

Justin Bell

one in non

I know it hasn't been easy."

That might be the most beautiful thing he'd heard her say. So much nicer than any compliment on his new hairstyle or the clean T-shirt that he unearthed from the knee-deep stratum of clothes on his bedroom floor. He shaved this morning, but no one could tell. Next time he'll comb his hair for their meeting. Today he's done enough.

The waitresses say "Hello" to him today when he walks in. Usually, they just ask "Smoking or non?" and he'll want to say "Smoking" but then he'll notice that she's already been seated in "non."

"There's the person I'm meeting right there," he says to the waitress and she proceeds to ask "Anything to drink?" and he wants to say "Coffee" but she's already ordered an iced-tea for him,

decaffeinated it turns out. "No thanks," he tells the waitress, "looks like I'm set" and he sits down to her left at the round table designed to seat six.

It's about that time when the waitresses will be going from table to table collecting the syrup containers in their wire carriers. "That's okay," he thinks. "Didn't really want pancakes anyway. Iced-tea doesn't really go well with pancakes anyway."

"You look good," she always says.

"Thanks, so do you," he always replies.

She's wearing that orange T-shirt again. The one with the puffy blue fish and the puffy white bubbles. He thinks that it's funny how she always asks the waitresses if they know who is singing the piped-in music. Sometimes they know

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and that's funny too. But the funniest part is when they don't know and they act like they care and they go and ask the grill cooks in the kitchen. Someone in the kitchen always knows. That's funny. That's great. And when that happens, he thinks, it's almost worth it all coming here to meet her and telling her about how he's making slow progress.

It has always amazed him how many people in this town walk with noticeable limps. He's sure that it's not just a coincidence. He might go along with the coincidence idea if it were different kinds of limps, but everyone limps along in the same manner, like they've all had their lower backs go out on them. "It's all got to be connected," he thinks. "Something I'll find out, I guess. Maybe after this is all over."

And there are a lot of fat people in this town, too. *A lot*. It's more than noticeable. It's distracting.

He's not a very good-looking man. He's not fat, though, and he doesn't have a limp, so that makes him somewhat extraordinary in this town. There are good-looking people in town. Not a lot of them are men. Of course, this doesn't bother him at all, but it does make things complicated because he feels like he should have a good shot at these good-looking women with the level of competition being so low. The crappy thing is that he really doesn't have a shot at these women because he is so not-very-good-looking. None of them are about to settle for not-very-good-looking guys, even an extraordinary not-very-good-looking guy in a town full of limping obese people. He thinks that's funny, too.

Something else that's funny (not so much funny amusing as it is funny peculiar) is that a man like him who finds so much about his surroundings to be funny doesn't really laugh all that much. That's noticeable to this woman he meets every Tuesday afternoon in this restaurant. That's a fact that's even more noticeable to her than the unusually high population of fat folks with limps. She doesn't pay much attention to physical features. That's why she says "You look good" to him when he sits down and leaves it at that, never anything specific, just generalities. Good and bad, anything else is beyond her capability. She's a good listener, though. A great listener, actually. And she's good at synthesizing ideas and explaining to people who and what they are.

There's something that she is looking for in him. Not looking, listening for. Feeling for. He's trying so hard to make progress and she knows it. That's why she's kept coming here to meet with him long past the assigned time.

He gets confused sometimes when he thinks about her, not because he's in love with her or because he's even slightly interested in her and her life. He's confused by her because she looks so much younger than she is. He's confused because she looks like a Native American princess who's been kidnapped and forced to wear beach clothes and smoke long white cigarettes. He's confused because she sits in "non" when she goes to a restaurant but she smokes all the time when she's not eating. He's confused because her hands are so elegant and willowy at the ends of her

thin strong arms. He's confused because she chews with her mouth open despite her grace and beauty. He wonders if he could do for her what she does for him.

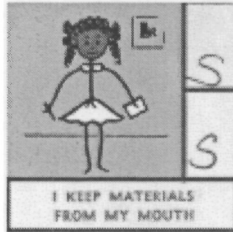
"Okay," she sounds tired today. The long exhalation of breath, a sigh that signifies either that she is recovering from a sleepless night, or something else is occupying her thoughts. He won't ask her what's bothering her. Something tells him that if he did, all of these meetings, all of the progress that he has made, will go for naught. "Okay," she says again, "what do you have for me today? What's new? Any developments?"

He pulls a ragged notebook out of the left rear pocket of his worn gray corduroys. "I had this dream last night. When I woke up, I wrote this down:

My God. What is happening? November 7th, 19...no...2002. God, it's so damn hard to remember that I made it to the 2000s. Almost 36 months into it and I'm still writing 19__ on my checks. Will I ever get past the twentieth century? It seems to me to be more than just dates. It's surrounding me, this envelope of days, months, years passed. Can I punch a hole through it to see a new day? A new millennium?

"Wow," she said. "That must have been some dream. I think that you are really starting to grasp the possibility that you can move on from the past. I think that you're almost there."

"Yeah. But then I wrote this:



I've put all of my faith in a man who does Jimmy Durante impersonations (or are they impressions?) for television commercials. "Pet commercials," he tells me. "For some reason, I get a lot of jobs doing pet commercials." Maybe people just associate Jimmy Durante's husky, breathy voice and its somehow perplexing ethnic qualities with dogs. "And women's products," the man says to me. "A lot of different kinds of women's products. Don't ask me why." I didn't ask him, but after he told me about his involvement in the marriage between the voice of Jimmy Durante and feminine hygiene products, Leggs pantyhose, and International Flavored Coffees, I could not help but wish that I had not heard of that. At least I could purge myself of the sadistic mental images of Jimmy Durante lounging in the late morning sunshine of a Sunday in spring, reminiscing with a couple of girlfriends about a trip to Paris while they were in college. I see him in a popasan chair with a steaming cup of creamy café mocha carefully cradled in the wrinkled, leathery catcher's mitts that are his

ancient hands while he hypnotically kicks back and forth his bedroom-slipped foot over the edge of the chair's bamboo frame. His white fluffy terrycloth bathrobe glows and makes him look comfortably warm and pleasantly cool and clean all at the same time. One look at him tells me that he has just stepped from a sudsy, steaming bathtub. While his friends, who are dressed similarly, chatter and giggle and sigh while throwing back their beautiful, soft, perfectly Pantened and conditioned hair so it cascades down the backs of their respective comfy/cozy chairs, Jimmy pulls a half-smoked Dutch Masters' cigar from a pocket disturbingly close to his genitals. He lights it with a flourish, a snap and a click of an ancient

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Zippo lighter. The lighter clicks once more and is replaced into another pocket, this one also much too near to his drooping testicles. I want to throw up, but I can't because I know how ridiculous it would be to simply vomit for no other reason than the fact that I am daydreaming about a dead Vaudeville star with a nose the size of his coffee cup. If something this stupid makes me want to release my most recent meal, how should I expect to be able to get through any day without becoming nauseous? I leave this scene of Jimmy lounging on his throne engulfed in a miasma of cigar smoke and memories of a grand European vacation. (Mickey Rooney is somehow involved. I don't know how. He is a symbol of anger and resentment in this vision. Maybe he's angry because he feels forgotten. Maybe he's jealous of the coffee commercials. I don't know. Maybe he is just an aphorism. Some kind of basic collection of anger and malevolence, densely packed into the small stature of an elderly former superstar which has long since fizzled and now feels cheated of yet another popular revival, a rebirth from the womb of kitsch. Maybe this is the supernova of his stardom. A sneer spreads across his face and I can see his burning, acidic, predatorial soul effusing from his dull eyes. Buried deep inside is a cauldron of lust and unfulfilled sexual anger. The demons that have possessed this body seethe with a primal hunger for subservient young bodies of starlets. Young, frail, moist women who are consumed quickly and returned to their lives without the innocence they took for granted. And I see this in the eyes of this devil that has taken the physical form of Mickey Rooney, and I recognize it because the devil has stared at me through my own eyes in this sterling looking glass stapled to my forehead of which I can never be rid. It is my

conscience. I am aware that I am not in control. I am aware that to try to gain control is pointless. What will be done, will be done. I am now, simply, going along for the ride.)

The look on her face lets him know what he suspected is true. He has taken one step forward, and two steps back.

"You know that this is not good, right?" she observes.

"That's why I read it to you last."

"I see. Well, this means that we are going to have to extend your treatment *yet again*," the exasperation in her voice is plainly evident.

"So I have to meet you here for another six months?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Well, I guess you have to do what you have to do. At least let me pick up the check."

"Oh please, let the county pay for it. I'll write it up as a business lunch like I always do."

The two of them do not leave together. Her pager whistles, and he watches her slight body glide out of "non" and out of the restaurant. He sits for ten more minutes, quietly sipping the iced tea so graciously bought for him with taxpayer money, the whole time smiling. He thinks that it's funny just how much he can accomplish by talking about a dream that he never had.

"Lemme guess," her significant other was balancing the checkbook at the kitchen table. He didn't raise his eyes

from the rectangular black digits on the pocket calculator as he spoke. "Another six months?"

There was a hint of derision in his voice, not that it was uncommon for him to subtly criticize his wife without actually saying something tangibly derogatory for her to contradict. He was cautious never to do such a thing because he knew she had a reservoir of knowledge in the realm of emotional analysis, the slightest amount of which he could not hope to comprehend. And he was aware that the most painful retort she was willing to utilize was one with which she would hone in on his tender ego and strike with an interpretation of his tendency to criticize her as a flaw of his own making.

"Mm-hmm." She pitied herself that she felt it necessary to reply at all. Not answering her husband would have nearly been the equivalent of her gentle "Mm-hmm," except that he would have taken no reply at all as a "Yes," and that would have been a signal that she felt it necessary to explain the situation further. "Mm-hmm," implied that his assumption was correct, just maybe she was as disappointed about it all as he, and there was nothing left to say.

He flipped through the pages of that month's bank statement and inserted numbers into gray and green shaded boxes on the backs. A stack of returned checks with panda bears and sperm whales and spotted owls on them, and of course his omnipresent calculator, comprised the table setting. Upon his completion of the task before him, the checks would go back into the tiny box from whence they came,

and the calculator would settle snugly back into its place in his shirt pocket. Everything with him was to be in its right place. The numbers, it was always by the numbers with him. The numbers had to be balanced. The bank statements reconciled and filed. The ballpoint pen clicked. The calculator replaced close to his breast.

The calculator reminded her of the last time they had sex. She straddled him while he sat in that same exact kitchen chair, preparing to balance last month's bank statement. She caught him before he could take the calculator from his buttoned-down collared, navy blue pinstriped Van Heusen shirt. She pulled his brown-belted, khaki Hagggar slacks

down below his knees and sat upon his lap. He was annoyed, but not as much as he was aroused. That made her feel good, and they fucked for four minutes. The radiant green digits on the microwave recorded the duration of their copulation:

4:13 PM: Commenced fucking.

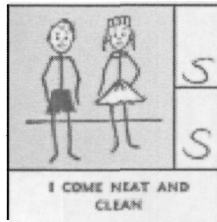
4:14 PM: Continued fucking.

4:15 to 4:16 PM: See above.

4:17 PM: Ejaculation.

4:18 PM: Breathing slowing down, various dripping.

He leaned back as far as the kitchen chair would allow, and she stayed on his lap, the bones in his hips digging into her thighs, his slithery manhood collapsing upon itself. The digits on the microwave clock froze at 4:18 PM, their eagerness to change during the previous four minutes was abruptly gone, the rapid



pace dwindling at the same rate as his member.

He was motionless, and his stillness betrayed a discernable twitching motion in his shirt pocket. It was the pounding of his heart that jostled the calculator enough for her to take notice. She observed this motion for the duration of that otherwise frozen moment, the entirety of the kitchen dead-calm other than the calculator in his pocket twitching on his heart like antennae on a dying insect.

Watching him press the keypad on a confusing symbol of their sexual miscommunication seemed to her like watching him masturbate to a pornographic magazine. She associated the calculator now with self-indulgent sex and indicative of the true desires within his heart. Its rigidity, its simple purpose, its calculating nature seemed in contrast to passion and love, but then again so did their sex-lives. He turned another page of the bank statement and she realized that in the nine years they'd been married, she had never caught him masturbating to photographs in magazines. Something told her that if he did do such a thing, it probably would be with a computer magazine.

The laugh that burst abruptly from her throat surprised her, but not as much as her husband failing to ask her what she found so funny. She waited just a moment, long enough for him to register one more total on the bank statement.

"I was just thinking about what he wrote today," she volunteered, and she lit one of her slender white cigarettes with a plastic disposable lighter that was the same day-glo orange as her shirt. It

was a rare occasion when she smoked inside the house, and that caused her husband to look at her for the first time since she had returned home. He sat up straight and placed his ballpoint pen on the stack of endangered species checks. His left arm stretched out at full-length, hand grasping the metal edge of the table. His right elbow rested upon the corner of the table, index finger pointing straight up along the side of his skull, remaining fingers curled like a soft pink clamshell in front of his puckered lips. He did not ask what it was that amused his wife. He just sat there as if to say, "Well? Go on."

"He had this dream about a guy who imitates Jimmy Durante's voice for pet food commercials," she explained through a listless cloud of white smoke and sunlight. "And Mickey Rooney was the devil or something." She laughed again and leaned against the counter where the kitchen sink could serve as her ashtray.

Her husband watched her snap ash down the garbage disposal. He bit his upper lip and snorted, "At least he's dreaming about impersonators of dead celebrities and not the real thing. Quite a breakthrough I should say."

Again she was aware of his subtle derision. He found her interest in this man to be an annoyance, a failure of his expectations of her competency as a counselor. She had spent over a year of Tuesday lunches with him, and apparently no resolution was in sight. He had not met this character, but he felt that his own life was somehow being influenced by this man's problems, and this was not according to his wishes.

"He dreamed about this Jimmy Durante impersonator's testicles, honey. I hardly consider that a breakthrough," her smoke-hushed voice replied.

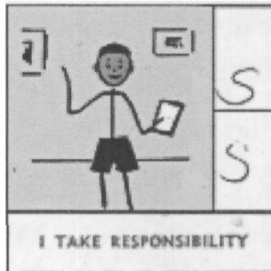
"You know what I think?"

She didn't say yes or no. She remained leaning against the kitchen counter, cigarette dangling from her soft ochre lips, her slim, copper arms folded across the puffy blue fish swimming in an orange sea as if she were attempting to return his previous "Well? Go on."

"He's making this all up."

That evening, she consulted her notes.

The subject was ordered to have weekly meetings with a counselor for a period of six months and to remain at least five hundred feet away from the grave of Mr. William Holden. The subject was arrested for trespassing, loitering, and public indecency at the site of Mr. Holden's grave. The subject had erected a makeshift campsite at the gravesite. The campsite consisted of an eight feet long by eight feet wide green tarpaulin nailed to the headstone under which the subject slept for an undetermined number of nights, no more than ten. The subject was asked on three separate occasions to leave the premises and willingly complied on each occasion. The subject gathered his belongings and left the cemetery grounds quietly, only to return after dark. Caretakers at the cemetery eventually contacted police following an incident in which the subject "slept in" one morning and was discovered sleeping in the nude beneath the tarpaulin. Police officers arrived and found



the subject sitting cross-legged upon Mr. Holden's headstone, still in a state of undress and eating a large bag of Doritos. When questioned about his reason for being at the cemetery in such a condition, the subject explained that he was there to verify that "William Holden was still dead." The subject also stated that ever since his television "began to only show classic movies on every f—ing channel" he had been unsure of his "place in time." The subject was subsequently charged with the aforementioned misdemeanors and then released into the custody of county mental health services for psychiatric evaluation.

Preliminary evaluation of the subject revealed possible severe depression and schizophrenia, the extent of which was not determined. The subject explained that he happened upon the gravesite of Mr. Holden after he "watched Sunset Boulevard for the seventeenth f—ing time on channel nine." When it was explained to the subject that the William Holden on whose headstone he was sitting was not, in fact, the famous film actor of the same name, the subject responded "Hub. How about that?" and promised that he would not return to that site. The subject was released on condition that he appear for his court date.

The subject was arrested one week later when he was discovered asleep upon the grave of Ms. Lauren Bacall. He was returned to the custody of county mental health services and detained at General Hospital until his court date two weeks later. The subject explained during the hearing that he located the gravesite of Ms. Bacall after "watching The Big Sleep for the twelfth time on channel f—ing five." It was explained to the subject that the film

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actress Lauren Bacall is not buried at that site and, in fact, the famous actress Lauren Bacall is still alive. To this the subject replied, "Well then whose grave is that?" It was explained to the subject that the grave was that of a different woman named Lauren Bacall. The subject replied, "How do you know that's not the Lauren Bacall I was looking for? Don't jump to f—ing conclusions. You don't know me."

He looks good today. The collar of his shirt is flecked with tiny dark hairs that the barber failed to dust off this morning. The hairs slip down between his shirt and flesh, between his shoulder blades, and that is the cause of his incessant scratching this afternoon. The waitresses cast their usual dismissive glances at him as he steps through the front door, one arm contorted at an angle above his head and behind his neck, his hand scratching where a hair digs into a spot on his spine. The change in his hairstyle attracts a brief glare of unfamiliarity from the waitress who rises from her seat at the counter to greet him.

"Smoking or non?" she asks. No "Hello" today, but that's okay. He walks on through her greeting, smiling politely at her, tossing his head in the direction of the table for six in "non." He thinks that the woman he is here to meet has probably ordered a decaffeinated drink for him already as is her custom, but when he turns to verify his expectation he sees that their table for six for two is empty. She has not yet arrived. He stops dead in his tracks.

"Meeting someone?" asks the waitress as his head swings from side to side, scanning the restaurant for any sign

of a recognizable face. Many are faces he has seen before, most of them overweight and gimpy, of course.

This is not the first time she has been late for their meeting, but he so wanted to walk in and see her reaction to his fresh new appearance, his closely cropped, clean hair. He is disappointed but not disheartened, and he knows that she will still be surprised when eventually she arrives and sits next to him at their usual oversized round table for two.

"One in non right now," he says to the waitress. "I am expecting someone, however. Could I have that large table right there?"

The waitress says nothing and leads him to the table he requested. She lays a menu on the table and asks what he will be drinking.

"Do you have decaffeinated iced-tea?"

"You know we do. Your friend is the tall pretty woman, right? With the dark complexion?"

"Yes."

"I'll bring one for her, too."

He sits and waits and looks over the notebook in which he concocts strange stories to keep her interested in him, to keep her coming back. Over the weekend, he carefully crafted a scenario involving a Marx brother and Olivia de Havilland in which the two of them moved into the apartment below him and kept him awake all night by playing saxophones and what he assumed was screaming while making love. In the end of his story, he pounded on the door to their apartment at 4:30 in the morning after a night of tossing and turning, and

heard a gentle “help me, help me please” come from within.

There is little more to his story than that. His plan is to reveal only this much to her and save the remainder of it for following weeks. Her tardiness provides him a chance to look over his journal entry one last time to find any inconsistencies that might give him away.

She arrives before he can finish reading the entry. She appears harried, unready for their meeting. She is wearing a lime green soccer jersey with a shamrock on the shoulder. He smiles at her, and she removes her pack of cigarettes and sets fire to one with her day-glo orange disposable lighter. He looks around sheepishly, his head pulled down between his hair flecked shoulders. He waits for the sky to fall. They are seated in “non.”

She grasps the sweaty glass of iced-tea before her and gulps four times; the ice swirls and settles as she replaces the glass upon a paper napkin. He stares at the amber light trapped inside the cubes and a sensation of loss tingles in his cheeks and burrows like a badger into his temples.

“Did you make up that dream?” she asks and slides her cigarettes into a turquoise beaded purse he has never seen her carry before. “The one with Jimmy Durante and Mickey Rooney?”

He closes the tattered cover of the notebook and leans far to his right, raising his left buttock off of the chair just enough to slide the little journal into his pocket.

“Don’t stop coming to see me,” he says as though he believes that she won’t

put an immediate stop to this uncovered charade. He scratches at the little hairs that seem to be multiplying all around his throat, digging into his neck until they bring up spinal fluid.

“So you did make it up. How long have you been doing that?”

“For a while.”

“Why? What happened that. . .? I mean. . . why?”

“You said something to me that made me want to keep having our meetings. I knew that I was getting better. And the court order was coming to an end. But I wanted to still know you.”

“Listen to me. No matter what you may think, you are not in love with me.”

“I know that.”

“Are you sure you know that?”

“Of course I know that. That’s not what this is about.”

“Well, what I think this is about is that apparently you’ve gotten over your problem. That’s what I think is the important thing. You are over your problem, right?”

“With the old movies and stuff? Yeah. You know, this all happened because my old Zenith television broke and the guys at the repair shop said they had one just like it that I could have if I wanted to take it. Turned out that it was black and white and I didn’t know that. I suppose I was on the edge of losing it anyway. When all I could get on the set was black and white movies it just pushed me over. I thought I was out of time.”

“Out of time for what?”



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"Just out of time. That's the best way I can describe it. You wouldn't know what it's like unless it happened to you. Like, all I could think of doing was to try and prove to myself that these old movie stars I kept seeing were dead, that they weren't still in Hollywood, out there making movies. It doesn't make any sense, I know. I wasn't exactly here in my own head. I wasn't sure where I was."

"Well. That's...hmm. I'm not sure what to say about this."

"Yeah. So, we're done with this I suppose."

"Yes. I should think we are."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the right thing to do. You've got other stuff to take care of, I'm sure."

"Yes." Her head sinks, her forehead pressed against the soft dark hairs on her forearms. All she can see is the grainy photograph of breakfast meat on the paper placemat. It turns her stomach, and she thinks about her husband and his subtle digs at her, his neat little packaged life, his calculations. She is sure that she is a failure at innumerable things. She feels that she is running out of options, running out of endeavors to undertake at which she may actually succeed.

"You know something, what you said to me also applies to you."

"What I said?"

"I know it hasn't been easy.' That's what you said to me. There are so many people in my life that should have said that to me before you did. So many of them knew that about me. No one said that to me until you did. Someone should say that to you someday."

"Thanks. . . I guess."

"See you 'round."

She sits there for ten minutes after he has left, her forehead still pressed against her left forearm. She is chain smoking through the crook in her arm, looking at her copper legs in a ray of sun burning through the darkness beneath the table. The waitresses do not bother her. They let her sit with her head down thinking, smoking one cigarette after another. They won't say anything to her, but they know, even the limping fat folks know, what it's like when you are smoking in non.