

Introduction

This is actually my second attempt at an introduction.

The first was dreadfully depressing: I recounted the pain of losing people I loved in the interim between these stories and the previous collection. It went on and on about how I quit writing because the world didn't seem worth injecting any more of my soul into, etc. etc. Like I said, it was depressing, and worse, rather dull.

While the tone of this collection is less glib than my previous work, I think that the mysteries, wonders and brilliant absurdity in this life still capture my imagination. So let me preface it with this:

This book is a miracle.

Not a “parting of the Red Sea” kind of miracle, more of a “bread landing butter-side-up for once” sort of miracle. The best I explain it is to steal from the life of a friend:

I have a friend who is an artist. Due to forces beyond his control he was chased from his home, abandoned by many of his closest friends and was left (metaphorically and literally) in the wilderness. During this period of exile he dove headlong into his work. All the isolation, fear, loneliness and illness came together inside him and poured onto his canvas.

When he finally was able to return home he gathered his works on the floor to get them ready for shipping and surveyed them. They were a thing of beauty—a testament to strength, vision and tenacity that he didn’t even know he had. He described it as a moment where he felt his essence expand—he’d taken the horrible things that had happened and turned them into something beautiful. That process had made him something greater than he had been. Usually just enduring ugliness and pain grows us as human beings, but there are those rare instances where we’re able to cultivate it and, through our work, are able to become something exponentially greater than we were.

I would say his work during that period was a “parting of the Red Sea” kind of miracle.

I don’t pretend to have overcome anything close to the trials and tribulations he has or even to have produced in these stories anything as visceral and poetic as those

paintings. I would say when they're at their best the stories in this collection do offer little snapshots of grace and beauty. Maybe they are a little preoccupied with loss and disappointment, but I think there's enough truth in it that you can still laugh at. I think there is a certain liberation in laughing at failure—especially your own.

As far as the stories themselves, there are sad ones, funny ones (or at least funny-ish, I hope), thoughtful ones and one with a talking dog—you know, for the kids. Hopefully they each can provide amusement on a number of different levels. I'm not sure where all of the inspiration and cautious optimism in them came from, but if I've learned anything, it's that you have to cherish those little stolen moments of grace that you're granted. These stories are the result of a thousand stolen moments—a collection of the kindnesses of friends and strangers alike. I guess I dropped the bread, but it landed butter-side-up for once.

I must acknowledge the following:

Brent & Adina: You opened your home when I needed a place to go, lent your ears when I needed to be heard and have never wavered in your honesty, support and friendship.

John: Part cheerleader, part drill sergeant. I am eternally indebted to you for your encouragement, insight and example—you're a true warrior-poet.

Jason and Jenelle: A life raft when I desperately needed saving.

Lisa: You're a trusted friend whose compassion can only be matched by your integrity.

Vanessa: Not the muse I deserved, but the muse I needed.

AMK: Often I measure my accomplishments by what I've lost rather than what I have. In either measure you've enriched my life in the best possible way. You're truly a beautiful soul.

Kari: One of the best human beings I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Your enthusiasm, willful optimism and kindness are extraordinary.

Virgil: The best friend, four-legged or otherwise, I could have ever asked for. He will be missed.

Thank you all.

Paul McCormack
19.November.2011

Iodine

for Vanessa

“You see, people think things are a certain way. But if you look at them, even just a little, you see that they’re wrong,” his voice had that tone again. Grant usually had a very thoughtful, even cadence when he talked, but when he’d get into something that would change. The best description Beth had heard was from her sister: when Grant got worked up his voice sounded like Cathy Corrin’s eyes looked when she started talking about eating meat.

Cathy had been Beth’s college roommate sophomore year. They got on quite well for the most part, but she was passionate (her word) about veganism. When someone ate meat in her presence, spoke about eating meat, or smelled of something resembling meat there was a 50/50 chance that she would get the “insane-o crazy psycho bitch stare.” Beth didn’t remember who coined the description, but it stuck and Cathy was either oblivious to the fact she was

doing it or flaunted it like it was a badge of honor (depending on the day).

She had incredibly clear, light blue eyes that seemed almost unnaturally large for her face. When the stare kicked in, they'd seem to miraculously grow even larger, her pupils would dilate and the rest of her face would seemingly freeze in a strange zombie-like expression. It was incredibly unnerving, especially if she didn't say anything. If she freaked out and started arguing and declaring how meat was immoral it actually made it a bit better. When she was silent it was like she was waiting for an unguarded moment to pounce and rip out your jugular with her teeth.

Grant's voice had that same uncanny warbling intensity. It wasn't that he was crazy, but when you heard it, it was a pretty fair guess that you weren't about to care nearly as much about the topic as he did.

“No, hear me out on this. It's all through western civilization—how many slaves did Abraham Lincoln free with the Emancipation Proclamation?”

“I don't know,” Beth answered. Guessing would have only made it worse, anyway.

“Zero. None. Not a single fucking slave. But what did they tell you in school? Abe Lincoln freed the slaves.”

“Well, it did happen as a result of things that occurred while he was in office—” even as the words were spilling out she realized that her input, even if correct, wasn't particularly welcome.

“But he couldn’t have known that. He was guessing. He was posturing and hoping to prevent the war that eventually accomplished what he was afraid to do beforehand.”

Beth just took a drink and nodded.

“I mean, it’s crazy, right? I mean it’s even in the Bible.” It usually ended up with either religion or vast international conspiracies. Although the fact he’d gotten to the Bible already meant this was likely going to be one of his shorter diatribes.

“Look at the creation story. What’s the creation story about?”

There was a pause until Beth realized it wasn’t a purely rhetorical question but he was awaiting some sort of response.

“Um, about how the world was made?”

“See, that’s what they always say, but let’s look at it. The creation of the universe? Sixteen verses, or something like that. It’s only the first chapter. The rest of it? It’s the Garden of Eden and Noah’s Ark and all that stuff. They didn’t care about how a tree got to be there. That’s just a footnote that said ‘there wasn’t stuff, now there is.’” Grant was gesturing frantically now, his voice getting higher pitched and almost squeaky.

“No, the question of Genesis isn’t ‘how did we get here,’ it’s ‘why are we always unhappy?’ I mean, think about it:

when you look at origin myths you think of these big grandiose stories of gods creating things and fighting and bringing humanity into the world to do whatever. They try to explain why there's lightning or where fire came from or whatever. In Genesis they just mention that in passing and then launch right into the story of getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden. They wanted to explain why things were horrible and the only explanation they could fathom was that we did something to deserve it. And then the rest of the book launches into murder and incest and God trying to wipe the slate clean and start again. I mean how the fuck is that a way to start a religion?"

He took a swig of beer. "They don't point that out. They don't like to see that. They like to think it's a story about how everything was made and a snake. That's what they tell kids because how do you explain to a four year-old that the story is about how people have been unhappy since the dawn of time and if there is a God it's that way by design.

"So what do they do? Demonize apples. Fucking apples! It wasn't even an apple in the Garden of Eden. It was a fucking pomegranate or some damn thing."

There was silence for a few moments. It was like an earthquake—you should stay sheltered until you were sure it was over but even then you had to be wary of aftershocks. Grant likewise would usually have a few minor rants in the ensuing hours.

Beth had learned that even if he sounded upset it was never directed at her specifically. When they had first started seeing each other his occasional random outbursts were

fun. Sometimes she'd even egg him on to see how grandiose and over the top she could get him to go. He picked up on it most of the time and it became a game.

It was different now. A lot of things were different now.

That night as he finished, body tense and breath ragged, she held the back of his head to her chest and closed her eyes. Even now he seemed far away. She hooked her leg around him keeping him inside her, keeping him near. She used to love this part: the eye contact, the feel of him seeping out of her, the breathy smiles and the little squeezes and motions they'd both use to prolong the other's pleasure. But he wouldn't look her in the eyes anymore. She tried to wrap her limbs around him to keep him with her, but he just rolled off her onto his back. She followed him over, lying on her side watching him.

"I have to get up early," he said. That was his way of saying he didn't want to talk. He grabbed a corner of the sheet and turned onto his side, his back to her. She reached out to touch him, but thought better of it at the last moment. She let her hand fall to bed where he had been lying. The sheet still felt warm. Her hand was close enough to him to feel the static-y warmth from his body, but it didn't comfort her. She was inches away from him but it might as well have been an ocean.

She didn't mind the ups and downs. Their relationship had its share but they'd made it through. When he got wrapped up in vast conspiracies and the injustices of the world she'd been able to bring him back to Earth. When she had been insecure Grant's quiet reassurance had turned the