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Zeno's Paradox

Zeno had wanted to own a gun to prove a point – that a machine was not an ethical object. A machine could be neither evil nor innocent, neither culpable nor blameless. It just existed.

He had brought it home, a handgun – 9mm Berretta, and felt the heaviness of it. As he pressed each round into the clip with his thumb he thought of his hometown in New York. He thought of the mindless political chatter of PTA moms – their eco-friendly station wagons with bumper stickers that read, “Ithaca: It’s Gorge-ous!”

They would disapprove of his gun. So would his mother and his brother Aristotle – Aristotle who had changed his name to Todd when he turned eighteen. His father would have approved – his father who had named his sons and told them that empathy was the best course towards enlightenment. This was before their father had died of lung cancer. Aristotle had been in college studying actuarial science. Zeno had been only fourteen when their father died.

He bought the car on a whim. Five hundred dollars cash and he was headed south towards California on I-5. Somewhere around Eugene his mother called him. She was worried. She used words like hope, courage, and beauty. He didn’t tell her how wrought with hypocrisy and absurdity these terms were – how they rendered existence meaningless.

“Everything is fine,” he told her. “I am fine.” When he hung up he turned his phone off and slid it under the driver’s seat next to the gun.

He drove through the night. When he got to Sherman Peak it was early afternoon. The black asphalt of the road glistened with melted slush. He parked on the shoulder of the road a couple of miles from the trailhead. In his hiking boots and wool pants he post-holed through deep drifts of snow, underneath a cathedral of pillars – sequoias bracing winter’s bluebird sky. His chest heaved beneath his sweat-soaked shirt.

He reached the summit at sunset. To his east was the Great Basin – a nonsensical desert where no rain flowed to nowhere. To the west was the grandiose Sierra Nevada –beyond that the horizon of the Pacific.

He sat on a rock and thought of his childhood. He thought of his father in good health and his mother without worry. He thought of Aristotle, first as a child, then as an accountant in Manhattan, then again as a child. He took the gun from his waistband and surveyed the glowing crepuscule of pastel hues to his west.

He put the barrel to his temple, and squeezed the trigger.

A police officer met Todd at the Bakersfield airport. They had found Zeno’s car at the base of Sherman Peak. There were tracks leading uphill into the trees. Conditions were whiteout now, but they would begin the search and rescue soon. He drove Todd to a motel near the airport.

Todd sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the cheap floral print on the plastic-like comforter. It was his father’s fault mostly. A goddamned philosophy professor so in touch with his own ego and so out of touch with reality that he had left behind a wake of misery trailing across the country from one franchise family to another.

In the morning, the police would phone Todd. They would tell him they had found Zeno's body. He would identify the body and he wouldn't cry. He would blame his father and his mother by the associative property. Then he would get on a plane to New York.

The lady next to him would ask what business he was on, and he would tell her how his name used to be Aristotle but now he was Todd – how his brother was named Zeno, after the pre-Socratic philosopher – how their father had explained once that Zeno's namesake had lived in ancient Greece and had postulated that if infinity was a reality, no two objects could ever actually intersect. It was mathematically impossible. The distance between two objects could only get infinitely smaller. It could never reach zero.

He told her, as she suppressed the urge to look down at her copy of *Sky Mall*, that mathematicians had asked others to shoot them with arrows, believing that, because this theory was mathematically true, the arrow would never pierce their hearts. The arrows did, of course, and these men died – in growing pools of their own blood, unable to comprehend the paradox between arithmetic and reality.