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The Writer Next Door Mon voisin l'écrivain Mi vecino el escritor



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B. E. Hopkins

Excerpt from the novel

Translated from the Gibberish

With a bit of effort, Daniel managed to make it to his feet and stumble to the corner. He had decided to walk to the Rocks to think, to absorb this moment and to contemplate its repercussions. He nearly fell flat on his back attempting a bell-kick.

'I'm drunk!' he shouted. 'God help me, I'm drunk!'

A veil of trees obscured the view of the valley below as Daniel inched his way toward the Rocks. He could hear voices from farther up the hill. 'Who's that?' one asked.

When he arrived, three shapes were perched on the Rocks. 'Hey, man,' another said. 'That you, Daniel?' asked a third.

'Adam?'

'Yeah. Come on up!' Daniel grasped Adam's hand. Across the street there was a gap in the trees. Lipping the rim of the rock, Daniel could see the lights of the town below.

'What are you doing?' Adam asked. 'Where is everybody?'

'I don't know. Who's up here?'

'Josh, Randy, and me. Are you drunk?'

'A little.'

'So, anyhow,' said Josh. 'As I was saying: It's after class and I'm talking to the professor, and I tell him the problem I had with his lecture ...'

As Josh continued, Adam leaned closer to Daniel. 'Josh here was just regaling us with a marvelous little anecdote about one of his *college* courses. Some very exciting stuff about something he called ... "metaphysics", I believe, was the word he used.' He pretended to hold up a microphone: 'Let's listen in ...'

'How do we know, for example,' Josh was saying, 'that there really is something – waves, for example, or particles even ... *gravitons* – keeping us on the ground? Newton never defined gravity beyond a *tendency* of objects to attract. We may have elaborated on this with Einsteinian physics and quantum mechanics, et cetera, but we have yet to explain the *force* behind the attraction. Forget gravity, what about *time*? Is time, for example, an immutable law governing the universe, or are we a necessary part of the whole equation – in our role as *observers*? What is it to *become*? Are there events and progressions? When is something *more* or *less* than it was, or what it will be? For example, when precisely does a seed stop being a seed and begin to be an oak?' Josh looked at each of them in turn. 'Potential? Actualization? Form? Design? Cosmogony, cosmology, ontology, entelechy, entropy? Here? There? Who? Am? What? Was? Is? Will be? Why?'

'Yes, Josh,' Adam said with an exasperated sigh. 'Why? Why, every time I see you, do you go on these tirades? What was it last weekend? Something about "Why

must I eat?" Rub chin, rub chin. "How do I know if I don't eat, I will die?" By cock and balls, you'd think one year of junior-college philosophy made you Socrates!

Josh laughed, wagging his head. 'Watch, I can see *you* – a tab, and a half-hour later, the conversation we'd be having!'

Randy looked puzzled, shaken – disturbed even. He nodded. 'What if nothing's real?' he asked, gazing up at the night sky. 'What if this is all something I made up? And you're all part of my imagination –'

'Holy sausage,' said Adam. 'Here comes another one!'

'Or what if I'm really somewhere *else*,' Randy went on, 'tripping my balls off, imagining *this*'?

'Tripping that you're tripping ...' Josh pondered, rubbing his thin, pointed goatee. They fell silent a moment.

'We're all alone, you know,' said Josh then – distantly, as though he were contributing to a different conversation. 'Each of us.' He lit a cigarette and leaned back. Each time Josh took a drag, Daniel could almost make out the faces of the other young men staring blankly. Josh continued: "'The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena,'" says Huxley.' He paused. 'But "they are crucified alone."'

Daniel sat up straighter. This was the one part of Huxley that had so thrilled him he'd memorized it. "'Embraced, the lovers desperately try to infuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence, in vain.'" He noted how the cherry of Josh's cigarette bobbed in the darkness before it flared again.

'Guess he never met the right girl,' said Adam.

'Whether solipsists or not,' Josh continued, oblivious to Adam's comment, 'we are doomed to suffer and enjoy alone.'

'*And a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries ...*' sang Adam. 'But what about enjoying other people's suffering? Or suffering their enjoyment? Take me, for example: By my pubes, I swear I've got carpal tunnel syndrome from frigging my girlfriend off.' He flexed his hand and offered them his fingertips to smell, waving them away as they went to whiff. 'It's worse than Nintendo thumb!'

'Why the hell don't you just have sex?' Randy asked.

'Because' – now Adam humbled a bit – 'honestly, it freaks me out.'

They gasped. *This* from the man who had managed (miraculously!) to acquaint himself intimately with Allison Hull and Mariah Semper in the same evening, and while he was a freshman yet? He who had wrested from quaint Sammy Slather, the seventeen-year-old virgin Homecoming Queen, her innocence, and who, moreover, had had the temerity to deflower her in the basement of her father's home? Of everyone at the party that night, Adam's catalogue of renowned sexual feats was rivaled only by the legendary prowess of their host MacGill, whose acute satyriasis and well-known cunning acts of cunnilingus were an inspiration to the teenage men of this and five neighboring counties.

Adam continued with an explanation: 'Because every time we do it, she misses her period and we wonder "Are we pregnant?" and "Do we make an appointment?" and "What will our parents say?" and I worry about what we'll do. I mean, her mother gets pregnant if you sit next to her on the couch. Anyway, it's just not worth it. I mean, it is, but it isn't – so we don't.'

Adam surveyed the shock on their faces, then broke the pregnant pause, shouting: 'Call me "The Reverend Adam Wyckoff, unholy celibate and masturbating

infidel extraordinaire!" Besides, it's like my Uncle Yahweh used to say: "Vimmen are shpareribs." And she wants me to give her another bone? I think not!" He chuckled, but then his face darkened. 'Put away your pity for me. It's really not so bad. The trick is, boys, you have to treat yourself. Wine and dine yourself, as it were – build up some anticipation. See, you start out with the Sears catalogue, browse the fall fashion section before moving on to ladies' hosiery and underwear. Then proceed to Victoria's Secret and get an eyeful of some fancy lingerie. Finally, move on to *Playboy*. By balls, I swear in the end you'll feel like you just had a date with a supermodel.'

'So what's the deal then?' Josh asked. 'Sex aside, are you guys still tight?'

'*She's* very tight ...' Pause for laughter. 'Hell, tonight I'm a bit tight ... Daniel's already admitted *he's* a little tight.' Adam paused again to ham it up. 'But what is "tight", you know? I mean: No, not at all. But whatever ...'

The others sighed collectively as though they were watching a burning byre with Adam, his spear-shaft and his shield on his chest, drifting out and away upon the whale-road, ne'er again to go a-viking.

'What a serious discussion about my sex life we're having!' said Adam (from Valhalla). 'What the hell were we talking about before?'

'Solipsism ...' Daniel reminded them.

'Oh, yes!' Adam sighed. 'So, anyhow, back to my shitty sex life ...'

But they fell silent. A strong breeze stirred, and they shivered.

'Winter's comin',' Adam observed matter-of-factly.

'I'm startin' to feel it,' Randy murmured, bringing his legs up to his chest.

'Oh, I've been feeling it for a while,' Josh said.

'Got a light?' Adam asked, pulling a cigarette from his pack. Josh hummed and lit Adam's cigarette. The flame on his lighter was so high it nearly singed Adam's eyebrows.

'Jesus, ever think of turning that down?'

'It's a personal trademark,' Josh replied.

'It's a fire hazard,' said Adam.

Another period of silence.

'All right,' said Adam all of a sudden. 'Somebody tell me. What the fuck is "solipsism"?''

Josh proceeded with an explanation, and the argument began anew. After a lengthy digression, another salvo of Josh's not-quite-Socratic philosophical inquiries, they returned to the topic of the force that attracts.

'But undoubtedly,' Adam said, shaking his head, 'gravity *does* exist. I mean, here we are – here on the Rocks, *not* floating off into space. Josh, you make it sound so complicated, like it's magic or something, without looking at the simple fact that we are sitting here, now, held down by it, whatever *it* is. And what does it matter? One day, I'm sure, we'll figure out *what* it is, *how* it works, and what to call whatever the thing is that makes it work.'

'The Cartesian in me wants to agree with you –' Josh began.

'See!' Adam interrupted. 'You're doing it again! Dragging in your pack of philosophical catchphrases to make everything more complex than it is. Look: Here is the rock, here is me – on the rock. Thank you!'

'But don't you see, you're oversimplifying it! Your unfounded faith in science –'

'Yes, science! Science it is. I wouldn't call faith in science unfounded. If anything, my parents dragging me to church on Sunday, in my opinion, is unfounded. Your mumbo-jumbo, abacadabra crap is, in my opinion, unfounded. What is founded is my ass on this rock! Science is the religion of today, Josh. Everyone seems to know this except for you and your nineteen-year-old junior-college philosophy types.'

'I'm not even talking about religion!' Josh napped. 'All I'm saying is that science is *grounded* in philosophy, and I'm asking "how" the same way a scientist does. But what you fail to see is that science has limitations that pure philosophy – thinking and arguing – can go beyond. And since you brought it up, *religion* can also explore things that science can't. What does science really have to say about our connection to the universe – I mean our *relationship* with the universe? Science can't explain away the fact that humans universally, culturally speaking, participate in a supernatural, mysterious – *whatever* – simply by denying it. What about art or emotion or beauty? What can science *really* say about them?'

'Plenty!' Adam returned. 'Ever heard of psychology? Anthropology? And what does religion have to say about art, anyhow, except that images are bad?'

'*Christianity* says that,' Josh interjected. 'But then we must ask *why* does Christianity say that images are bad? That seems to me to be more a question for a philosopher or theologian than a scientist.'

'Call a frickin' sociologist!' Adam barked.

'Call an artist,' said Daniel.

Randy, who had been paying close attention all along, chimed in with: 'If science is grounded in philosophy, what can philosophy come up with that science can't?'

'Thank you!' Adam cheered.

Josh thought a moment before proceeding. 'It's just ... Science refuses to see its shortcomings. The fact of the matter is, just as Adam said, science is the modern-day religion of the industrialized world. For most people, a priest or a minister is there for a type of metaphysical comfort – a kind of "just in case it's true", that they keep around to ease a lingering superstitious fear of all things beyond comprehension.'

'Stop dodging, already!' Adam jeered.

'It requires the same amount of faith that religion used to. Everyone who doesn't understand science, the people who don't understand the specifics – like the formulas, for example, or the concepts – take it on faith that these scientists, these priests of science, are right. I don't see too much of a difference between scientists of today and the pharaohs of ancient Egypt!'

Adam harrumphed. 'Talk about oversimplification!'

'If it was announced tomorrow that scientists had discovered that the theory of natural selection was wrong, and that animals actually mutate based on some type of instinctual impulse, and the news reported that this had been agreed upon by all the big guys of science – wouldn't we all accept the fact? Wouldn't all of us then be taught what was completely false yesterday?'

'But that's not going to happen, is it?' Adam said.

'Probably not ... But the point is' – Josh rubbed his chin once more and lit another cigarette – 'we would have to accept it. For me, the charm of philosophy is that it doesn't presume too much. I believe in an absolute – I have faith in it,

whether I call it God or something else – but I don't see anything absolute in the proclamations of science. There's more going on in the universe than science can show. I'm convinced of it!

'Well, Jesus loves you for it,' Adam said. Josh sighed and took a deep drag off his cigarette.

Randy's attention had waned, and now he was gazing down absently at his hand, which he waved back and forth every second or so. The others watched him for a moment, then Josh waved his lit cigarette back and forth through the air between himself and Randy. 'Whoa!' Randy muttered.

'I believe in fun,' said Adam. 'I believe in a good time. I believe in girls.' The others hummed their assent. 'You know, I guess I believe in a lot of things. But I believe in the world. I imagine I don't know too much about what's beyond it – you know, I can't say for sure about all that. But I think that's magic enough. For me, at least. The world is magic enough for me without any explanations ...'

They sat still for a moment.

'What do you believe in, Randy?' Josh asked finally, just as interested now as his companion in the floating red dot he continued to push through the darkness.

'I believe ...' Randy replied slowly, 'that I ... that I'm *totally* fucked up ...'

'Daniel, you've been quiet awhile,' Adam said. 'What are you thinking about? What do you believe in?'

Daniel felt himself sinking into his drunken state, and he spoke slowly and deliberately. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm not sure. But I wonder ... I wonder, is all. I mean, I don't have a religion or anything. I wasn't brought up anything, and in a way I kind of miss that. I wonder what it all is, what it's all about, where we're going ...' He stopped a moment to think. 'I guess I believe in what Josh was talking about earlier: attraction. It all comes down to that – gravity, strong and weak nuclear forces, chemical bonds, relationships. Everything's based on that. Life demands so much attraction. So I guess the only thing I truly believe in is attraction ... I'm not sure what it means, but I have faith in beauty.'

'What do you mean?' Josh asked. 'In beauty as God or a reflection of God, or what?'

'As a thing, but not a *reflection*. As something – maybe something almost magic, I don't know.' Daniel paused, his thoughts carrying him away from the others. 'Like primitive man in awe of ...' he began. Then: 'And I wonder about the force of her.'

'Her?' asked Adam.

'I mean *it*.'

Josh posed the question again: 'What is the force of it? Is it universal? Is it just relative? Is it a harmony of elements, form, function, or a representation of –'

'No, no, no!' Adam shouted. He stared at Daniel, comprehension smoldering in his eyes. 'None of that! He doesn't mean *that*! Do you, Daniel?'

'I suppose not,' Daniel said, trying to find the words. 'It's not the *how* of it. I don't care about aesthetics, really. It's the *the*-ness. Or, no. Better: the *it*-ness of beauty. The individuality of it. Yes, the *radiance* of it, but more than that!'

'What?' Josh asked. 'Do you mean the femininity of it? The eternal feminine in art? Love?' Josh continued with another catalogue of questions and concepts. Listening to him made Daniel feel even drunker. He hung his head between his

legs, tired and dizzy, and when he could take no more of Josh's philosophical divagations he raised his head.

'No! All that's bullshit. Don't – don't sex it. I'm not talking about a concept or a form or an image. It's something much, much simpler. Beauty is just ... beauty. It's the unity of it. The lifeness of it – the *experience* of it. The radiance of everything seeming to come together, or actually coming together, all at once, in one spot of space and time, in *now* – in a woman, or a sunset, or a moment. It's the universality of it contradicted by the brevity of it. Not that it's male or female, but that it's both at once – all things, at once! Beauty, not as a woman, but as a hermaphrodite.'

Josh said nothing.

'Nyaaaa!' Daniel drawled with a long laugh, and none of them was quite sure what he meant by it.

Again, they were quiet.

Daniel drifted away in a smile, sinking back now into his thoughts. He imagined Laura, at her house, reading the fifteen sonnets he had just given her, and he repeated in his head what he had written, mumbling his favorite lines softly. In his drunken fever, he felt invigorated, as though he had been initiated into a new rite of life. Again, he looked down at the town, the starry night reflected in the brimming bowl below. The wind bore up to him the soft sounds of slumber, and he seemed to soar above the lights upon the viewless wings of Poesy. He hovered in anticipation of an omen, half-expecting the lights below to jump up like cannon fire or meteors heedless of the law of gravity. They're mine, those lights! he thought – and attempting a swifter conjecture, he leaned and reached out his hand to grasp them.

He slipped and, falling from the Rocks, heard the cries of the others above him like a distant *frater ave atque vale* – downward-plunging into darkness, forever down and down, until he landed dully on the dewy grass.

'Jesus, man!' Randy gasped in fright. 'You see that, man? I mean, did you *see* that?'

'*Wha? Wha?*' Josh whispered, suddenly tense, looking all around.

Randy started laughing maniacally now above Daniel, rambling to Josh about what he'd seen. Daniel, below, was laughing softly, too, as Adam swooped down from the Rocks.

'Daniel, are you all right?' Adam asked, stooping to help him.

Daniel tried to stop, to catch his breath and say he was fine. He gave up and lay back a moment in the grass, enjoying the cool dew on his hot nape. Adam grabbed Daniel's arm and made him sit up, and Daniel, with a sort of madness in his eyes, whispered to him: '*I did it! I gave them to her. O, I did! Shit, I gave them to her ...*' He paused a moment, almost worried, then laughed again silently. Adam laughed with him and crouched low next to him on the lawn, and they laughed and laughed.

(Unpublished, 2008)