

Some Minor Boundaries of Faith

(And I mean *faith* in the *good faith/bad faith* sort of way, not *faith* in the religious sense of the word. At least for the most part.)

Anyway, I leave work after a long and debaucherous on-site wedding. Vows were exchanged, moves were busted, and one particularly voracious bridesmaid wound up in the hospital. Someone told me that she took downers and then drank heavily on an empty stomach. Someone else told me that her busty faux-blonde sister flirted with the sexy fireman taking her vitals.

All of it made for a classic wedding, and everyone left happy—except, perhaps, that one voracious bridesmaid in the hospital. But it was a job well-done, and I always feel good after a job well-done. It allows me to believe that my current station isn't entirely meaningless. And yet, as invigorating as these event shifts are, they also deplete my reserves of social energy. Keeping the party going for eight consecutive hours is a lot of work, and that's not even to mention the plaguing questions of etiquette, such as whether I'm supposed to clap when everyone else claps, or if the aforementioned busty faux-blonde sister noticed me glancing at her chest.

After it all, I'm somehow both exhausted and wired; jittery and sore. Now it's my turn for a drink. I pop by Atlas to visit William, the best cocktail bartender this side of town. The spirit of the preceding shift inspires me to ask him for a fun, party-girl-style shooter.

Beer too? he asks.

You betcha, I click and shoot finger guns.

He ducks behind the well and pours me a bottled Coors Banquet in a chilled pint glass, careful to stretch the 12 ounces such that the head just reaches the brim. For the shooter, I'm expecting some sort of Cosmopolitan shot, or maybe a Bee's Knees riff. But instead, William brings me a neat pour of Booker's. As a premium cask-strength bourbon, Booker's is pulled straight from the barrel, sees no dilution, and is usually bottled somewhere around 130 proof. That means it's 65% alcohol.

Dude, I say, *I think we know different party girls.*

I knock it back regardless, and all at once. The shot's brash intensity smacks me around a bit until a full body and lingering complexities catch up to mellow everything out. I've had enough big bourbons in my life to taste past the burn, and like what this one has to say. I don't even make a face.

Hell yeah, says William.

We chat about whiskey and work and this and that as I sip on my Coors until a bit past midnight. But then I note the hour, and not wanting to overstay the welcome I have likely already overstayed, drop a couple bills and dip out the back, homeward via Robertson St.

Across the dim lot, some dude in a wheelchair passes at a snail's pace. *Got any change, brother?* he asks, his rickety wheels in vague search of purchase against the coarse pavement.

Change? I ask. *It looks like you need a change of tires!* He laughs. *Can I give you a hand and push for a bit?* I ask, unsure if the question is totally uncouth. It probably is. I'm certainly not drunk, but that boilermaker put me in just such a place where I only think twice before asking.

Well, that would be a big help, he says. I realize my offer before I process my commitment, but what the hell; why not. Saddling up, I begin pushing him past the stinking trash bins outside Tom Robinson's fish market.

Which way you going? I ask.

Up to Merritt, he answers, *towards the hospital.* I'm not sure I follow, as Merritt Mill only runs parallel to the general area of the hospital. It's certainly in the right direction, but a weird way of putting any of it. Maybe there's a Merritt St. or Merritt Blvd. closer to campus. Maybe he means Merritt's, the sandwich shop. Maybe he's got somewhere to be down there that's simply closer—in absolute terms—to the hospital. Who knows.

Well, I can't take you all the way there, I tell him, wherever there may be. *But I'd be glad to push for a bit,* I say as we set our feet and wheels east on the Libba Cotten Bike Path.

So what have you been up to this evening? I ask.

Had a few beers at Steel String with a girl I'm seeing. It didn't go great, he says as we round the first bend. *I guess she doesn't want to date a cripple.*

His bluntness forces a laugh that I fail to hold back. *Women,* I say in clumsy recovery, *...they always find a reason.*

We get to the first course of inset railway tracks and I instruct him to hold on tight, pushing forward and downward on his chair with near-equal force. The first bump goes fine, but our shared loss of momentum causes the second to buck him a bit. The fear strikes me that I'm gonna push this guy over like splat, but he just laughs, braced hard in an upright position, totally in spite of my best efforts. Were I a more savvy man, I'd have leaned him back on a wheelie and cruised over the minor hurdle with cool swift grace. But I'm not that savvy. Maybe next time.

Sorry, he says, *it's a pretty flimsy wheelchair. I'm sitting on plywood.*

I trudge firm against the ramshackle weight of it all. *I can tell. Where'd you get this thing anyway?*

I did what I could with what was around. I'm only supposed to be in it for eight weeks, he says. *But boy, an electric wheelchair sounds nice right about now.* I don't even bother to consider asking him how he got there. Of course it's better that I don't ask, but I've been trying to be more generous with my listening recently. I would have preferred my tact to have been a conscious decision.

Past the first set of tracks, my pants start slipping down, so I free my right hand to dance myself back into place. The left hand—now applying an asymmetric force upon a single corner of the wheelchair—veers the gentleman on an off-course trajectory, rightward towards the grassy

threshold. Once more, I fear I'm gonna push him over like splat, but at the last second, I manage to return the waist of my pants to my actual waist, and return my hand to the handle, just in time to guide him safely back centered on the path.

Hey man, I explain, I forgot to wear a belt today, so I'm gonna have to pull my pants up every now and then. I lost some weight recently, a good portion of which was ass.

I've got a belt, he offers.

Given the boilermaker, I somehow fail to question the following extremely questionable words out of my mouth: *the fuck you need a belt for in a wheelchair!?*

He lets off a hearty laugh—thank God. Then he asks me if there's anywhere around here that a guy can get a bag of chips.

Well, there's the Murder Mart, but that's up on Franklin; pretty far out of the way... and probably closing soon. Bummed, he accepts the lay of the land as I see it. Sure, we probably could have made it if we took Brewer Ln. to the main drag and then hopped over to Rosemary. But that would mean doubling back now, and then again later. It just didn't make a lot of sense to me.

Let me know if you need to take a break, he says softly.

No break needed, I insist as I hike up my once-skinny jeans. But, uh, what do you do for work?

Machine stuff. I make sure everything's running right.

I think about it for a second and wonder aloud, does everything run right?

Sometimes. What about you?

I figured my sloppily cuffed black dress shirt would have given me away, but evidently not. I suppose he never got a good look at me initially, and I've been entirely behind him for the past several minutes. Plus it's dark. And he had a few beers at Steel String.

I do restaurant stuff. Bartending. Making drinks, you know. It pays the bills, I say, nearly ashamed but unsure why.

Hey man, he assures me, it's work.

What's your name, by the way?

Dale, he says. And yours?

A pleasure to meet you, Dale. My name is Ben.

Nice to meet you too, he calls back to me.

Our voices startle a possum up ahead, which scurries away beneath a warped chain link fence. *Look at that!* says Dale. *He's a fat one. If I had my shooter, I bet I could knock him clean out! I hear they taste good.*

I've never had one, I say, but I suppose there are worse things in the world.

Dale shakes his head. *Not for me. They feed on garbage and shit. Can't be good eating.* I think about it for a second, and figure he's probably right, but also remember too that I eat pork and shellfish, which are certainly just as grotesque in their gastronomical proclivities.

It's the little hands that freak me out, I say. They look too human.

I realize, at this moment and with moderate shame, that I'm going to write about this whole experience.

My buddy Stephan is always going on about this Kantian notion of treating people as ends in themselves rather than means to an end. It's a notion I've decided to strive towards, mostly because Stephan is better at moral philosophy than I am. He even studied it in school. But it all makes me wonder why I make my decisions, and if I ever subconsciously intend on another end through people, even if I don't mean to. Or, worse yet, if I have no end in mind but find one to pursue along the way, and then pursue it in spite of my awareness. I wonder if everyone can see right through me, even if I'm not so sure I can see through myself. I pull up my pants.

Around another bend we approach the bike path's mouth, returning to civilization. *Alright, cool if I let you off at the stoplight?* I ask, gesturing to where ours meets S. Merritt Mill.

That's great, Dale insists. We cross another set of rails and go through the rigamarole again: the first bump is fine, the second is nearly splat, he laughs, and I pull up my pants. I kick myself for failing to do the savvy thing this time too.

You were going this way anyways, right? he asks as we reach the intersection.

Yeah, more or less, I lie, lacking the conviction to sway either of us.

In the yellow glow of the stoplight streetlamps, I ask Dale if he wants me to take him over the crosswalk to W. Cameron proper. He declines.

Merritt is all downhill, he says; *I just gotta watch the brakes.* That's enough for me. I center his chair and get down to business.

Alright, one more matter: you were asking for change, I say as I pull out a wad of cash tips from the evening's service to search for a bill. All I find is singles. *Where the hell did all my cash go?* I ask aloud.

Did you drink it all? he asks.

Not yet, I don't think, I joke. I eventually cull a twenty and hand it to him.

You sure, brother? he asks.

Of course. It was a good night at work.

He thanks me, *this is enough for breakfast and lunch!* I wonder what he'll do for dinner.

God bless you, he says as we part.

God bless you as well, I respond, unsure what I mean or have ever meant by those words. Who am I to receive a blessing? I'm doing fine. I've got cash for the night, plus a strong back. My tribulations are relatively minor, really, in the grand scheme of things. I've even lost weight recently. But moreover, who the hell am I to bless anyone? And on the Big Guy Upstairs' behalf, no less! It all renders me somewhat uncomfortable, so I pull my headphones into place to queue up some sad songs. That's when Dale calls out to me again.

You're a good dude, he shouts, silhouetted by the streetlamp and dimmed by my dirty glasses.

I don't know about all that, I retort as I twist back down the bike path, forgetting entirely to shake his hand and pulling my pants up instead.