

Daphne and Derek

as written by

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a work of fiction

for instance, Daphne's real name is Darla, but I changed it to Daphne throughout, so no one would be able to know who Darla was, but don't think you know to which Darla this story relates, because I craftily changed Darla's name from Delilah when no one was looking, er, that is to say from Dotty, Darlene, or perhaps even Dietrich... Or maybe we should just say a Daphne called by any other name would likely not turn around as quickly when addressed and leave it at that.

as to Derek, fuck Derek, like I'd give him the honor, of using his real name and as for me, myself, and I, well, anyone who has ever met me, right away, they can tell, I do not even come close, to the lies that I tell

or you know, the names have been changed, and all the rest of the usual disclaimers.

###

*While traveling through
The Trickster's domain,
It's best to remember...*

What?

*It's all just a game?
The poor boy's insane?
Or, perhaps, some other,
Equally witty refrain...*

#

Despite the title, this little yarn is not about Daphne... nor is it about Derek. True, I knew them both, back in the day, as we all went to high school together. And though it shouldn't be surprising, what with the reunion approaching and all, but when I received that note in the post, well, I was... yes, I was indeed, surprised, suspicious, aroused, all of that, and so much more; but seriously, none of that matters, not right now.

#

Derek is walking down the street, a city street, small town, urban center, towards the local cinema, a small movie theater, single picture show, they do art films there, these days, whatever that means, with a small stage up front, roll up the screen, rent out the hall, Sunday morning, church; Wednesday afternoon, local investor club; and the Saturday Matinee tends to be a play by the local theatrical production company, amateurs, the lot, but fun once you get past the edges and look at it the right way, into its heart, as an exercise in existentialism and an escape from the norm, for audience and actor alike. If I had to guess, they probably did *The Important of Being Earnest* last week; and so that, most likely, means something more along the lines of a post-modern-isticly pre-cryptic-al epic today.

Derek is forty, nearing fifty, not looking a day over sixty, maybe seventy five; he's fat, heavy set, doesn't really care how he looks, no designer clothes for him, he's wearing jeans today, an ill fitting suit sometimes, for work;

at work, it's low level tech, pencils and paper, dab of oil, in the nitty-gritty with a screen over there, so they've got that hands-on geek-aesthetic thing going, he knows all about the *Maker's Manifesto*, lives by its creed; and as such, his collection of inanely witty t-shirts has gotten way out of hand.

Derek cuts across the street, lazily, no cars in sight, he wears a ten-year-old windbreaker, not quite threadbare, as protection against the cold, autumnal air. The ground is wet. There's mist in the air. He sports a beard, more because it's a hassle to shave than anything else, and what else... oh, he likely gets his hair cut once every three, maybe four months, whether it needs it or not, so, you know, random kicking of the man, poor slob, when he's down.

But whatever.

At the theater, if you'll remember, we're going to the theater, there is a girl, working the old time ticket booth, out front. Yes, let's look at that girl: Daphne, his wife, could be his wife, from so long ago, what she was, yes, what she was in her youth, he smiles... or does he, such frustration, two, three feet away, might as well be all eternity, between him and that glass, photograph mirror, so really, what else is there to do but for Derek to buy his ticket, in cash; but as he walks inside, he sees the same girl, again, behind the concession booth, I guess she's got legs, this girl, and can run, moving so fast.

Derek fancies popcorn, extra butter, if I remember correctly, a coke, no diet soda for him, and some kind of candy, but what to get, can't decide, I can't decide, I, yes, I, *your humble narrator*, cannot... do you remember that line?

Well, I, *your humble narrator*, very much enjoyed a subway ride, upon my, how shall we say, return, yes, return from adventure, in the wee early hours of the morning, and this man, this delightful black man, is that PC, correct, I mean, it is correct, accurate, he was black, but to say it, mention it, point out that he screamed blackness, the ghetto, a whole different sort of class, and for breakfast, before work, or was that a court summons he held in his hands, twitching, unfolding, studying, reading the details, the date, carefully folding it back up, as he switched pockets and proceeded to count the vast quantity of bills that he carried about, so perhaps, he was going to pay for a friend, bail out of jail, but of course, if there was an important point to this aside, it was that he was carrying a vast quantity of bills and that he wanted me to know that he was carrying a vast quantity of bills, don't ask me why, we were strangers, never talked, never met, just eyes glancing, crossing, yes, I am counting the bills, along with you, how could I not, and him smiling, pushing the wad back, and pulling out, for breakfast, he proceeded to pop JuJu Drops for the rest of our ride, journey together, through the dark tunnels, it would be poetic to say something... like into the light. But this man, this character, switched around, seeing beyond, twisting his likeness, his memory, his fate, he became *Sir Francis Drake* who became *Carmel Pops* who in this short, some might say senseless aside, as my mind wanders, and I stare into that case, that candy case, staring at the candy, in front of my eyes, and that girl standing, there, have I mentioned that candy, her eyes, a wad of bills in my hand, what would I buy... or better yet, what could I share with her, in this moment, just a moment, how can you pick up a

girl in a moment, reach out and touch, a girl in this moment, lifting her up, so she can see what it would be like, to leave it all... and travel, *The Roads So Much Less Traveled*, alone, with me.

#

I liked *Lemon Heads*, back in the day, don't ask me why, and a *Bit o' Honey*, they lasted so long, so without the slightest care or clue as to what Derek would chose, that's what he'll buy, or I'll buy, whatever, as he, him, I, we walk into the auditorium, no straggling, no wait, no enjoying the posters on the wall or the advertising bill, informing of the performance to be shown, on this date, right now, starting up next.

#

We are in the auditorium now, you, me, him... me, she, him... him, me, you; something like that; mixing it up, obviously, all for one and one for all...

Derek pops his JuJu Drops, yes, I already forgot what he bought, it doesn't matter, never look back, that's my motto; and Derek, he's impatient, waiting for the show to begin, when is this thing going to start. And as often as not, the theater is empty except for him; but then, a private performance is almost always the best kind... but is it the best kind... and is this that kind?

In moments, the lights dim, I like that moment in time, when the lights dim, a narrator voice over booms from the speakers, sound stage... but then, I don't like loud noises or

speakers, so, rather, instead, imagine me saying, ‘I don’t like that,’ yes, a human voice from somewhere, in the mists, hidden offstage, ‘But a statement like that always begs the question, what do I like?’

#

We are at that point in the story, where it is appropriate for it to wrap around into a play, a theatrical production, monologue, a girl, center stage; but she is an old woman, now, well, oldish, I guess, Derek’s age, his wife, they met long ago, high school, perhaps a title character, but really, who knows, Derek and her had known each other for years, and this being what, the twenty, twenty fifth, what year reunion is this, I forget, I don’t care, the point is, they’ve grown old together, next to each other, with each other, and as Derek watches, eating his popcorn, now, hot buttered salty perfection, fuck them JuJu Drops, don’t even know what I was thinking, when I said that, back then, what a senseless aside, while Derek having better things to do, throws a defective kernel at the seats towards the front, passing the time, if only there were someone else there, sitting in front, someone to aim at, and as his wife takes the stage, does he even notice, can you see this scene playing itself out, at the dinner table, every night, Daphne, the wife, might as well be alone, husband a million miles away, thinking of work, the big game, some girl he saw earlier, that very same day, walking down the street... or a check-out girl, candy-counter dream, and back here, on the theatrical stage, at the dinner table, up on the stage, life on display, she is, she will be, she will always

be... solitary, alone, trying to make small talk, chat it up, but about what, to who, and what does this trivia matter, there is no *hook*... and what does that mean, hook, does the word even have any meaning, to you, so a hook, a connection, a desire to meet, somewhere in the middle, that grappling, that hook, yes, there must always be that kind of hook... but Derek doesn't see the hook, the why of it all, why he should listen or care, so maybe there is no hook, maybe it's not there; but then, maybe, just maybe, its not he, she is seeking to snare.

Of course, the *why's* and the *wherefores* don't really matter, they stopped mattering long ago, one can do the soliloquy, play to the crowd, but for only so long, and in time, even the crowd doesn't matter, no, it doesn't matter, exit scene one, the dinner table disappears, raised to the rafters, low budget set, black with white lights, spotlight on Daphne, center stage, and she starts to dance, Daphne starts to dance, it's the dance of the old, the older, you know, those yoga classes, take it slow, limber up, reclaim one's youth, for who, for what, the only answer anywhere, ever, can only be self.

But whatever, she dances. She dances for self. Now, I don't have a problem watching Daphne dance... oh, and the critics rave, *I don't have a problem watching Daphne dance*, a critical review, no, yes, there is something there, what man cares for an older woman's dance, there, there it is, the nail on the head, cruel, unkind, but so true, it's like that old joke about *Playboy*, do you remember *Playboy*, and the insistence by fools that they read it for the articles? Well, it's true, the only reason to read *Playboy*, now, and forever was the articles, have you not seen what they've got

on the Net... perhaps Derek could show you, yes, I think maybe Derek could show you, what they've got on that Net...

But that's not the point, fuck Derek, the dance is the point, I can see the modern interpretation, jazz, freeform, and the days, months, perhaps even years in the studio, practicing, 'I always wanted to be a ballerina, so one day, I stopped wanting,' and here it is, years later, community theater, not even close to a sold out crowd, but it might as well be Carnegie Hall, because it is the dance, the dancing that matters, alone on the stage, share with the crowd, the dance, the dance, pirouette, twirl, up on tip toes, do you see the dance, can you feel the dance, can you see the fog machines fire up, curl in the smoke, from somewhere off stage, dancing, she dances, I remember a dance, when she danced, how she danced, receding further and further, backwards in time, to who, I would like to dance with, oh, yes, even further than that, so much further than that, yes, once again, perhaps Derek could show you, so much further, so much more on the Net...

###

Do you remember? Daphne? Can I call you Daphne? Do you remember? Daphne? Up there, on stage, of course, you remember, dancing this way and that, the scenery slowly falling into place, in filtered white light, upon that backdrop of endless black, and here, into this, the bookshelves slowly descend, held up by wires, at the corners, you can see them if you look, I, myself, can never help, but to look, and the bookcases, they fall, one after the

other, until we, yes we, are in a library, at the library, still on stage, with no one else here, OK, maybe a cut-out, librarian, cardboard in the corner, and you dancing, around, I remember you, the you I wish to remember, long beautiful hair, how long would it need to grow to fall backwards in time, into what you once were, the body of youth, alive, energy, when all the world was new, and new to discover, I loved the library, loved books, loved that I would see you there, it was easy to write you into my books, then, now, this day and that, can you see me around the corner, like something out of the *Nutcracker Suite*, they must have made a porno of that one by now, though, to be honest, I don't know the plot, either, both, so I might have it wrong, but no matter, back then, at the library, you at the center, center stage, object of desire, my desire, that is the plot, the plot, we must have a plot, and that is my desire, made manifest, whole, you dancing, not a care in the world, as you flip through the books, this book, that, read, toss away, flip, turn the page, and me, edging ever closer, can you see me edging ever closer, do you see me edging ever closer, till the next book you want, to read, is the one I hold, in my hand, word on the page...

#

We met in a library. Do you remember that? Did you think it was luck, fate, or did you see me coming, planning for weeks, edging ever closer, gathering the courage...

Up on stage, we are dancing together now, books tossed aside, the library shelves floating, up into space, do you remember that first conversation, *Plato's Ethics*, the

substance of thought... or do I jump ahead and was that on some *Midsummer's Eve*, some further divide...

No matter.

On the stage a streetlight floats down, small town, that's where we're from, small town, center street, downtown, on the main, theater just a few blocks away, it's snowing, forget the stage, this is the real, it's snowing, late at night, that deep dark, post twilight, during a storm, a blizzard, all the town closed, library closed, walking you home, the crunch of the snow, on our boots, tennis shoes, mine at least, if I were to look down, at yours, you'd be wearing highly insensible heels, lace up black boots, perhaps speckled in purple and green, the type an Elvin Princess might wear, perhaps just like a princess, you know, perhaps, just maybe, like one, I used to know...

But we were talking of snow, the soft crunch, the silence, voices, our voices, echoing off the storefronts, abandoned buildings, a world of silence, and the lights glowing like wonder, snowflakes, as to insects, on a *Midsummer's Eve*, but softer, colder... but, dare I say it, in a way warmer, than that world, in a way, more benign.

And with that, little mystery, snow still hanging in air, we shall leave the main street, taking the side road, I wanted to walk through the forest, well, by the forest, by the old road; lie in the snow, making snow angels, hands cold, do you remember those cold hands, icy cold, nearly frozen, almost numb, my hands in yours, well that won't do, cold as they are, frozen through and through, so in armpits, that's the way to do it, yours, mine, but still... it was the first time my hands were ever in another girls pants, her pockets, I can't honestly remember if my hands

ever went into another guy's pockets, in all the years of my youth, it would have seemed... so gay, so very gay, but, eh, if your hands are cold, fearing frostbite, if one fell in the river, what would a Boy Scout do, but into the pockets, your own, another, I remember that, do you remember that, my hands barely fitting, like a dare, it was your idea, I wonder if your hands were getting warmer, mine weren't, halfway in, hands just as cold, colder by the second, the minute, could have been hours, but I couldn't take them out, away, I wouldn't take them out, away, frozen in time, it's times like that I remember, if I could go back, change things, change time... then I would not be the man I am today.

'This isn't working.'

Those were your words not mine.

###

But for me, in that moment, there, yes, there was something more, I could see the more, on the horizon, I could see the future edging closer, but only in the abstract, sure, there is a next step, but this is this step, here, now, hands still in your pockets, not groping, not reaching, not searching, not fending off cold, just being, being enough, and never wanting that moment to end, progress, fade into the future, or decay to the past, but still, can you hear it, I can hear it.

'This isn't working.'

Those were your words not mine.

###

Do you remember summer? I remember summer, I have mentioned the summer, *Midsummer's Eve*, I am leading to that, but before that, still after that, first kiss, cold lips on mine, shivering night, your asking me, if I was ever going to kiss you, and though the thought had crossed my mind, the possibility had not, but still, we kissed, in the cold, under the light, cold lips, snow on your face, dancing in hair, lips, so cold, nose, so frozen, skin, turned to ice, but such a warm mouth, your tongue, I remember that tongue, weird touching tongues, and the inevitable discussion about kissing, was it good, but the answer was simple and remains to the day, it was a kiss, with you, how could it not be good, and the seasons passed, winter to spring to summer, I remember, do you remember that we are heading towards summer, that summer, of our innocence, my innocence of youth. I prefer to remember a time when I would have believed... in your innocence, I don't know that I do, not anymore.

But whatever, never mind

###

Do you remember that summer, lying in a hammock, rocking back and forth, I think there might have been a third, there, at the start, heck, maybe Derek, maybe another, a third wheel, leaving, leaving us alone, to rock back and forth, I don't even think we were lying in the same direction, your foot, my head, my head, your toe, so really, no kiss, no footsy, no hands in the pants, deep pockets, seeking fast, just lying next to each other, all alone, no

stage, the stage is so far away, not even part of this story, not anymore, just you and me in the backyard, rocking back and forth, and the mosquitoes, I am not stupid, not blind, and I remember the mosquitoes, the zits, the childish imperfections, and in that hammock, on that hammock, rocking back and forth, I remember the mosquitoes, getting bit, being bit, in this moment, do you feel the sensation, knowing that a mosquito, a vampire, is sucking you dry, maybe that's what I've become, do you feel that, I wonder, an emotional vampire, perhaps that's what I've become, infected with a need, to torment, suss out, control, but long ago, so long ago, in that moment, I would have endured a thousand mosquitoes bites just to lie there, another moment, with you, only you, talking about... whatever, maybe Plato, maybe this was where Plato arrives, platonic lovers, enjoying the sun, the summer shade, the gentle rock, words like a kiss, gentle voice, of a lover.

I think we must have talked about philosophy, the real things, the sweet things, of this world... and that.

#

And then, I went far-far away.

#

Yes, I went away, far-far away.

It was simple. It was easy.

Did I want a wife? No. A family? No. A job? A career? Both, double no. So many things I did not want?

Even you? Of this, one cannot know, not even now, what I felt, certainly not then.

Whatever.

It matters not.

I went away, to college, to school, ok, yes, I came back for that break, the one they give you, after boot camp, oh, I am a master, what a subtle shift, but, yes, after boot camp, and then I went away, further and farther than far-far away...

#

Could you follow?

Can you follow?

Even today, not many know of the way...

#

Let's transition back to *The Summer*. A moment ago, I was talking of *The Summer*. What does *The Summer* mean to you, think on it, remember it, feel it, can you feel it on your back, see it in your eyes, or better yet, taste it on your lips?

For me, *The Summer* means June.

That was her name, June. Have you ever been to *The Realms*? Do you believe in *The Realms*? Honestly, I don't know that I believe in *The Realms*. I did my twenty years, to the day, and I once asked, so now I answer, why is it now, and only now, that you write, or more exactly, why, after all these years, am I, suddenly, in a place to receive? Clearly because, now, only now, am I back, among the

living, returned from the dead, how could it ever have been, otherwise, *The Realms, Gone South, and Far Overseas*, an army of one, intent on killing, the self... and all the other unfortunates, who happen to share my own name, or you know, perhaps one is more comfortable with:

I have no recollection.

Nor if I had any recollection...

It's nonsense, of course, but a nonsense that rings so very true, to me, feels so very real, for me, the only serious question being, what sort of memories did they put in their blood-killing place... and why are there so many books focused on the *Boundary* dropping these days, if the *Boundary* didn't drop, and would there not be so very many books to write, to cover, to overwrite, to discredit, to disguise what the others would say, unless there was something, something very secret, that they, indeed, had to say...

Unless of course, Science Fiction is more your thing, so once again, right from the top, alien artifact, invasion, expeditionary force, sent off, sent back... which would, of course, just make the *Fantasy Realms* so much the cover, the lie, the deception, I mean, we can't scare the public, with an imminent Klick'it invasion, for that would unwind the day to day, and the whole world, the whole system, would unravel, and collapse on itself, so erase the memories, curate the memories, mold and change the memories, but then, I think they made that into a movie, so even in my dementia, my recovery, the ineffectiveness of the treatment shines through, and yet I still, remain a prisoner... doing my time, in my own mind, in my own way.

Do you follow?

Can you follow?

Is there anything to follow, chart the course, go again, but for the world, to visit once more...

I was there, I don't care if you believe me, to believe is not the point; but suspension of disbelief, to join me in the moment, and after a while it doesn't matter, you can play this role or that, so let me insist, I was there, and together, we can once more go hither and gone, and it is *Summer*, and it is June and...

Have you ever partied through June, the month, no not through, but with, embraced, to touch her, step into her soul, I was there, with her, that hot summer, that hot summer sun, middle of a forest, oh, raging out of my mind, so there's the out, drug induced, so much simpler than some science fiction memory drop, but whatever, the how's not the point, it's the when and the where that matter... and not just the once... but still, in that single, mystical moment, when the Earth comes alive, I was passed out cold, ants crawling in my pants, in my pants, so used to ants in my pants, so dirty, so alive, so one with the dirt, a mere human, a human, can you see her wonder, her delight, to the festival, this day, middle of June, soon we all, all of us will die, all of us, only some of us, of them, are more keenly aware, the little ones, fairies, this day, maybe next, that's all they have, and with 24 hours notice, they have no need for a philosophy, a higher agenda, you brought some wine, a question, maybe more, a hopeful inquiry, if so, come, join the party, and dance, I shall dance, will you dance, now, with me, alone in the woods, have you ever danced, alone in the woods, bottle or pills or smoke in the hand, and at the

end, tired, stand still, paralyzed, stop, behold, mind frozen in wonder; and it will land, alight, The World, on your shoulder, fingertip, extended, such beauty, it will simply come, to you, explore, that which is you, the whole, entire World, at your fingers, merest command.

They took me to their queen, led me by hand, like something from out of a dream, was it a dream, but I can tell this world from that, it was no dream, there was no grey confusion, I could do math, 'Why do you look at your hand?' Old trick, hands of the clock, so I showed her the watch, we talked, we drank, I cannot begin to tell you of that moment, or perhaps, I already have, have you ever just laid in a hammock where you would have done anything, alighted under a lamp post in winter where for just one second more, anything, any price, for just one second more, and her name was June, she crawled under me, into me, on top of me, such love, can I ever describe, I don't like that crap about transcendence, 'I could never describe, words do not describe,' then shut the fuck up, give me the soap box, and I'll try to describe.

She looked like you, Daphne. Only more so, if you were perfect, are you perfect, do you think yourself perfect, standing next to her, you would not, could not, nor can any man, not I, but it was your touch, your soul, your eyes like the watering pools, the depths of a waterfall, where that liquid embrace comes from, where it goes, and I've lost it, that moment... in time, gone, from so long ago.

###

June was the queen of the fairies, forest incarnate, I loved her, that's really all I can say, and being a man, she loved me in my own way, details, I suppose, you'd have to drink so much... of anything, everything, every pill, bottle, container, not caring, see, there's the out, high as a kite, blown totally, out of his mind, couldn't tell night from day... but I could?

#

Have you ever had the pleasure of a Succubae? Oh, yes, the boy is out of his gourd, but tell me, have you? Have you had the dream? A thousand points of light, all focused on one, at that moment of ecstasy, time standing still, completely, utterly, still, and the needs, reality, pulling apart, the shaking, it's intense, you know you're being pulled apart, or at least, I knew, my body somewhere lost in the depths of time, was shaking, sweating, all in that moment, rigid, all points erect, to the point of self destruction, spasm leg, clenched fist, but not caring, only... wanting more.

The best fucking thing in the goddamn world and it wasn't of this world...

June was like that... how does that commercial go? Like a warm summer breeze, crystal spring water, her kiss, so complete, her friends, so delightful, her love... everything I have ever wanted... to have and to hold.

She asked me, this emissary of the elves, Fantasy Forces, expeditionary mission, Diplomat to the Damned and Demented, some government job, some core (or should that be corp.), and she asked me, this elf, this lovely, this

being, what I missed most from my land, my country, you know, this place, here, reality, where I am from, and why I must return, and not stay, you know, like forever, in her embrace, and in answer, to this question, the query, it was easy, oh, so easy, in that moment, to look into her eyes:

I would have revealed anything.

I'm sure I revealed everything.

But what was there to reveal?

'Nothing.'

There was absolutely nothing, no one, no thing, nothing, nowhere, none whatsoever that I would willingly go back for, to leave that place, and not spend one more moment in time.

And in there, somewhere, but right there, smack dab at the top, forefront and center, right in the middle, we have the complete and utter explanation for the lack of a crossover, alien invasion, why the elves have no need to leave their forest nor wish to come here, into our lands, for in our eyes, our hearts, our souls, to a one, not a one, not never, no one us of ever, would in their right minds trade this world for that, our world for theirs, and in that, they know they have the better of it, so why leave, any place, like that...

#

I woke up with a chainsaw in my hand. Well, that would be poetic, a lie, art of the craft, in reality, point of fact, the chainsaws were stacked, placed, discarded, haphazardly, to the side, next to the gallons of gas, pints of oil, sprayed it, all over the land, wine bottles empty, sun

starts to rise, clear day ahead, and time to wake up, start a fire, campfire, camping in the woods, cutting down trees, got to make a living, you know, so make some coffee, make some eggs, time to get ready, for work, just ahead, and in the clearing, camped around, was the great tree, and after talking it over, lighting the smoke, yes, we agreed, all to a one, it was a matter of fact, so what's one to do, I walked away, never looking back...

And if I were making these words up, I'd say I heard her scream in my heart, my head, my soul, as the mighty oak fell, but it was a hickory and in my heart, my head, my soul, I know, she barely felt it, time to close the portal, nothing lost, all is well.

#

We have left the pretense of a theatrical production, a play, long behind, but if we return, it is not hard to see Derek clapping, alone in the audience, unenthused, it's not his type of bit, seriously, 'What the fuck,' but standing, applauding, if that's what it takes, for an encore, for one more... exchange, then why not, string him along.

I do not know Derek, not anymore.

I do not know Daphne, just like I said, not anymore.

Could I see her in June's eyes? Did June see her in mine?

Whatever, logging, clearly, wasn't my thing, but they give you a paycheck when you quit, pretty much any job, pretty much every job, that very same day, and from there, easy enough to put out the thumb and hitchhike away. I felt like I'd made some insight, broken through, seen

something of the other side, that mystical beyond, and walking on payment, that *Graveyard of Death*, it was like walking down the *Necromancer's Dark Highway*, so maybe a bit too much of the Sid, and I needed a break, so where else, but the desert, where there is nothing left to kill, for it is already dead.

#

I chose the high desert, just to get away from the plants, I didn't want to walk on the plants, I didn't want to kill the bugs underneath. So, stop by the store, pick up a bag of rice, oatmeal, all the light weight grains that ferment so easily, so nicely with just a little bit of water, and up into the hills, the high desert, just in from the coast, hotter than shit, I fuck you not, hotter than shit, and I found an old mine, it would be great to say it used to pump silver or gold, but there be copper in them thar hills, half-way up a hill, great place to camp, they'd made a camp there, so it was just me, setting up camp in their old camp, I found the camp first, the obvious, ideal spot to camp, and there it was, the old mine shaft, boarded up, sure, but busted and loose, easy to pry away, remove the loose boards. They drive the mines into the mountains sloping uphill, it's easier to get the ore out that way, everything flows downhill then, on the way out, the water, the tailings, the copper, the ore, and so on and so forth.

I wasn't in any hurry, had all the time in the world, oh, so slow, so cautious, at first, I napped by the opening that first time, escaping the heat of the day, water trickling down my back, it didn't take but a few minutes to drop my

core temperature all the way down, to something more closely resembling normal, back to where I welcomed the heat of the day, but a few days later, I carried in an old pallet, made out of wood, something to keep me elevated, to keep me dry, off the worst of the cold, running water, and every day, every night, sleeping further back, into the hole, ever more, ever deeper, onwards and upwards, up into that hole, but I always felt like it should be down, downward, but, no, it was up, upward, looking out, looking down, the way out was down, so disorienting, so unexpected, and such a straight shaft, laser eye straight, they cut that thing straight, right to the treasure, the heart, that great ore, so no curve, no bend... when I tell folks about this, they always insist the wall must have curved, blocked out the light, but it's surprising how quickly, in a straight line, at the height of the day, the whole world disappears, into the darkest of nights.

Is it hard to imagine me drinking back there, down there, a months supply, I brought a month's supply, went back down the hill, climbing back with more, but other things are easier to carry, lighter in weight than wine, that pack so much more punch than mere wine, lighting the flame, alone in the dark, ashes in the pipe, eyes closed, by touch, no bother wasting the sight, flash would kill what limited sight, alone in the dark, oatmeal cooked at the mouth, brought in, fermented grain does strange things, in its old age, and me, weary, and stupid, and drunk, and full of glee...

It wasn't the stupidest thing I've ever done, no, leaving the elves, the forest, that glen, that was stupider, way stupider, stupider'est, or something like that, and even

there, while there, in the forest, watching another, his intent, to scrape mud from his shoe, with a chainsaw no less, yes, that wound went through... and through... and through, I never saw him again, but it's hard not to see him again, I'll be honest, I try not to see him again, that blood spurting, all over that hill. Still another time, this time, myself, being stupid, stupider, and stupider'est still, at the end of a long hard day, hard work, hard day, sweating, clothes soaked, body depleted, and the mosquitoes, don't even get me started about the mosquitoes, and without thinking, just going to scratch that itch, bringing the ax up in my hand, up to scratch that itch, shiny ax blade, right to my head... how quickly that day, I swung an ax, to scratch an itch in my head.

But even that was perhaps not the stupidest thing, ever I've have done, hitting the wall with that hammer in that mine, yeah, that was stupid, but in the end, only one in a very long list. And even then, long before I took action, I thought hard, I smoked a few pipes, yes, I knew it was stupid, stupider, perhaps stupider'est still, maybe the last in a very long list, but one has to push the limits, their limits, the limits of this world... and that, and this is where they mined, I knew this is where they mined, where it led, it all, the tunnel, my life, this moment, the tools still there, this is where they mined, mined it out, I guess, but I wasn't going to mine, just make a nook for a candle, break a rock loose, it was already loose, they were all, already loose, bad things are coming, when the rocks, that are plural... are already loose.

###

If you were a Dwarf, if Derek were a Dwarf, don't ask me why that needs to be capitalized, Dwarf, not elf, but Dwarf, the Dwarves are proud folk, too easy to slight, even more so than elves, who know their place, awed by the grandeur, the *Light of the Forest*, and all that, the rest, but if you were a Dwarf, and it was time for a break, perhaps, maybe, just maybe, if you were a little bit cold and needed a rest, of course, but of course, you'd cover yourself with a few rocks, boulders, a small bit of dirt.

I was covered with the stuff, dirty throughout, a thousand times more, who else would care, when was the last time I bathed, and covered in dirt, small rocks, maybe more, that's how they found me, I guess, I don't know, they tell me, told me, I woke up in the hall, The Great Hall, isn't that always the way, with Dwarves, what they do, eat and drink and be merry and sing in The Great Hall, and the price, so cheap, so fucking cheap.

I tire of writing, I will not tell you much of the Dwarves, I do not feel like filling great tomes on the Dwarves, suffice to say, they have honor, they have tradition, they have their ways; and at the heart of it all for one such as me, a traveler lost in both time and both space, the most important factoid is that the cost of your stay is always just one drop of gold; and under no circumstances, shall the cost, be it war or strife or what horrors might follow, a single drop more.

###

Drop, Drop, one drop of gold...

Can you hear the rhyme start?

Any good Dwarf, which pretty much means any Dwarf worth his gold, makes his own gold, coinage, heat it up, pour it out, drop by drop by drop, everything costs a drop, pound it into a circle so it's easier to carry, stack them together and wrap them in leather, and when it's time to fight, and very much always with Dwarves it's about time to fight, it just about always the right time to fight, you grab that lot in your hand, the measure of the man, the Dwarf, your net worth, your tie to the clan, and hold on for all... no, not your life, grab hold of all that's worth fighting for, down to the very last drop. May the best Dwarf win and all that schlock.

Or, you know, you could just pay the grimy little fucks, and I say that with all due reverence, you could just pay the little pukes what they want, that bloody drop of gold. How much for a drink? A drop. How much for a meal? A drop. How much for a toke on your pipe? A drop. Well, then, my fine short-bearded stubby-little man, 'How much for it all: a drink, a meal, a toke, a flop?' And in the end, it's all just a drop, best friends for the night, come stay at my house, it's all still the same, the same little drop. Oh, I didn't start with much, but I may have mentioned something about being prepared for a month, good smoke, good toke, the best, the absolute very best, California, High Country, weed, from its very inception, the intent was to sell, and be sold, and at a drop a pop, fucking hell, you know damn well, I'd landed on top...

###

Eh, but the truth is, I don't love this part of the story, not as much, not as much fun to write, I must get on with my life, there are other things to do, adventures for which to prepare, luggage to pack, places to go, things to do; besides, Dwarves, Derek, fuck Derek, I mean, we could insert, right about here, gratuitously long pages of comedic abuse, insult, and degradation... seriously, what kind of man can't keep his woman in tow, sending love notes to another... and really, right there, that's it, just another way of saying, fuck Derek, anyway, anyhow, any time, anywhere; but then, if we're going to go on, talking this way, I should just mention: it's with Daphne, I'm flirting, this very day.

###

And Dwarves? What do they matter? I mean, they don't visit me any more than the elves. Looking into my eyes, the elves knew, they just knew there wasn't any reason, nothing worthwhile, nothing I was leaving behind.

And the Dwarves, well, let's just say, staying at my place will never be worth that drop. I mean, hadn't I shown up, dirt poor, not a drop to my name, not a bloody drop to my name...

###

I walked up the hill the other day, part way, no portal did open, I wasn't near any gate, but I'd packed what I'd need, what I'd take, and after enjoying the view, at the edge

of the woods, I found a small bar, a dive, something that would serve, something close, sort of resembling beer, not real beer, of course, no Dwarven Ale, but it would do.

I mean, need I mention that Dwarves feel about their beer the way Elves feel about their wine, they know the vintage, the field the hops came from, the year of the harvest, and of the water, they knew, always knew, the exact where and the when, the part of the mine, from which it began; oh, yes, over the years, all those heavy metals, I wonder if there wasn't a time, my blood did not shine, radioactive...

But we were back in a bar, where I met a fellow traveler, who'd done his time at the core, with the Dwarves, meaning, he never did get to the elves; and as we talked, he bought me a beer, if that's what you want to call it; and as we talked, I bought him a beer, if that's what you want to call it; and in truth, normally, I wouldn't, buy him that beer, sort of as a point of honor, you see, I like to think my stories are worth... more than a beer; yes, every last drop, but if you've spent time with the Dwarves, then you know, it's often simpler, easier to pay, if you ever again, you should want to be on your own way.

But I didn't want to go anywhere, I suppose, not anymore, so I took out my roll, of coins, so carefully wrapped, soft leather, worked by another, sigil, designs, and each and every one of those coins a different shape, a different size, a different weight, does that mean anything to you, the lack of consistency, nothing, not a whole, not a single coin my own, so what does it mean? What would it mean? A robber? A thief? A winner of fights? A human? A trader? Now there's an insult that *cuts to the 'ore...* or

perhaps it would tell a tale, all on its own, of a man who in Chaos, has found a new home...

#

Now, the elves say that they like a good joke.
But the Dwarves, they are the real comedians, the clowns, the tricksters, in a culture so riddled with honor, the slightest deviation or degradation is treated as a call to war... or an amusement, so worthy, in itself, of honor, the boldness to behold... or maybe they were just giving me the benefit of the doubt at every twist and turn, else surely, at the bottom of that mine shaft, I'd still lie, dead in the head...

#

Or perhaps, more to the point:

*The Old Thane hit,
The nail, when he said,
'Boy, you ain't right.'
He meant in the head.*

#

The point is, Daphne, can I call you Daphne, should I call you Daphne, after all, your letter was signed, with more than just love, but lust in your heart.

But then again, I knew Derek and knew him well, long before I'd ever met Daphne, talked to Daphne, really knew

her at all. And in fact, I likely only ever met Daphne, really got to know her, like at all, through my association with Derek... and with that in mind, it really came as no surprise, when I'd learned that they'd married... not long, after I'd left.

You see, I'd always been a traveler. As soon as I could, I made friends with those in the next town over, in preference to those I had grown up with, every year, spending more and more time, with those further and farther away... well, from there, I hope the progression is clear. I was perfect for the core. I was born the core. Even if on retirement it means I can no longer recall... exactly which core.

#

But I was telling you about Derek and how I met him first, came to know him first, spent more time with him first, than Daphne. And he was always privy to... more than she, much more than she.

I wonder if Daphne ever knew that Derek had a secret admirer in high school, did he ever tell her? No matter, he had one. She sent him notes, this secret admirer, left those notes in his locker, over the course of his junior and senior year. The notes never said who they were from, just:

Derek Rocks

Derek's Great

And why the hell not, a boy such as he, young, good looking, such prospects in life; but Derek never did find out who that secret admirer of his was; never laid a trap, that's what it would have taken, a trap. At times, in his hand, a

note, it was easy to ask, 'What's that?' and he'd tell of the letters, 'So, who is it?' this secret admirer, and he'd explain how he was waiting for whoever was leaving the one-sided correspondence, the craft projects, the small tokens of artistic affection, to leave their phone number; he figured that some day they would, you know, along with a name, a point of rendezvous out in the woods... or something like that. But this secret admirer of his never did own up, never did leave their name, never left any number, and there never was any rendezvous, alone out in the woods; and when graduation day came and after the ceremony, someone he didn't hardly know, maybe only by sight, you know, probably someone from the next town over, probably someone who lived right next door, to me, probably someone who owed me a favor... probably, just a guess, I only have Derek's recollection to go by, here, so whatever, I can only guess that someone, handed Derek a final package, someone who was set to run away if questioned, if cornered, but he wasn't questioned and he wasn't cornered; and I'm guesses, just guessing...

Later that night, while we were celebrating, Derek remarked that if he could only go back, in time, he would have asked, given chase, but at the time, he was so sure, he would find, the answer, to who it was, in that package. Why would a secret admirer not want to meet and reveal who they were, unless, well, yes, unless it was all just another... great joke, in the end.

###

And there it is, in a nutshell, do the wrappers reveal?
Or are you like poor Derek, already out in the cold,
standing in the slush of the street, shaking his head, tearing
up his theater ticket in utter disgust, ripping it to shreds.

'What the actual fuck, dude?'

'What the actual fuck?'

I guess modern dance isn't his thing.

###

Eh, doesn't matter. One thing I've learned, for all
their differences, both the Elves and the Dwarves believe a
story like this should end with a cryptic sounding rhyme:

*Daphne proposed,
By the bleachers, she'd be
But maybe it's Derek,
Very soon, now, we'll see...*

###

Or in other words:

*Daphne or Derek
Or both if I care
A slow dance at dawn
I'll happily dare...*

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!!! Fiction !!!
!!! The Usual Disclaimers !!!

Any Dwarf who has ever even heard of *The Forest*, knows you're much more likely to be hit on the head, by falling tree branch, than to be caught in the deep; and as to that whole month of June rubbish... let's just say, *Goldie*, now, there's a spirit of a different vein.

The teller mistaken
Hit on the head
To live in a forest
I'd rather be dead...

#

#

#

Daphne and Derek
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fiction is as fiction does...
or as they like to say in certain circles, in the end, the truth will out...