

Bliss

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The glass of whisky on the nightstand rarely helped. There were too many coarse strands of memory preventing sleep from becoming comfortable, blissful, oblivious. Oblivion would be nice.

To be cleansed would be nicer. He often dreamt of taking a firehose to his ear and flush away the bad memories that haunt him. Like a whiff of burnt wood reminding him of a blazing fireplace, the smell of a thought would transport him to a memory he'd rather forget. Denial he managed, like taking bad thoughts and stuffing them in a sock drawer to ignore. Or shoving them under the bed. But denial soon fills the sock drawer till it can no longer close. Denial collects too many dust bunnies that at night transform into monsters crouching under your mattress.

On the other side of the hallway, he still can see the crack in the doorjamb when he kicked the door in after his daughter slammed it on him.

He'll hear on Netflix a comedian cursing and he'll whirl back into the whiff of time when he yelled a profanity from the stands at a referee during a basketball game, trying to impress those fellows who weren't his friends to begin with.

Reckless days those days. Younger, he nearly blinded his best friend, them horsing around in the elementary school by the metal fence. He pulled on a loose bar until he couldn't hold it any longer and it sprang back only to strike his friend, Mike, between his temple and left eye.

Then there's the smudge he smudged discreetly where he dinged a car door in the parking lot, convincing himself it wasn't by him.

Or the regret over telling two parents during a frustrating parent-teacher conference that their daughter was either lazy or stupid.

He couldn't fathom where from his youth he suffered a haunting apprehension that he may have killed someone unknowingly. He almost did one Mischief Night. It was a clever prank on his buddy. He snuck up to the front door and tied a fishing line onto a bell they had

attached to the door frame. He ran the line out to the neighbor's bushes where they hid and pulled on the line. Ding ding. Ding ding. Someone came to the door but shut it when they saw no one was there. Ding ding. Ding ding. They rang it for an hour until the figure at the door refused to appear. Come next morning, his Dad asked him about his friend's grandmother. The ambulance came for her late last night. A heart attack, evidently.

Denial itself denies the freedom from the anguish. He wants to be rid of them completely. If you cannot paint over the stain, let it be gouged out and spackled.

"Rinse my brain, please," he pleads silently to the silent gods at night, sipping another sip.

The small lies. The failures to step up when he should have stepped up. The inappropriate jokes. The anger. The pride. The lack of generosity. The assumptions.

Some people with more glaring sins might scoff at what he's desperate to forget, but those with graver sins likely lack the remorse he feels. Perhaps their brains lack the storage capacity he does. It's not as if he's a bad man. His life resembles more a statement followed by a comma and that spoiling-all-too-honest conjunction. The shoe will drop. Most view him as a good man. He doesn't always attend church as regularly as his wife would like, but he's devoted to his students in the Middle School. He even likes teaching Middle Schoolers over teenagers. They're caught in that crazy paradox between the mystical stuffed animal delight that comes with childhood and the desperate neediness of critical teenagers. But, despite his fondness for them, he hadn't always been the best for them. It's not even that he has disappointed them – a few could have cared less, schools tend toward low expectations – but, he's disappointed himself.

"Will no one rid me of these turbulent memories? Where can I find the bliss of forgetfulness? Oh, to cleanse this meddlesome brain! Forgiveness won't cut it – I want them flushed, gone, banished. Fools say: "Forgive and forget. Fact is, if you have the forget you won't need the forgive. Oblivion would be better, kinder. A firehose in my ear would be better." He drained his glass and placed it beside his glasses on the nightstand. The TV comedian began his monologue.

Something soft curled up on his pillow.

"I give you what you want," said the yellow elephant with fluffy orange ears that had once been his daughter's favorite friend. Friend? Is that accurate? No, to children and their magic, these friends are more a witch's familiar. "But beware," elephant continued, "Once you awaken I also will show you yourself."

The elephant leaned over on the pillow and spew water into his ear. He felt his bad memories dissolving. He smiled as he finally got his wish. The cleansing. He sighed as he fell back to sleep. Sweet forgetfulness came upon him.

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"Honey, wake up. You'll be late for school," said his wife.

"It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter. It's not that important."

"Don't be ridiculous. What do you want for breakfast?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Stop that."

"Okay, if you wish. I'll have some toast."

"Are you feeling ill?"

"No, just content. All's well with the world."

"Well, maybe with you but I've got to get to work too."

"If you say so."

It was the same at school. He did exactly what was expected and disappointed them all. He was completely compliant, completely indifferent, completely unruffled by any antics of the kids. Even the kids eventually found him so boring in class they drifted into their own compliance and gave up bothering.

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"What happened to me?" he asked the elephant that night after his wife had fallen asleep and the elephant appeared again on his pillow.

"Simple: you became what you wanted. You banished yourself. You became contented entirely with yourself. No frustrations, no sorrows, no suffering, no sadness, no mistakes. Also then, no passion, no drive, no hope. You washed away yourself and become a hapless, dull dolt. You do realize there are too many of them in the world today. You humans do keep us stuffed animals very busy."

The elephant stared at him. "Did you like fully liking yourself free of the bad and sad memories?"

"No."

"Do you wish for me to cleanse you of the cleansing?"

"Yes, please, please."

The elephant leaned forward, raised his trunk, and sang softly into his ear:

Grieve those bereft of the virtue of discontentment.
The initial stirrings of wanting change,
wanting something better,
awakened to be something better.
Loving yourself and liking yourself aren't the same

Grieve those bereft of the virtue of disillusionment.
Realizing what you thought were the answers weren't...
questioning the conventional,
questioning yourself,
even disliking bits of yourself if you're observant.

Grieve, O best beloved, those bereft of the gift of dissatisfaction.
Blessed holy restlessness, discomfiture, so true
To erase your bad memories, erases also the good,
erasing who you have become today, that's the clue
The fortunate admit them, transform them,
making you more human than inhuman.
Remember, name them instead of letting them name you.

He flapped his orange ears and wiggled his trunk. "We elephants are wise, are we not?"

The yellow elephant with the fluffy orange ears placed his trunk against his ear and this time, inhaled.

The man, feeling restless, fought going to sleep.

"Speaking of names, I must ask you one thing," he said to the elephant. "I know my daughter called you by your family name, Elly, but like the Practical Cats, do you too have a secret name?"

“We do. All do. Toys, cats, all creatures, sometimes dogs, nations too, although nations try to dismiss the notion, like people. Nations, busy with their own self-absorbed denial, think themselves exempt. Even you have a secret name, as someday you may discover. For my fancy name, you may know me as Never Forget, but, as you must realize, I am obliged to keep my deep and inscrutable and singular name to myself. Good night and sweet dreams.”

Ode on Melancholy

BY JOHN KEATS

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.