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A Somewhat Entertaining Short Story with Little, If Any Redeeming Social Significance

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Redeeming Social Significance

I. Death: A Quite Satisfying Beginning

"Before I go," whispered my father on his bed, "I want you to have this." He pulled out an old scrap of paper from somewhere under the old sheets that he had been lying in for weeks.

My eyes scanned over the weathered map. "Where did you get this?" I inquired.

"From an old pervert in Czechoslovakia named Ivan," said my father. He then added, "He claimed he had the cure for cancer." As to what the cure for cancer had to do with a map of the Himalayas, I thought it better not to ask.

"All my life I wanted to find this place," he continued. "It was a dream, my whole purpose for life, but I couldn't make it."

"Why not? What stopped you?"

"Well, you know how it is; I kept thinking, 'I'll do it tomorrow' or 'it can wait a week,' and, well, time just kind of slipped by, and here I am, not in any position to do much travelling. Anyway, (cough), I want you to complete my task."

Now this was getting a bit ridiculous. "C'mon, Dad, you know how dolly production gets this time of year. I don't know..."

"I will die happy if I know that you will find the cavern."

"Okay, whatever you say. I'll get there. See you later, Dad." I then heard the kind of tone you always hear on hospital TV shows right before the nurses pull the sheet over the heart attack victim, then I looked at Dad. He had a big smile on his face; he died happy.

I turned around and walked out of the room, tossing the crumpled up map in the trash on the way out, which missed and fell on the floor; I never was much of a basketball player.

Dolly matters were pressing.

II. Dollies and Pythons

"And now it's time for Colonel Poos and his Dancing Teeth!" announced the television in my Lear jet. It was not getting much of a response, though, because at the time I was too
busy figuring out which mountains were now passing directly underneath me. I had also seen this particular episode quite a few times already, and I wasn't very interested in dancing teeth. I was actually more interested in dolly production, probably resulting from the fact that I'm the manager of London Dolly Inc., en route to an important meeting with the International Lace and Other Dainty Things Corporation.

"We are on route to Amsterdam, aren't we, Mr...."

"Waterhead, Bob Waterhead. Yes sir, we're on our way to Amsterdam."

I looked out at the mountains for a few more minutes, then inquired, "There aren't any mountains between London and Amsterdam, are there?"

"Mountains?" Of course not. Why would there be mountains between London and Amsterdam?"

I ignored that question, and decided to turn back to the TV set.

III. Concern Edith Baxter's Back

The next bit happened on the day of my dad's death, about three days before I was up in the previously mentioned Lear jet: one of Dad's nurses was having back trouble that day, and was talking to another nurse about it. Priscilla (the latter) gave Edith (the former) the number of the local chiropractor, who was pretty good at fixing backs. However, Edith had nothing to write on. Fortunately, she saw a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor, of which she tore a corner off to write the number down; she then stuffed the other part of the paper in her purse.

The next day Edith had to pick up her sister who had flown into London from Toledo, but had the nasty experience of having her purse stolen. She made enough of a ruckus to alarm the airport police, who have started to chase the assailant. This thief, (who happened to have a neurotic brother named Bob who flew private Lear jets), decided to drop the purse off on a baggage conveyor belt rather than get caught.

The purse landed in a jet en route to Tibet. Not many people fly to Tibet, so naturally the plane wasn't of the highest quality. As a matter of fact, it had a faulty door on the luggage compartment, and subsequently left a trail of luggage all the way from London to Lhasa.
IV. On the Relative Importance of Cockroaches

Bob was now preoccupied with thinking of something he would rather be doing at this point, which is practically anything. He always hated flying planes, but seeing as his father had made 53 bombing runs in World War II, and that at the time of his youth, his father ran a pilot training course, and because he had dropped out of high school because he believed that all teachers are cockroaches, he didn't have much choice. At this particular moment he wished to be back at his home in Wyoming, on solid ground, cruising around in his '68 Thunderbird. His Thunderbird had a bumper sticker on the back that read, "I brake for cockroaches." He also would brake for plankton, if any ever got in his way, but he couldn't find a bumper sticker that read, "I brake for plankton." The lady from whom he bought the former bumper sticker told him that it may come in handy some day. So far he hadn't run over any cockroaches, at least none that he could remember.

"Bob," I asked, jarring him out of his daydream, "exactly which mountains are the ones that are now passing beneath us. I was just sort of curious."

Bob started fishing through his maps. "Damn," he thought, "when am I going to get this thing computerized?" Then he would have to do even less flying, leaving most of it up to the computer, which would be all the more nice.

"They look like the Himalayas to me," Bob finally answered. Of course, the Himalayas. I should have known.

Bob looked back through his windows, taking little notice of a small black speck on the horizon.

"Bob?"

"Yeah."

"Just what exactly are we doing in the Himalayas? I don't mean to say that there is anything wrong with them; of course I'm not in much of a position to make any kind of judgement, seeing as I've never been to the Himalayas before."

The speck was growing.

"I don't know, I've just always wanted to see the Himalayas. Kind of pretty, aren't they?"

Just then Bob announced that there was a call for me on his radio, and had it put through to my phone.
"Hello, Ian? This is your father."
"Dad? Didn't I just see you die the other day?"
"No, someone apparently tripped the cord on the heart monitor. They say I'll be better in a few days. I want my map back."
"Sorry, Dad, not today. Gotta go." I hung up.

V. Intermezzo

There once was a lively plankton named Buford. He was a typical plankton, living his life drifting with the currents, feeding on bacteria, and reading his lessons and doing daily homework. However, something was troubling him today, something he had just read. His lesson dealt with the continuing cycles of feeding: how smaller things got eaten by bigger things, and they in turn get eaten by bigger things, and so on. What he wanted to know was this: "Why? Why life and death? What's it all about?"

Then suddenly, as he was swimming along with a million or so of his closest friends, it hit him.
"I've got it!" Buford cried.
"What's your problem?" asked his friend Buford. (Plankton are not very intelligent; Buford is the only name they know. Of course, they usually don't have very much trouble when naming babies.)

Buford then went on to explain to his friends that he had just figured out why they were here, what the meaning of life is, and why some people laugh when other people pass gas.
"Tell us, tell us!" the knowledge-thirsty plankton then asked, but Buford would not.
"If I tell you, then you will go about claiming that you figured it out, and I won't get the credit," retorted Buford. The other plankton pleaded, and swore to him that they would tell everyone that Buford thought it up. If they would all split up and tell everyone whom they met about the meaning of life, word would be spread much faster and the world would be a much better place to live in now that all life forms would know why they're here. Also, they pointed out, what if he would forget? Plankton don't have very good memories.
"No, no," Buford declared. "If anyone will tell it to the world, I will, because I thought it up. Now, we must go and find Tom Brokaw."

So Buford and his friends went out in search of Tom Brokaw, so everyone who watches NBC Nightly News would know why they're here on Earth, what life is all about, and why people laugh when other people pass gas, so the world would then be an overall nicer place to live in.

Swimming lazily along came a blue whale whose name was Reginald (not all whales are named Reginald; some are named Oswald), who was busy wondering why life was so boring. He yawned in weariness, accidentally swallowing Buford and his friends.

That was a story that Dad used to tell me when I was young.

Dad was an unusual person.

VI. Cockroaches Revisited

Somewhere in Czechoslovakia, the fourth through the ninth dimensions, who had been wound up in a tight little ball since the beginning of life, decided to unwind themselves and see what what life was like. By chance, they unwound on a cockroach. It was somewhat lucky for this cockroach, because he was just about to be squashed by the rocker of an old rocking chair; then again, it was somewhat unlucky for him, because although he was zapped out from under the chair, he was zapped back 30,000 feet above the Himalayan Mountains. The cockroach had no idea what was going on, except that he had just become very cold.

VII. Exit Bob

At that point we heard an explosion, the type of explosion that is usually heard when an airplane engine blows, and the plane started to dive.

"What exactly was that?: In inquired.
"Sounds like we blew our left engine," Bob answered.
"Don't we have a right engine?"
He paused to read his instruments. "Doesn't look like it. Damn, should've had that checked out before I took off, that's been giving me trouble for the last few flights. I suppose we'll have to bail out."

He tossed me a parachute and we got ready to jump. I hoped that he had these checked out before he took off.

What caused the little incident was this: The cockroach that had just been transported to somewhere 30,000 feet above the Himalayas had just been sucked into our left engine. This would normally have caused no problem, except that this particular cockroach had been feeding on enormous amounts of nitroglycerine, which it had found in the laboratory of a man named Ivan, who happened to be trying to find a cure for cancer, and who also was the owner of the rocking chair.

We bailed out. I had never used a parachute before, but I probably would have enjoyed it if it weren't for the sub-zero temperatures that I was free-falling through. Obviously Bob had never used a parachute before either, because instead of pulling his rip cord he pulled on the belt that held the chute to his body, which then glided away from him and ended up landing on and killing some poor Hindu who was on a pilgrimage to Mount Kallas.

Poor son-of-a-bitch. It would be a rough landing without a parachute. But then he just disappeared, and I never heard from him again, that is, until about twenty years later. Bob reappeared again, under the rocker of Ivan's rocking chair, and ended up with a broken foot. This began a strange chain of events in which Bob started working for Ivan, and, twenty years later, found the cure for cancer and became rich and famous and the world's biggest celebrity, until he died in a plane crash due to engine failure.

I made a rather hard landing on a rock ledge about halfway up one of the mountains, and was knocked unconscious for quite a while. I was then awakened by the roar of a jet engine, and as I looked up and foolishly tried to wave them down, I saw something coming down towards me. I dodged to get out of the way of this object which seemed to have a growing passion to meet with the ground, and barely avoided that which I then had realized was a purse.
Deciding not to listen to whoever it was that said you should never look in a woman's purse, I opened it. I found out that it was Edith Baxter's purse, and that Edith used Tampax. I also found a Duracell flashlight (with new batteries), and a strikingly familiar looking map of the underground tunnels of the Himalayas.

I pondered over what to do for a while, looked at the map to find the entrance to the caverns, and turned around and saw a cave.

VIII. De. Re Underground Caverns and The Like

The next two or so years of my life passed rather uneventfully, except that they were living hell. Not until I got myself quite deeply into the caverns did I realize that a corner had been torn off the map, and I quickly got lost. As for what I did about food and warmth, there were enough edible plants growing down there to keep myself alive, and there was also an underground stream which provided water, along with strange-looking fish to eat. Fortunately the temperature usually was comfortable, and rarely dipped below about 50 degrees.

About halfway through my first year I came upon a monkey who seemed about as lost as I was, and who soon became my constant companion. It's a good thing for that, because I would have lost any sanity I had previously laid claim to if I hadn't had somebody to talk to. After about a year we had some interesting conversations going on about the meaning of life, digital watches, and other related topics.

It soon got to the point at which I had no idea if it was day or night. This came about because of an interesting encounter with a school of plankton:

As Nemo (my friend the monkey) and I were fishing one day, a school of plankton swam up to us.

"Er, could you please direct us to the place where we could find Tom Brokaw," asked one of them, whose name I ascertained to be Buford.

"I don't even know where I am; how could I tell you how to find Tom Brokaw? Anyway, what do you want to talk to him for?" I voiced.
"We are the only survivors of the Great Whale Swallow generations ago, and are destined to reveal to all forms of life the reason for existence," voiced another. Needless to say, he was also known as "Buford."

Now this was getting interesting. "And what is the reason for our existence," I queried.

They then all formed a huddle, and whispered among themselves for a few seconds. Buford then came forward. "We can't say," he declared.

"Why not?"

"Um, well, we forgot what it is."

They all started to mill around. "I don't think he ever told us," cried one voice from the group. another yelled, "Didn't it have something to do with digital watches?"

Then there was a great clamor, arising from the shouts of the plankton, which included "yes," "I think so," "maybe," and "you're screwed," followed by the hoard of plankton crawling up my wrist and removing my watch. I really don't know they unfastened the clasp, but I really didn't care, seeing as by then I couldn't care less what time it was, anyway.

They played around with the watch for awhile and pushed all of the buttons, until they were aroused by a certain sound. The sound came from me; that day I had been eating a ceratin type of fish which frequently made me flatulent, and just then I let loose some gas.

Immediately they all began to laugh hysterically, and kept on laughing. Even Nemo was on the floor. They were still giggling among themselves as they went swimming down the stream with my watch.

IX. Tampons, and Their Significance To Me.

As the end of my second year of wandering was drawing to a close, I was hit by a stroke of luck. Being in an extreme state of boredom, I decided to read the directions that came with the Tampax's; I had already read that ridiculous romance novel I found in Edith's purse 16 times. As I pulled out the directions, a small corner of paper dropped out. There was a phone number written on it; I almost threw it away, but noticed what was on the other side.
In a matter of about five days I made the journey that I had been trying to do for two years. If I had only been more curious about tampons I probably would have saved a lot of time.

Now I was getting closer. As I wearily trudged through the labyrinthine caverns, I checked my map. It wouldn't be long.

As I came up to the entrance to the goal of my journey, I noticed that it started to get brighter inside the caves. The walls gave off an eerie glow as if there were fluorescent lights placed behind the walls, which I now noticed were becoming more and more crystalline. This must be it, I thought in anticipation, as I clicked off my flashlight, which had been in use since I found the purse. If I would ever make it back to the real world, I would know what kind of batteries to buy.

I stepped up to the entrance, and looked out. I looked out as far as I could see, straining my eyes in the process. The interior of the cavern was more immense than I had ever dreamed; it must have been the size of a small city. I could barely make out the wall opposite me. As for the top of the cave, it was as tall as the cavern was wide. My eyes followed the roof from the entrance where I walked into it, as it curved upwards like a huge dome. Everything was crystal. The whole place was sparkling in not only white, but all shades of every color in the spectrum. I think there were even a few that weren't in the spectrum. I could not believe that I had actually found it, what no other human has set eyes on...

"May I see your pass, sir?"

I had not even heard a human being speak for so long; it took me awhile to figure out what that bizarre sound was.

"Sir, may I see your pass?" the voice droned again. He then asked Nemo for his pass.

I finally pulled my eyes away from the hypnotic effect of the crystals, and looked towards the origin of the voice. On the way down I noticed something very familiar.

"What...what the hell is that?!" I stammered.

"It's a McDonald's, sir, that's where you can eat if you get hungry. Don't you recognize the 'M'? But if you don't like that, there's always Wendy's, or..."
"What's it doing here?" I said, as I started to notice all of the neon signs decorating the eateries. I also recognized some other signs. They said, "Caesar's Palace," and "Wanda's Massage Parlor," and "Go-Go Strippers Galore."

"To eat at, sir," he again whined. "Now can I see your pass?"

Pass? What pass?

"Pass, what pass?" I then said out loud, figuring that he couldn't read my mind.

He then explained to me that I should have bought a pass at the door, and then when I responded with something to the effect of "What door?", he went to get his superior. Meanwhile, I gazed at what I believed to be my cavern, watching the thousands of people wandering all over in this underground city. Intricate webs of tracks for what I later found out to be electric-powered trains joined the buildings with the neon signs together. I saw unhappy faces leaving the casinos. I saw happy ones leaving the places with the signs that said, "Wanda's Massage Parlor."

"Which entrance did you come in, sir?" asked the manager, who had just walked up and tapped me on the shoulder.

"That one right there," I replied as I pointed to my cave.

"Didn't you take the subway?" he asked. I later found out that it was only a fifteen minute subway ride from Central Park to here. The ticket fare was a little steep, but then again, there's no plankton to tie you up on the way. When I replied that I didn't even know what he was talking about, he asked, "Then how did you get in here?"

I showed him my map, and explained to him the experiences leading up to my arrival here.

He laughed. I asked him what was so funny. Then he laughed harder. He laughed so hard he started crying. He fell to the floor in his amusement, which looked much like an ice-skating rink I used to pay a quarter to get into when I was young, and laughed so hard that it was starting to annoy me. I decided to give him a good swift kick in the head, which instantly killed him.

A justifiable kick, I might add.
X. Denouement

I then decided to lose myself in the crowd, seeing as people were starting to gather around the now dead imbecile. As I walked down the city streets, I heard a phone ring. Looking around, I noticed it was a nearby pay phone. Faced with the dilemma about what to do in a bizarre situation such as this, I thought about the events in the last two years of my life, and decided to do the only reasonable thing.

I answered it.

"Uh, hello?"

"Yeah, Ian, this is your father. I thought I might find you here. I lost my calendar; I was just wondering if you remember when Mother's birthday is. I know it's coming up soon, but I can't quite remember which day."

Of course, it was Dad. I should have known. "The sixth, Dad. By the way, would you happen to know how my business is going?"

"Business?"

"My daily business, Dad."

"Oh yes. It's fine."

"I just wanted to know if anyone is wondering where I am."

"Not that I know of. Most of them think you're still out on coffee break."

A reassuring thought. Our conversation soon drew to a close, and I decided to jump on the subway to get back to the real world. However, the ticket seller would not accept pound notes. He did tell me, though, that he would accept a digital watch with an alarm and hourly chime.

Joel Firehammer