

SERVICE

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John Tottenham



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To Mark Ehrman

Los Angeles 2016–2019

I

“Do you need a bag?” I asked, and received no response.

“D’you need a bag?” I asked again, and again received no response.

I tried again, a third time.

This time, the customer looked up from his texting.

“What?” he said.

“A bag,” I said. “Do you need one?”

“What kind of bag?” asked the customer, a clean-cut young man with facial hair and neck tattoos.

“Do I have to describe the bag?” I said.

“Is it a paper bag?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s a paper bag,” I said, and handed him a brown paper bag.

He walked off, looking put out. Perhaps he had wanted me to bag the book for him.

“Hi Sean.” From whom this greeting came, I had no idea. It is the fate of the terminal bookstore employee to frequently be addressed by people he doesn’t know.

A forlorn figure shuffled up to the counter with an expectant look on his face that suggested I should be pleased to see him. I returned an unconvincing imitation of his smile, anticipating the twenty minutes of my time that this energy-draining vampire was certain to consume. It was inconceivable that he would leave any sooner than that. He was fresh and ready to twist my ear off. This

might be his first social interaction of the day, but it was my umpteenth, and I was trapped.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“What else is going on?”

“You mean apart from nothing?”

He just stood there, waiting for me to alleviate his boredom. Not content with killing his own time, he wanted to kill my time too.

“You ever have this dream where you’re in a dark room and can’t see what you’re doing?” he said. “You turn on the light switch and it doesn’t work, and you’re just alone in the darkness. Then you wake up.”

“‘Tell a dream, lose a reader,’ as Henry James wrote,” I said.

“‘Lose your dreams and you may lose your mind,’ as the Rolling Stones said. But they were talking about a different type of dream.”

It wasn’t what he said that was so boring, it was the sound of his voice and the desperation palpably simmering just below the surface. The merciless drone was the sound of him charging his loneliness on my battery. I could feel my already slim reserves of energy being sapped, ounce by ounce. *I need to think, I cannot think in your presence.* But what was the alternative, to spend time with him outside the workplace? That would be even worse; better to endure him here.

“I don’t have those kind of dreams,” I said.

The pest stepped aside to make way for a long-haired, denim-clad woman who prompted her young daughter to hand me a children’s book. The straining child could barely reach to the top of the counter and I had to stretch down to grab the book. The kid smiled up at me, almost begrudgingly it seemed—fully aware of her own cuteness but somehow recognizing me as an undeserving recipient

of it. I knew the routine: another fake smile was being extorted from me. I couldn't very well refuse a child: I forced out a weak and partially toothless grin.

"Do you do gift wrapping?" asked the adorable little girl's mother.

I took a deep breath and responded in the affirmative.

The phone started ringing.

"Hi-i-i-i-i-iiii ..." A perky, high-pitched voice on the other end of the line almost punctured my eardrums. "How's your day going?"

"Never mind that," I said. "What do you need?"

"Can I ask you if you have a particular book in stock?"

"What is it?"

"*The Artist's Way*."

The wailing of a child tore through the air.

I put the caller on hold and began to crudely wrap the children's book.

Another stack of books and a soiled credit card were placed on the counter. I rang the books up, sickened by the continual swiping of cards and punching in of numbers, the dead time entailed by credit card transactions.

The denim-clad woman pressed up against the counter. "Don't worry about it," she said.

"It's almost done."

"My child is hurt," she announced in a shrill tone of maternal authority.

I handed the partially wrapped children's book over to her.

The phone rang again. The caller whose book I hadn't looked for was on the other end of the line: "I called up five minutes ago ..."

"Yes, I'm sorry. We got cut off. We're out of it."

Without a word, she hung up.

I felt another unflattering Yelp review coming on.

The forlorn pest returned, the stale fumes of perennial bachelordom wafting into my face as he leaned across the counter to destroy what was left of me with meaningless conversation.

"I don't know what to do with myself," he said. He found his own company oppressive but didn't seem to mind inflicting it upon others.

"Thanks for the information," I said.

"I'm going to get a coffee," he said, and walked back to the café at the other end of the store, only to be replaced by another pest.

"You know I knocked myself out writing a puff piece about you a few years ago," I said to Cyrus Fapper, since he insisted upon standing in front of me at the counter.

"You did? I never saw it. What for?" said Cyrus, a dandiacal middle-aged culture vulture who flaunted his many artistic passions widely and loudly on social media.

"Your publisher put me up to it. But it was never published and I was never paid for it."

"I have good news," announced Cyrus with unforgivable nonchalance. "I have a memoir coming out. So maybe we could use it then."

"Congratulations," I said with as much conviction as I could muster. "A memoir concerning what?"

"My childhood."

"Very nice."

"Prolix are publishing it," he casually added.

"How did you swing that?" I asked, rendered almost speechless with envy and disgust.

"I pitched it to them."

Why would anybody want to read Cyrus' memoirs? He'd never published a book before; he wasn't famous. Then the light flared up over my head: His mother was famous—she had been part of the '60s

Warhol circle, and Cyrus had been raised in the rarefied low-life environment of the fabled Factory scene that people never tire of reading about in these less decadently glamorous times. Brigid Polk had been one of his babysitters. So, naturally, his childhood memories would command great interest.

“Did you get an advance?”

“A very small one.”

But really, who cared about an advance when you were being published by Prolix? The distinctive logo on its tasteful white spine was a stamp of quality that automatically invited respect and curiosity from reader and reviewer alike. What more could a first-time author want than to be published by such a distinguished independent press? And it’s not as if Cyrus even needed an advance: he was supported by some sort of trust set up by his mother, who, while documenting her years as a slumming artist in several memoirs of her own, had made a small fortune on the real estate market.

“What are you buying that for?” I asked Cyrus as he placed a copy of *Glass of Anger*, a Brazilian novella, featuring strong sexual content, on the counter.

“Gil recommended it,” he said, referring to the store’s owner.

“He likes any slim translation with a whiff of perversity about it.”

“It looks good.”

“It’s crap.”

“Have you read it?”

“I flipped through it. It’s one of those translations in which the lady parts are referred to as ‘her sex.’ I can’t read that. Nobody ever uses that euphemism in English, so why does it appear so frequently in translations?”

“If it’s an old translation it might make sense,” said Cyrus.

"It's a recent one," I said. "No word has ever been found that I feel comfortable using to describe feminine genitalia; all the usual appellations trivialize, vulgarize or demonize it, but 'her sex' really takes the cake."

At sixty-three pages this recently published book was no more than a short story, but it was presented in the form of a novel; it was the sort of book that people who wanted to be thought of as "well-read" felt they were supposed to like, and it was presented with a classic red-on-black design with bold lettering. I had given it a chance, reading a few passages between ringing up customers. The words lay dead on the page but it was flying off the shelves, and not only owing to Gilbert's recommendation. Its popularity suggested that the words must sing for somebody. Maybe it was another case of bad writers for bad readers, and vice versa. Can there really be a correlation between writers that write badly and readers that read badly? This dynamic clearly applied to music, art and film, so why wouldn't it also apply to literature?

"Do yourself a favor, read this." I pointed Cyrus toward a copy of Barbara Pym's *Some Tame Gazelle*.

"Subtle ... unpretentious ... comforting ... elegant ... understated humor." Cyrus recited the copy on the back of the old paperback, and put it back down. "I don't think so," he said.

"It's only three dollars."

"Maybe next time."

"There won't be a next time. Her work is too accessible and enjoyable to be appreciated by the likes of you. I'm not giving you a discount on that shit," I said, as Cyrus tentatively poked the credit card machine with the edge of his card.

"Go on, man, stick it in," I said, aggressively.

"That's what she said," he said.

"I doubt it," I said.

"Now it says 'Please Remove,'" he said, apparently mystified by this simple command.

"She probably did say that," I said.

"Send me a copy of your piece," said Cyrus as I handed back his receipt.

"I'm sure you can get more prominent puffers than me," I said.

"I don't know about that," he insincerely responded as he walked out.

This well-connected nonentity and literary fringe-player was getting published. Unfortunately, I didn't have a prestigious art-damaged lineage to trade on. My father had been an accountant. *Intellectual* was a dirty word in the household I grew up in. There was no hope. I liked Cyrus better, if at all, when he was a failure.

A smiling stranger walked in and wanted a smile in return. But smiling is hard work and I have to ration them out if only to conserve energy. I can't return the greeting of everybody that walks in: that would be painful, unnatural, and exhausting.

"Do you have any like Borges?" he asked.

"Do we have anything similar to Borges?"

I pointed him to the fiction section a few yards away. Two minutes later, he returned with a copy of *Labyrinths*.

"D'you want a bag?"

"That would be amazing," he said.

"Hello, my friend, I'm looking for *The Trial* by Kafka," stated a potbellied middle-aged man attired in a horizontally striped T-shirt and tight pants.

"Fiction, under K."

"I exclusively buy books from shops like this and have been doing so for five years," he said upon his return with the book.

“Congratulations.”

A skinny guy in a wifebeater and shorts, so as to better aerate his armpits and nether regions, wearing his sloppiness as a cloak of unhygienic arrogance, brashly munched on a slice of pizza as he browsed the metaphysics section.

He swaggered up to the counter and thrust a copy of *The Artist's Way* at me: “Have you read this?”

“What do you take me for?” I said.

And then, the pinnacle of my evening, the most dreaded question of all. Here it comes again ...

A yellow-haired woman stands there, beaming hideously at me.

“How's your night going?”

I can't take it.

But I take it.

I groan the words out: “Great ...”

But it's not enough. I can tell that she needs more. I can also tell that I'm entering an irony-free zone, a black hole of positivity.

The idiot, just humor her:

“How's yours?”

“Really well. Thanks for asking.” Her tone is as aggressively bright as her dyed hair, while her fake gratitude is a patronizing concession to my distaste for the exchange and signals her victory.

And as if that's not enough, she has to add insult to injury:

“Have an amazing week,” she says, with her hostile smile still in place, as she walks off.

Wrapping children's books for Silver Lake MILFs; a target for the malodorous and the tedious: this isn't really the end of the literary business I had in mind. If I wasn't already a misanthrope, this job would have turned me into one.

How did it come to this?

It is what happens when somebody nearing the end of their prime, who is unfit for daily toil, and has a morbid horror of anything involving effort, is forced, through a harsh diminishing of circumstances, to earn an honest living.

It's a long story, too sad to be told, and I am not inclined to tell it. Life is plotless. Plots are for graveyards.

* * *

I have decided to stop writing for a while.

* * *

The most important thing is to stop writing, now: to stop prioritizing this so-called work that has generated no income and that nobody will ever read. This futile, masochistic, self-indulgent pretense has interfered with everything; it has been carried out at the expense of love and work: real work, that is, the kind that is a visible manifestation of mental effort, not this endless supposed honing of my craft compounded by the preposterous conceit that the torturous process of giving shape to my thoughts might actually serve some sort of purpose, when it is merely an excuse to immerse myself in a morbidly self-reflective haze, of which there is seldom any visible manifestation.

* * *

As I was walking out, my downstairs neighbor was walking toward the house; he was returning from the gym, judging by his garb, and had a cell phone pressed to his ear.

“We should do something about that,” he said, reluctantly disengaging himself from his cellular conversation—“I’ll have to call you back”—and gesturing toward the Latino gentleman who was sprawled out on the street near the garden gate, an empty bottle of Olde English malt liquor by his side, dozing peacefully as the sun beat down on him. “He was there when I left, two hours ago.”

“I just noticed him. I’ve been upstairs working all day,” I lied. I found the presence of a recumbent drunkard on the other side of the railings comforting; it wouldn’t have bothered me if he became a permanent fixture.

“We should call the police,” said my neighbor, as if there were no other solution to such a grave problem.

“Maybe give him a kick, wake him up,” I suggested.

My neighbor leaned down, getting as close to him as he could stand, and addressed the man in Spanish. “Muy borracho. Si no te mueves, voy llamar a la policía.”

“Thanks, baby,” the napper mumbled back.

“If he’s still here in fifteen minutes, I’m calling them,” said my neighbor as he walked through his gate.

At the end of the street I looked back and noted with relief that the man had risen unsteadily to his feet and was stumbling away. As I was doing so, a full-grown man hurtled by on an electronic scooter, almost knocking me over. “You little prick!” I yelled after him, but he had a headset on and was already two hundred yards ahead of me.

A young couple walked by, typical of the new demographic, the new contentment: the settlers who pay exorbitant rents and populate the expensive restaurants that open on a weekly basis. It used to be that most people one saw on the streets of this serene residential neighborhood—the oldest in the city, on the western edge of

downtown—were so-called minorities. These days the majority of passersby are majorities, young Caucasians with all the essential accessories perfectly aligned: smartphones, coffee, dogs, each other—babies are optional, meanwhile the dog serves to signify an aspiring breeder. The males wear trucker caps or beanies, tight pants or shorts, and beards—those ubiquitous signifiers of redundancy. The girls are unattainable. And there are joggers, joggers everywhere, where nary a jogger was ere seen before. From whence had they sprung, this ever-expanding population of callow dullards? The hybridized bastard offspring of fifty years of youth culture, compressed by capitalism.

I continued on my merry way. Since the death of my last car, I had reverted to pedestrian status. One of the few positive effects of all the recent changes in the city was that it had become easier to exist without a car, especially on the so-called Eastside.

On the major artery, Sunset Boulevard, swarms of young people poured down the sidewalk. On a late Friday afternoon they were setting out to enjoy themselves. Formerly the province of working-class Latino families, it was now a pedestrian thoroughfare lined with new stores, new restaurants, new coffeehouses, and refurbished bars that catered exclusively to a clientele of perplexingly prosperous young Caucasians.

It didn't really matter what city it was. It could be any major city in this country, perhaps in the Western world—I wouldn't know, I haven't left town in years. At this point in the rising decline of civilization all cities are more or less interchangeable, with their revitalized downtowns and influx of inexplicably affluent young white people into "ethnic" neighborhoods initially rendered "inhabitable" by a vanguard of artists and other layabouts (shock troops for gentrification who moved in before the lemmings, now expendable), and the

Sunset corridor of Echo Park had become one such district. What had happened to this neighborhood had happened everywhere, and I knew that it would be worse for me elsewhere. A new life in a new town at my advanced age was out of the question.

The conveyor belt of youth culture had been firmly laid in place, with its mass-produced bohemian lifestyles and generic youth zones. The bar that served as a social hub for rogue police officers involved in the notorious Rampart Scandal (when cops behaved more disgracefully than the gang members they were supposed to be policing) was now a meat rack with a dance floor. On the next block a long-standing “dive bar” had been reinvented as a young person’s “dive bar,” albeit one at which prices were as high as those at a Beverly Hills hotel. A few doors down, a Mexican bar, famed for its history as the site of numerous shootings and stabbings as much as its five-dollar shot-and-a-beer specials, now sold fifteen-dollar cocktails poured by a mixologist with a waxed mustache. The Vietnamese lunch counter that went about its business in an unassuming manner for years was now a glossy new lunch counter that served fifteen-dollar bratwurst sandwiches. The Mexican supermarket was now a massive health food chain store. The pawn shops were gone, the dollar stores were closing. A pleasantly decaying block of cheap clothing stores and antique shops that used to seem timeless was in the process of being razed to make way for a massive retail outlet, the last of the dusty old storefronts replaced with boutique showroom glass.

As was my custom, I stopped in at the Mexican market, TeeJay’s, on the next block from the bookstore, to buy some broccoli. Another echo of the old Echo Park was the bakery next to it, Chilpancingo, where upon my entrance the lady behind the counter held up four fingers, confirming my usual order of four tamales. These purchases would serve as my meals for the following day.

I arrived at my place of employment, a bookstore that was formerly a Salvadorean café.

“Would you like to read your latest piece of fan mail?” said Gilbert, my former friend, former colleague, and current boss, as he coolly pulled up the bookstore’s Yelp page in order to confront me with an unflattering review the moment I entered the store to switch shifts with him.

Looking over Gilbert’s shoulder, I read: “I’m new to Echo Park and was I really looking forward to visiting this book shop that I heard was cool. It’s a small shop with a coffee house at the back and they have a cool mix of new and used books but the attitude of the man with gray hair was so not cool (i.e. had a badittude = bad attitude) ...”

This was as much as I could stomach. This line of work was difficult enough without being pilloried by dunces on an online forum—but that, nowadays, is the way of the world, and, sadly, business owners take the complaints of their customers seriously; and there had been reports of customers leaving in horror, shaken to the core, their assumptions regarding the time-honored proprieties deemed fundamental to the customer-retailer relationship cruelly shattered.

“Is it so hard to be nice to people?” said Gilbert as he picked up his jacket and walked off in reproachful silence.

“I’m not sure what I’m guilty of.”

It was a long yelp, and I couldn’t be bothered to read all of it.

“Where are you off to?” I asked, attempting to introduce a cordial note.

“A meeting,” he said.

“Have fun,” I said.

A few years ago Gilbert would have found these Yelp lambastings as farcical as I did, but now, in his managerial role, he took them seriously. He had become a different person since he had stopped

drinking: sobriety had unleashed a previously suppressed ambition, and his sense of humor seemed to have been sacrificed in the process.

Gilbert was of medium height and medium weight, and had brown hair. He was one of the world's great tension exuders, a hard worker whose energy and commitment had the perhaps deliberate effect of highlighting the lack of those qualities in his colleagues. I was always aware of his critical gaze; I couldn't relax in his presence; I was consistently clumsy around him; he was ten years younger than me, and he reminded me of my father.

Fortunately, we were rarely in the store at the same time and only encountered each other when we switched shifts twice a week. It was a relief when Gilbert left to attend his nightly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and I was left to brood over the Yelp accusations.

"Gray hair": This was galling. I thought I still had a full head of luxuriant dark hair.

While pissing into the sink in the staff restroom, I inspected myself in the mirror. Although the overall impression was of dark-brown hair, up close the grays were clearly visible. Once again my attention was drawn to the deepening vertical lines around my mouth that dragged my face down like the creases in an old canvas tent being stretched into place, pulled taut into a gathering lumpiness around the chin. Other lines, from no discernible source, appeared like the crevices on the side of a mountain that was about to collapse in an avalanche of sourness. When I viewed myself in semiprofile I was shocked to discover that the thing which happens to aging men's necks, which I had so far been spared, was happening to my neck: it was becoming venous and scrawny; it was beginning to sag and the veins were popping out like cables from chin to collarbone.

The mask shrivels into a skull and misery gathers like dewlap under the chin. When I see myself in my mind's eye I imagine I still

look as I did twenty years ago. Then I catch myself in the mirror and barely recognize what I see. The last traces of youth have faded. Time has made itself known. Nobody is spared, not even me. I held on for so long. And now it's gone.

Smarting from the Yelp critiques (which I only ever read when they were brought to my attention) and from Gilbert's dismissive attitude, I sat behind the counter with my head down, a sitting duck for whoever felt like shooting their mouth off at me, a dumping ground for the unloading of loneliness and desperation.

Behind the counter, I was prey not only to the endless mad parade of customers with their various annoying needs but to every unhinged and lonely person who wandered in off the street, driven out of their claustrophobic hovel in search of some poor helpless soul to unload their desperation on. There was a ceaseless torrent of such types, one after another, frequently overlapping. My indifference or irritability, unfortunately, was never enough to drive them away.

A captive audience, unfortunately,¹ I have no control over my interactions. People that I can avoid the rest of the time always know where they can find me and drain me of the precious few remaining drops of my by now inconsequential juices—three nights a week and especially on a Sunday, the hardest day of the week.

It's simply not an ideal venue for social intercourse. Between ringing up customers, answering the phone, and dealing with other book business, there's no room for abstraction and consequently no appetite for conversation. I recoil visibly and groan audibly when anybody I know walks in. At this point I would groan at the sight

1. Rather than me wasting my time inserting the word "unfortunately" into every statement, from now on the reader should just assume it is there.

of my own mother, risen from the dead, were she to walk through the door, so drained and discombobulated am I from the relentless barrage of humanity. I used to wonder what made booksellers so grumpy. Now I know.

“Everything good? You’re doing good, right?”

Well, actually, no, not exactly, but ...

What’s the point? An honest answer isn’t expected. But at least give me the option. There exists, however dimly, a remote possibility that I’m not “doing good,” and this increasingly prevalent presumptuous preemptive strike seems designed to prevent one from saying how one actually is doing; it can be simply translated as “If you’re not doing good, I don’t want to hear about it.” Then again, as somebody—I forget who—once wrote, “A bore is a man who when you ask him how he is, tells you.”

“Some things are going well and some things aren’t,” I replied, settling for a compromise that would hopefully be sufficient to get rid of yet another bookstore pest.

As usual, there was no time to gather my thoughts between unwanted exchanges with people I had no desire to communicate with.

I looked up and groaned when Greg Roach ambled in. Greg had been the bassist in a brutalist pop ensemble way back in the 1990s. They didn’t possess an ounce of originality but they toured extensively, released a few records, and built up a so-called cult following. In recent years, however, Greg’s fortunes had declined to the point where he had been reduced to working in a coffeehouse. We were about the same age, so I took some consolation in his predicament. There weren’t many people of my own age whose position in life I could relate to anymore. Most of my contemporaries had money, had property, had each other, so when I found somebody

that was still in the trenches, although I might not otherwise relate to them or even like them, it had a tonic effect.

"You look like the Hollywood version of your former self," I remarked, struck by how unusually healthy and content Greg looked, and hoping to get rid of him by way of a compliment.

"I just got back from Japan," he volunteered.

"Eh? How did you manage that?"

"My girlfriend flew me out there."

"What?"

In that infuriatingly self-assured manner that people often adopt when their luck has suddenly changed, he acted as if it were a perfectly normal turn of events that he should suddenly be in a long-distance relationship with a twenty-three-year-old girl, more than half his age, who had reached out to him via email from the other side of the world and flown him over to Japan so that they could consummate their love. It turned out, conveniently, that she was rich.

This fucker was balding and overweight, but he had been in a band with a minor reputation twenty years ago, and his legend lived on, as even the most minor legends tend to do in the rock-and-roll firmament.

"Did she pay for everything?"

"Yes."

"Did that create any tension?"

"We got through it."

"Are you in love?"

"You make it sound like an accusation."

So she paid for everything, and they were in love. That was nice. My only consolation was that Asian girls had never gravitated toward me, a curious phenomenon that I remarked upon to him.

"Why are you so dour?" was Greg's curt and insensitive response. And with that he was out of the door; he had to be somewhere.

Now even the dour ones were calling me dour, and moving on. Now even those most entrenched in the trenches were digging themselves out, or being dug out, and moving on. Now I really felt alone.

I resumed browsing a copy of Alain de Botton's *The Art Of Travel*. The opening paragraph was an exquisitely crafted evocation of winter. It reminded me of my youth and made me crave the seasons. I missed weather so much that even looking at a photograph of snow or rain filled me with yearning and nostalgia.

Considering how much he had written—at least seven books—I assumed that de Botton must be older than me, but when I turned to the biography I was horrified to find that he was a year my junior. Disgusted, I closed the book, with no intention of opening it again.

A mild-mannered young regular wandered in and stood in front of the counter, smiling, awaiting some sort of acknowledgment.

"You look happy," I said.

"I think I am," he said.

"Well, keep it to yourself. It might be contagious."

He moved along to the coffee counter.

"Hey." Another smiling customer stood there.

"Yes." I stifled a snarl.

"What's this book about?"

"I don't know, I haven't read it." *Am I supposed to read every book in this store in order to save you the trouble? Why don't you open it yourself?*

The capacity to suffer fools gladly should be part of the job description. The main requirement is the ability to answer stupid questions with a straight face, and, if possible, with a smile.

If only I'd spent my youth playing bass in a middling cult band, which could have been achieved quite easily. But it had taken a long time to see these things clearly, to see anything clearly; and now, as always, it was too late.

Something had to be seriously the matter when I found myself envying people I used to pity. I was ten years behind my time. But at least I had failed deliberately, or so, none too convincingly, I attempted to convince myself.

It had been an odd trajectory, this lack of a trajectory. At an impressionable age I had made a commitment to unrepentant bohemianism, and I was now finding that it was a lonely stance, since nobody else had taken it.

This was no way for a middle-aged man to be carrying on.

But I carried on. Like this ...

The store closed at ten o'clock, and after I pulled down the shutters, toted up the receipts, and emptied the trash, I walked back along Sunset, through the Friday-night streets of irksome revelers.

I peered into a bar but it was packed: a grimthorped sty packed with kids who were learning how to drink, learning how to smoke, learning how to hold a cigarette properly, with music blasting so loudly that one couldn't hear oneself think, let alone engage in conversation. Ten years ago that bar was a hole in the wall with a curtain in the doorway, and it was off-limits to the white man. In those days a fresh-faced Caucasian on the Echo Park stretch of Sunset, especially after dark, was an aberration. This primarily Latino area had slowly, then suddenly, been transformed into a nightlife destination for the sort of young people who would formerly never have been caught dead in the neighborhood, and wouldn't have entered it for fear of actually being

caught dead. If one went out to eat or drink in those seemingly simpler and sweeter days, one went to a bar or restaurant that was patronized by locals. But ordinary pleasures and consolations that used to be taken for granted, like coffee and beer, were now fetishized, and as the prospectors and profiteers moved in, the locals were driven out of their old haunts and almost every business was turned into a bleached and sanitized version of its former self.

When I got home I fished three envelopes out of the mailbox. One was a subscription offer from *The New York Review of Books*, the other two looked like they were from creditors. I dropped them all in the trash, fixed a drink, and sat on the sofa with one hand around a glass of liquor and the other on my crotch.

Half an hour later, having drifted off, I awoke and caught sight of my reflection in the window, merging with the gleaming towers of the downtown skyline, and saw a tired and beaten man gazing warily back at me: a man who had just pulled a shift at a low-paying job and walked home on a Friday night to drink alone; a middle-aged man sitting alone in a room, masturbating over a memory, fantasizing about women who had forgotten about him, and brooding over deliberately missed opportunities. A shadow of my former shadow, slowly becoming invisible, turning gray.

* * *

How the fuck did it come to this?

A modest career on the lower slopes and outer fringes of journalism dried up when the frontiers of the internet opened up to people who were prepared, free of charge, to perform the services that writers had formerly been paid for.

Slopes: they were more like ditches, which I never tried hard enough to dig myself out of, having mostly slept in them, and fringes frayed to the point of ragged nonexistence.

A freelance writer and copyeditor, I edited an art magazine that folded amid the death of paper journalism (online revenue not being enough to sustain it). I also wrote a column for the same magazine that addressed various art-world idiocies and other vital issues of the day, which gained an enthusiastic local readership. However, after the magazine went under I made no attempt to place my monthly musings elsewhere, and found I didn't have much to say anymore—it wasn't always as easy as it might seem to find new things to complain about with conviction.

I continued to work as a freelancer until there was no longer enough freelance work to go around and hustling for work itself became too much work.

This unsteady means of self-employment was supposed to keep me going until the time inevitably rolled around when I could live in style on the returns from my own literary exertions, which I was toiling away at but never getting very far with. I was disciplined enough to sit down to write on an almost daily basis but rarely disciplined enough to spend that time actually writing. I never finished anything and seldom showed what I did to anybody.

For all but the most talented, driven and shameless hacks it was a parlous time to be plying the scrivener's trade. The small income derived from freelance duties was augmented by the accumulation of substantial credit card debt that I defaulted on when I could no longer make the required minimum monthly payments. I was forced to let go of all my cards at once—they were all maxed out in any case, and I had drawn cash advances on as many of them as possible.

Bereft of credit and no longer able to scrape by as a freelance journalist or copyeditor, some form of gainful employment became an urgent necessity—that dreaded thing I had somehow succeeded in avoiding for so long: a steady job.

Fortuitously enough, around this time a friend was in the process of opening a bookstore/café. Although I had never worked in a bookstore before, or in any line of retail work, and despite being temperamentally unsuited for such employment, she hired me out of sympathy, and I brought my friend Gilbert—thirty-four years of age and a recovering alcoholic—on board.

In those purer days there wasn't a café on every street corner and not every single business had been transmogrified into a pallid, youth-accessible version of its former self. There was no bookstore in the neighborhood at the time and it seemed like a good time to open one, with an adjoining café. Somebody had the bright idea of naming the place Mute Books.

At first, the selection of both new and secondhand books was embarrassing in its lack of quality and variety, but it improved greatly due to Gilbert's tireless work, into which he poured the full force of his addictive personality.

Now that it had become a respectable store—not exactly a powerhouse of idealistic utilitarianism but a far cry from its charmingly shabby origins—it served more as a neighborhood hangout and tourist attraction, as has every exploitable space in the heart of what was named, in a major weekly periodical, “the second hippest neighborhood in the country.” Not too many bibliophiles cross the threshold of this establishment. Mostly it attracts the sort of people who wouldn't usually enter a bookstore: gawkers, pleasure-seekers, and fun-loving family groups who descend upon it en masse, especially on weekends, with most people walking straight

through, chatting loudly on cell phones as they do so (we get it: you're "on the go"), to the café at the other end of the store.

In my midforties, with the résumé of a much-younger man, I reentered the workforce as a bookstore employee.

It's an honorable profession, of course, being a middle-aged middleman in the service of education and enlightenment—deepening, broadening, comforting and corrupting people's minds with potentially dangerous wisdom—and it requires a certain amount of knowledge, but it's not the kind of knowledge that translates into money.

I signed on for a couple of shifts a week, expecting the position to last no longer than six months. Five years later, I'm still there.

* * *

Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, decade after decade, consumed by this precious illusion of service to the pen: priceless time that might somehow have been used to benefit others, to benefit myself, from which I might even have derived pleasure.

Yet nothing definite emerged from it, only a copious and chaotic abundance of glorified note making.

There was no glory in it. And what have I received in return for this self-serving—if that—satisfaction of having attempted to actualize myself? Poverty and solitude have been the chief rewards.

And what, actually, was I attempting to actualize? Did I have anything to say that was worth saying at all, that hadn't been said better before, that might have justified such a substantial investment of time and energy: this unflagging commitment to a lost cause, as if it were a sacred act and not a sickness born of vanity?

What would happen if I didn't do it? Nothing. Nobody would notice. It wouldn't make any difference to anybody.