissed. There is one, however, that has stuck with me. One I found, or perhaps coined, that's withstood criticism, and even cultural norms: most people only find meaning in the relative suffering of others.

I mean, really, that's why we have heroes and villains.

Without the ability to compare your lot with that of another, how would you know you were content? How would you know what contentment is? The concept itself requires a comparison of some sort. Thinking about it beacons the classic *alone on a deserted isle* hypothetical, most often colored by *only ones*.

Well, let me put to rest one of many hypotheticals: if you were alone on a desert isle, you'd have no sense of contentment, only the brutality and the brevity of life itself.

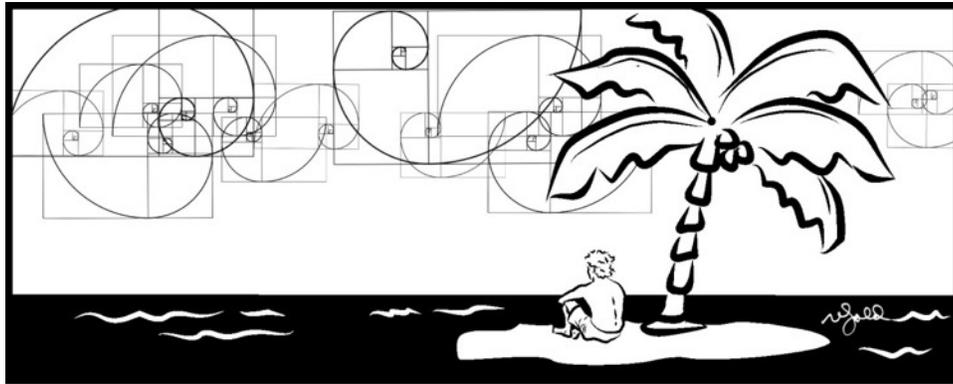
Survival. And Christ on a bike, you'd be thankful for that!

But that all gets shit-canned in a civilization. *Thankful for what*, you ask yourself. *A little'a dis? Or a whole lot'a dat?* People, places, and things: objects to be owned. And for what? You're not the king, even if you live as well as a king of yore.

*Thankful for what*, you'd ask yourself. *Steve just got that goddamned power boat, and I'm stuck with a wooden raft, floating down this goddamn river without a goddamn paddle.*

Just another guppy headed to the gutter.

The lone man on a desert isle is unknowingly thankful – because he *doesn't* ask the question.



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When I was first forced to eat from the tree-of-knowledge-that-won't-help-you, the suffering faded into the background as an ancillary issue so consistent and regular in its stride that it became the unnoticed norm.

And for a year or so, I was able to overlook it. Just like that.

And for what seems a couple of years, I didn't bother going back to Doc. After all, what the hell was she going to tell me? I wasted enough time and money on her medical mumbo jumbo.

No, at some point the symptoms became more than mere white noise, and the suffering became so overwhelming I couldn't simply ignore it – in large part because the world couldn't ignore it. More and more, blood and pus and yellow rotten filth oozed out from my degenerate appendages.

And it all had to be concealed to appease my fellow monkeys. To affect that end, each and every day, I wrapped my hands in sterile gauze, many times up beyond my wrists even – just to make sure.



But by the end of the day the blood and pus soaked-in and colored the bandages, working around the medical tape and leaving a stiff yellowy-orange muck standing on the outer covering, almost coming to a point like some crystallization process.



Sometimes it was accompanied by a peculiar smell as well – the smell of *old*.

Despite attempts to ignore my fellow monkeys, in hopes they would do me the same courtesy, the rotten bandages were too much, and their predisposition for comparing and judging got the better of them. Even the old stonewall, look-through, gaze-away did nothing to circumvent their curiosity and, eventually, contempt.

Worst of all, at times I found myself explaining away what was going on. And it was a difficult thing to explain, considering it all was the result of my choice – my decision to suffer.

What the hell could I possibly have told them to play into and then retreat from their feigned care?

To this day, I don't know.

"Jesus, Fred, what happened?" I remember a co-worker asking half-heartedly as I exited the breakroom with lunch. It caught me off guard, so I looked up at him in several brief glimpses and responded somewhat spontaneously. "Huh? Oh, *this*," I said raising my free hand, "yeah, I'm allergic to metals, and I've been playing too much bass these last couple of days."

His brow wrinkled as his face aped at the problem and his hand performed a mannerism meant to show confusion. "Oh. Aaaaaaa, yeah. Well how bad are they? I don't want to sound rude, or anything, but those bandages look disgusting. Your hands have got to be in bad shape. You should really get them looked at."

"Well," I said almost offhandedly, "I guess my skin reacts to the metal and then swells. And the swelling causes the skin to break and bleed, so..." Fitting in was a task that couldn't even be faked anymore.

"Have you seen a doctor about it?" He asked the question so fast, I wasn't really sure if he even listened to my response.

"Uh, well, yeah, a year or two ago. The doctor said there was nothing I could really –"

Interrupting me, he quickly concluded, "Wow... if playing a guitar did that to me, I'd give it up."

*No shit, Tim. That's because you're a goddamned flim-flam.* At least I thought his name was Tim. It didn't matter. The whole conversation was a sham anyway.

"Yeah, I might have to. Thanks," I said taking the opportunity to walk away, offering only a forced smile as insincere as the conversation itself.

It was at some point thereafter that others in the office took notice of my problems, calling me "The Mummy" behind my back. I can't recall how I learned of the moniker. Perhaps it was just the way people got real quiet when I walked by. The misunderstanding had spread from one ear to the next and judgment was quickly rendered: inferior.

Or perhaps it was the fleeting smell of *old* they noticed when I walked by, or perhaps it was the feel of the fridge handle after I'd opened it.

I'll never know, but people are naturally biased against the old.

No, it was when I saw Flim-Flam Tim walking with his arms outstretched horizontally in front of him, grunting and shuffling foot-to-foot, maintaining a flat, deadpan face. The cruel silence in all those eyes and all those smiles, that darkness making light of the audible, was more annoying than the nickname itself.

And don't get me wrong. Despite understanding the misunderstanding, I still thought they were all a bunch of pricks. but how *can* one help but judge a book by its cover? That's all you know when the river flows and you don't care where it goes. In this odd contradiction between logic and emotion, I can't say I even understand myself.

People should judge books by their covers. You drown in the undertow, not from falling in.

Well, anyway, I guess it wasn't all bad. My resolve never faded, though it once faltered, and my zealous pursuit of perfection continued unabated under system after system after system. New systems were constantly created and modified based upon my plight and relative to the needs of the work.

I started carefully timing when I recorded strings and worked out a system to maximize my time between healings. When the time was ripe, I made preparations to record strings for an extended period – as long as my flesh might bear it – later taking time to allow the poison to work from my flesh. Sometimes I was able to work a couple of days before the old itch-burn presented and debilitated. Sometimes I was granted far less.

But depending on the time it took my hands to heal, I could repeat the process several times a month – at least up to sometime around year three. And it was after the third year that I found myself wearing the mummy gloves all day, every day, except those times when I recorded strings and started the process over.

Time after time – after time!

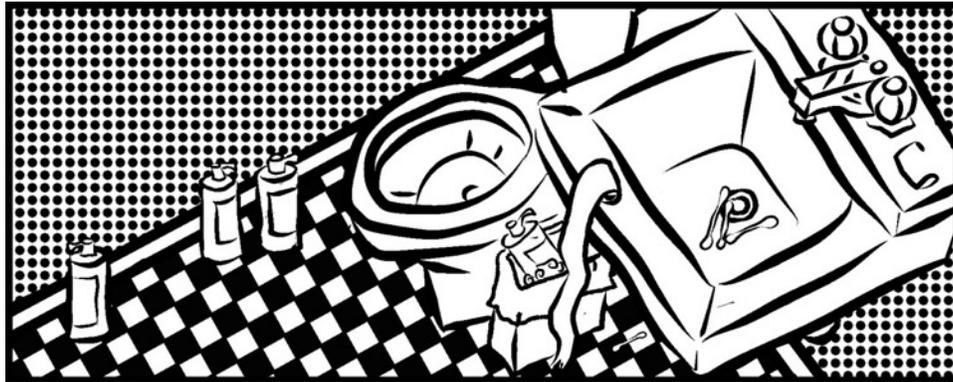
As Doc predicted it all steadily grew worse – to the point that I really couldn't do anything without help. To the point that the bandages should have been changed several times a day. To the point that my hands were but ruined remnants of what they once were.

The simplest of things became obstacles to my everyday living: brushing my teeth, opening doors, writing, typing, eating, picking up the phone, hitting the buzzer on my alarm clock, wiping my ass with something other than the gauze itself...

Tortured flesh.

At that point I was no longer a thumbed-monkey hiding amongst other thumbed-monkeys, but a helpless freak cast out from the troop. *Inferior*, the other monkeys concluded.

Even so, it was only after I questioned my devotion to the work – it was only after risk of catastrophic failure – that I returned to her.



It was in a brief lapse of control, gritting and grinding my teeth, staring at my tired face in the bathroom mirror, so sick of all the toil, that I ripped my wraps off and started viciously itching at the puffed flesh, seeing red, tearing open old wounds and creating new ones, scraping and digging that yellow muck deep into my finger nails – and letting the blood flow all over the place without a care in the world!

And when that wasn't enough, I scraped my teeth along the organic fissures of my withered limbs, biting, trying to get a better itch than my fingernails could provide. And when that wasn't enough, I stared down at the bloody mess, nerves shot, hands trembling, wanting to gnaw at my wrists until they were chewed off, wanting to lick the nubs clean and get on with my miserable life.



I vividly remember this absolute feeling of disgust, this emotional monster. A desperate animal caught in a trap and giving in. A monkey can be beat into submission, but nature itself cannot. I remember feeling a distinct pleasure from the thought of licking the nubs clean, a feeling that must be similar in-kind to that which a mother must feel when she cleans her young. And despite all evidence to the contrary, I couldn't help but indulge these dark emotions.

This instinctual plea to do what needed to be done.

And it was only thereafter that I heeded the call and found myself thrust back into her uncaring arms, groveling for relief, implicitly begging her to assume the role and do what needed be done.

I remember Doc's stern yet curious face as she attempted to gently unwrap the tarnished bandages. I didn't want to look into her I-told-you-so eyes, so I just looked down and watched her struggle in a brief tenderness. It reminded me of Christmas, and Doc was opening a present she'd been anxiously wondering about for some years. Eventually, she gave up and got some special scissors out of a drawer to cut the nasty shit off.

As she finished cutting into the wrappings and began to lightly tug on them, I breathed deeply and cringed. The wrappings had a tendency to reopen old wounds when I forgot to change them for a couple of days. The cold air in the examination room stung as it graced the naked flesh of my hands. And on that particular day the wounds were, well, already open.

Now they were out in the open.

She noticed my pain and tried to be more careful as she gently ripped the last bits of the mummy gloves off. And, yes, at some point I adopted the horror film moniker myself.

“Oh, Mr. Hegel...” That was all she could whisper. And who knows what the hell she was thinking. Thankfully she had one of those cloth masks covering her mouth and nose; the stench was stronger than usual, and I didn’t know what she’d think about it.

“Oh... I’ll be back in a moment.” She left the room, and I was nervous. I didn’t know if she going to come back with two able-bodied men – you know, to carry me out the back door.

In spite of the conspiracy theories, she reappeared with a nurse carrying a tray of medicines, syringes, and other medical supplies. She moved about the room, grabbing a few additional things from a few different drawers. I tried focusing on that medical smell inherent in the room but my rotten flesh wouldn’t allow it.

“Have you been keeping this clean?” she asked gesturing for me to offer them up.

“Well, yeah, more or less.”

“With what?” she asked as she began to work.

I didn’t want to look her in the face so my eyes danced around any which way they might in avoidance of responsibility. I noticed a scar on my left forearm, just above where the swelling broke. After a moment of thought I realized it was left from that cat – when it’s clamped down onto my flesh, dealing pain to deal with its own.

“Well,” I hesitated, “for a while I used bar soap, but I was having trouble getting the suds out from between my fingers, you know, what with the swelling and all, and it was...” My voice quivered a bit as I noticed she was looking directly at me – into me. “...and, a, so, eventually, I just started cleaning them with the hand sanitizer – you know, since it doesn’t need to be washed off or anything after you use it.” I was even using excessive verbiage to avoid her. “That really seemed to work.”

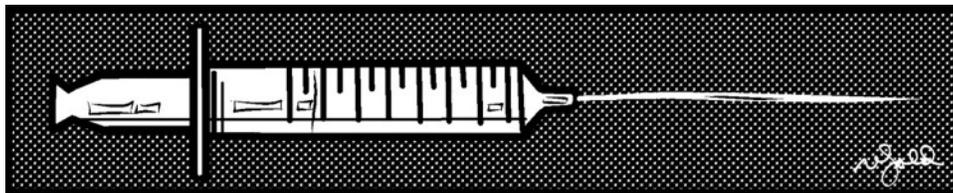
“You haven’t been cleaning them when you put on new bandages?” she asked with contempt. “Seriously?!” She took a moment to regain her already questionable bedside manner. “Excuse me, Mr. Hegel. You need to be cleaning your hands *daily* with soap, before you put medicine and bandages on. And they make soap for sensitive skin, and people with conditions similar to yours.”

“You need to use soap,” she reemphasized.

I was tempted to ask *how in the hell I was going to clean this shit with soap? I'd have to dump the whole damn bottle on my hands, if I was even able to do that.* But instead, it came out, “Well, why not hand sanitizer?”

“Because hand sanitizer is probably doing more harm than good. The alcohol in it is drying out your skin and causing it to become even more irritated when you contact metal, which means more swelling, more itching, more lesions and abrasions...”

“It means there is a greater likelihood of infection.”



“And your hands *are* infected,” she said with finality. “I’m going to have to give you a shot of steroids and antibiotics to try and stave off the possibility of a secondary infection, or even sepsis, and help your immune system deal with the allergens. You’re going to have to take antibiotics orally for some time as well.”

Time after time – after time.

She looked at my hands a little further up close, flipping them around while her opinion was exposed by the strained creases around her eyes that disappeared into her mask. “Do you remember what we talked about the last time you were in here?” She asked almost as though I was a child, and I couldn’t help but indulge a little cynicism.

“When you told me there was no cure?” I snapped back in an innocent yet sardonic tone, suggesting implicitly that I assented to the role of child.

“What I said was you have to stop coming into contact with the metals you are allergic to. I gave you a prognosis that mirrors what I am seeing right now; I told you this would happen, and I am telling you again that you need to stop whatever you are doing, playing stringed instruments or whatever, and take care of yourself.”

*I told you so.* That's what I got for my time – and the co-pay.

“We can probably take care of this and save you from a few more scars, and your hands should heal within a few weeks... but you cannot keep doing this to yourself.” She opined further, “you are eventually going to get a severe infection. Something that I cannot treat. Or you will wait too long, and the infection will travel to other areas of your body, and it will be too late.”

“Do you understand what I am telling you, Mr. Hegel?”

“Yeah. I understand,” was all I could muster.

“You’ll need someone who can stay at home and help while your hands heal? Any family? Maybe a friend or co-worker?”

I left her office in the silence of a broken man’s stare.

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Even after all the shots and all the pills it got worse, and the symptoms kept with me longer and longer. No quick fix, no cure to be had. She wasn’t joking about that.

And after the second visit I wanted revenge, for what I couldn’t tell you. I guess I just wished Doc was wrong, and I blamed her for being right. Why couldn’t she have been wrong? I needed to finish the work, and her diagnosis was hindering the process...

If only I could forget it all, then maybe it wouldn’t be.

But she was right – at least mostly right. By the end of the fourth year just a few hours of recording time cost me 7-12 days. The symptoms progressed even further throughout the fifth year, and two weeks to a full month were needed for a full heal.

Without a choice, I started focusing more on percussive elements. I could work out some contraption or another to hold them properly, and I could also “purchase” them from one of many music stores around the city, only to return them once I was finished. It was a little harder to return more expensive instruments, like a Music Man or an SG, and the stores began to lament when I came in the door.

In fairness, I bought my strings, picks, and other small accessories from them, so it wasn't a total loss, and unlike my fellow monkeys they couldn't ostracize a quasi-paying customer.

After all, the customer is always right, even if they aren't *all-right*.

Creating a more novel and nuanced rhythmic section led to a better overall sound anyway – or at least that's what I told myself as an ad hoc justification. Although I still worked on strings at that five year mark the illness made progress slow: what used to take a day or two took a week or more, and eventually a month or still more.

At some point, my hands just stopped healing, progress halted altogether, and I was just a crippled, thumbless monkey. Worthless and destitute. It was in abject helplessness that I realized tomorrow would never come, and The Epic would never be finished.

“What a world, what a world!” the witch rhetorically cried. “So it goes,” was the hole the cynic thought himself into. “But why, Lawd, why?” the black woman begged to the clouds.



“Est quod est,” Socrates concluded.

### Is *Dis* a Duck? Is *Dat* a Dick?

So around the fifth year, I started wearing leather gloves rather than the mummy gloves. With blood and pus seeping through and damaging everything I touched, bandages were no an longer effective means of concealment, and keeping the wreak clean and sterile had to take a back seat to pragmatism.

Well, that, and the STDs... but I'll get to that in a bit.

But even so, by the end of the fifth year, recording was off the table, and my hands were so contorted from the swelling-cracking-bleeding-healing cycles that they wouldn't even fit into XXL gloves. And, you know, it was awkward – not just at work but in public – where people noticed my bulbous appendages and then looked up at me with a puzzled expression, some sensing the vibes of a Sadomasochistic freak; others offering pity to their conscience; and still others covering a snicker or just outright laughing, wondering later if they got a glimpse of the Elephant Man's long lost descendent.

All those thoughts of the man-on-the-street were unacceptable. And I knew what they thought because I knew what I thought: walking along the sidewalk, seeing some woman with lifeless eyes and a busted up face walking along side a man with a bandaged hand and drug-rotted teeth; passing by some disgustingly fat waste bound to an electric wheelchair – rolls hanging over the bars – never to walk again because of their inability to control their diet; stepping over some brown-bag-bumbler, cup out, hand waving in the breeze, coins rattling, defeated, never to utter another stutterless sentence; smelling the filth of some oxygen-toting fiend with electronic vocal cords, never to catch a break because they can't catch their breath, puffing that smoke in-between sucking that hose – and yet they all continue, ever onward, into the madness.

“You *chose* this,” I reflected. “Therefore, you *choose* this.” I was just as culpable as any of these other so-called victims, but only in the sense that our past decisions *effected* rather than *affected* our downfall. It was a very counterintuitive idea.

There were many odd, unforeseen symptoms that presented over those seven years, but there are a few from year five worth mentioning – that is, if you have the stomach for it.

Once, after a night of recording, I awoke the next day and noticed in the bathroom mirror that my lips had bumps all over them. They were swollen out, and it was hard to feel the texture since at that point my hands were destroyed. I got a good idea by rubbing my forearm on them though; they were hives of some sort with several puffed out blisters ready to pop.

Not knowing what to do, I went to work and tried to forget about it all. But my tongue's curiosity wouldn't allow it, and throughout the day the bumps grew worse, eventually swelling out just like my hands – to the point that it looked like I'd grown a goddamn duck bill. It itched and

cracked in its own right, and I found myself harshly rubbing my lower teeth over my upper lip, not just to soothe the itch but also to feel the novelty of it all.

After a another day of the same, I started hyperventilating in the break room. *What if it's an STD?* I feared.

There were a couple of times in the recent past that I actually sat on the toilet seat at work. I knew it was a bad idea when I did it... and who knows what those assholes do in their spare time. For all I knew, they were sneaking into the bathroom to work one out on break – shooting their potential directly into the toilet and down into the gutter.

If nothing else, they were efficient.

And I guess it saved everyone time and money – but maybe they overshot and left a little on the seat, which found its way onto my bandages... which found its way to my lips!

*Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!* I knew public restrooms were a bad idea.

I didn't know where else to go, and I didn't want any co-workers seeing me, so I casually walked to the bathroom and entered a stall, hoping like all hell no one noticed.

*Oh God, I can't even cover it up!* I'd known for some time that bandages wouldn't work.

Doc said to change them several times a day, and I knew in my heart-of-hearts that, really, I'd never do that. No one actually does what the doctor says – although everyone tells the doctor they will. Too often doctors speak in hyperbole and the patient doesn't know what advice can actually be taken for granted. I mean, all advice is granted, and ten days of antibiotics becomes five, a few months off that ankle becomes a few weeks, and changing bandages several times a day becomes once, if that. If for only a moment they were honest, instead of trying to cover their ass, maybe their patients would heed the advice. But in the aftermath of so many fallen trees and so many wasted words, doctors can't help seek self-preservation, and much as I wanted to, I couldn't really blame Doc.

“Calm down, calm down, calm down...,” I kept saying to myself. Without due care, I ripped the tainted wraps off my hands, never to wear them again. I knew it would be problematic – you know, everyone at work seeing what my hands actually looked like underneath the mummy gloves – but it was an acceptable risk at that point.

I fumbled around in nervousness mucking up my pants until I got the phone out. They tried to make me work through some middle-man nurse, but I convinced the secretary or whoever to get the doctor on the line. I reached Doc in a panic and explained what had happened and that it could be an STD, and all she said was, “No. No, Mr. Hegel. Calm down. It sounds like your allergies are acting up. I’m going to call you in a prescription as soon as we get off the phone. Go pick it up, and take it immediately, and if the swelling doesn’t go down in a few days, give us a call and we’ll run some tests and try something else. As I’ve told you before...”

*A few days?!* I hung up the phone. But, of course, that goddamned doctor and her goddamned voodoo pills took care of it. Within a week the bumps were gone. Still though, the thought of sexual disease repulsed me, and in fear I purchased my first set of leather gloves. Idiotically, I initially only bought the one-size-fits-all pair, unaware that generalities no longer applied to me. They lasted a week before they were returned to nature.

I have little doubt my co-workers saw the three day duck bill, and it was odd – the silence. Not a single one came up and asked me about it. Something had changed.

But the duck bill wasn’t the worst by far...

At a later point I got this smooth itch on the underside of my dick – you know, that partitioning line of flesh that runs down the center of your nut sac. It was like Mother Nature manufactured man’s balls from a two-piece mold, not unlike the cheaply fused glassware at megastores.

I say smooth because it felt like the surface was rubbed raw, like it was sanded down with the finest grit. And the first scratches only seemed to make it smoother – until the swelling that is.

To say that it itched is an understatement. It mother fucking itched! So much so that self-gratification was second nature, and I’d reached that point in the torture process that I wasn’t afraid of consequences anymore. I didn’t care what my co-workers thought, and I didn’t give a damn about

my job or my rent or my groceries. It was all secondary to my other needs. There was no deterrence mechanism, no notions of retribution that could rebut the necessity of the moment. For once, I just embraced immediate gratification.

At some point, I just said piss on it all.

I mean, to be honest, I never really had a problem itching my crotch between the day's chores only to go right back to the paperwork and handshakes, but I'd never taken to the itch in front of others. It was something discouraged early on in my childhood, like running around naked, or picking my nose. Yes, I was a nose picker – and I still would be if any one of my goddamned fingers could fit into my nasal crevice; I had to take to just holding one nostril and forcefully blowing out of the other to get my shit out. Mom was around one day when I did it and she seemed disgusted – but I think she understood.

I can't say I'm proud of my absent-minded indiscretions, but surely you can understand as well. There are worse things than itching yourself in public. And I bathed as best I could – and everyone knows that money's the dirtiest thing in existence – so if people could bear to change currency then they could bear my questionable shake.

At least that's how I justified it.

And surely my co-workers already knew how foul their hands really were from the corporate red tape. But in the fifth year there was only an uneasy silence in the cubicle hallways. A silence with a certain ebb and flow, and as nonsensical as it may seem, it was a silence ground in sound.

A ghost town at sundown – and I was the lone gunman. Ten paces to my demise. There was no gun at my hip, there were no hands at the ready.

But, yeah, my underdick, as I coined it, started intensely bothering me when I got up from my desk, and I went to the bathroom stall to check it out. Lightning pain pulsed up from the tip of my dick and out into my balls, and also extended out further into my pelvis. It was a unique pain to my dick, difficult to describe. But my balls felt like some prick just took a baseball bat to them.

Once inside the stall, I hunched over from the pain and tried to put toilet paper down on the seat. But my body wouldn't have it, and I quickly wiggled my pants part of the way down, sat on the half-covered toilet seat, and took a look at my crotch to see the damage.

There's this odd biological mechanism that somehow works in connection to your dick getting hard – some kind of *lifting* feeling that most often coincides with sexual pleasure. Not that I'm some kind of sex fiend or anything like that – well, I've had my times. But, I mean, you get the picture.

Well, for some reason, that *lifting* mechanism was just spastically going off, and my dick was kind of bouncing about, almost as though it were trying to avoid the pain, but in its avoidance it was only causing more. It must have been a muscle of some sort, unable to consider my current dilemma. This problem, among many other biological factors, explains the development of neurons and brain cells; all cells are equal, but some are more equal than others.

*It was a quasi-chicken shitting a pseudo-egg*, my thoughts corrected.

There was a raised red line running down it with what looked like several perforations. But there were no bumps at all. It was swelling from all the itching, and there was a gooey substance lightly coating it, probably the beginnings of the pus phase.

*“What the fuck is this?!”* I blurted out loud. *“Oh God!”* The uncontrollable *lifting* was becoming more spastic, and I felt it move a little south. I stood up, quickly pulled my pants the rest of the way down, and plumped back down right as my ass opened up and released some waste. I couldn't control any of it, but out of some instinct I hunched over, putting pressure on my abdomen which expedited the process. I didn't know what to do.

*“Oh God. Fuck my face,”* I whined.

It didn't appear to be the same symptoms as the other allergic reactions... and I hadn't had sex... I know I hadn't had sex, so it couldn't be syphilis. I'd never read anything about *lifting* symptoms. The red line still itched like all hell, and quickly ballooned out. Still the *lifting* continued, and as my dick swelled, it began to look like a fish out of water, desperately flipping and flapping about trying to survive.

I found myself scratching even as I continued to auto-eject every pent up nuance from my bowels. My intestines twisted inside me, constricting like a boa, trying to get out every last ounce of waste; and the pain forced me to remain hunched over, pushing as though I were giving birth.

For a moment I wondered if all that pushing and all that pressure would cause me to shit out my guts. I'd read about that happening somewhere.

*Syphilis.* I might've found some other relief in holding my head in my hands, but it no longer fit. I kept forgetting: this wasn't a one-size-fits-all world anymore. And my hands would be the last place offering any solace.

*Syphilis. Allergies. Impotence.*

You want to know until you know – and then you don't.

Fervently, I continued to itch the underdick, doubled over weeping and wincing while my bowels made all kinds of questionable sounds. “*Oh God. Oh! Oh God!*” I continued. My stomach had started to turn from all the pressure, and I felt my lunch welling up. As I dealt with that, in the background, seemingly out of nowhere, I heard a scampering – and then a light cough! Someone was in here with me! Did I forget to lock the door? There was a toilet and urinal, so technically two men can share the bathroom – but it also locked, presumably for times like this. I heard the door close before I could make any attempt to figure out who intruded on this of all things.

The stress of it all was too much to bear, and I puked on the floor right in front of the toilet. I didn't know what to do. There was nothing to say. *Oh God!* I couldn't deal with it all right now.

The thought crossed my mind that my body was actually attempting to inform me. *We must take more drastic measures*, it urged. It was telling me to gnaw at the itch – to gnaw off that sinful abomination and cast it from my body, so that I might fear no more!

I heaved a few more times from the mixed aromas and realized that even if I wanted to gnaw my hands off, it couldn't be done in a squalid place like this. And I was no acrobat...

You see, pain is a hell of a thing. It has a tendency to undermine, and in many cases nullify, any positive effect it may have. All you have to do is visit a stroke survivor or some poor fool in a bout of depression.

I left the stall in an uncomfortable state, and by the time I left the office my crotch was horrifically swollen. My hands, then my lips, and now my junk... there was nothing to be done, and, yeah, I had to leave work early. What else was I going to do?

I hobbled out of there like a college slut leaving the frat house on an early morning walk of shame. The only difference was that my morning-after pill didn't cure the problem, only the symptoms.

As I left, for the first time, I noticed the logo of the company: it was a half-star of sorts with a fish weaving it's way in and out, almost as though it were coming toward you.



I wondered if he was trying to make his way out of the gutter – if the star engulfing his tail represented all those things in the past that held him back: all those ideologies and religions and those cultural gooble-de-goops, all those rights and wrongs, oughts and ought-nots, that people put so much emotional stock into; all those bullshit abstractions that may have been beneficial for someone or something in the short-term, only to come to a point of absurdity later downstream – when the concept becomes polluted and a certain ruined phrase, often colorfully called a term of art, devolves into ridiculousness, only to be overcome by shedding blood.

For it is blood which makes the grass grow and the fish was no more than a mascot, encouraging yet another generation to swim with the current rather than against it. And they will. Willingly.

When I got home, dick was a football and my nuts were golf balls. I called Doc's office as soon as I could grasp the phone and started telling her secretary all about it. It only took a few sentences better she stopped me, saying, "Hold on, Sir. Let me go speak with the doctor." For once, honesty was the best policy.

And, once again, Doc got on the phone, put a few pins in the doll, and called in some drugs. "This still sounds like an allergic reaction to the metal. Get the prescription, wait a couple days, and call back if things don't improve."

It was not good enough this time. We were talking about my manhood.

“Come on Doc,” I begged, “you’re a specialist. You know, you’re the only specialist, and I know somewhere in there, you’re a wonderful woman. You were right. I should have stopped. But you’ve got to have something that can help me out. Please, I’m begging you, Doc. I was wrong.”

The sound of desperation whined out from my throat-hole, pleading with my arch nemesis – the general on the other side of the battlefield, the one who years ago told me to surrender.

“I – I – I was wrong. Please help me, Doc.”

I have no doubt she derived pleasure from my admissions that day. I could sense smugness emanating from the other end of the line.

“Please, just get on my underdick.” It was a poor choice of wording. Even I’m not all that sure what I meant to say, really. But I guess she thought I was speaking in some crude sexual manner.

“Excuse me?!” she said clearly offended. “This wasn’t part of the deal!” I shouted in response. “I sacrificed my hands, not my dick!”

And with a click, only more silence.

I should’ve been thankful that she still called in the prescription... but I wasn’t. I didn’t want to have sex with her – well, not anymore. I mean, I found her attractive and all, but I didn’t want to take any chances. You know, you can’t be too careful – just because she’s a doctor doesn’t mean she isn’t spreading her legs for every other patient.

I can’t say the thought of sex with her never crossed my mind. But for all I knew, she had syphilis, so that was that. I mean – you know – I’m not one for taking risks like that.

I don’t know. Maybe she never heard the term underdick. I mean, it seemed intuitive enough – even if it wasn’t the proper medical term.

The line-and-itch and the swelling went away after about a week on the meds, and only came back one other time – about a month later – before it was all said and done. And it healed that time too, but my

relationship with Doc, unfortunately, had soured, and that was last time I ever sought her assistance.

Mom came and helped me a few times with things but I never really told her what was happening. I figured if I tried to explain myself she'd think it was too crazy a story, and that I'd really just gotten an STD and was trying to cover it up. I mean, who'd really believe me if, when asked, I just shooed away their concerns with a hand gesture, smiled, and responded, "Oh, it just allergies."

*Yeah, you've got **the** allergies,* she would've thought.

And, you know, she would've helped me either way but I didn't want to explain myself into disbelief. It would've done little more than make me look like a liar – which is pretty much the same as actually being a liar.

Guilty until proven innocent. The same can be said of mere happenstance – at least when you put your mind to it.

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Sometimes when one thing or another would happen, I would wonder how it related to *The Epic*. I mean, all things related to the work in some way, right? All things are invariably connected in some way, no matter how attenuated the link. Hell, even non-object objects, and intangible tangibles, if you can wrap your mind around that advanced level bullshit.

Everything that I do is a product of all the things that happened in the past; and every choice I make, everything that I do will have an effect, however great or small, on the future – and not just here and now, but in there, off in the distance, as well. The decimal point may be left of miles and miles of zero's, but the causal connection is there, looking me in the face, telling me, *The Epic is worth it.*

There was a day I spilled coffee all over myself, and I couldn't help but wonder what it meant – for the work.



What was the link? What did that coffee and my ruined shirt *say* about it? I thought on it for at least an hour – or at least until I was distracted by another call.

Unfortunately, cause and effect has nothing to do with intent.

In this, like other happenstances, I would think until something brought me out and threw back into reality – to do modern drudgery for modern problems based upon modern abstractions. And once I surfaced for a breath there was no delving back into those depths.

Once out, you'll never swim in the same river: it's too goddamned dirty, and you're too goddamned old.

I grew to hate having to think on things more than once, and that probably explains why I didn't care when I saw a disheveled mother with her little crack baby sitting and waiting for the bus. My only question was, what does it's incessant crying mean for the work? If I couldn't come to an adequate answer, then why reconsider it. And even if I did mete a fair response, what then? Think on it a second time, only to come to another one?

It's not worth it in the end.

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Slowly but surely the itch progressed, over the entirety of my hands and onto my wrists and forearms and other extremities, swelling and contorting not only the extensions I needed to affect my masterpiece, but my very being. The itch took whatever there was of my humanity, my so-called soul, and left only the madness.

Everything came back to the work. And because I couldn't keep it out of my thoughts, I found myself forgetting about *dis* and *dat*. My strides to-and-fro work marched the tempo; days wore on in 4/4, 3/4, 7/8, and 5/2, among other time signatures; the voices of those around me were mere pitch, emphasis, cadence, and vibrato – used in taste, of course; and I was constantly trying to exercise the irritation out of my fingers, to keep them strong and nimble.

Most times the only result was pain, and a tilted scale to the negative.

On many occasions in the sixth year, I walked to work only to find the building entrance locked. Unable to understand the significance of it all, I'd stare blankly at the double doors with an uncertain look on my face, my real thoughts only on the work. You see, I needed something to keep me on course, and one day my bloated hands knocked the alarm clock off the nightstand next to my bed and whatever was left of measuring time consistently was gone. It still would tick and tock, its hands would try to keep up, it still tried to do its job, but something had gone a rye. Something had been lost. And where there was once a systematic *ring-a-bing-bing-bing* prompting the day's events, there was only a whimper of chaotic noise, if there was anything at all. Without that clock, my days, hours, and minutes mixed together and eventually were altogether lost.



I guess that's what happens when the tide strikes the line in the sand.

Some mornings I'd come out of the work long enough to realize my day job was cancelled – I mean, that it was a holiday or a weekend or some other day we didn't have to work – and I would be saved the walk. Other mornings, I'd just lay, often already awake, hoping for a *ring-a-bing-bing-bing* that never came, and soon enough I'd be making the trek downtown – waiting for the day to pass, trying to get away like the fish in the star, only to realize the current was too strong.

After a couple write-ups for being late, I quit rolling the dice. I could no longer rely on externalities to regulate myself. I could only presume a given set of circumstances, and react accordingly to maximize my time dedicated to the work.

Other times my legs grew tired of standing and I would just sit next to the entryway of the building, largely unaware of anything around me, instead listening to the music in my head, sometimes humming along with new ideas, waiting for the door to unlock. If the morning progressed into the afternoon, and I felt pangs of hunger or some other bodily necessity, or the sun took its toll or the rain made me wet, I'd give up and head home to the madness.

It didn't matter. After all, it was time *after* time.



### **rGOLD & JOSEPH GABRIEL**

"How do I know rGold is my soulmate, you might ask: she can beat Lemmy Koopa with a damn frog suit!"

- Joseph Gabriel



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[www.modern gods.org](http://www.modern gods.org)

Fred is a musician, a composer, committed and obsessed, with seven minutes, six seconds, and its killing him - literally. The question is: what do you call a song when it takes on a life of its own, when it is the cause of an illness and the symptom of morbidity, when you can taste your own words take new meaning, and that meaning turns on you?

Originally, Nicholas Anthony and Joseph Gabriel wrote a mission statement to form a collective of artists based in Missouri and dedicated to creating something beautiful, something inspiring, something to share with the world.

...something that would leave a lasting impression.

Instead we drank Bourbon and Scotch, and dreamed up a monstrosity that threatens our very hold on reality. We called the plethora leviathans plaguing our lives "Modern Gods" and have since offered up our creative energies as a sacrifice to appease the foul beasts.

Creativity is a miraculous curse.

Visit [www.modern gods.org](http://www.modern gods.org) to hear the songs and you will bear witness to these relentless yet playful gods as they develop through countless retellings. In the end, the art looks good on your fridge, the music is perfect for disturbing the peace, and the writings are great when you need to spend a hot minute on the toilet.

It's your choice: read or wipe -- but regardless, enjoy.

**USE** *modern gods* **STRINGS**