

HELP YOURSELF



CASPAR ADDYMAN

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John Smith just died as a comedian but may have been reborn as a prophet of the present moment. Dr Hazel Cole has written a self-help book so good that it might even work on daytime TV presenters. Behind the scenes, billionaire press baron Eric Hayle seems to be pressing all the buttons. But will this mysterious man spoil everything?
God only knows.

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Caspar Addyman has a PhD in baby psychology. It was no help in writing this book. He lives in Brixton.



UK £8 EU €9 US \$10

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In other words, help yourself.

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ISBN: 1475199465

ISBN-13: 978-1475199468

This book will change your life. But only in subtle and
insidious ways that you may never notice.

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With a guide to the meaning of life, the universe and
everything, thrown in at no extra cost.

For Ailsa, who wrote the bit about the horse.

PROLOGUE
THE FOOL ON THE HILL

•

A man stood on a hill. He looked up at the stars and tried to remember what on earth he was doing here. Why had he climbed this hill? Such memory lapses happened to him all the time when going from the living room to the kitchen, but this was the first time one had happened at the top of a big hill. It was a big hill. He was out of breath. Perhaps, he reflected, this was not the first time it had happened. After all, his memory was evidently less than reliable.

There was no fridge at the top of the hill, so he did not think he had come to get something out of it. There was no kettle to put on and nothing on which to put it. There were none of the makings of a cheese salad sandwich. It seemed increasingly unlikely that applying the insights of his previous kitchen-based amnesia was going to help here. Although, now that he thought about it, he could do with a nice cup of tea. And maybe some toast.

The man thought he had better sit down and think things through. There was a seat - the plastic bench at the bus stop where he had finally stopped walking. His kitchen would have been much better but he sat down anyway because he was tired. He had just walked several miles. Several miles in the rain and mostly uphill. He sat for a long time.

He soon forgot about his forgetfulness. He was not thinking of very much instead. Mostly he just sat there. Sometimes he prayed, sometimes he looked up at the stars, but mostly he just sat there. However, by the time he stood up he had come to a conclusion. It was time to stop taking his medication.

Moments later, a bus arrived at the bus stop and stopped to let two passengers off. The man got on it. He liked buses. Buses were good.

CHAPTER ONE DEATH

XXXVIII.

One Moment in Annihilation's Waste,
One moment, of the Well of Life to taste--
The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
Starts for the dawn of Nothing--Oh, make haste!
– Edward Fitzgerald, The Rubaiyat of Omar
Khayyam, 1859

* ¢

John Smith was dying again. It happens to even the truly greatest comedians. John Smith was not great. Truly, he was not even good. He wasn't terrible. There is something memorable and remarkable about a dreadful comedian. John Smith was forgettable, anyone who had to sit squirming through his obvious observations, over-contrived anecdotes and featherweight punchlines wanted to forget the experience. Occasionally he would get a few mercy laughs or the momentum of the previous performer would carry the audience laughing into his act. But tonight he killed them; he reduced the whole room to a deathly silence. Yet this would be the second best performance of his life.

The fantastic acoustics of the Covent Garden Comedy Club only enhanced the unpleasantness. Tombstones of silence

marked the death of every gasped-out joke. Everyone in the room could hear everything with crystal clarity. They clearly wished they couldn't but no one was intervening to put John Smith out of their collective misery. Instead one hundred and thirty seven people squirmed uncomfortably in their seats, checking their watches or looking longingly toward the exit. In the darkness of back rows, friends exchanged pained looks while the people in the front rows, illuminated by the footlights were finding their shoes very interesting, desperate not to make eye contact with the condemned man before them.

The compere stood, sadistically impassive in the shadows, indulging his long-standing dislike of Smith; a largely irrational, highly visceral antipathy borne out of personal loathing and professional derision. Davie Wales had been on the stand-up circuit seventeen years; he had toiled through the apprenticeship and was now acknowledged by his peers as a senior member of their establishment. He was usually a generous mentor to struggling newcomers. Assuming there was some talent to nurture. He really hated mediocre no-hopers who did not know when to quit. He was a professional jester but he didn't suffer fools. Fools like Smith. He could not stand nor understand them. They must know that they were not funny. Being at the centre of a horror-show like this, stared down by nearly three hundred despising eyes ought to work its way into the mind of even the most self-obsessed egotists. After all, didn't they claim to be good at observation?

Attending your own funeral was an unusual thing to do voluntarily. It might be a thrilling experience, just once to dig your own grave and deliver your own death sentence in front of dozens of stony-faced mourners. Mourners whose only wish is to bury you quickly and piss on the grave. But why put yourself through repeatedly and why should everyone else suffer too? Why spend ten minutes every Saturday night

making strangers hate you? Normally losers like Smith were only inflicted on small groups in tiny basement clubs or the upstairs rooms of pubs. Tonight, for some inexplicable reason, he was being allowed to make over a hundred new enemies all at once.

Davie could step in at any point and win the crowd back at the drop of a hat. If he wanted, he could do it at the expense of Smith and having the whole room laughing with him before he had even said a word. All he would have to do would be to walk onto the stage at a dead march. The tension would be burst as everyone felt the relief of release. He had done it many times before and it never failed. Tonight he was going to let the corpse swing a little longer before he cut it down.

He was not typically malicious but something about Smith got up his nose. Nothing in particular distinguished John Smith from any number of other unfunny wannabe comedians but Davie had taken an instant dislike to Smith when they had first met a few years ago. Perhaps it was the slight air of superiority and awkwardness with which Smith failed to fit in with the other comedians waiting to perform. Or perhaps it was that he was wearing on of those pathetic, supposedly amusing t-shirts. Davie could not remember but thought that this was exactly the sort of thing Smith might do. When Smith turned out to be as crap at telling jokes as he was wearing them, it had only cemented the hatred. Two years later and if anything, Smith was a shitter comedian but with a thicker skin that kept him coming back. Still, this was his biggest gig and this was the biggest fuck-up Davie could remember, maybe this would penetrate.

So he let Smith struggle on with some pathetic sequence of jokes about replacing the pieces in chess with different types of dinosaurs to make the game more interesting. Chess? For fuck's sake! Nobody would blame Davie if he went and broke

a chair over the man's head. In fact, why hadn't anyone in the audience thrown anything yet? Or shouted him down?

The Saturday night crowd at the Covent Garden was comedy's bear-pit; multi-millionaire stars of American sitcoms had come off this stage in tears. Tears that were often mercifully hidden by the beer dripping down their perfect features. Yet tonight the audience sat in ominous silence. He hoped that this was not the calm before the storm, because if it blew up they might lose their entertainment licence. Westminster Council would be unlikely to let them continue trading after a lynching. But if silent treatment was enough to stop Smith from ever performing again, Davie was going to let the audience suffer a little longer. The rest of humanity would thank them in the long run. This first three minutes had been uncomfortably long enough for most.

Eric Hayle was more uncomfortable than most. Twenty minutes ago he had done a line of coke as long as his cock and it was starting to work its South American magic. Or it would be, if it wasn't for this fucker on the stage spoiling his buzz. He was tempted to leave. But gave up on the idea when he realised how much hassle it would be to try and explain to his party that they were leaving. He doubted that this Thai prostitute spoke much more than massage parlour English, and while Raoul, his favourite Brazilian rent-boy, was a very talented linguist, he was very petulant and would not leave without a scene. So Eric gave up and resigned himself to being trapped in a darkened basement, folded into a highly unergonomic chair. The Viagra he had popped was starting to make it's presence felt too. He tried distracting himself by texting Hans to see if the party was still on for later. When a Berlin fetish night comes to London you can never be entirely sure what might go down. And this was tolerably interesting in its own way. He had seen and done things a lot more unpleasant in his long life. As Mih or Liu or whatever her

name was would probably find out later. His night was young. Eric Hayle was ninety-one years old.

Despite Davie's doubts, John Smith was not enjoying his evening much either, and to Davie's potential glee he was seriously considering his future. And he seemed to have a lot of time to do this in the gaps between the jokes. Gaps that in his interminable rehearsal he had left for laughs. Having practised so much for what was the largest showcase for his talent, he was unable to deviate from this timing. This was of course his problem. One of them. Poor timing was one thing, lack of decent material did not help, but having no discernible talent to showcase was the real iceberg to his Titanic comic pretensions.

Though his perpetual failure was more in the style of King Henry VIII's hopeless vanity, the Mary Rose. Never once had he got out of the comedy harbour before sinking under the weight of his over-preparation, his archaic jokes top-heavy with his intellectual arrogance. In real life, Smith had a dry sarcastic wit, he had the ability to make his friends laugh with arch and accurate dissection of the preoccupations of their small circle. This convinced him he was funny, and he was, though in a particular wordy and unworldly way. Sadly it was a brand of humour that did not sell well to the customers of the comedy store. Right now it was selling like hot cowpats.

He noticed the word 'OFF' on the handle of his microphone. At first he saw it just for what it was, a tiny white stencilled word on a black background. At the same time, he really 'saw' it, his vision focused down to a narrow beam, momentarily unaware of anything else in the room or anything else in his mind. And then as suddenly as it had arrived this fleeting moment of intense conscious experience was lost. He became aware of the room again and of all the people in it and of how they felt about him. He had lost track of where he was in

his script. It was completely gone. He could not remember a single one of his jokes. (This was a good thing, though he had not yet realised it.) He became aware of a panic like none he had ever experienced before. His bowels had turned to ice water and his intestines were rearranging themselves to escape the cold. In the process they bustled uncomfortably against his stomach and pancreas, releasing acid and bile that rose alarmingly in his throat. His adrenal glands became aware of the commotion and flooded his body with adrenalin. It was this that saved him. And made him famous.

The audience had noticed that John had not said anything for nine seconds and a second is a long time in comedy. For the first three seconds they had assumed this to be an over-long pause. For the second three seconds they struggled to work out if this was some joke that they were failing to get. After sitting through the last three minutes, it was a feeling they were becoming accustomed to but they recognised this as something new. In the final three seconds they divided evenly between two camps. Those who thought and prayed this was the end and those who had registered the panic spreading across Smith's face. The second camp split into a faction who were feeling dreadful, stomachs knotted in sympathy with the poor performer and a faction of those who were starting to get excited in anticipation of an on-stage breakdown. Davie Wales and Eric Hayle were both in this last category but they would be disappointed and delighted respectively.

“Whoa!” Smith broke the silence but not the tension.

“A few moments ago I was wishing I was dead. I would have given my life to be anywhere but here, but now I am not so sure. I can feel my heart racing, like I have just escaped a race with a leopard. I feel great. I feel alive and I like it. I had a scare and I survived. But this is what I am wondering; Why is it that this is what it takes?” John knew that he had not quite

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worked out what he was trying to say so he went slowly. He saw it clearly in his head but had to untangle the thread to lead himself logically through it.

“Why is it that this is what it takes to make me wake up?” he continued. “To make me stop and look? To really look. I want to be clear here. I want to try and tell you what I mean because it has amazed me. Amazed me that I have never noticed this and I want to know if you are the same.”

The uncertainty in the room indicated that, by and large they had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. It is unlikely that Smith had noticed this and it was even more unlikely that it would have mattered to him if he did. He was at this point mainly talking to himself. He carried on regardless, picking up the pace and pacing the stage.

“I have awoken to the moment. In my plodding life from past to future, I had never noticed ‘now’ before. Not before now, not properly. I had always gone along reflecting on what was going on or reacting to whatever had happened. But when you are reflecting or reacting you are attached to the past. Your attention is engaged with events that have already occurred. You might be getting something right, but you are lost to the world as it unfurls around you.” Smith did not know exactly where he was heading but he had found his feet and was starting to warm to his theme.

“If I was not looking back, I was preparing to act. Planning for the future, which might be ten minutes from now, it might be next week or a couple of years. You are laying down waiting for the world to wash over you. Between the past and the future there is a tiny sliver in which we live. Except we do not use it to live, the present does not get a look in. We stand here, arranging the remains of the past into what we would like for our futures.” He looked around the room. One usually

could not see much beyond the stage lights and John could not see the people looking at him. But he knew from the silence that everyone was attending to his every action. It made him even more aware of himself, of what he was doing right at that moment. Everything was beyond real. Exactly the same but different, as if he had been seeing the world in black and white and the colour had switched on.

“I have just woken up to the present, I had always been absent from it because I was not paying attention to myself. Nor to the world. And it took the visceral shock of this death by comedy to make me spot it. I am not talking about living your dreams. That is trite American trash. Your dreams will always be implausible and distant.

Or else I was frozen in the amber of experience. You are either observing the world or looking inwards. It seems very hard to do both simultaneously. Yes, we have times when we are living ‘for the moment’, but these are the times we are most likely to be lost to ourselves. We are so wrapped up in our enjoyment of whatever intense pleasure it is that is pleasing us to reflect on the self that is experiencing this buzz. We do not pause on the dance-floor to take stock of our mental state; we do not become contemplative in the middle of the plunge of a bungee.

Or just now, as you were sitting there in the audience enjoying some comedy. Or you were originally back then before I messed it up. But after that, after it stopped being a performance. Then we’ve had to do something new and that has woken us up.

To put it another way. What is like to be you, sitting there right now, staring out of your eyes, thinking your thoughts? I cannot know, but most of the time you don’t know either. Because most of the time, it is not like anything. You just are.

But you are unaware of who you are. You do not look inwards because the world is rushing past so fast on the outside that you are caught up in the experience of things rather than the experience of experience itself.

Do you know of anyone who has had cancer and has not had their life changed by it? Tragic isn't it, that it takes the face of death to wake people up to life. It would be more remarkable to find someone whose outlook on life wasn't changed by cancer. Who took it in their stride because they knew they were liable to die anyway."

John Smith was starting to enjoy himself. He was getting a reaction. He was figuring things out and able to explain them to the people in the audience. He took the luxury of looking round the room, becoming aware of his surroundings. He saw the 'OFF' switch again and stopped. It was turning back into a performance.

"No! Stop! Look, you are all getting comfy in your seats again. I am getting relaxed into telling you this shit. We are back to the beginning where you're the audience and I am the performer." He looked around. "Just a few moments ago we were all uncomfortable. It was not 'nice' but at least it made us think. Even if all you thought was 'I wish this idiot would quit it?'

"The rest of the time we are not really here to think. We prefer to play mental games. The comedians make you laugh and some of it may stick with you but mostly it's just a way to fill an evening. To take your mind off things. Well, it's a waste. But I am not saying it is the opposite either.

"I am not saying we should be alert and questioning at all times, going though life thinking about every little detail. It would be exhausting, impossible.

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