

## SUPERFLUOUS MAN

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I HAD A year-long hangover from using lighted dollar bills to make the sizzle and snap on folded aluminum foil. I burned the money for the Man, if I denied him, I'd be free from him. He always said I was nothing without cake in my pocket. So I stole a danish from the coffee-shop around the corner. But I only did that a few times. I felt too guilty, even though I gained the approval of Beef-Stew and Meg by sticking it to the Man. American Puritanism was a stain that even years of brain washing couldn't get clean. Besides, I preferred a real breakfast over sugary pastry.

But what I knew was the truth—spending a dollar just contributed to the demise of the planet. Bartering with goods and services was the new way, the old way, a righteous excuse to support our religion of cynical disbelief. We were poor and quoted passages of “The Illuminatus!” from memory. We contended that we had no need for a monetary system that wasn't based on flax. After turning in empty bottles and cans in exchange for drugs, we used whatever money we had left to light our glass cigars. Better that than being fucking frugal, sniveling with our have-not-ness, buying the cheap noodles and rough paper napkins to wipe our asses. Once our money was ash, our buzz was at its peak, so who the hell gave a fuck that we were now broke and that we'd soon be strung from here to here?

“I'm goddamn Jackson!” Beef-Stew said. In his crooked, stained teeth he held the sawed-off, hollowed-out, ass-end of a Bic pen.

“Jackson isn't on the thirty-dollar bill,” I told him.

“Oh yeah, right. Listen to you. Only a capitalist pig would bother knowing that,” Meg said.

She was heartless and cruel and covered in tattoos that she hadn't paid for. She didn't believe in such things.

But I was ready to believe in anything. I loved her. We sat around and smoked cigarettes and prayed for a class struggle. Nobody really wanted a war, but it was coming, and it was obviously for everyone's own good. Until the pig blood spilt, I had Meg. Meg had a body that was

divine, tits that seemed impossible, she was a perfectly proportioned petite package of pleasure.

Only I didn't get much of it.

She didn't believe in that either.

“The smoke from burning money is toxic,” Beef-Stew said. “Hahaha . . . they put raisins and cyanide in the paper.” He took a long drag. “Ahhh, I'm not dead, but I am dying. Watch me.”

Christ, he was stupid! Everybody knew that the American dollar wasn't made out of paper, but from the dead, dry skins of former congressmen. It didn't burn like paper, it didn't burn like anything. It smoldered, sadly as if in the middle of some painful catharsis.

“Hmphft,” she said, cooking up a new solution that would surely solve everything.

Eventually, there would be no more cotton to suck or razors to lick, and Beef-Stew would crawl onto the couch and pull a ratty blanket over his head and lie very still. On a pile of pillows on the floor, Meg would pass out underneath me as if that was supposed to stop me. It was easier than asking for what I needed. Those kind of demands were putting an unsustainable burden on society at large.

But I did need things. Love, well, yeah. Food and clothing being others. I wasn't cut out for the constant contempt of the anarchist lifestyle. And it was all or nothing with those people, mostly a lot of nothing.

The first step I took was to sober up. There was no earth-shattering scenario, no OD to scare me straight. I just stopped. I stopped for the same reason I started, because there were no reasons, and it was something different to do. We did heroin and speed and coke because we wanted to go deaf, because we thought we should be persecuted, but we had everything going for us.

Me, I was a college graduate and was white and a man. I came from a family that hadn't asked for much and didn't get it. They didn't complain. I was encouraged to see it that way. To stop thinking about life as something I was owed and more like something I needed to pay back.

So I looked for a job. It was that or Jesus.

I was hired on as a prep cook at a newly renovated restaurant downtown. They had done a good job with it, local reviews were promising. The guy who hired me, Al, was a domed-head, pointy-nosed, jittery dude. Later, after I had quit, or been fired, I got in a fight with his girlfriend and smashed up her car. Even later still, I heard from a friend that Al had burned the place down hoping to cash in on the insurance money. He was doing five to ten in Chino, his girlfriend was pregnant.

The restaurant was small and there were only six employees. I was introduced all around. Jack was the waiter. When he wasn't working he could be found at the Elks Club slouched over a beer staring at the TV, breaking promises he'd made to himself the night before. Cindy was the waitress, and she was from New York and automatically knew everything. A pair of half brothers were the dishwashers, and then there was the chef, John, a hulking, hunched-mass-of-a-guy who struck me as the type who subsisted on a tiny, weathered sailboat out in the old marina. He seemed like he was doomed to end up somewhere damp.

John appeared to be in his mid forties, he had a head like a rugby ball standing on end. In the corners of his lips was white, cakey mouth foam. He and Al were friends from their high school days, addressing each other through conversations they had started years ago, denying the fact that they had nothing more to say.

Al kept saying, "Jesus, he looks good, doesn't he? John, you look great. I can't believe it. You shudda seen him before, oh my gawd, shee-it... but now look at him! Doesn't he look great?"

"You know you're in trouble when you can't see your dick," John said twitching his shoulders and rubbing his fingers like he had crumbs on them.

"Whaddya mean? Now?"

"No, then. That's why this," John said holding his arms out doing a slow, pathetic pirouette. His face breakdanced through a series of robotic lip curls.

"I can't believe it. Remember Julie and the Camero? When we hit the telephone pole and the airbag went off, that was how fat you were. Now? Fuck, forgettaboutit. That means, god, you look good. Doesn't he?"

I nodded, sweating profusely. Was this part of the interview?

"I was in the back seat, you ever been in the back of one of those things? It wasn't my fault they were tiny," John said.

Al continued smiling, "What's the secret? What's that diet called?"

We all knew what that diet was called. The one I was trying to get off of. The one that didn't make anyone look

good unless looking good meant sloughs of pale skin rolls that your bones shook in.

We all went into the kitchen. Al asked John for how many more days he was going to be sleeping in the office.

"It's hard to say," he told him.

"Well, I guess that's OK," then he turned to me, "Listen to him, he's your boss now."

John was eager to teach me everything he knew about the culinary arts.

"It's good to know a trade," he said, rubbing his face. "That way you can get a job no matter where life takes you. You know what I mean? Sure you do, you're young. But let's hold on that thought, I need to shave."

I didn't bother saying that I had plenty of education. I wanted to be dispensable. My fortitude was unclear at that moment. I mean, I feared the space between seconds, the infinities I could get lost in if I weren't very, very careful. Each tick of the clock brought about a rebirth of consciousness in which an awkward miscarriage of confusion reigned until the long, skinny hand once again came to rest. Responsibility was an idea I couldn't fathom. I couldn't expect anything more of myself than a breath or a heartbeat. And here I was with an opportunity. And even peeling potatoes and tossing lettuce and wiping the rims of plates with a wet towel were opportunities of some sort. Half of success is, after all, ninety percent opportunity. Ask anyone. They'll tell you.

One of my duties at closing time was to mop out the bathroom and collect all the dirty linens in a garbage bag while Al and John hung out in the kitchen drinking cooking wine and smoking cigarettes.

One night I popped into the kitchen to say I was done and was going home so goodnight, but it was just John in the kitchen. He was shadowing a saucepan, tenderly stirring its contents.

Suddenly, I felt a swelling of admiration for this cheap stooge whose highest aspirations were for pornography and bullshitting. Basically my philosophy is that people are shit. However, contrary to most who hold this opinion, their shittiness isn't inherent. It comes from a general lack of passion for anything, including their own lives. So when I saw John at the stove, like he was birthing his own son, I had to stop and take notice.

He had me pull out a sheet pan and lay parchment paper on it.

"What's that smell?" I asked.

He didn't look up.

"It's making me dizzy."

"It'll do more than that, brother," he said, pouring out a yellowish paste onto the sheet pan.

"Now we'll just wait 'til this cools down, boy, and then

have us something.”

“Is that . . .”

“Yeah,” he said.

I became very angry. Why someone would want to waste perfectly good cocaine on that shit was beyond me. I mean, yeah, speed kills, but this stuff would really kill you damn dead.

But I wasn't one to talk anyone out of the dangers of anything. I was the person who wafted encouragement, “Well, chances are you'll probably make it through with only a minor criminal record, some missing teeth, and a debilitating sense of paranoia.”

Because I was too cool to say what I really felt. I knew you could never make it through it. I knew you could never make it through it because the world was populated by people like me who were too lazy to reach out to a fellow man. There was a reason that the circle is the most basic shape in the universe. And John Lennon could say all he wanted about instant karma and have millions of drooling idiots ready to suck his dick because he happened to notice the cyclical nature of things and put it into a pop song. I failed when I thought I didn't have to justify my own self-righteousness. When I couldn't possibly care about the rest of the world because I was too busy babying myself.

And so I didn't say anything. I left him that night and went back to my stupid house. And within a short period of time I had left my house, my girl, and that job in favor of others, no less shitty, but less so. I set about trying to rebuild and relearn all the things I'd destroyed and forgotten.

Years later, I was driving my car down U.S. 1 on a day thrown over the coast like a wet canvas tarp. I pulled up to a traffic light at Princeton-by-the-Sea, right in front of an old, pissed-out harbor where the remnants of a fishing fleet shuddered and lurched against a god who found pleasure in lingering destruction. As they banged into their moorings, tiny bits of paint flecked off into the ocean from the broken bows like millions of pleading messages from desert islands. I was about ready to give up, renege, believe in only disbelief, but who the fuck did I see crossing the street, heading out towards a sailboat, a gaunt ghost ship hunched over his own cowering soul?

What goes around does not come around. It's us that does the going, baby.