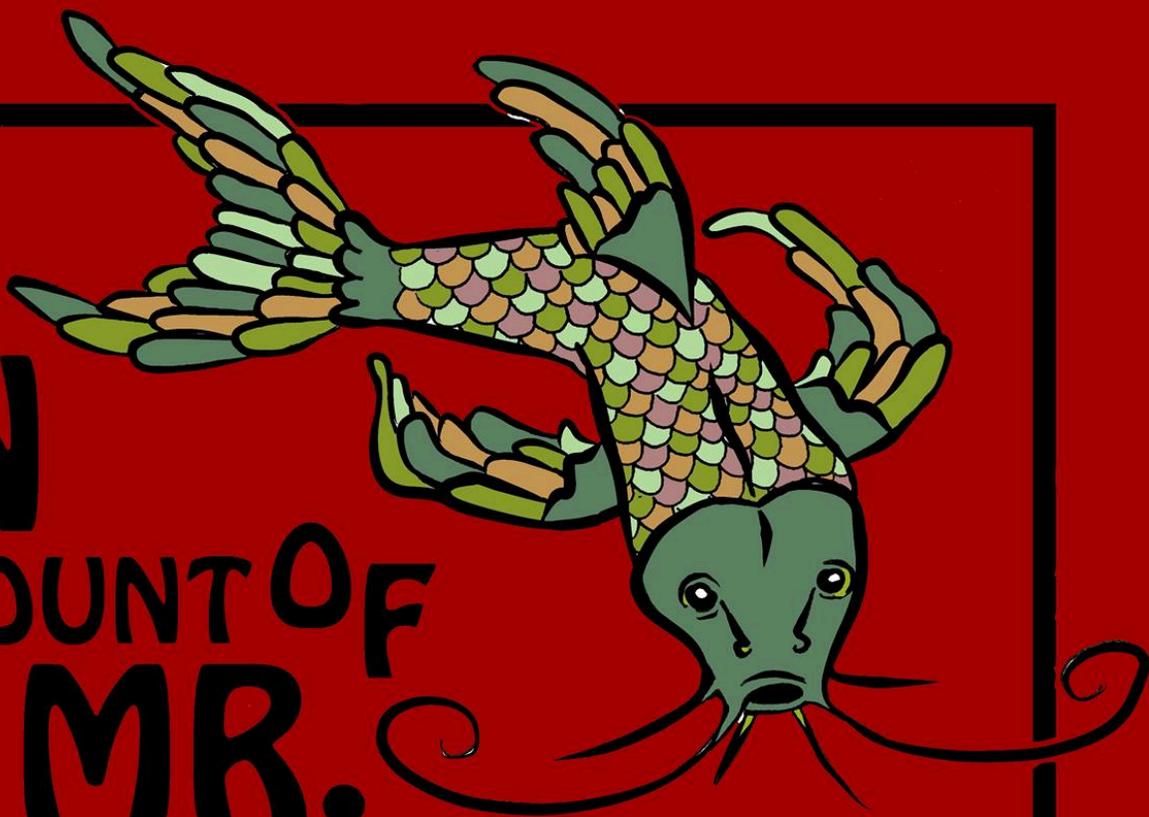


a novella by
JOSEPH GABRIEL



**AN
ACCOUNT OF
MR.
CONTA
GIOUS**

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



**PART IV
JUDGMENT**

A tale of delusion, disease, and sordid sacrifice

Joseph Gabriel

An Account of Mr. Contagious

Illustrated by rGold



GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCTIONS
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PART IV: JUDGMENT



Inferential Imbibing In Innuendo

And so it was...

I guess I should talk about Boozkamisich. I'm sure it's obvious what happened, but I may as well lay it all out for you.

Yeah, I'll admit it: I stopped cleaning myself like I used to. I mean, I couldn't really! I'd go in looking a bit disheveled most days, but in my defense we didn't have any personal contact with customers – at least I didn't. It was all over the phone. People didn't know what I looked like, and I doubt they would've even cared so long as they got their kickback.

It wasn't *every* day, but sure, there were times I came into work with stubble and bed hair. And there were times I wore wrinkled clothes and failed to tuck my shirt in all the way. Sure, there were even times I wore dirty clothes and stale undergarments...

... I mean, what the hell else do I have to lose by admitting it?

Sure, my hands were most often covered in bloody, pus-ridden gauze pads. I had to give up on the leather gloves; although they concealed my issues, they weren't malleable enough for the give and pull of my new found flesh. Every time I took them off – and at some point or another they did have to come off – I ended up bleeding quite a bit. No, at some point I realized I was doomed to mummy gloves, and so it was.

And, sure, it didn't help that I continued immersing my hands in hand sanitizer and burning hot water, bandages and all.

You know what it all boiled down to? The itch. I can't describe how distracting and unnerving it was to feel a constant itch over my entire body. It was always there, no matter what I was doing, no matter what the circumstance. Every decision, every day, every nuance was contorted by the itch as it spread all over my body – an itch that was no longer confined to my extremities.

An itch that colored the Work as much as it soured my flesh and textured my face.

And sure... there were times when I forgot to shower or brush my teeth. You know, many normal people don't do it anyway, and people itching on the inside of their throat have an incentive not to. No, on my worst-of-absolute-worst days, I still wiped deodorant on my pits and whisked some fragrance into the air around my exterior.

There! Good as new.

Plaques of rash covered most of my body at all times, and there was a constant tightness to my skin from global swelling. Too often when I bent or flexed, a sharp noticeable crease would rear itself where the swollen flesh had chosen to give in to pressure. I could feel the density of it in my joints, and the bumps and blisters around my eyes and lips.

It was a miserable existence.

I began to fear the shower, knowing that it would dry my skin out further and cause the itch to be even greater. An onlooker would almost instantly notice how fidgety I was, using my clothing to grant a slight itch, rubbing my mittens along my forearms, bending down for a moment to rub a leg, or, when no one was looking, helping myself to a good itch of the crotch. My ability to focus on anything in particular was compromised for the sake of relieving the itch, and there came a point when those at Boozkamisch felt it necessary to intervene.

I have little doubt it was my co-workers who initially caused me grief, and it was one of my co-workers who snitched me out to the boss. Maybe it was that asshole, Bob... Bob Johnson – at least I think that was his name. Or it could've been Paula – that day I left a smudge of yellow organic filth on her desk.

I was just pushing the trees downstream and accidentally pushed too hard, leaving behind a big splotch of gunk alongside her in-out tray. It wasn't much, just a tiny dollop, but it was enough to drip down onto her desk next to her coffee mug. She noticed instantly, and when I tried to clean it up she did as well and came into direct contact with my mummy gloves. She pulled away disgusted and just looked at me and said, "I've got it, Fred. I've got it."

I think for a moment she wondered if she might have syphilis now.

Seriously! I know that look.

Anyway...

This is what it was like for Fred Hegel, the man who composed The Epic. And I'm only admitting it because I want an authentic account of all that happened – no bias, no bullshit – so when future generations hear The Epic they know it's author was human even if it's divine.

It's crucial that this testament be accurate, not some bumbling mess like the Gospels. Believing inconsistencies -- dissonant remnants of the past... It's really asking quite a bit when you think about it. At least that's what I thought. And, you know, I wasn't asking for worship or anything like that. Quite the opposite: it was the Work that composed me – and everything else.

Anyway, whoever it was, someone snitched me out to the boss, and I found myself called into his office to grovel and explain away the alleged improprieties.

“Hi Fred! Come on in and have a seat,” he said gesturing as he stared at a computer monitor. A piping hot cup of coffee rested next to his right hand while he glared at the unknown and artificial light accentuated a glaze of sweat covering his brow. The steam rose from the cup, fluttered for a moment, and then dissipated; it was no different from the trills of the upper woodwinds.



His name was Franklin Talbot. He'd always had a good demeanor, leaving me alone to do my work and continuing his own in the same manner.

And I was never any trouble. I showed up on time, and I always pushed the trees downstream to their next destination. One more hand in the waterway, and over the years Frank had come to believe I was self-greased and good to go.

And he still believed it as I sat in his office.

“Fred, I’ve never had a problem with you...” he first said, confirming my suspicions. And, you know, he began telling me all the great things I was, but the honeymoon period quickly ended and then came the *problem* – the reason for this awkward little pow-wow.

“But, taaa, well... there have been a few complaints about your, well... professionalism... and your hygiene.” Once again, my suspicions were confirmed.

My left hand started to itch beneath the bandages. I tried to relegate it to the depths, but when one itch sprang up others called from the darkness as well.

“People have been saying that you might be having some... personal problems. And just like everyone else, I couldn’t help but notice your hands. Is, a, everything alright? Anything I might help ya with?”

He was fishing.

Should I bite?

You know to this day it amazes me how fast the mind reacts when particular circumstances bombard hardwired heuristics. I don’t think I’ll ever understand it, and I certainly didn’t understand it that day when he was politely digging into my life and my choices.

Fishing for a reason – fishing for logic he could never understand. Still though, there was a certain cadence in his voice, an almost parroting of a counter-melody in the Work. The connection would later bother and further complicate my already non-existent sleep patterns.

“Ummmmm... well Frank, it’s kind of difficult to talk about, but...”

“Oh, I completely understand,” he said blowing me off, “and I’ve been down a dark path myself. People just don’t understand... If it weren’t for my wife and kids, I don’t know that I would’ve made it out.”

He paused, for the first time looking up from his monitor. “They called it a midlife crisis,” he continued, “and I thought they were full of *shit* when I first heard it.” It was clear that he used profanity as a rhetorical device – trying to ease my nervousness with impropriety.

Is that what he thinks this is? I thought. Frank was several years older than I and what better way to figure out the problems of your subordinates than to internalize and compare them to your own plight.

Perhaps he thought his own confession would render my own, or perhaps feigned empathy had worked miracles on other flim-flams.

I don't know.

"Well, I guess it could be called that," I said responding with whatever I could – because I didn't really know what to say.

When I look at it all in retrospect, it's pretty simple: my goals weren't his goals or anyone else's goals for that matter. I couldn't even try to describe what I was doing to myself and why I was doing it because he never would have understood.

It would have never made sense to him.

I was alone: a lone musician, a lone composer, alone in my dreams and alone in my endeavors. Alone with the itch. At one time there were parallel goals: make money, pay bills, help Mom, blah, blah, blah... But I slowly drifted from all that, until those ancillary considerations fell by the wayside. It was never about doing the job, or *for the betterment of man* reasoning, or because I love my mom, or any of that twisted bologna.

Now it was only about pain and precision – two things Frank could never understand.

"How long has it been going on?" he asked.

"Several years," I replied.

"Oh, wow, it's amazing you lasted that long before falling off the wagon."

What wagon? It didn't make sense.

"Fred, you seem like a *no-bullshit* kind a guy, and I'm gonna be honest and *frank* with you." He smiled after he emphasized *frank*, trying to ease tensions with a senseless double meaning.

No doubt he'd used it to break the ice in the past.

“We got a real problem here. You and I -- we represent the company in what we do, how we dress, how we live our lives – you get what I’m saying... I probably don’t need to explain the problem your addiction creates for our image – but at this point I have to since we’ve received a few complaints.”

Here it comes: *you’re fired.*

“We sell booze, Fred. That’s what we do.” He pointed at a clock on the wall to the right of his desk with the Boozkamisch logo on it. I noticed its ticking cadence was in line with the song as it repeated in my mind.



“Don’t teach a man to fish, Fred...,” he recited in an almost angry tone, accenting the *F* in my name.

“You know, I’ve never agreed with that saying...,” he recounted after a brief pause, reclining back in his chair and looking up. “It ends with people in situations like yours. And I know we don’t personally deal in sales or distribution or anything like that, but I can’t have addicts coming into work a mess, having hygiene issues, and waiting at the door to be let in after days of binging... It’s not only harmful to you but its harmful to all of us. And I get that you’re here every day – hell, apparently you’re here on days were closed – and that you do good work. I get that, Fred,” he said trying to accommodate within the reaming.

“And don’t get me wrong,” he added, his hands gesturing like a cop directing traffic, “I love a neat glass of Scotch and a couple Boozkamisch with the games on Sunday...” He smiled and lightly shook his head as he spoke, thinking incorrectly that we shared a commonality in sports. “Hell, without that...,” he feigned thought and looked up briefly, “I might not have maintained my sanity when the kids were growing up.”

“I get that. I really do, Fred. But it’s harmful on office morale and the company’s image to bring it to work.” There was some silence, and I think he was trying to gauge my lack of response in his redundancies. In the end he seemed as confused as I. Perhaps a silent stare and a slightly furrowed brow weren’t in keeping with the norm of these situations.

“Fred,” he relieved us of the silence, “I want to teach *you* to fish.”



What the fuck?

“No pink slip, no write-ups, no yelling, nothing like that...” He waved his hands emphasizing the un-necessity of mentioning such threats. “But I’m gonna need you to get some help with all this.” He continued his lackadaisical speech. “I’m going to keep you on board, and I’m not even gonna write you up this time. Like I said, you’ve been a great employee for years, and I don’t want to let you go or anything like that.”

“But...,” the tit-for-tat went, “you need to get control of your life, and you need to kick the habit and get some help. Are you willing to do that? Can you let the booze go?”

That’s what this is about? He thinks I’m a drunk? What about my hands? What about my fucking hands?! I thought fuming and foaming at the mouth.

My hands... Could he smell a rotten, booze-ridden stink on my hands from across the table? The bandages soaked in sanitizer? I remembered reading something about drunks drinking sanitizer, perfume, rubbing alcohol -- hell whatever they could get their hands on. Sometimes they died from drinking odd stuff. The article memorialized that our fine state was best among the others within this particular predisposition.

Maybe he thought he smelled booze. The possibility made me itchy, and I saw the Work ring out from his body language.

Still though!? None of this explained my hands -- the muck, the destruction. I shook my head in silence with a stern, mute expression. I didn't know what to say to him. I was at a complete loss.

“Well,” he responded to my confused resentment, “why don't you take an extra hour after lunch and schedule an appointment with someone? In fact, go ahead and take the whole afternoon off, Fred. You deserve it, and I want to make sure you get off on the right foot. If you need any help figuring it out, there's a counseling program offered and provided through the company. I met with some of those folks in the past, and if nothing else they can point you in the right direction.” He head bobbed up and down like mallets striking the timpani in a show of strength, as though he were trying to get my subconscious on board with the notion.

Instead of nodding in agreement, I lifted my eyebrows.

“Fred,” he said a bit awkwardly, “I want to thank you for being so... calm and respectful through this talk we had to have...,” he said beginning the closing remarks. “I know it's got to be hard confronting these demons and getting called into the boss's office and all... but you've handled it like a man and a professional. And you let me know if there is anything I can do to help you with your recovery.”

He gave me one more half smile and twitch of the neck before looking down at some papers on his desk in front of him. That was a boss-cue for *now get the fuck out of my office*. And as I walked out the door, the first thing that occurred to me was that I'd have both the afternoon and the evening to devote to the Work.

I quickly walked back to my desk, grabbed my things, left, and the Work repeated.

Before I could get real work done I wanted to make some token gesture to get the help I evidently needed – primarily to convince the boss that I was a loyal slave and that I'd began to remedy whatever alcoholic fantasy he fixated upon. He'd mentioned a company program for drunks but I couldn't find any information on it. I didn't know where the

employee handbook was, and I never kept any of that paperwork they sent out. In any case, it was probably minimally funded – one of those things the company has to look good on paper but does nothing in reality.

I finally got a number from someone in human resources. It rang for several moments before I was placed on hold. Even that droning waste had some similarity to the Work. I imagined a lone Indian stashed in some small dark crevice of New Delhi. A cardboard roof covered in shit for water proofing allowed a few glimmers of light in while the receptionist frantically tried to answer calls and even more frantically tried to comprehend what each caller was saying from the 3-8 hour training session she'd received *in English*.

The 22-pages of scripts with bolded keywords that the caller might say were helpful to get people off the phone though. Setting aside the language barrier, the Indian's plight wasn't all that different from my own.

A, E, I, O, U --- it all sounds the same... and more importantly, it all means the same thing, especially when considered in tandem with the Work. I gave up pursuing the call center out of boredom, and at any rate it all seemed simple enough: What do alcoholics do? They go to meetings – those alcoholic meetings.

And just my luck! It only took a few more moments to find an Alcoholics Anonymous group in the area that was meeting in just a couple of days.

It was odd and disconcerting, but I was a little intrigued by the chain of causality. Because of some impression my boss got from co-workers complaining about oozing bandages, and in consideration of his own history of substance abuse, a sober non-religious individual will now attend a meeting for drunks at an inner-city Methodist church.

I suppose at some point we all must pay homage to the madness that is mankind.

And that was fine. It only took a few minutes to figure it out, and I'd have several extra hours to put toward the Work. If drunk meetings gave me this much extra time in the day, I'd go all the time.

Payment in full.

The sun had been waning earlier in the days when I went to the meeting. By the time I arrived, it was dark, and the underbelly of the city fumbled about the halls of God to speak openly of their detestable acts.

And I wasn't there to save them nor was I there to save myself. I was there to save my job. And, really, I wasn't even there to save that but to save the income that fueled the Work – the income that fueled the ceaseless melody. There was no saving to be had. All one has to do is read up on the plight of poor old Jesus to know no one ever gets saved – least of all the Savior himself!

As I walked in and placed myself in the back row of the poorly lined chairs, those few who were able to get a glimpse made me feel as though I was contemptible. Oddly, this seemed to make sense: after all, I worked for the smut peddlers that brought these fiends to their knees and into the gutters. And the cheap booze that paid my rent and furthered my goals was the same substance that enlarged their guts and destroyed their minds.

“It works if you work it,” they said in failed unison for some reason.

Fools that they were, there was a tinge of pity hidden somewhere inside me; there was also a part of me that countered with *eh, fuck 'em*. It was a balance properly struck in the Work, and it was something these people obviously relied upon -- a fair shake: an unnatural balance people seek but never attain.

Despite chemicals and conclusions though, I really didn't know what to think of them. And so there I sat awaiting the beginning of the ritual... but it seemed to have already begun. Someone had just walked from the front, and someone else stood up to take his place as some clockwork moderator bobbed her head.

An odd ritual it was. “My name is Dunsley, and I'm an alcoholic.”

“Hi Dunsley,” was the flat reply of the crowd. Their depressed chorus echoed for a moment through the steeple. “I just want to say that I'm now four days sober, and it's getting better every day...”

I quickly began to lose interest. I mean, what the hell was this anyway? Nothing more or less than a lack of purpose joined to an unconscious acknowledgement of meaninglessness, all held together by a belief of powerlessness.

And shame. You could hear the shame echo for miles.

It manifested itself in several meandering speeches from stumble bums seeking warmth, blue-collar lifers trying to keep their blue collars, and... well, somehow at least one person thought I fit into this group. “It’s almost been two years since I beat and drove my family out of my life,” he paused sniffing a bit. “And it’s been almost two since my little girl or her Mom took a beating at my drunken hands...”

Jesus Christ, I thought.

“I’m thankful that they’re safe, but I can’t forget what I am or what I’ve done to them.

It realized itself in an unattainable goal – no, for most of these people it was a mere hope that tomorrow would never come – that they would stay sober for just one more day.

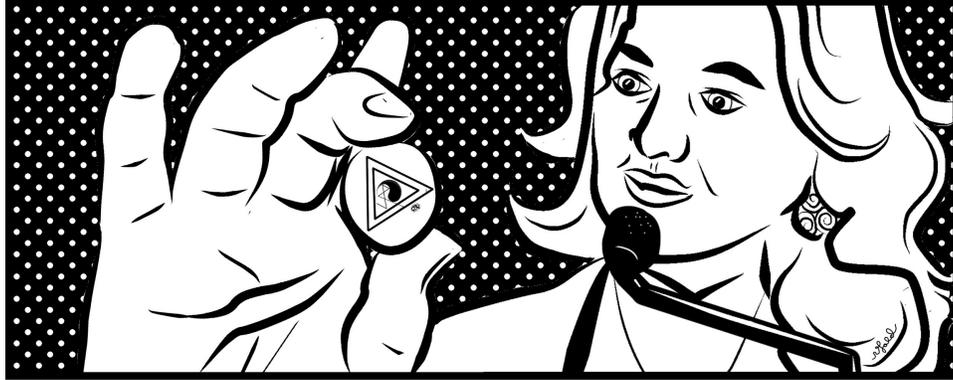
“My baby girl will only see the world with one eye,” he finished slowly.



“But she’ll never see me in it again, thankfully. I’m three weeks sober today, trying to make it to four.” He bowed his head in shame and began to move away from the makeshift podium.

“It works if you work it,” the herd uttered.

The moderator thanked Dunsley and asked if it was anyone’s first time. “If anyone would like to come up,” she said, “talk for a bit and get a sobriety coin, you’re welcome to share.”



It occurred to me that many of these people may only be here to get the coins – so they could buy more booze. *Why are they paying these people?* I thought. But just like any other profitable organization, they made you work for a drink.

A woman raised her hand and went up. “Um... My name is Susan, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Susan,” came the reply.

“I’ve, uh, been three months sober since getting into my car accident and being arrested. I’ve been doing all I can to help people and atone for what I’ve done. My family’s been really supportive... and, uh, I’ve just been trying to pay it forward.” She smiled and turned.

“It works if you work it,” they chanted.

The leader looked offhandedly at me a couple of times from the podium, trying to avoid the silence probably, and I didn’t respond so she moved on, asking if anyone else would like a coin.

“Remember everyone,” she said, “we all need to try and ‘pay it forward’ like Susan here. We have sponsors here that ‘pay it forward’ to new members, and we have others who help around the city in any way they can. They can help you keep your mind off the bottle, and it just helps give us all a reason. Just keep that in mind: *pay it forward.*”

Pay it forward.

“Anyone else?”

“Hello, My name is Kakia, and I’m...” another female droned.



I imagined myself as the moderator, handing out coins riddled with a taste of self-destruction altogether different from their own intoxo-subjugation. I imagined the stumble bums lining up readily accepting the coins, but later realizing from the coins gritty texture a meaning written in constant pain and characterized by a belief in endless suffering: the Work.

I imagined thunder and lightning: a storm of epic proportions. The bums, quite frightened by the unknown, quickly retreated from the heavy rain desiring instead a heavy hand.

Again, she looked offhandedly at me. “Who needs a coin?” I guess they just threw them to the fish if there were no bites. I gave her the *no I don't want what you're pandering* look. I think she understood.

Admit you're powerless, the brochure said...

Pay it forward...

You'd think I walked into the goddamned Gambler's Fallacy Casino: Where the House Always Goes to Heaven.

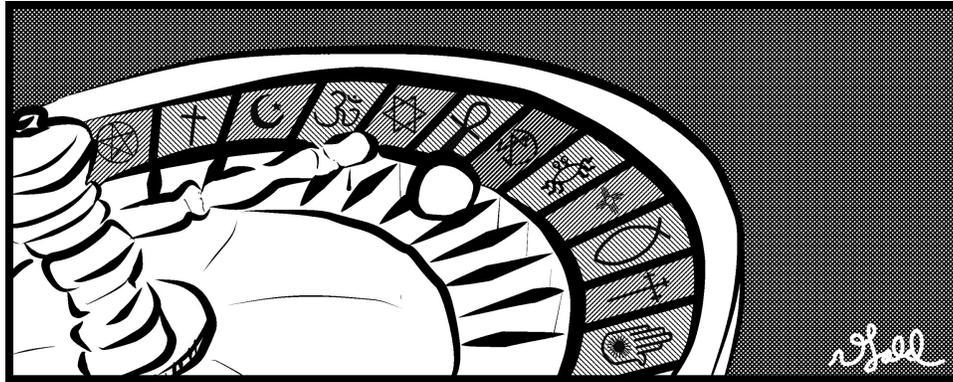
Come one, come all! Pascal bellows waving his hat in one hand and a decorated T-handled cane in the other. *I got a wager you CAN afford to lose! Just come on in and try your luck at the roulette wheel!*



He smiles and points to one of the mouth-gaping rubes. *Well, hey there, fella!* Pascal says smiling, and the rube immediately smiles back, nodding his head. *You can't defend either proposition but ya sure as shit can appreciate uncertainty and bet there's a horse of another color trotting down the ol' water canals of the red planet itself! Am I right? Am I right? Come on, now. Am I right?* The rube continues nodding, mesmerized by complex verbiage coupled with simplistic repetition.

It was a sure bet, the poor rube thought.

Yes, sir'ee! We've got a winner right here, folks! Right here! Cause EVERYONE'S a winner with ol' Pascal.



No, it was time to leave church. All bets were off.

All Things Considered

I left as it began to rain. It was a few blocks to the closest bus stop. I methodically paced to the bus sign as a chill began to take hold all around me. The darkness and its kind made me realize that I hadn't checked to see what time the bus would arrive.

I guess it would when it was time, I thought circularly, shrugging to myself.

It was but a few minutes that I was standing idle, shifting weight among my feet, waiting for the bus, and I realized this would not do. Aware of impending misery, I searched the vicinity for a place that might stay the rain. There was no refuge near the stop itself, but in an alley close by there were several balconies stacked floor-by-floor, and the lowest of their brethren seemed to offer solace.

I began to shiver and necessity drove the decision making process.

As I approached I noticed someone else had beaten me to the punch – a small thing, wearing a drenched black hoodie and some tight jeans. A slender body begged the feminine and some wet blonde hair spilled out the top of her hood.

She didn't look like a bum. On the contrary, her clothes appeared clean, and from what I could see – and smell – she wasn't a creature of the streets.



She kept her face slightly angled downward, knees to the air, ass flat on the ground. Without seeing, I could tell her face was sullen, and I wondered whether she, like I, came here to hide from a downpour.

It was difficult to tell all things considered.

Her mouth slightly gaped open revealing a rack of rotten teeth. They were well on the way out having turned a bit blackish and all. I wondered briefly what that kind of rot tastes like, and quickly thereafter I was grateful enough to leave the matter unanswered.

There appeared to be very little emotion in her demeanor, no trouble in paradise or whatever people call it.

No, this was a different beast.

In any case, there was plenty of room so I moved right up against the wall immediately to her left and felt the full chill of the air. It numbed my face, and I realized the rain had actually been keeping me from the wind's full fury -- somehow or another. It was too late to go back to the wet

though so I remained. I scooted over a bit closer to her to get right underneath the balcony, and hunkered down a little more – not for the purpose of conversing but because of some false belief that being closer to the ground might help me avoid more raindrops.

It made little sense, I know, but I did it anyway.

Several minutes passed as I focused on the rain – it had been falling in waves, and feeling as though I understood its pattern I turned and looked at the blonde. There was a certain wavering of her eyes as she stared at apparently nothing in front of her. It didn't seem like something someone could do intentionally – and it didn't look like some gimmick.

Those eyes were sunken and fragile.

Her mouth was gaping open but I now noticed that her lower jaw – the one with all the rotten teeth – kept shifting forward and backward, as though she were chewing on something between the nothing.

Under bite. Over bite. Under bite. Over bite.

Which is it, really? I wondered.

I could tell she wasn't shaking from the weather. There were unspoken tensions emanating from her. Things words couldn't describe – torments beyond my comprehension.

She was beyond grief and beyond the cold that controlled me.

Two vodka bottles themselves lay beside her, and I leaned over from some unknown curiosity to see if she had any left. No, her cheap comrades had deserted her and left her to the elements.

It bothered me a little that the scent of alcohol wasn't upon her. If my boss could smell sanitizer on my bandages and make a connection, why in the hell couldn't I perceive it on an obvious case of alcoholism?

It was a bit disappointing, really, but as puzzling as it was I wrote it off to the rain.

And even after I leaned over she didn't acknowledge my presence... It was very odd – very odd indeed — and I felt a greater kind of curiosity beg for satisfaction. I took a few small duck wobbles around to face her,

brought my head a little lower, and tried looking her in the eyes. I was getting showered with a bit of rain on my back and goosebumps ran down my spine – but, you know, there are times when contentment requires sacrifice.

I needed to know. But what? I didn't know... I even squinted a bit trying to see something that apparently wasn't there.

She just looked beyond me, moving her jaw back-and-forth, back-and-forth, and I didn't know what to think. I duck wobbled back closer to wall with a confused frown on my face, avoiding more of the rain which now came down even harder. You could see the water moving from the gutters rapidly, and I felt a certain nervousness from that swift liquid's movement around us.

My bandages were becoming waterlogged and noticeably heavy. It was far from pleasant.

“My poor, poor, poor...,” she uttered so softly I almost couldn't hear it over the rain. Her mouth gaped a little wider and the arm on her other side sprang to life furtively moving about the asphalt. Her hair stuck to her face in the wet air, her eyes cried out in silence, her body shook with unknown angst, and her voice screeched in pain – but there was nothing.

Nothing left.

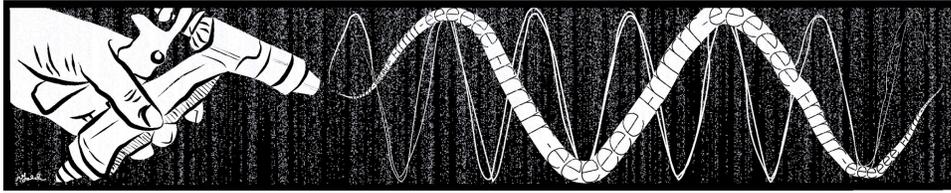
Her hand popped up, and in a clumsy reaction I fell back on my ass to sit in the wet. It made little sense to get up – all things considered – so I made myself as comfortable as one might. The hand that caught me was completely soaked, and instinctually I rubbed my face in puss, asphalt, and rainwater.

It felt pretty good – you know – all things considered.

It was a garden hose nozzle. That's what she had in her hand.

She held the piece quite firmly, as though she were going to water the garden. I turned from more curiosity and noticed there was no hose attached. No spigot to be seen. Perhaps she imagined the water swirling around us was the result of her own desires.

A few gurgled breaths huffed from her, and I saw a taste of drool ooze from her mouth. She took three more deep breaths, lifted the nozzle up further, and I noticed her hand squeeze upon the garden hose nozzle.



Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrrrr-eeeeee....

She'd held it to her temple.

Again I squinted, and my tongue licked a bit of the rain from around my lips.

The silence of her agony was only lifted by the creaking of that nozzle. I shared a moment with her as she pulled that trigger over and over again.

Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrrrr-eeeeee....

She squinted so hard a hint of bodily wet overcame the titanic wet which surrounded us. She was helpless to a fault, and there was no going home. Still she kept squeezing that nozzle.

I didn't know what to make of her...

Soaking wet, a silent drama played out in front of me, no doubt, and it no doubt played out over the course of her entire life. There was very little to be said of it all. Still she kept squeezing that nozzle.

Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrrrr-eeeeee....

Where was the bus? I wondered. I looked to the left hoping to see what I couldn't hear. Perhaps that heavy diesel engine wasn't coming to take me away. *Perhaps I was mistaken*, I thought in fear. It was as though the world had left me out in the rain. I turned back to my immediate surroundings.

Still, that nozzle...

Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrrrr-eeeeee....

Her gaping mouth closed and tightened to the point that she was instead grinding her teeth and staring intensely at that nothing before her – and, still, she kept squeezing that goddamned nozzle.

Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrr-eeeeee.... Errrrrrrr-eeeeee....

The wretch was ruined much like my hands!

“The bridge is just a few minutes from here...,” I suggested out of nowhere, overcoming the rain and staring at nothing myself.

And it startled her too!

All things considered, she hadn’t noticed me.

She put the nozzle down and moved her hair from her face. She looked down at the empty bottles and her hair quickly found its place plastered flat by the wet. But before her vision was impaired she looked to the nozzle, apparently uncertain of its nature. And then I saw it. She’d finally heard the sound around her.

She didn’t hear the rain: she heard the river.

It called her.

Turning and looking to me for the first time, she asked, “Where?”



Where, indeed, I thought as I heard the telltale sounds of my own personal savior. My pace accelerated as I reentered the rain and removed myself from her unending curse.

Some guppies don’t want out of the gutter – they want in.

It wasn't enough. Nothing ever is...

Not even a week later, I was back in that fake-walled office-cubicle, looking at my boss with stupid-worker eyes as he lurched over a cup of coffee proclaiming him God in his infinitesimally small area of effect.

“Well, Fred, I can definitely see some improvement.”



A smile was on his face and his head was bobbing. “How’ve you been doing, Buddy?” He was correct that I’d made several attempts to clean up my image, but I think there were some kinks to work out – you know, if I was going to fit in with the flim-flams.

“Well,” I said hesitantly. “Yeah, I tried to get some help, but – it’s hard finding the right place to fit in.”

For what I think was the first time I consciously, intentionally lied: “I’ve got plans to go to another meeting group in a few days. I think this one will actually help me more, what with my disability and all.” I smiled and lifted up my bandaged hands.

I really have no idea where the comment came from. I had no plans. There was no group. There would be no help.

“Well that’s great, Fred,” he said as his glare moved back to his computer. “I’m looking forward to hearing how it goes,” he said out of habit, implicitly gesturing me to get out of his office.

This time I was out as quickly as I walked in -- with the pat on the head I needed. But why did I lie? It wasn't me. I tended to beat around the bush, or intentionally change the subject, but I never lied.

It bothered me. It really did.

It bothered me so much that later I actually looked up another group meeting that was going on in a few days. My mind seemed to fuck itself as the lie actually became truth *as a result of its own existence*. Stuck in tautological absurdity, the only thing I could do was attend some group and *change the future* so that the lie was not, in fact, a lie.

That's the beauty of prophecy and fortune-telling, I suppose.

So I went to another meeting but this was no meeting of the drunks, but one of the cripples. It made more sense, really.

Since I didn't fit in with the drunks maybe I'd fit in with the unfit. After all, by that point, my hands were double their normal size, what with the swelling and all. And when I tried to use them in any normal way as I done in the past, I was riddled with sharp racing pains running up my arms. Very often, I suffered from severe, mood-changing headaches brought on by that shooting pain, as though its last stop was my frontal lobe.

If I remember right, at that point, my body was red and ballooning up as well. Cripples... and I was done. It was the end of the line.

I wondered for a moment if the format would be the same as the drunk meeting: *Hi, my name is Fred, and I'm a goddamn cripple*.

"*Hi, Fred,*" the crowd would respond.

When I arrived, people were gathered in a similar fashion but the feel of the place was altogether different. I could tell there weren't as many STD cases here as at the AA meeting and I immediately felt more at ease.

Hell, perhaps there were none, I remember thinking.

There was a wide variety of cripples present. I can't recollect what they actually called it – support center for independent living, or men with similar disabilities peer consultation. It was some string of seemingly unrelated words.

I had little doubt a dyslexic would have been totally hosed...

They met up once a month rather than weekly and I guess when you went for the first time they wanted to get to know you and what your problems were – an airing of grievances or the like.

And at this particular meeting, I guess something was up: a reporter from the Post, the main newspaper in the city, was there trying to make a name for himself. The guy was interviewing several cripples when I walked in, apparently for some series about the city's disabled population not getting enough help.

The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor, then? I jested facetiously.

And who better to get riled up about such a topic than the cripples themselves? As I watched him finish up whatever notes he was taking, our eyes connected and I saw him look down to my waist.

A slight repugnance gave away his disposition.

The leader of the organization opened and wanted to see if anyone was uncomfortable before we began. No one raised their hand or stood up, though there were some that could not. Even if they were mindless or crippled, who really would have objected?

The Ash experiments had already won the day, and the reporter would have his story even if there wasn't anything worth telling.

The leader went through some listing of programs or upcoming events that I really didn't pay much attention to, and before I knew it I was called to the stage to speak.

"S'cuse me, Mista Hay-gull? 'm I sayin' tha' rye?" I looked up. "Hi ya, Fred! Well, since you new to the group, I's hopin' you might tell us a little bit 'bout yo'self. Nah, nah!" She tried to dissuade the look from my face with her vernacular and grand arm movements. "No. No. No. No. No. All I'm axin's some background info, ya know, wha' you do, who you are, and what you hopin' ta get outta dis group. You doan have ta tell us everythin' and we woan' be axin' any questions... but we'd all like to know who yarr and how we can help."

She spoke in a common broken Urban English and reminded me of someone, what with the flow of her speech but I wasn't sure who. Her vocal tones were strict yet soothing, quite reminiscent of a very brief introductory part of the Work.

Taking the cue from the last meeting, I said, “Hi, my name’s Fred, and I’m a cripp– I mean, disabled.” Several people just burst out laughing; I wasn’t sure whether they were laughing at my politically incorrect language or the way I worded it like I was at a drunk meeting.

All of a sudden I wished I was at home working on The Epic.

“Ummmm... Well, I guess I’ve grown up in the area all my life, and I like to play music, but I’ve got this problem.” I lifted my hands in the air, showing my mummified hands, and their yellow encrusted outer shells. A lightning bolt of pain shot directly into my brain, and I cringed a bit. As a result, something at that particular moment snapped, and I found myself being outwardly frank about my plight.

“To make a long story short, my boss got some complaints about my dress and hygiene, and I found myself in his office getting lectured about how I need to get help for my problems. And, well, I don’t even think he gave a damn about my hands or anything like that. He didn’t want to hear other employees complaining about their disgust over my hands. So to keep my job I promised I’d go get help somewhere, and so, well, here I am... trying to keep my job.”

The black lady looked at me with a compelling demeanor which I took to mean that she wanted more.

“I don’t really know what I’m going to get out of all of this. I really just want to keep my job and lead a normal life -- well, as normal as I can. And to do that I just looked up programs, this one was going on this week, so I decided to come down here. I don’t feel like I’m crip-- I’m disabled. I really just need to work and pay my bills.”

That was enough. Her brow relaxed. “Well, thank ya, Mista’ Hay-gull fur sharin’ dat wif us. We do have a bunch a differen’ programs dat may be able a help ta you. We have a mentorin’ program where ya could work one-on-one wif someone else who’s sufferin’ like you, wif a similar disability or we can help ya ta get da process goin’ ta get help from various governmental benefits offered to you... and if yo’ boss keeps attacking you fo’ yo’ dis-bility, den we can refer you to legal aid department which could take steps protect yo’ rights and stop them from discriminatin’ and such.”

I didn't really know what to say so I said, "Oh, well thanks." I smiled a little. Hopefully this would be enough to convince the boss that I'm on the road to recovery – I'd hate to have to do something for the sake of not lying again.

I'd describe the rest of the meeting, but I could understand half of what was said – and, quite frankly, I didn't really pay attention then, and fortune telling isn't my business now.

Smoke the Right Poll

As I walked out of the meeting I was accosted by the newspaper guy. "Excuse me, excuse me," he shouted trying to catch up, his own able body crippled by cripples. I considered just ignoring him and hastening my pace.

It was a lost cause though. He was determined, and in short shrift he was upon me with his request.

"Hiya-- Fred was it?" he began. I turned around right outside the building and faced him. "Hi. My name's Mark Adamson. I'm with the Post doing a bit of work figuring out the needs of the disabled community. I've been investigating potential discrimination against the disabled for months, and I'm hoping to put out a series of articles on how the city can better help people like you."

People like me, I thought.

"There are a great many disabled individuals out in the cold this winter, and the city's doing very little to help them. They deserve more than the soup kitchens and overcrowded shelters. We need to be doing more to help people like you, Fred."

People like me... An unenviable cruelty revealed itself as a result of his presumptuousness, and I thought cynically, *the soup kitchens and shelters are in full swing? Good... I was afraid from what you said at first that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course.*

No doubt he was at least partially genuine, though he'd been selling this story for some time. "I was hoping you'd have a few minutes to work on a poll with me." He cocked his head with a one-sided smile.

No doubt he'd been working on that foot-in-the-door language for some time. He was effective: I wasn't put off by it... though I really didn't want to go on the record. Memorializing some individual's fleeting notions of fairness seemed a complete waste of time.

But a bit of silent reluctance compelled him to persist: "I heard your story in there --- about your work, and I was curious what happened?" He pointed to the entrance. "Would you mind if we sat down for a bit and talked about it all?" I looked at him, and he sensed my disinterest --- and yet, perhaps he also sensed a bit of curiousness.

Indeed, there was something unusual in his demeanor.

"I'd really like to know what happened," he repeated. "But'ta...," he trailed off.

Instinct kicked in. Warning bells rang in my head and red flags bounded around my vision --- and yet I was unsure how to proceed. It made little sense to tell this leech my life story.

"Well..." I began.

"Hold on. Give me just one second," he said with a facial expression indicating he was trying to read me. "Let me get you my... *business card*," he said out of left field. He started to dig into a carrying case shouldered on his left side.

Why the hell would I want your business card? I thought. *I was about to blow you off.* But, sure enough, I stood there like a schmuck waiting to take a business card I didn't even want.

It made very little sense, I know.

He dug around occasionally looking up at me -- almost as though he were trying to feel me out. "Oh, fuck it," he said abruptly, still digging around what I realized now was a black leather case.

He pulled out a pack of smokes instead.

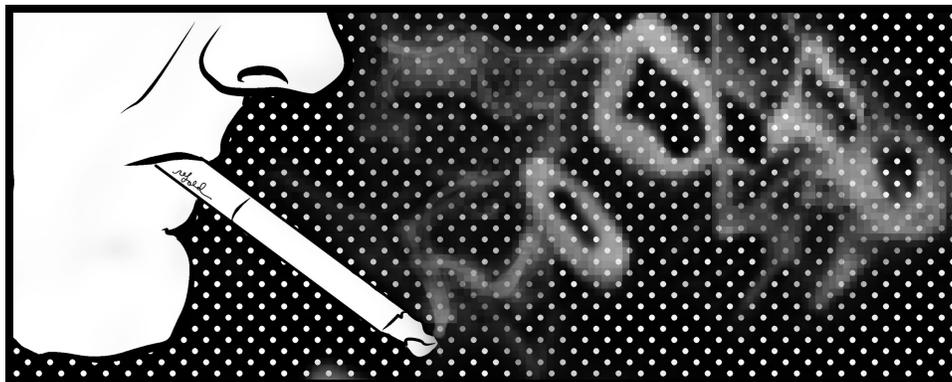
"Want one?" he gestured and brought the pack into my purview with a cigarette dangling out the end. He had a way about him which compelled me to act -- a self-assuring grace which puzzled me. I reached up to pull the cigarette out even though I didn't want it and was immediately met with severe, almost crippling, pain.

My hands began to shake, and I couldn't take the cigarette without tearing it to pieces. Realizing I wasn't one of the cool kids, he apologized, pulled it out, stuck it in my mouth.

“So, you ready to take that poll?” he said after lighting my smoke and taking a drag himself. I inhaled and immediately started gagging.

It was too much.

I wasn't sure how things had gotten to this point. I felt as though I'd already declined the interview... In the same vein as the *it works if you work it* chant, I wanted to say *no means no*. But in the moment, and the pain, all that came out was *sure*.



The sniveling little Siren somehow got whatever the hell he wanted.

“Great!” he immediately responded. He took and flicked his unfinished smoke onto the street. I'd already dropped mine from the coughing and stomped it out.

He directed me back into the building, and we looked for a place to sit. “Alright then,” he said reaching into his cargo pants and pulling a digital recorder out of thin air. We sat at the closest table to the door, and he flopped the recorder down and began to go at it.

I licked my lips out of nervousness.

We went through numerous questions, both general and specific. Name. Age. Occupation. Length of employment. Disability. Onset. Circumstances. Medical history. Prognosis. Day-to-Day. Who helps. Government services. Types of services... He went on like that for some time, and it was like I was lost in a trance as answers bubbled up from inside me.

For the most part, I was honest, though I didn't tell him the specific circumstances of how I became disabled. It was enough that he knew it was allergy related.

Many times, I think he veered away from the tool in front of him and just free formed as his needs required. More and more the questions were directed toward Frank and Boozkamisch: Are there any other disabled employees at Boozkamisch? What kind of accommodations did they provide? Is Boozkamisch a hostile work environment for the disabled? Were any employees disciplined for discrimination? Was anything happening for the ridicule I endured?

In anger, I let it slip that someone snitched me out and the boss accused me of being an alcoholic. In follow-up, I also mentioned that Frank made me attend an AA meeting even though I hadn't drank since my college years, some six or seven years ago. But, you know, that all really pissed me off.

To many of the questions, I responded that I really didn't know. Other times, I said didn't understand the question. Still other times, I simply didn't respond because of the loaded nature of the question. I'd never filed any kind of complaint against anyone, and I didn't really care about their unprofessionalism.

You have to keep your wits about you as best you can when you're under a Siren's call.

Adamson seemed particularly offended by the mummy glove moniker. "They call your bandages *mummy gloves*," he said disgusted. "That's a hostile work environment if I've ever heard of one..."

"Well, it isn't as bad as it sounds," I countered.

The pain coursing through my arms compelled a lengthy prose from my throat. The pain... it works on you, and before you know it you're a rabid animal ensnared and desperately trying to pull away. It was a doggish kind of day, and as the pain lessened so did my responses -- until it all was a wash and he finished with me.

“Alright, that should do it. Thanks, Fred,” he said as he stood up, apparently content with my performance. “It was really great getting to know you. Your story will really help the upcoming article.” I didn’t immediately respond, just looked up at him. “I might be able to get something out sooner than I thought,” he said winking at me. “And don’t let anyone else get you down over there at Boozkamisch. You seem like a good guy, and I’ve really enjoyed interviewing you.”

“Wow,” I said realizing that I’d need to get the later bus -- which meant work on The Epic would be delayed. I felt ashamed that I wasted time helping this guy out... “Yeah, it’s getting to be that time,” I said more speaking to myself.

He shook his head in agreement, still lingering around for some reason. “Hey,” he said almost as an afterthought. “You know, this is a really nice place. Been here a few times now. Met a lot of good people with a lot of different *personalities*. A lot of *hidden glory* here...,” he enunciated, ticking his head to the back of the building. “Not like some of the other *holes* disabled people deal with.” His cadence changed.

“Yeah?” I said questioningly. He acted like he was fiddling with something in his bag. “Yeah. They’ve got a great bathroom too,” he replied throwing his bag over his shoulder with an affable smile on his face.

I wondered how long it would be until the next bus arrived. We shared a look in silence for a few more moments, and then he bid me good evening.

Seemed like a decent enough guy.

A couple weeks later I was summarily fired.

Some predictions do not require prognostication.

Some presumptions do not rely on assumptions.

And some rivers expire of their own accord.



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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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 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**