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Georgia College and State University

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Alice in Wonderland (or a Clockwork Tour) + Whale Watching

Introduction to Research

My graduate thesis is a collection of short fiction based on my experiences of growing up in the Southern United States. Fairly late into the writing process, while discussing ideas for my required critical essay with my thesis advisor, I realized that the works that my greatest influences are works of classic British literature: Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories (1865, 1871) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Considering the way both these texts invent and explore language—not to mention their shared thematic concepts, and the uncanny similarities between their authors—I find it shocking that so few comparisons have been made between the works.

Contrary to what their respective film adaptations would have us believe, Carroll's *Alice* stories and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* are remarkably similar. In examining the plots, for example, we find that both the *Alice* stories and *A Clockwork Orange* are British coming-of-age novels set in fantastic worlds in which the idea of “growing up” is a notion of fear and nonsense and in which the adults themselves are of little to no account. As concerns the authors' backgrounds, we find that Carroll and Burgess both foil and complement each other. Carroll was protestant; Burgess was catholic. Burgess lost his faith yet remained haunted by fears of eternal damnation; Carroll remained pious (and was ordained a bishop) yet balked at the idea of hell for the unsaved. Burgess became a widower after his wife died due to injuries suffered at the hands

of American GIs—an experience he later fictionalized in *A Clockwork Orange*. Carroll, meanwhile, never married, made friends with young children (whom he occasionally photographed nude), and also wrote himself into his work—most notoriously as the amorous White Knight in *Through the Looking Glass*. Both, on the other hand, were prodigies in their own respects—Carroll in mathematics; Burgess in music—and incorporated psychedelic themes into their texts. (Unlike Carroll, Burgess actually admitted to doing drugs.) And how can we forget the texts’ shared penchant for linguistic invention?

The story that follows—“Whale Watching”—is an attempt to translate the themes of identity and “growing up” into a twenty-first-century context. Instead of tumbling down a rabbit hole, my Alice—a recent patient at an eating-disorder clinic—follows a red-haired gym rat into the world of competitive eating, where she finds love, loss, and (perhaps) a sense of purpose. Please be warned that this story contains themes of disordered eating and body dysmorphia.

Whale Watching

She hadn't wanted to be thin. Not in the beginning. Thinness had just...happened, and happened long enough to become part of her. Hearing other girls complain about their bodies—about love handles and saddlebags and jeans that hugged their thighs, about diets and sweatpants and all the boys they'd never date because they were *too fat*, the word whispered like a well-kept secret (fat), like there was any way to hide those muffin tops and jello asses and double D's—she'd laugh. She was skinny. Always had been. Beanpole, toothpick, boobless, buttless, thin-as-sin Alice. Boys had called her a brick. She was sixty-eight inches and twenty-two years of blonde-haired, blue-eyed bone, 115 pounds on a good day and—she didn't mind admitting, 110 on a better one.

She was spending the summer in Jacksonville with her grandmother, crammed into one of those scruffy retirement communities for senior citizens half a day's walk from the nearest beach. *A vacation*, her mother called it, a short getaway from their home just over the state line now that Alice had been released from Renew—that clinic for skinny girls where she'd spent the past three months. *Prison* seemed like a better word, for all she sometimes missed it—a way for Alice's mother to keep Alice out of her hair while she decided what to do with her. At Renew, she'd been tied to a bed, stuffed with food and pills, and forced to gain more than twenty-five pounds. When she'd arrived at the clinic, her doctor told her she had all the signs of a “Triple A Case”: anorexic, amenorrheic, and absolutely destined for an early grave if she didn't get her ass in line. By the time she'd left, the other patients had given her a different set of *A's*: angry, agitated, aloof. She'd come up with her own list, as well: alone, apathetic, acidic; alien, argumentative, antagonistic.

Alice.

She was shopping with her grandmother when she saw him. Not “him” like “him?” or “him!” or “oh, him” but *him*. *HIM*. While her grandmother bought clothes for her—she didn’t like admitting the old ones no longer fit—she loitered in the parking lot and passed the time by playing a game she invented at the clinic. Scanning the parking lot, she found as many people as she could who were noticeably larger than she was—not a difficult thing to do—and tried to guess their weights. She called it *whale watching*.

She’d been at it a good fifteen minutes before she noticed the yellow tent on the other side of the lot. Curious, she left her bench and walked toward the tent. As she got closer, she noticed a sign next to it that read FOOD * FUNDRAISER * CHARITY * CONTEST. Standing beneath it, among a dozen or so melon-bellied men wearing loose tees and cargo shorts and stuffing their faces with piles of syrup-drenched waffles, was *him*.

He was smaller than the others. Thinner. She’d have called him attractive if the word had meant anything to her. He had a punk rock look about him—pink tank top silk -screened with a pizza slice, black gauges, an orange mohawk that severed the air with every motion of his head. She’d have called him delicate if not for the chiseled muscles that spoke of hours in the gym, or the shark fins tattooed on both deltoids. He looked young, she thought—no more than thirty—and wore a name tag that said—she craned her neck to get a better look—*Rexo*. She felt her pulse quicken. He was, she thought, the most beautiful man she’d ever seen.

“Let’s count ’em down, folks!” shouted the emcee, a man in pinstripes and John Lennon glasses who stood on top of a soap box waving a bullhorn. He pointed at a timer beside the tent, where the final seconds were ticking away. *Rexo*’s scoreboard showed him leading at forty-two waffles. A man twice his size wearing a nametag that read “Buffalo Bill Coyote” followed at forty-one. Most of the others were licking their fingers or clutching their stomachs, apparently in

the throes of giving up. Studying Rexo, Alice held her breath as the emcee began the countdown. Never in her life had she seen anything so disgusting. Never in her life had she felt so curious and fascinated; so anxious and envious and...turned on.

Rexo and Buffalo Bill chewed straight through the buzzer. The crowd roared.

“There it is, folks,” the emcee thundered into the bullhorn. “David slays Goliath; bitty beats the beast; this competition’s lithesome dark horse, Rexo from The Gym, has bested the behemoth Buffalo Bill Coyote the Incinerator in the first-ever North Florida Waffle-Eating Tournament. Come on over, Rexo!”

Alice watched Rexo clamber onto the box. She envied his composure. Even at the clinic, she’d never eaten that much in a week. Rexo wasn’t even flushed.

“I like to exercise,” Rexo said, replying to a question she hadn’t heard. He scratched his chin, his nonchalance making her shiver with jealousy. You couldn’t out-exercise *that*. Could you? “I work out and fix bicycles,” he continued. “That’s all.”

“A man of simple tastes,” the emcee said, thumping Rexo on the back. He handed him a fat leather purse. “Any last words?”

“Be seeing you,” Rexo said, snatching the purse. A moment later, he was jogging across the parking lot in Alice’s direction, the crowd cheering in his wake. Too late, she realized she was blocking his path. His shoulder clipped her, and she stumbled back.

“My bad, man,” Rexo said, shooting a look across his shoulder. Their eyes met. Then he was gone.

It took her all of two hours to find his Instagram: @trexoeatsjax. Already, he had over 800 followers, which she had to admit wasn’t bad. Her first and only year of college, she’d been a social media intern for a vegan bakery that had had close to that number with none of Rexo’s

flair. No doubt he could double that number with a bit more organization. She followed his page and spent the morning searching through his photographs. Most showed his eating competitions: tacos, pizza, ice cream, empanadas, malts. In more than a few of them, a diet Mountain Dew stood prominently in the background. Later, she used his Instagram homepage to access his other social media accounts. On his Facebook, she found a link that led her to the website of a fitness center called The Gym. *Bingo*. She Googled the address. It was barely two miles from her grandmother's condo.

That afternoon, she watched every video on Rexo's YouTube channel. Some had only a couple hundred views; a few of the more popular ones had closer to 1,000. After her grandmother went to bed, she poured a bowl of corn flakes, sat on the couch, and clicked through one shirtless picture after another showing Rexo mounted on a stationary bicycle or dangling on a pull-up bar or, as she searched further into his archives, stretched out with a Mountain Dew on the beach. Nearly every picture showed off his body: his biceps or triceps or a torso rippling with muscle. His latest picture showed him doing a shirtless handstand in front of a red Jeep Wrangler caked in mud and pine needles and a plate that read "TREXO88."

The following morning, she put on the pair of new running shoes her grandmother had bought for her and punched The Gym's address into her phone. The idea of movement thrilled her: other than light walking, she'd been forbidden from doing any exercise at Renew. Within the first minute, however, she felt every moment of her months of inactivity—from lungs to ribs to the weight she carried in her ass. The two miles took her over half an hour and left her gasping for breath. At The Gym's front desk, she breathlessly told the man behind the counter that she was looking for Rexo. With a bemused expression, he led her to a back room where Rexo squatted behind a stationary bicycle, a screwdriver in his hand and a pencil in his mouth.

“You found my channel?” Rexo asked, climbing to his feet with an amused grin. He seemed surprised but hid it with a shake of his head “Look, man, I don’t do fan talks. That’s what Reddit’s for.”

Alice didn’t know how to reply. He looked different, she thought, with his mohawk down and gauges out. He’d gotten a tan, too, and smelled—she sniffed—*fresh*, the spiced scent of his deodorant mixing with the ripe musk of his sweat. He was hot, she realized, surprised by how the thought registered with her. *HOT*. She saw his grin and felt her cheeks flaming. Her words, when she found them, came in a rush. “I saw you at the mall,” she blurted. “When you beat”—she grasped for the name—“when you beat Buffalo Bill.”

“Buffalo Bill’s a pussy,” Rexo said. He squinted at her. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Alice blushed. “You bumped into me after you won.”

“Hope I didn’t hurt you,” Rexo said. He ran his thumb along a fin. “You know I spent the hundred bucks on a speeding ticket? Some luck.”

Alice heard the door chime. Rexo cocked his head and frowned.

“What is it you want, man?” he asked, running the head of the screwdriver along the bristles on his chin.

“I want to know how you do it,” Alice said.

“Gotta be more specific than that.”

Alice licked her lips. She wanted his genes; his body; his secret. She wanted all of it. All of *him*. Prepared to say as much, she opened her mouth. Then an idea came to her. “I want to help you,” she blurted.

Rexo looked her up and down. “Like a groupie? Listen, man—”

“Your YouTube channel’s pathetic,” Alice said, and was emboldened by the look of surprise, then embarrassment, that suffused Rexo’s face. “Your Instagram’s cluttered, you’re Facebook’s out of date and *nobody* uses Tumblr anymore.” She let her comments sink in and was satisfied by Rexo’s blank stare. “And now you’re stuck here fixing bicycles”—she lowered her voice—“you’re fixing bicycles and making minimum wage when you could be making thousands online.”

Rexo scoffed, but there was no humor in his tone. “You’re kidding.” When she didn’t answer, he took a slip of paper from his pocket. “I have a break in thirty minutes,” he said, scribbling something down. “Here’s my number.”

Alice glanced at the paper without really seeing it. “Half an hour?”

Rexo knelt beside the bike. “No autographs.”