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OUBLIETTE

Last night, in your town, a businessman stepped out of a sleek skyscraper, stretched, gazed at the darkening sky. You will remember that there were no stars, yet the moon shone brightly, as if the world was covered by a warm, comfortable haze through which a pleasant spotlight was gleaming. It was the type of evening where all and sundry wish that man was a nocturnal animal, the type of eve which intrigues people into exploration with the hope of action. The warmth lends serenity; the spotlight goads people on, casually urging that it's their time.

The businessman, having stretched and imbibed the alluring atmosphere, decided not to go directly home, decided, instead, to walk about town. If you were astir, and you might have been, you perhaps noticed the businessman making this decision, remarking to yourself that it was a special eventide, the type where people often form ostensibly momentous resolutions; the spirit of the night infuses them with strength and conviction.

Having settled his mind on the walk, the businessman turned to the main street and commenced. As you could see, as anyone could see, he was a confident man who knew his business. His stride evinced a readiness for anything, any adventure, any challenge. The moon shone on the businessman as if it was his own personal spotlight; hence, any action would hold the utmost importance, any situation would be handled with the utmost acumen.

Unsurprisingly to you, but a startling revelation to an infrequent perambulator in your town, the businessman stumbled upon a mendicant at the corner of a decaying brick building along the main street. As you are well aware, the vagrant is a mainstay; and although no one knows his actual name, he is called by a sobriquet stemming from his affliction: Fuck You Bob (his affliction:

Tourette's Syndrome). Bob lives at the corner of the dilapidated brick building, but he could live anywhere else. For he is also blind.

Upon conquering his astonishment, having been ignorant of the homeless problem in your town, the businessman looked at Bob with curiosity, still filled with the vigor of the night air; Bob replied with a string of epithets (but nothing else is to be expected), then smiled at the businessman. The businessman, who could certainly see that Bob was blind, was enthralled by the gesture. Walking by during this encounter (for you were there, let us not dally about the point any longer), you noticed that the two were staring at each other as if they were not sure the other existed (indeed, Bob had a partial excuse, although he had been struck). The businessman gaped at the wretch as if he was a visionary churl from an Arthurian tale, the entire scene lit by the spotlight moon gleaming warmly from behind the haze.

If you were mitigating in the circumstance, and you might have been (for who is to say but yourself?), perchance you noticed that the men were not merely staring at each other, they were enmeshed in a silent exchange. Neither one moved; Bob, as expected, would occasionally explode into a torrent of profanities (but nothing else is to be expected); no other physical actions were manifest. The conversation was only identifiable in the eyes of the interlocutors, for they were animated, darting, never resting in the other's gaze for too long, as if communicating through a form foreign to humankind.

You stopped to watch this oneiric colloquy. What could it mean? A night like last is full of possible meanings, the very landscape, the very sky, the very ground you walk on bursts with secret messages refusing to explain themselves. The invigorating power of the warm evening air, coupled with the moon irradiates all with a fascinating brilliance, and you believe that if you were able to wrap your mind around each symbol, you would understand the whole of being. For instance, in this circumstance, there were two men staring at each other, and if not for their eyes, they could have been mannequins. Unlike most, you saw their eyes; and combined with the galvanizing charge of the night, you wished to comprehend the significance of this esoteric tete-a-tete. Your heart beat faster

until it was the only sound; you watched the two as if they were part of an augur's vision made flesh; you blocked the world out hoping to catch a clue to the mystery.

And then it was over. The businessman broke away from Bob and continued on. Still he was filled with the promise of the evening, hoping that an amusing adventure would befall him before his journey was through; and after stepping away from Bob, if you could have seen his face (but you still stared at the now vacant stage, erstwhile scaffold of the enthralling scene), you would have recognized that peculiar mien manifest in one who suddenly forgets something of, perhaps, the utmost importance—a moment ago the thought was prevalent; a moment later, it never existed...but it had to have existed, if it was only possible to wrap one's mind around it... At last, you turned and saw the businessman saunter away, unable to summon the strength to charge up to him, to demand the import of, to demand an explanation for what had just occurred.

Unable. Instead, you looked on as he headed up the main street and then turned into a side alley, away from the light of the moon.

What you did not see was what happened in the alley.

The businessman was traipsing up the main street, which you know so well, when he came upon the narrow way. As most of the townspeople, you have passed the alley many times before, but you have never ventured therein. In your town, whenever anyone wants to indulge in the sordid, they find more salubrious methods to do so. The businessman, too, might have overlooked the offshoot, for although he was in an adventurous mood, he was not prepared to descend deep into the bowels of the town, saving for the fact that he heard a noise—ever so faint, but the man detected it. A drop of water? A cry for help? He only knew it was a sound. For a night like last night, that was enough.

Gazing down the narrow way, the man was met with those conflicting emotions of one who wishes to explore and one who knows better than to walk down any dark alley which exposes itself. And the alley was certainly dark, the type of darkness that is not merely devoid of light, but that

absorbs all light.

This was not a warm haze covering the earth. This was a black hole. And when you saw the man enter the alley, you were met with the distinct sensation that he had disappeared from the face of the planet. That he was swallowed up.

The alley was sweltering and smelled faintly of fish—a smell not completely unattractive. For it was not the smell of rotting fish, nor the smell of a fish market, but fish just the same.

Standing near the opening of the alley, the man called, “Hello,” but answer came there none. Until, again, he heard a faint sound identical to the one before. He followed the sound.

Walking deeper into the tenebrous alley, the man realized he was on a steep declivity. With each step downward the darkness somehow grew thicker. It appeared that the inky blackness would never end, when, at that moment, the man came upon a light. Comparable to the moon, it was also far off, perhaps miles away, and the atmosphere being pitch, the luminescence more resembled an amber nightlight, rather than a theater’s spot.

With the caliginous, fetid, sudorific atmosphere, the man was beginning to feel giddy. Stumbling along, at one point he quickly turned around to see that he could no longer locate the entrance to the alley; after spinning, the man could no longer be certain in which direction he was moving, for although he now saw a light, the light did not illuminate the way, it merely shined in spite of the darkness. Looking in each direction, the man saw, or perhaps imagined myriad corridors bending off of the alley. But panic did not arise in the businessman. For he felt that this is what he always wanted: to be in the dark on an adventure unparalleled in his quotidian life. He groped through the blackness, inexperienced in such circumstances, to the point where the light ceased.

It was a hole in the ground. The hole was barely identifiable; without the light the businessman would have fallen into it—for he could certainly fit. The depth of the hole was unknown for the light did not penetrate the darkness any farther than to unveil the hole, nor did the businessman lean over to inspect. He felt around, but that was all.

Again the noise came; this time the businessman was able to pinpoint its emanation—whoever

or whatever was moaning (a moan barely escaping through slightly parted lips), was behind him. The noise was of little consequence any longer. The pleasant warmth of the inviting evening was now a stifling blare of heat. Sweat poured off the businessman's face into the cavity, as he finally bent over top of it on his knees, arms around the borders.

He wanted to enter the hole. He wanted to dive down into the darkness. He wanted to seethe in the ubiquitous filth and blackness of this gully. He never wanted to be clean again. He wanted everything that his life was not, the polar opposite, the Antipodes. He wanted to blot out all light. He wanted a world of chaos and stimulation. He wanted to descend into the underworld. He wanted to become the ruler of the underworld.

Yet the businessman was split: one side yearned to descend, the other demanded to leave the alley forthwith. The crux of the matter was how inassimilable the experience was. A businessman did not walk into unknown alleys; a businessman did not plunge into holes in unknown alleys. But that was why he wanted to do it. Afterwards, he could walk amongst his fellow businesspersons and they would never know that in their antiseptic zone one of their own had crossed to the other side, had conquered the abyss.

The businessman rose, stalked around the hole hoping to find an angle, hoping to ascertain what was inside. Such an angle did not exist. All his troubles gained him was another muffled moan—this one louder.

Crouching down, the man was about to submerge his head, when someone appeared. At first he could only hear breathing, then he saw the intruder's lips: they were heavily lipsticked and lined—a woman.

“Will you?” The woman's voice was emitted with the same whispering strain as the moan.

“What?” said the businessman.

“Now?”

“I don't know.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s probably not a good idea.”

“It’s *your* business.”

“I *know* what my business is.”

The moan again, this time annoyed, more of a sigh. The man focused on the lips; they moved as entities unto themselves: two agents that proceeded in concert for some unknown, unknowable purpose. As unknowable, perhaps, as the symbols of the invigorating night.

“Why have you come here, then?”

“It was the night. I was curious.”

“Curious.”

“It was this place, I’d never seen it before.”

“This place...”

“I heard a noise.”

“Shall I be quiet? I can be quiet.”

“Yes. No.”

“You *know* what you *want*. You want to find out.”

“I...”

“It isn’t that difficult.”

“But I know nothing about it. It seems like I’ve wanted this forever and each day my ignorance makes it less likely that I will ever try.”

“How will you learn?”

“You can teach me. You can go first.”

“I have already been.”

“Then you can tell me.”

“No.”

“Why?!”

The lips laughed, a quiet, patient laugh. When the businessman attempted to reply, he realized

he had been whispering. If you were in the vicinity you would have heard the whispers, the voices which fill all towns when the streets are crowded, yet no one is talking.

The businessman jerked his head away from the lips, spanned his hands around the hole, testing to see if the edges would sustain his weight. Again the woman made the sound. It was an uncanny note and the businessman's sweat turned cold, though the alley was still sweltering. He grasped the wall next to the hole and held on, his body rigid. Looking into the darkness of the abyss, juxtaposed with the faint nightlight, the businessman experienced the vertiginous sensation of one not on the brink of falling, but who realizes he has it in his own power to remain on the ledge, or to plunge into the abyss. The compulsion to dive down was so puissant it could have been a physical force. But the businessman stopped and looked back to the lips which released another annoyed sigh.

“What is so important? Huh? It's just a...”

“It's a mystery.”

“And why do I have to solve it?”

“It is not to be solved.”

“I thought it was a mystery.”

“It is.”

“And mysteries must be solved.”

“Not all of them. Some must be experienced.”

“That's it! I'm not interested.”

“You are. You...are.”

It had all begun so simply, so clearly. But the situation from the outset of the evening had become more and more inchoate, until now it was utterly entropic. It started innocently. There was the beautiful, symbolic night; the prospect of an adventure away from the norm; the vigor, the motility to pursue the adventure because of the night one hopes to wrap his mind around; the mystery of the alley (a mystery in a mystery); the deeper mystery of the hole (a mystery in a mystery in a mystery). But now the vigor was replaced with confusion. The confusion was represented by an

intense yearning to burst forth in abstract rage, cursing the world for its ill-defined secrets. But the man stopped himself, retreated, slumped down next to the hole. The moan came again.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” said the man, body slackening.

“Then go.”

“I will.”

“No, wait.”

“And?”

“*And,*” she said, drawing the word out.

“Why?”

“It’s what you’ve come to do. You must. Or...”

“How do you know?”

“Why else would you be here?”

“There are plenty of other reasons.”

“What are they?”

“Um...”

“You’ll be sorry if you don’t.”

“Why? Why is it so damned important?! Can you tell me? Why?! I just wanted to go for a walk. I wanted something different to happen. But now... But now...”

The lips gave a light laugh, the buoyancy made it all the more mocking. The businessman did not understand. He felt another explosion rising in him, yet this would be one of chaotic proportions, not at all focused as his angry speech. The man suppressed the attack with difficulty. Expending so much energy to stifle the eruption, the businessman found now that his confusion was gone, replaced by despair.

The alley was stifling, but the heat was more of an unnatural heat, as if the man was feverish. He moved away from the hole, away from the light. He could no longer see anything. He stared at what he assumed to be the ground. Now there were only voices in the dark.

“I was fine before.”

“You were?”

“I was.”

“You were not.”

“What proof is there?”

“There are ways.”

“No there aren’t. It’s dangerous.”

“Everything is.”

Again the businessman felt a furious passion that wished to escape through his mouth—the feeling one gets when about to be sick. But the businessman did not feel sick. This time he was impotent, unable to control his paroxysm, so he screamed a long, dolorous howl. You would have recognized it, had you heard. Anyone from the town would have recognized the howl.

“It’s getting worse and worse. I can’t see. It’s building inside of me. I don’t know what to do.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

“It’s too bad.”

“What is?”

“*It.*” The voice began laughing. When the laughing stopped, the businessman, on the ground, slowly began speaking in an affected monotone—a voice not his own:

“I remember this story. I don’t know from where. It’s like it’s been rattling around in my head, but I couldn’t catch it. Now, I think I’ve got it:

“There’s this man. He’s walking along a road when he sees a house. Seeing the house, after walking for so long, the man thinks he’ll go up, knock on the door. Hopefully the owner will let him sit down. He could sit on the road, but he’s tired of sitting on the road. From far away the house looks beautiful. It’s a brick house with a tall, pointed roof. There’s smoke coming out of the chimney. It’s a pleasant house. But the closer the man gets to the house, the uglier it looks. It’s

rundown; the smoke might be pieces of the roofing being blown away. Only that doesn't matter. The man wants to get to the house. It looked so good before. So he puts his head down and keeps walking.

“When he gets to the house, the place is a shambles. The front porch is so full of holes the man wonders if he'll fall through when he steps on it. But the road is far away and the man wants to see the inside of the house.

“Inside, the man realizes that this is no ordinary house; when he walks through the door, the door slams behind him. He tries to open the door, but it's locked. So he looks around. The room is completely bare except for four doors: one to the left, one straight ahead, and one to the right—the one behind him being locked. Now the man has heard that you can get out of any maze by always turning to the left. So he goes to the left, opens the door, walks through it, and again he's in another room filled with doors, the one behind him being locked. The man laughs, happy to be engaged in something other than walking on the road. So he forgets his weariness and continues to take the door to the left.

“Time goes on. Who knows how many rooms he's been in? No matter what, because he heard one time that you can get out of any maze by turning left, he keeps taking the door to the left. Finally, after all those rooms, he comes to one that only has two doors: the locked one behind him and the one to the left. Without thinking he walks directly up to the door to the left and is about to open it when he stops. He wonders why there aren't other doors to choose from. Quickly he goes back to the door he entered through, but it's locked. There's only the one door for him, yet that's a problem. It's the same door he's always taken, why not choose it again? Only it's not that easy this time. Something seems wrong. Like he made a mistake. Where, though? Where did he screw up? He doesn't know. All he does know is that he has one more door to go through, but because there is only one it seems sinister.

“After much mental anguish, he opens the door and walks through. This room is narrow and short. There are no doors. When the man calmly turns around, he finds that there isn't even a door

behind him. He's stuck. Marooned. So he thinks about the road, the house, the doors. And he wonders where he went wrong."

The businessman finished speaking with a note of true finality, stood up, brushed himself off, cracked his back, began to walk away from the hole.

"It must be nice," said the voice.

"What?!"

"To know...so well."

Waving his hands, the businessman delved deeper into the darkness.

"That's not your business. That's the wrong way," said the voice.

"I know my business, I know which way I'm going!" shouted the businessman.

"The wrong way," said the lips again.

But the businessman continued to walk in the same direction. It had to be the right way; the slope was upward and steep. Soon, however, he found that the woman must have been correct because there was a wall directly in front of him. First it felt as if a ceiling was lowering, but now there was a wall. The businessman took no injury because he had been tramping slowly to compensate for the darkness. Leaning against the inscrutable abutment, he could see the light, so faint in the distance. The light that had discovered the abyssal hole to him. The hole. He still felt an intense yearning to run back, to jump down into it, to discover whatever he could. In the hole. If he didn't care for what he found, couldn't he get back out? Couldn't he go about his business? He could take precautions, in case the hole was too deep, to ensure his safe return. Could the woman help him?

So full of fury, the man had trouble thinking, focusing. He wanted very much to scream in anguish and frustration, but he was silent. Reluctantly, he began to feel his way around, trying to discover an exit.

Sliding along the walls, the wanderer had no idea where he was going. Cogitating became increasingly difficult, until it was utterly impossible. Unable to control himself any longer, he wanted

to yell, "This is all your fault!" but the letters refused to right themselves. They erupted in a jumble.

His incoherent howl was met with cruel laughter. If you had been there, you would have recognized the howl. Anyone from the town would.

"There is still time," the woman said.

But her words fell on deaf ears. The wanderer stumbled ahead, he knew not where. His thoughts were so jangled, they could no longer be considered thoughts; they were electrical impulses blasting at random in his brain. Somewhere, deep down in the labyrinth of his mind, the wanderer wanted out of the anfractuous alley, he wanted to be back on the main street. Yet it was too dark to see anything at all and the anger that rose in him now found vent forever in his mouth.

The longer he spent roaming in what could have been a circle, the less he felt autonomous. It was now as if he was being pulled inexorably in a never-ending round, painfully thoughtless, erupting into bouts of fury. The wanderer knew not who was pulling him, nor did he have any idea why he was being pulled. Soon the sensation was so familiar that the wanderer no longer felt drawn, felt, instead, only forward motion. It seemed that there never had been a hand to pull him with. There never had been any pulling. Nor any wandering. Never any walking. Never a woman. Never a hole. Never an alley. Never an evening. Never any light.

All was dark around him. His thoughts clouded, as if covered by an impenetrable haze, impermeable even to a calm, comfortable spotlight. He could no longer focus. He didn't know where he was going. He was tired. He had been moving forward for so long on this road and he wanted to rest. Finally, he slumped to the ground, his back leaning on a wall.

Only it wasn't a wall. It was a door. The wooden surface seemed odd after rubbing against the brick. Still in darkness, the man turned around, hands grazing over the portal to he knew not where, until he found the knob, which he used to lift himself up before he pushed the door open.

When he slid through the doorway, all remained black. He fell to the ground. A barrage of epithets escaped his lips. But nothing else is to be expected.

This morning, in your town, Fuck You Bob died. Everyone was talking about it. You were jarred by the news because just last night you experienced such a bizarre encounter involving Bob. On account of your moment with the homeless man, you found yourself thinking of the many times you have seen Bob raving outside of the dilapidated brick building on the main street. Often you found that you hadn't even realized he was there, until suddenly he appeared as if from nowhere and everywhere. But such is the case with most vagabonds. You never look for them. Sometimes, even when they are directly in front of you, you find that you can't see them—they are ethereal beings only called into existence by the right minds, the right pair of eyes; then, one day, as you are strolling along, there they are!, just as they've always been.

With Fuck You Bob, however, you grew curious. You found yourself, this morning, asking about him. Your investigation led you to a very old woman's house. You asked the old woman how long Bob had been raving on the main street: she said as long as she'd been in the city. You asked if she knew what he was like before: the woman said she knew him before. You asked what happened, how did he end up like this? She said that he turned and left. He turned left. Left and left and left. She cackled. She rocked back and forth repeating the word "left." Never right, he went left. He left.

You took leave of the deranged old lady and walked back to the main street, right to the spot where Bob used to sit, staring blindly ahead. Outside of a dilapidated brick building.

You now sit across the street from his spot, gazing forth. As if he were appearing for you and you alone, the ghost of Fuck You Bob suddenly materializes much as he was in life. He stares forward, directly at you. He raves. You see him walk up to part of the building, his back to you. He curses the wall. He shrieks at the wall. He is old and blind and he shrieks at the wall. It appears as if he is shaking a door by the handle, a door that is locked. But you cannot see a door. You see only a wall. In despair, Bob returns to his usual spot, looking blindly ahead at you, but seeing only darkness.

And then he disappears.

In the wind you hear a string of epithets. But nothing else is to be expected.

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