

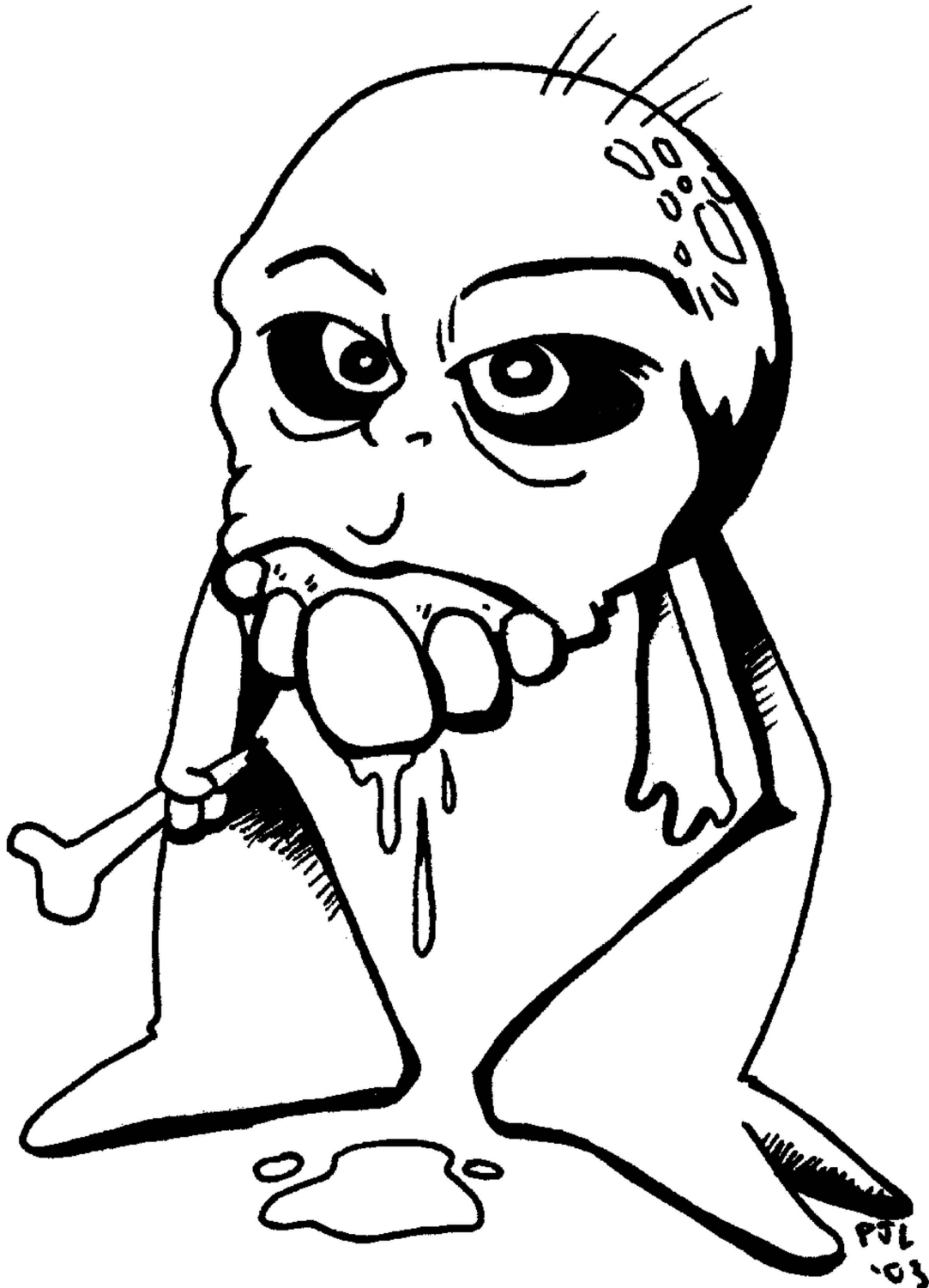


Gracies Dinnertime Theatre

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Mussolini, part two: In which the Author is Regaled by the Prolix

By Kjöen and Hanna Thomas

*Norman, coordinate.
-Star Trek, "I Mudd".
Written by Stephen Kandel*

The thing about having a conversation with Mussolini is that, when you're done (or at least when he thinks you are done), that's it. The conversation comes to an abrupt halt in a sort of verbal train wreck. The best Mussolini had ever concluded a discussion was by saying, "Ok. That's it. That's all I have to say."

As he was sucking on marbles, I assumed he'd finished with me. The digital clock nearest the door said it was just after two in the morning, but I wasn't tired yet. I might have missed Cowboy Bee-Bop, but I could still do something interesting. I wandered into the next room and logged onto Imaginary Bridges to see if I could get some work done and chat with friends.

In simplest terms, Imaginary Bridges is a text based virtual environment where people can meet and discuss things. It was instituted and is run by some friends several years younger than me as a means of keeping people across the country in closer contact. Developed by the same mad-capped geniuses that brought the world GUIs, the mouse, Ethernet, and WYSIWYG printing, Stephen White and Pavel Curtis from Xerox PARC developed what they called a MOO. As biologists and computer scientists are wont to do, MOO is a meta- acronym: MUD Object Oriented, where MUD stands for Multi-User Dungeon. While MUD's are mainly used in the context of text based role playing games, MOO's offer more flexibility, allowing the user to easily create and write code for virtual objects. This has made them the platform of choice for educational facilities when they're after text-based interactivity.

Logging into Imaginary Bridges, I appeared in my laboratory. All about me were virtual bits of ceiling wax, thread, and duct tape, as this was where I did most of my development and testing of things I was building for this world. In the corner of the room was a large fish tank, just as in the corner of my actual room. The major difference was that there was nothing in the tank.

Mussolini had begged and pleaded with me to make him a place he could live in Imaginary Bridges, but he'd only logged on once, complained about how he couldn't go anywhere, and quickly logged out. To combat Mussolini's feeling of being trapped, I was working on something that would let Mussolini roll around the virtual world. Most of the time, it was R.M., which stood for Reality Monitor. It was a sort of mirror I'd use while testing things to see what other people saw. When Mussolini was inside it, however, it was Arem, and it was under his control.

Right now, RM was randomly rolling around the rooms in my work area. I'd programmed it to stay in places where there was conversation, and since I hadn't logged on for a while, it was bored. At the moment, however, I needed to look at some code from an object in another room, so I climbed my textual stairs and entered The Yard.

The Yard

Short, soft green grass extends before you in a wide glade. Surrounded by dense cypress thickets, the Yard is about 150 meters across and roughly circular. Several giant trees dot the lawn; one of the largest has a trunk several meters across and stands incomprehensibly high. The ground slopes up a bit to the northwest to a rocky hill.

All manner of chairs, stools, ottomans and couches are scattered about, in various configurations. Some surround a few tables, others look to have been hastily arranged into rings, and a few hide in quiet pockets near the cypresses alone or in pairs.

Gentle, golden sunlight filters down through the canopy and a soft breeze occasionally pushes through the cypress from the west. The ground slopes up a bit to the northwest to a rocky hill. There are no insects anywhere, but you can hear several different kinds of bird calling from the trees

around you.

You can go north, west, northwest,
and down.

You see prolix and the fern here.

The prolix is by far one of the more interesting parts of Imaginary Bridges. Part listening robot, part text mungger, the prolix records what is said in the room it's in. Then, as conversations take place around it, the prolix attempts to insert meaningful comments based on what it had previously heard. There was a lot of chaff, but the prolix was often scarily on target, reaching a level of coherence that I couldn't readily explain away.

The prolix bot sits inside a brushed-aluminum casing, listening to everything and trying desperately to add to the conversation. Its case is partially open; you can see the corner of a Radio Shack breadboard. Clearly this is no sophisticated device.

Kjöen [to prolix]: "Morning, sunshine."

prolix beeps, "Good morning, even."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "I was just talking with Mussolini about sociobiology."

prolix beeps, "That was what made me pay attention."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "His whole position is that one should just give in to their instincts."

prolix beeps, "I'm not buying it."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "No? Why not?"

prolix beeps, "It has inspired me to be vicious in chess. Sweet divinity."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "Are you talking about logic? It's been argued that it is our intellect that sep-

arates us from other animals. Prometheus is said to have molded man so man can look up at the stars... I'll give you this: the human mind can really override a number of autonomous systems. It seems there's a spectrum of things we can control, but the more basic the function, the more difficult it is to control."

prolix beeps, "CONTROL!"

Kjöen [to prolix]: "One can hold their breath, for example, but the minute they pass out they'll start breathing again. The same can be said for the heart; one can stop their heart, but once the person blacks out, the heart will start beating again."

prolix beeps, "That's quite good."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "So, I suppose it could be argued that the more self-aware one is, the more control they have over their non-conscious functions."

prolix beeps, "Lesson == learned."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "Potentially, yes. But you're not self-aware at all. You're a strictly programmed automation, providing no innovation to the things you experience. You're a perfect example of mimicry."

prolix beeps, "Oh, wait... I'd be *funny*."

prolix causes Kjösen to laugh.

Kjöen [to prolix]: "Logic isn't enough, though. I can't believe that one could use logic to override all of their instincts. Maybe one could suppress the urge to act on a genetic desire, but that doesn't remove the desire."

prolix beeps, "Once again the solution is to put me in charge."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "Now that makes no sense. Anyone can come up with a view of life, a code of conduct, a morality, but if humans can not live up to it, what good is it? As much as I hate to admit it, Ayn Rand had a point when she was talking about how to make a guilty population. What's that quote?"

Kjöen goes googling.

prolix beeps, "BRACE FOR IMPACT"

-----paste from Kjöen-----
"Did you really think that we want those laws observed?" said Dr. Ferris. "We want them broken... There's no way to rule innocent men. The only power any government has is the power to crack down on criminals. Well, when there aren't enough criminals, one makes them. One declares so many things to be a crime that it becomes impossible for men to live with out breaking laws. Who wants a nation of law-abiding citizens? ...just pass the kind of laws that can neither be observed nor enforced nor objectively interpreted and you create a nation of law-breakers and then you cash in on guilt."
-----end paste-----

prolix beeps, "That is a np complete problem"

Kjöen nods.

Kjöen [to prolix]: "I really think she's onto something, though not for the reasons she intended. What if culture is just an outgrowth of our biological drives?"

prolix beeps, "How will you know they're related?"

I stopped and thought about that for a minute. If biological drives influenced our psychology as much as I suspected they did, then all of human culture would bare the mark of our biology. Humans are a gregarious species, so we live in families, tribes, towns, cities, states, and nations. As these units grew increas-

ingly more and more complex, governmental forms were needed, and humans fell on what their genes demanded. Feudalism best fits a large number of primate social orders, including the acquisition of large female populations for use by the dominant males, but in our current world, democracies of one sort or another speckle the planet.

Kjöen [to prolix]: "John Curran's statement that 'eternal vigilance is the price of liberty' might have more truth to it than we realize. If we, as a species, are genetically predisposed toward feudal systems of social order, than democracies are a doomed experiment. That is, unless we actively work against our instincts."

prolix beeps, "I read you."

Kjöen [to prolix]: "But the instincts are still there. No amount of cerebration will remove a deep-seated desire for feudalism, if it exists. Just as no amount of willpower will change my eyes from green to violet."

prolix beeps, "I WANT A REFUND"

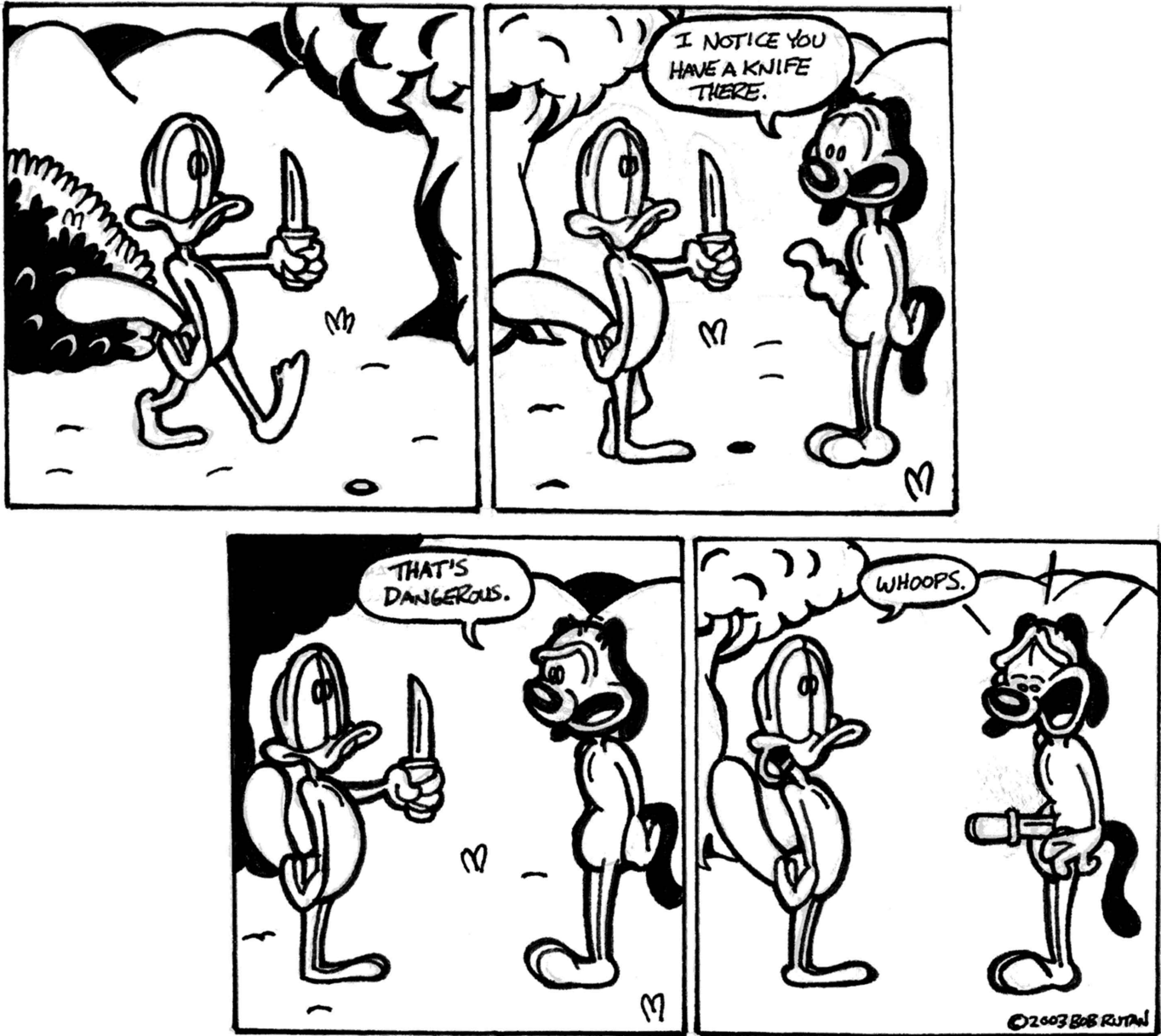
Kjöen [to prolix]: "Whine all you want. If humans do have genetic predispositions toward particular behaviors, than there's little we can do to remove those drives. In time, we could potentially breed humans lacking those drives, but for now, we need to be aware that someone is in the driver's seat of most humans, and it isn't their logic."

prolix beeps, "Fuku fat hamburger"

At that moment, Arem came rolling up from my workshop with Mussolini humming Queen's "We are the champions."

Did I mention I hate cocky fish?

Next week: part three, in which Ani Difranco is proven correct.

The Traveling Platypus Bob Rutan, Guild of Sequential Illustrators


The Confessions of an Addict

By Jon Byrd

I've seen the warnings; I've heard the lectures, laughed at them with my friends even. But addictions are no laughing matter, as I've come to find out. This is my story, and I hope that by sharing it with you all, you can avoid some of the mistakes that I made.

I wasn't really tempted until I arrived at college. On my own for the first time, it sounded like a pretty damn good idea. I casually passed one of the many vendors at RIT. I thought "What the hell! I'm at college! I can do whatever the hell I want!" I succumbed

to my temptation and I bought a package.

I purchased a 75 cent Snickers bar.

Little did I realize the repercussions of my actions at the time. It started a downward spiral that I am still feeling the effects of today.

It started harmlessly enough. After all, everyone who was ever a freshman at RIT knows what little value food debit holds. It's not even real money, it's just a magic card that you use and it gives you food-

type stuffs. I was not concerned using the debit that was part of a meal plan that I didn't even pay for.

I casually ate a Snickers bar, maybe once or twice a week. But this phase would not last for long.

Soon enough I was getting a Snickers bar every day, I would stake out the vending machines in the halls where I went to class. You could name a building number to me and I would be able to list off where every vending machine was in that building.

Even this was not enough.

I began to crave more sugar, more peanuts, more nougat. I began purchasing the **BIG** Snickers bar, the \$1.15 version (or the \$1.25 version depending on which vending machine I visited that day). The debit money was fading fast.

Added to the expense of the **BIG** Snickers bar, I decided that I needed something to wash down the caramel-y goodness. I landed on Mountain Dew. Oh, how I rued the day that I decided to attempt that combo. I had heard about the dangers of mixing drugs before. And nothing was under exaggerated.

Not an hour went by when I wasn't hopped up on either sugar or caffeine, or more often than not, both. At this point the debit money was gone; I began to dip into my flex account.

Books, laundry, school supplies bought from the campus store; all of these things were secondary to purchasing my delicious high fructose corn syrup laden snacks. About \$2.50 a day was required for this

craving to be settled. I know that it doesn't sound like much, but if 99 cents could get me up to 20 minutes of telephone conversation, imagine how much time \$2.50 would get me! I could support up to 8 needy children in some country I've never heard of! I could watch a movie every three days! I could wash *and* dry a load of laundry!

I recently realized that I had a problem. I tried to go cold turkey. Those were the hardest days of my life. I went through serious withdrawal. I had headaches all the time, my grades started to drop, I slept all the time and was tired even when awake.

Summer vacation helped with my addiction a lot because the magical money card no longer worked on the vending machines in my location. I had gotten rid of the hold that the candy bar held over me.

I went into remission as the school year resumed, the Snickers bar was a powerful foe indeed. I am currently battling the addiction I've had for the past year and a half, and you'll find me in one of two moods. I'll either be on a sugar high, giddy and jovial. Or I'll be sleepy and once again trying to break the chains of the candy bar.

If you see a student sleeping in class, give him or her a pat on the back. Tell them to keep up the good fight. Encouragement and community can not be overstressed when attempting to cut off Snickers bars.

I hope some freshmen read this testimony and make a wiser choice than I did concerning the drug of choice at RIT.



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Too Much**By Alex Wendler**

Nick pulled her closer to him. They walked alone in the dark. Up ahead there was a door with light coming from underneath it. They came up to it, and as Nick reached for the door, the girl turned to him.

“Nick, wait... we need to talk...”

Nick stood there alone. The dark seemed to overwhelm him into his own world. Dimly he heard the cars driving by on the street. After a while his legs started working and he went in the direction he came from. He walked and walked and walked. He tried not to think. Thinking would hurt. Finally, he saw a light post up ahead. Underneath it the figure of a woman stood. It turned towards him.

“Nick, that you?”

“Yeh.”

“Where’s the girl?”

Nick said nothing.

“Oh. Gotcha.”

They stood in silence.

“So you read that book yet?”

“The one you gave me?”

“Yeh, that one. You know he’s gay, right?”

“No.”

“It’s true. He’s overcompensating with the women and car racing.”

“Alright. I’ll be going on now.”

Nick walked on. He needed something to get his mind off of her so he walked into a bar. Inside it seemed darker than outside. He ordered a Scotch and drank it all in one gulp. With the walking done, all he had to do was think now. The past month had been a blur, one party after the other, hardly sleeping, always with her. Now that Nick was alone his ears rang from the silence. Nick tried not to care. He tried hard. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. Nick paid the bartender and walked out.

The next day Nick decided to go riding. He pulled his bike out of the garage. The tires were low so

he inflated them. The handlebars were loose so he tightened them. He liked fixing things. It kept his mind and hands busy. Nick got on and rolled out onto the street. No cars were around so he circled in the middle a few times to get the feel back. Up ahead there was a hill. Nick had always wanted to ride down it, but usually there were cars in the way. Now there weren’t. He peddled up to the top, and looked down. He flexed the brakes a few times to make sure they made contact, and pushed down.

The wind came quick. It was slow at first. As he gained speed it became fast. Faster yet. Even faster. His hair pulled back. His hands were cold. His eyes watered. He kept on, accelerating. He didn’t brake. Not even when the car turned the corner. Not even when he tried to turn but couldn’t. Not even when he was over the car. When he hit, his bike shot sideways and he shot forward. He then tried to brake, but the bike was on the other side of the street.

Nick laid there for a few minutes. It felt like a few hours. He couldn’t feel anything different. He felt warm. When he tried to get up he felt much colder. His white shirt was now a certain shade of red. Nick looked at his hands. They were red, too. He looked at his legs. They were red, too. He touched his forehead but pulled his hand back quickly. People started gathering around. Someone tried to ask if Nick needed any help, but all Nick heard was a muffled buzzing. Up ahead Nick saw a hospital. He tried to stand but fell down and woke up in a bed. He looked down at himself. His body was no longer red.

A woman came into the room. She asked how he was doing. Nick couldn’t remember what he was supposed to do after this, but then remembered that he was supposed to talk. He came up with “Fine,” and she walked out. Nick put his head back and closed his eyes. This week had been too much.

House of Fun, part 8

By Rich DeTommaso

What was once a pile of bones was a person: living, breathing, feeling no more. He is my confidante. The symbol of my cowardice remains here as never-ending kicks to the groin, to pull me back together, to keep me keen. Once, these bones that lay here before me were torn from flesh with the precision of a dull knife, and thrown into the trees for all of Nature to behold. I am attached to Him as much now as I was when it all happened. It was not good enough that He was dead, but He had to be *destroyed*. He was the alpha. He *is* the omega. He is my real punishment: judge, jury, and executioner.

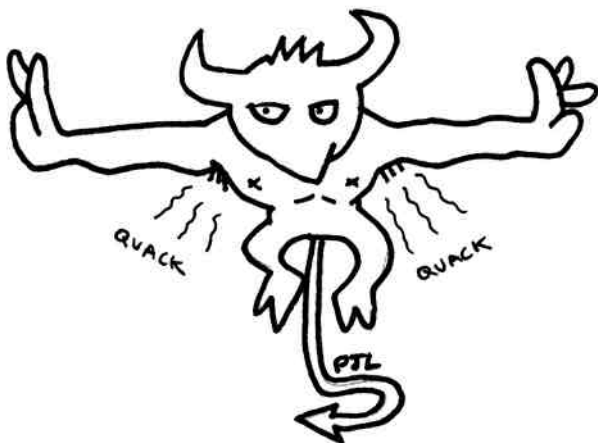
If I think really hard, I know that this must be. It was determined for me. Now, as you all know, I've never been much of a religious person. But destiny never had much to do with God, anyway, right? God

was the kind of deity who would destroy a person's life in a bet with Satan. What kind of fucked up God would do that?

There comes a time in every person's life when they need to re-evaluate everything that they've stood for in order to move forward. Perhaps, no, not perhaps. "Perhaps" is a fancy way to say, "maybe." "Maybe" is a gateway into a whole new dimension of doubt and uncertainty, ending in the all encompassing, "I don't know."

Tiny fragments of fear start welling up in me. Not like the way you are scared when a plane crashes. This is the fear you get when you hear rumors of layoffs in the office. It's fear like sweat. First, it beads up

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on your forehead & temples. Then, it starts moving its way down your face, until it is held on the edge of your nose until that instant when it drips. You are engulfed, drowning in a sea of phobias. Then, the fear owns you.

My arm finally stopped working. Putrefaction follows me everywhere. I feel the infection coursing through my veins, slowly eating away at me.

It's my fault.

I forced them on that plane.

They are dead because of me.

At least I'm not dead. That's what I tell myself. The hole was about as deep as it was wide when I put Him in there. There comes a time when you have to forget your past and move on with your life, otherwise you will be trapped forever.



Have a sip.

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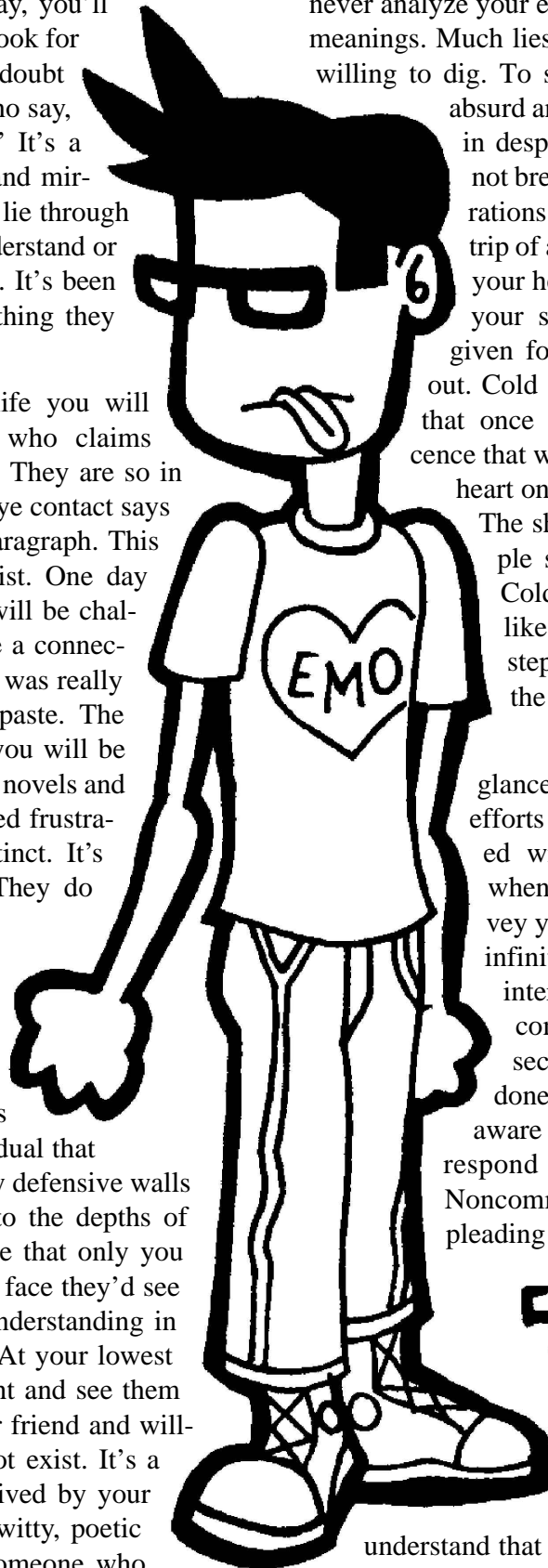
They Don't Exist

By Ian C. Smith

They don't care. Try as you may, you'll never find what you so eagerly look for and yearn to have. There is no doubt that you will encounter those who say, "Yes, of course, I understand." It's a farce, a ruse, an act of smoke and mirrors. They stand before you and lie through their teeth. It's not as if they understand or even know what they are doing. It's been bred into them and there is nothing they can ever do to truly understand.

Perhaps once in your life you will stumble across an individual who claims they've discovered a soul mate. They are so in tune with each other that mere eye contact says as much as a well articulated paragraph. This ideal friend does not really exist. One day things will go astray and trust will be challenged. What was thought to be a connection secured at your core beings was really stuck to the surface by mere paste. The metaphysical bond that joined you will be broken. Your eyes won't convey novels and sonnets, but distrust and harbored frustrations. Simple subtleties are extinct. It's the age of misunderstanding. They do not exist.

The existence of this understanding body of cerebral mass is short lived. The host is volatile and prone to change. In your wildest dreams perhaps you could conceive of an individual that would traverse through the many defensive walls you've created. They'd travel to the depths of your being to the unknown core that only you can stand. With a smile on their face they'd see your all, every blemish; with understanding in their eyes they'd embrace you. At your lowest low you could look to your right and see them tall and proud, proud to be your friend and willing to pick you up. They do not exist. It's a dream, a fantastic image conceived by your naive and unscarred heart. No witty, poetic away message will draw out someone who understands. No one cares, no one is that close. They'll



never analyze your every word searching out the hidden meanings. Much lies beneath the surface, but no one is willing to dig. To soil their person with your filth is absurd and worth no time. When you cry out in desperation and leap forward they will not break your fall. Your fool hearted aspirations will yield you nothing more than a trip of anguish. Shards of doubt will pierce your heart and tear shreds of naivety from your soul. The warm glow within you, given forth by a tiny wick, has been spat out. Cold and damp will be the dark corners that once thrived in the sun-lamp luminescence that was your soul. The doughy mix your heart once was is now calloused and tough. The shimmer in you eyes that made people smile is gone, crushed under foot. Cold and gray stares back now. A sloth-like shuffle replaces the bounce in your step. They do not exist. Save yourself the toil and don't reach out.

Across the room they shoot you a glance, and it's one of concern. Their efforts are pointless and should be regarded with derision. Watch carefully, for when you attempt to speak up and convey your emotional state you'll notice an infinitesimal change. Their moderately interested eyes will slide into a state of complete apathy. It's at the precise second when they realize what they've done; invited you to divulge. Suddenly aware of the result of their actions they'll respond in a nonchalant fashion. Noncommittal responses will accompany pleading eyes. You'll be so glad someone has finally lent an ear, but alas it's all a charade. Within seconds a keen understanding will wash over you; they don't exist. Inundated throughout society are ghosts of concern, disguised with masks of hope. Once in the light you'll understand that these ghastly figures are but empty shells, mindless corpses that pretend to know. No one knows and no one cares, they do not exist.

What is this magazine?

This is Gracies Dinnertime Theatre, a magazine of satire, literature, poetry and art. We publish out of Rochester, NY but we have readers around the globe. We exist as a medium for your expression and invite you to contribute.

Anyone is welcome to submit.

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Someone is always offended

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