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THE VISION OF SAINT JOHN

HE SAT, BUT NOTHING CAME. He felt the same heavy feeling down there that had haunted him for weeks. “Nothing’s happening,” he called to his wife from the porcelain throne. “I’m really trying, really pushing, but nothing’s happening.”

“Take another laxative,” she answered.

Even muffled through several layers of quilt and the door, he felt the disdain in her voice. He knew she would react this way, which is why he waited so long to tell her. But she was his wife. She should show some sympathy. No illness, no matter how indelicate, should be beyond the boundaries of discussion in a marriage.

“I’ve been drinking quarts of it for weeks, and I’ve been packing away the fruit—apples, peaches, grapes, strawberries, and even prunes, which you know I hate.” These were all of the formulas that his mother had employed when he was a child.

“Have you tried, you know, an enema?”

Yes, he had.

“Go to the doctor, John,” she called from the bedroom. “I’m sure it isn’t a serious problem, dear.”

But seven weeks was a very serious problem. He sat and waited, expecting the sluggishness to melt at any minute, hoping the heavy numbness that was his lower torso would drop away. This state of eternal expectancy locked his insides into what he imagined was a dry, contorted mass.

“Go to the doctor. He’ll fix you up. Now could you make your own breakfast and let me sleep in for a change,” she said, a bit testy.

When he first sat down, the seat was chilly. It sent shivers through his body that started at his ankles and followed his skeleton but somehow managed to circumvent the stagnant burden in his viscera. If the coldness from the plastic seat would only pierce his colon, then that might do the trick and loosen things up. He wondered if a cold shower would help.

Staying squatted over the toilet bowl, he stretched his body and reached an arm inside the bathtub to turn on the cold water and flip the shower toggle. The steady thunder of water against the tub transformed his wife's snores into muffled sighs and muted their indifference so that he could imagine her whimpering in conjugal pity. But he knew all she felt was disgust and indifference. He could see it on her face when he mentioned it for the first time last night. It pervaded the room, and it pervaded his insides. It cohered to every fold of his clogged intestines.

Twenty minutes under cold water did not expunge the heaviness. It was time to plod to the car and drive to work.

John Hetego worked in the Kansas City regional office of the Bureau of Statistics. He was a minor functionary charged with the upkeep of a small piece of a large and multifaceted organization—one of the many who kept the organism of government moving in a regular manner by the steady performance of one task. His job was to proofread reports on local area unemployment statistics, job openings, labour turnover, employment and wage censuses, workplace injuries and fatalities, ten-year occupational projections, and economic analyses. He was one of four mid-level functionaries to review every document produced by the local office. Each looked for something different, and John was responsible for adding up and reconciling the numbers in all of the graphs and charts. The structure of the work was inherently frustrating. A report was supposed to circulate from one editor to another and then to a supervisor in quick order, but someone was usually sick or on vacation, so the system often gummed up. Reports moved along torpidly, like slugs moving across concrete on a warm summer's day. The department chief had hoped that computerization would speed up the process, but it only made it worse, as people began to cc: everyone on every email, leading to a tangled crisscrossing of changes, proposed changes, and deleted changes. Those like John, who kept a hard copy of every correspondence, soon became lost in paper. Dog-eared files stuffed with memos spread across his cubicle floor, so that when he walked to his desk he felt as if he were slogging through a muddy swamp without waders.

Between email, electronic documents, and Skype, John almost never had to leave his cube. He would sit in his chair and wait, sometimes hours, for a report to come his way or a conference call to start. He would often sit quietly, pretending to work, waiting for the clock to grind down to 5:00pm. Under normal conditions, the state of lassitude in which he spent much of

his day was relaxing, but with no movement required and in fact all signs of life except quiet counting discouraged, the inner bulkiness plaguing John grew relentless.

It had started imperceptibly. Everyone has these minor problems from time to time after changing time zones or forgetting to eat apple sauce with pork. Even a weekend of sitting on the couch watching the Masters Golf Tournament and chomping chips can do it, but these things usually go unnoticed by the average person, who is more focused on work, family, chores, finances, hobbies, sports teams, and TV shows.

It was a week before John realized what the matter was. He took a strong dose of laxative, but it didn't work, so he increased the dosage until he was drinking a bottle and a half of the pink goo every day. That's when he began to feel a pressure that no amount of squeezing could expel. The agony didn't chip away at his abdomen like a chisel or feel like the fiery sting of arthritis; rather, it was constantly alive in a dull, almost passive way. It sat heavily inside him, cohering to every fold of his clogged intestines. It was as if some dead animal were putrefying and growing at the same time, slowly feeding on his insides as it expanded.

He had been stupid to tell his wife. For Stacey, most bodily functions were private matters to be dealt with alone. She did not like them to be in the bathroom together, even if one was brushing teeth and the other was in the shower. Their biweekly intimacy always started in the dark under covers, and when they had finished she always waited until he was out of the bathroom to wash herself—or whatever she did. She never told him when she was having her period. She hid it so well that he couldn't even smell it on her. He didn't even know if she had gone into menopause or was taking hormones. He had opened a can of worms by telling her. He knew that he should have just quietly gone to the doctor, and he wasn't going to bring it up again. This thing, whatever it was, would soon run its course, and things between him and Stacey would normalize as soon as his body did. But it would be nice to get a little pity. It would be nice not to get that cold-shouldered rejection she was so good at giving.

John sat in the doctor's office peacefully listening to instrumental versions of Beatles tunes flow from hidden speakers. He glanced at the other patients, who were mostly men his age with thinning hair, slight pot bellies, and an occasional limp. He heard the sound of the air conditioning, and the

cold blasts from the ceiling made the intense pressure inside of him slacken until he just felt a little stuffed, as if he had eaten too much.

The nurse called his name and beckoned him to follow her to a small examining room, where she took his blood pressure and measured his height and weight. Then she told him to strip to his underwear, don a pale blue paper gown, and sit on the examining table. The room was also cold, and his legs dangled off the edge of the table. He fell asleep waiting.

“You’ve been eating too much crap—chips, fast food, doughnuts. It’s not good for the system.” Dr. Dreckless pushed John forward on the examining table, ran his stethoscope under the paper gown and poked him in several places. John was suddenly warm again, and he could feel the white wax paper that covered the surface of the table get moist from his perspiration and stick uncomfortably to the bottom of his thighs. It felt like it was also sticking to his insides.

“Stand up,” Dreckless ordered. When John did, the separation of the moist paper from his skin made an embarrassing peeling sound.

“For Christ’s sake, you’re in lousy shape. Your blood pressure is way too high, and you’re nothing but a butterball around the middle. Don’t you get any exercise?” Dreckless was sporting his own pot belly, which hung over his belt, but his arms and shoulders were taut with muscles. “I lift barbells and use the machines at the club. You should do the same. Sit down again.”

John sat and entered a state of exhausted non-existence, in which he was no longer aware of the doctor or his instruments—the rubber-coated hammer that hit his elbows and knees, the long beam of light that invaded his ears and throat, and the dozens of patches of adhesive that attached him to an electrocardiogram.

From his inner sanctum of non-thinking he suddenly felt a dull thrust when Dreckless began the rectal exam, as if asymmetrically weighted tectonic plates were shifting inside of him. John awoke from his waking sleep and went into a panic. His perspiration began to dry and turn thick and pasty, coagulating like blood. He began to choke, and his mouth felt as if he had swallowed dry muck from the side of a barn. He felt like he was suffocating in his own skin. In the distance he heard the doctor muttering something about feeling lots of material but no obstruction. The voice sounded surprised and offended, and John realized that the doctor resented fingering for so long in someone’s stool.

“Okay, get up and get dressed,” Dreckless said. “I’m going to prescribe

a special suppository that I want you to insert twice a day for a week or until you have some success. And I want you to schedule a colonoscopy. I'll be back with the prescription and a referral in a few minutes. I'm confident that what I'm giving you will do the trick. The colonoscopy is just to be on the safe side. You're basically okay, I'm sure. But when this is over, I want you to lose some weight and start exercising a few times a week."

John lifted himself from the table and again heard the lap of wax paper peeling from his skin. The paper glistened with a patina of his brownish perspiration, and he felt dry and stiff in every muscle, bone, and organ.

He dressed and lumbered out of the office to his car. As he walked, waddling weakly from side to side with short, heavy steps, he began to feel a pressure building inside of him. Soon the pressure turned into an urgency. Perhaps this was it, he thought. Perhaps this was the moment when he would finally get some relief. He rushed back to the medical office building as quickly as he could, but by the time he was at the door of the men's room the feeling was gone.

John's body sweltered under the two sweatshirts and undershirt he had on. He toddled through the bog that the walking trail in Loose Park had become after a night of thunderstorms. His tennis shoes, heavy with water, sank deep into mud. He felt like his entire body was mired in it as he sluggishly waded through the dense, gummy substance. His insides felt thick, too, and he struggled to slog through the exterior and interior morass at the same time.

The morning air reeked of another impending rain storm. Black clouds, fecund with droplets, looked as if they would fall from the sky in great sheets if it weren't for the thick humidity holding them up with short, muggy wind swells. John thought that he might feel a little better if the clouds could expel the rain and let it wash away the humidity.

It was now twelve weeks. The suppositories didn't work, and neither did the awful-tasting colonoscopy prep, which meant that the gastroenterologist couldn't perform a colonoscopy. The prep also left him bloated and gave him the most painful cramps he had ever endured.

The best that the befuddled Dreckless could come up with was a regimen of diet, a daily jog of at least two miles, lots of fluids, and a series of laxative treatments to be taken in a repeating series: day one the liquid, day two the suppository, day three the pills, day four the enema, then back to

day one again. The protocol drained John of his energy, and the longer he followed it the more lethargic he became. He found it increasingly difficult to get out of bed in the morning. His muscles were always sore now, and it took real effort to lift anything—even a fork. He felt as if his entire body was transforming into a costive lump of rotting flesh.

At home he spent hours sitting in the bathroom, contracting and releasing his anal muscles, staring into space for a while, and then trying again. Sometimes he would just sit there, hunched over, listening submissively to the strange gurgling sound emanating from his clogged intestines. He feared that if his condition didn't improve he would soon be too exhausted to get out of bed.

What disturbed him most was what his condition was doing to his marriage and his relationship with his two grown daughters. Stacey was at the end of her patience. She spoke to him loudly through the door of the bathroom in an acridly calm voice that barely contained her anger, explaining that his disease made her feel helpless because it upset her sense of normalcy. She resented that they were spending so much money on copays and uncovered treatments to cure what should have been a minor indisposition. When they were not separated by a door, she refused to say a word other than impassive one-syllable grunts. She treated him with a mechanical indifference, still making his meals, doing the laundry, and keeping the house clean, but with a joylessness that she let John see. She never asked him how he was feeling. She had taken to sleeping in the spare bedroom and eating her meals after he had left the dining room. As for the girls, Stacey must have told them something because they avoided coming by.

While jogging one day, John suddenly felt extremely heavy behind his crotch, as if his anal muscles were dissolving. A wave of tension undulated through his trunk, and he had a series of violent cramps. He began to quiver, and his skin grew hot. There was no time to get back to his car and find a restroom, so he pulled down his sweat-soaked pants and squatted gingerly over the oozing dirt path, apprehensive that someone might see him but unable to control himself. He steadied himself with a hand and began to work the muscles of his lower abdomen, but nothing happened. The tug was gone, and the sensation of impending movement weakened into omnipresent heaviness. A feeling of sinking into a thickening bog descended once again upon his body. It had felt so good to have to go, but it was nothing more than a trick of the mind.

He was startled by the sound of footsteps from behind, which made him slip and fall, rear end first, into the sludge. He had to pull up his pants quickly to avoid being embarrassed by another jogger. As he walked back to the car, he felt the mud dry, crack, and reliquify on his skin as he broke into another warm body sweat.

The rain started falling before he reached the parking lot, and by the time he got to the car he was soaking wet. He sat in the car and stared through the windshield at the raindrops bounding off the glass. The rainfall was so heavy that he couldn't see well enough to drive. The asphalt, cars, trees, trails, and signs all appeared as blurry shadows. Then the rain stopped, and the sunlight bullied its way through clouds, opening a path to the sky for him, as if he were staring right into the centre of a cathedral dome. The space expanded in concentric planes suggested by the parting clouds, from which he could see apostles stretching out their hands back to the earth. He started the car and drove through the shaft of light, shattering it into countless sparkles and flashes. When he got home, he went directly to bed instead of taking a shower and driving to the office.

His withered body balanced lightly in the shrouds of the double bed, and his bony arms, once fleshy with middle-aged prosperity, stretched over the covers like brittle kindling on a drought-plagued forest floor. His pupils no longer responded to changes in light intensity but stared listlessly ahead, like the eyes of a blind man. His mouth was parched, and a hot vertigo swarmed around his head.

No longer able to move, he spent his days lying under thick quilts, too overcome by his dull pain to seek refuge in books or television. Unable to sleep, yet never fully lucid, his mind was caught in the same suffocating cesspool as his body. All he could do was lie there and quietly observe the growing putrefaction of his flesh.

Dreckless and the other doctors had given up hope of saving John. They had twice performed surgery on his bowels. The first time they removed about twelve pounds of dried excrement that seemed as dense as diamond. They spalled it away carefully with scalpels, as it presented itself as one solid piece of matter. The strong stench that emanated from John's exposed intestines filled the operating theatre and made the doctors and nurses gasp. One surgeon's eyes began to tear, and he had to withdraw from the room. The surgeons closed him up with still much more to be extracted because the



Antonio da Correggio, *Vision of St. John the Evangelist at Patmos* (1520-1522)

anesthesia was going to wear off and John was too weak to extend the dosage. They gave him three weeks to recuperate and tried again, this time with two industrial fans set up on one side of the operating table to blow away the fumes. The world-renowned gastroenterologist Holden Innenfest flew in from London's St. Mark's Hospital to oversee the procedure. Innenfest, his two assisting surgeons, Dreckless and the nursing staff all issued a sigh of terror when they opened up John, as if they were mountain climbers who had seen lightning fracture the sky and announce the sublime. What they realized immediately was that the clumps of excrement were stuck tight in the folds of his large intestines and had become inextricably intertwined with his flesh. Like a cancer or a parasite, the rock-hard slime had become part of John and could no longer be removed without killing him. It was now a necessary part of his being.

They could find no cause for this malady, as it was not due to cancer, bacterial or viral infection, organ malfunction, or chemical imbalance. Most of the physicians blamed his ailment on decades of poor eating and little exercise. Dreckless and Innenfest collaborated to wrangle a small grant from the National Institutes of Health to study this new disease, which they labelled "Constipatory Accelerated Neuropathic Syndrome" (CANT). In his grant application, Dreckless predicted that the diagnosis of CANT would likely increase significantly among office workers in the coming years.

John's mind rambled directionless in a semi-coma, pursued by the anguish of his self-transformation into indurate feces. He subsisted on two meals of dry toast and clear soup a day, which he sipped slowly so that the sudden addition of liquid would not bloat him even more than he already was. Each afternoon he received a five-minute visit from Stacey and his daughters, and during these brief visits he listened through the muffle of his delirium as they bragged about the trophies the grandchildren kept winning in local gaming tournaments for StarCraft and Super Mario Brothers. He remembered how much he enjoyed watching his grandkids play video games when they visited, which had not happened since he first announced his ailment to Stacey. They would sit next to him on the large sofa playing with their consoles, while he would fall asleep to whatever sporting event was on TV. During the commercials, he would stare at the explosions on their screens. It was a pleasant memory, but it seemed so far away.

He also saw Stacey when she brought him his two meagre meals and changed his sheets. She never said a word to him, asked him how he was

doing, offered sympathy, or shared any news of the day. Her cold, reproachful eyes and mechanical hand movements told him everything. She didn't care whether he lived or died; in fact, she could hardly wait until he was dead so that she could collect the life insurance and the pension. His disease disgusted her, and he knew she wondered how this could have happened to her. Hadn't she always conformed to the dictates of social and civic regularity? He wished that she'd stop fussing with the blankets and just leave.

At the beginning of his confinement, a few friends from work stopped by with offerings of candy, flowers, and gossip. They asked nervously about his temperature, his appetite, the medications he was taking, how he was sleeping, and other aspects of his care, without ever mentioning what was wrong with him. John felt his disease weighing down on their conversations, making everyone stiff and embarrassed, but at the same time he could also see that they found it humorous. Their questions didn't end with a rising voice but instead dissipated into weak titters. The visiting stage soon ended, as did the weekly phone calls, and he was relieved to be delivered of his friends. His only desire was to relax. He was no longer trying to eliminate. He let himself slide into the sluggish cesspool his body had become, and that released him from much of the pain.

He spent day and night in a waking sleep, aware and unaware at the same time, thinking about nothing but the bends and curves in the space between himself and the world. He could lie motionless this way for hours.

He thought he could feel his soul trying to force its way out of his brain, just as the dry costive matter at the other end was trying to force its way out of the tortured remains of his clogged intestines. He imagined the soul forming a second body that hovered above the bed. He could see himself among a group of men and women writhing in ecstasy. He was one of many whose twisted arms were reaching out joyfully towards white robes that hovered just below the ceiling of the room.

As the last small bit of consciousness left him, he suddenly panicked. He tensed up, bit the inside of his mouth, and gripped his covers in one last effort to conquer the disease. He would not wait to crawl to the toilet or call Stacey. No, he would have it out with the foul matter inside him right here. He would go right now.

He tried desperately to fight death, but the pain was too great. His muscles slackened, his will relented, and he gradually drifted back into himself. But this last gathering of energy restored his lucidity. He could see, hear,

smell, and feel the world directly for the first time in months, but what he experienced with his senses was not the bedroom but rather a vision from his past.

He must have been sixteen at the time, and it was a very hot and muggy summer day. The leaves on the trees seemed to float on top of the dense humidity, and all the flowers were wilting in front of the houses in the suburban plan in which he found himself. His hair dripped perspiration and the greasy cream he had run through it with a comb that morning. He had been walking for hours in this oppressive heat, going from door to door of dozens of houses, trying to sell magazine subscriptions to raise money for college. He had only succeeded in placing one order, which meant that he had earned \$5.00 for six hours of work. All the houses looked alike, with the same aluminum siding, the same two steps leading up to the front door with a slight metal side railing, the same attached garage, and the same hedges concealing the front windows. Sometimes he had mistakenly knocked on the same door twice, much to the ire of the housewife or retiree who answered.

He unexpectedly felt a tug and realized that he had to go, but he was stuck in the middle of a maze of cul-de-sacs and one-way sidewalkless streets, and it was at least a mile to the nearest gas station. He walked briskly, tensing the muscles in his thighs and balling his fingers into tight fists to keep his body from giving in to his need. The heat and humidity only made it worse. His eyes turned desperately to a street sign, and he realized that he had made a wrong turn. He wasn't lost, but he wouldn't make it to the gas station in time. He considered squatting in the street, but he was afraid that someone might see him.

He decided to throw himself on the mercy of a housewife. He hurried across the lawn of one house, up the concrete front steps, and rang the doorbell. A woman in her late thirties or early forties appeared wearing a knee-length housecoat, through which he could trace the curves of her body. Only two buttons secured the housecoat, and her hair was rolled over large plastic corrugated tubes. She wasn't wearing makeup, but the sensual fullness of her face turned its lines into sparkling ornaments. Her mouth formed a languid, quizzical expression when she saw him.

"Yeah?" She asked in a careless voice that was almost lost in the blare of the television behind the door.

"I've been selling magazine subscriptions in your neighbourhood," he

said in a loud, urgent voice, his legs shaking in desperation.

“I don’t want any,” she said, starting to close the door.

“You don’t understand lady! I gotta go real bad, and I’m miles from a public bathroom. Could I use yours?”

The woman stared at his quivering body for an instant that seemed to last an eternity. Then she formed her lips into a negligent smile and opened the door. “Come on in. It’s over there.”

She walked through a messy living room, and he followed a few feet behind. On her way to a small hallway that led to a bathroom she turned off the TV and leaned down to pick up a toy truck and a tiny racing car. Still scattered on the floor were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, crayons, a stack of children’s books, and a little toy dog. “The kids are at their music lessons—finally! I was just relaxing.”

When she leaned over, she didn’t bend her knees, making her housecoat ride up and giving John his first ever unobstructed view of panties. Her thighs were plump with delicate flesh that looked soft and tantalizing. The panties were sheer pink and translucent, allowing him a shadowy view of more of a woman than he had ever seen before. She bent over in that way for a seductively long instant, gathering her children’s playthings and murmuring about waking up from a nap. When she stood erect again, she turned quickly to John, which opened up the housecoat to reveal her nipples. It was several seconds before she realized her state of undress and pulled the sides of the housecoat together. He gazed at the woman, confused and bewitched. He felt some relief in his anal area as his crotch grew warm.

“It’s in there,” she said, pointing to the bathroom. “I’ll get you some lemonade. Unless you want a beer?” She spoke these words very slowly, with seductive pauses before the stressed syllables, as if each phrase were a piece of clothing shed in a striptease.

Unless I want a beer, he thought to himself as he dropped his pants and sank onto the cold seat. He immediately did his business, heard it plop into the water, and felt splashes caress his buttocks. It was an elegant sensation.

The bathroom was cool, and a small window was open to provide a breeze from outside. The perspiration dried off his body, and he leaned forward, breathing in the fetid but cool air. He thought about the woman on the other side of the door—a beatific vision promising an earthly paradise. Had her flash of flesh been intentional? The beer must be a proposition. He had

heard from some of the guys about lonely housewives who gave themselves willingly. He had never had such luck, but there was always a first time. He tried to imagine how it would happen—the tossed-away blanket and sheets, her housecoat crumpled over a dressing chair. He could feel himself sinking into her sultry folds of flesh as she moaned.

His thoughts gradually wandered from the hot pleasure he imagined might await him to the current pleasure of sitting on the toilet. He felt cool, tranquil, and secreted away from the oppressive heat outside. Angels danced among the orange and yellow flowers on the plastic curtain that concealed the bathtub, and the toilet tank chanted gurgling prayers that lulled him into a state of pure relaxation. He had never before known such peacefulness, and he felt like he was letting go of everything as his pores opened to breathe in the world. An almost imperceptible breeze grazed his skin, but instead of shivering he sat motionless on his porcelain paradise and smiled his satisfaction.