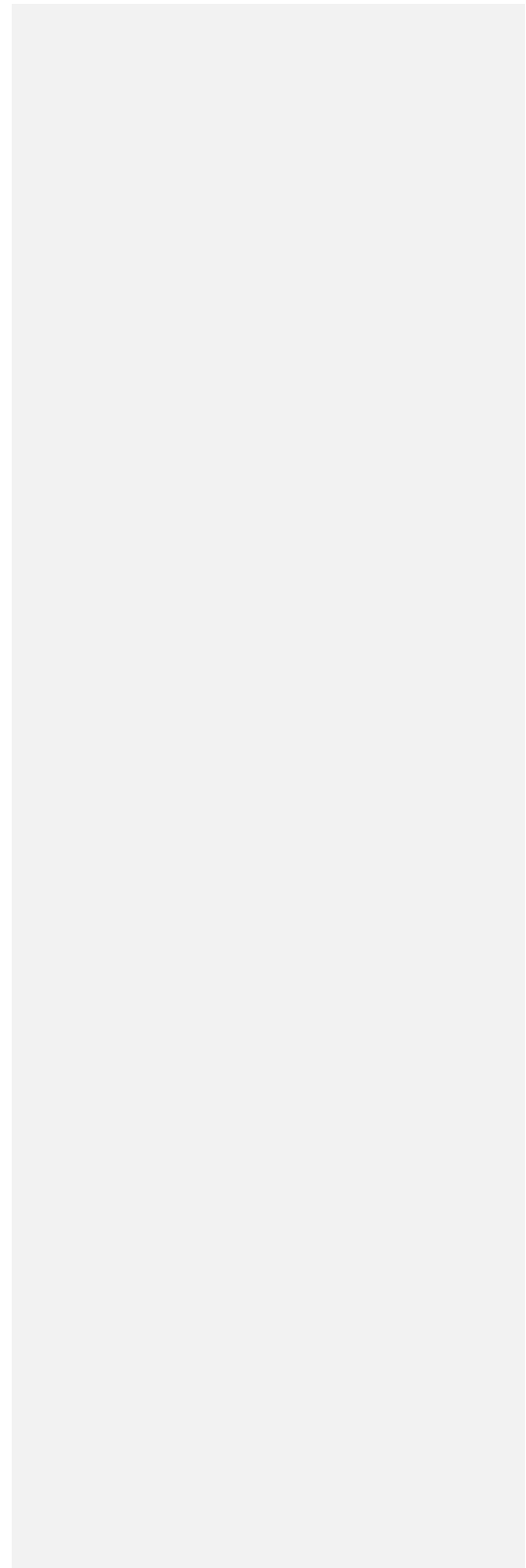


THE FOREST OF STONE



ALSO BY LANCE MANION

Merciful Flush
Results May Vary
The Ball Washer
Homo sayswhaticus
The Trembling Fist
The Song Between Her Legs
What You Don't Understand
neXt
Tales of Adventure With Nap Lapkin
Dizzying Depths
Broken World Stories

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FORWARD

When you walk through most of the largest churches in Europe, you'll usually notice one striking feature: the Gothic arches. Also known as pointed or ogival arches, a Gothic arch is an arch with a pointed crown, whose two curving sides meet at a relatively sharp angle at the top of the arch. The end result is a feeling of walking underneath a towering forest canopy.

Emulating something that exists but is different. Not elevated per se, just different. Tastes vary. This is what I think flash fiction is all about. Taking a short walk with an author beneath their forest of stone.

If you believe that the Gothic arch is superior to the round arch only because it is more structurally sound, because the weight is distributed around the arch's curve and into the supporting columns or walls, then you're probably not going to enjoy the following stories.

On the other hand, if you can close your eyes and put yourself in one of these massive cathedrals, looking up, hearing your footsteps on the marble floor, inhaling and smelling the place, and feel momentarily overwhelmed, like each arch is pointing towards heaven, then maybe you will get something out of them.

Either way, let's set off. Hope you're wearing comfortable shoes.

Cavity Samantha

"The thing under my bed waiting to grab my ankle isn't real. I know that, and I also know that if I'm careful to keep my foot under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle."

— Stephen King *Night Shift*

As both an avid reader and moviegoer, she was a big fan of Stephen King and the horror genre in general. The problem was that she was very tall. Not tall by a woman's standard, tall by any standard. Discounting giraffes of course. Thus there were times she did not have the luxury of not allowing her feet to hang over the bed.

Sure, there were nights where she tried to stay all curled up, especially after particularly scary book or film, but eventually, she needed to stretch out to get to sleep. As she tried to drift off, her feet hung there over the abyss, waiting to feel the icy embrace of some demonic creature.

It became clear there was only one course of action. Iguanas, when cornered by predators, will detach their tail in an effort to distract their pursuer. The tail will flop around drawing the attention of whatever is trying to eat the iguana while they scamper off to safety. Something along these lines was in order.

To that end, although she was a very health-conscious person, she avoided any exercises that strengthened her ankles. She avoided any vitamins that supported healthy connective tissue. She even went so far as to avoid sunlight as it would sneak a little Vitamin D to her tendons.

Then one night as she was falling asleep, her feet hanging over the bed, she did indeed feel the grip of some unearthly creature. Terrified, she screamed and her feet popped off and began to wriggle around the floor. That's when she realized the flaw in the iguana strategy. Without a tail, they still have four feet to run away with.

She had stumps. Not ideal.

In the end, she was lucky that the demon was so freaked out by seeing her feet come off that it beat a hasty retreat back to the shadows that had spawned it.

"I am nothing special; just a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten. But in one respect I have succeeded as gloriously as anyone who's ever lived: I've loved another with all my heart and soul; and to me, this has always been enough."

— Nicholas Sparks *The Notebook*

As both an avid reader and moviegoer, she was a big fan of Nicholas Sparks and the romance genre in general. The problem was that she no longer had feet. While this solved her initial issue with them hanging over the bed, they now sat neatly underneath the bed like a pair of slippers, it made finding a suitable partner, an already treacherous endeavor, that much more difficult.

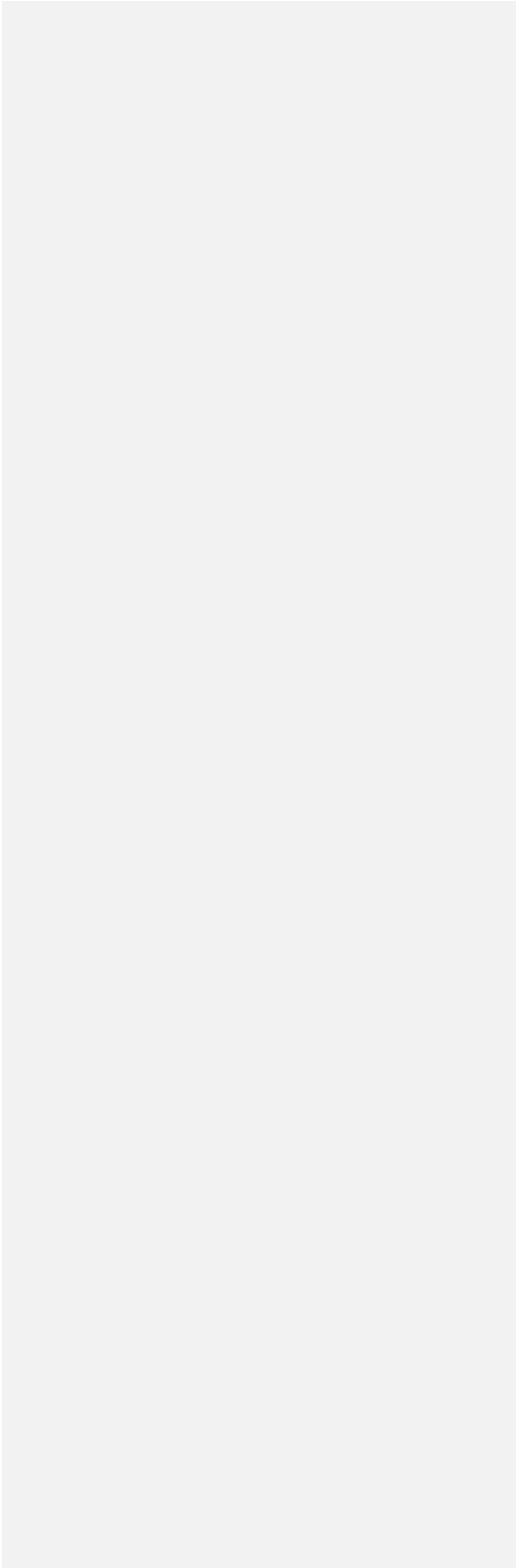
It became clear there was only one course of action. As a child, she played a game called Operation in which the objective is to remove various body parts without setting off the buzzer. It was a game that required eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills, much like romance itself, except in the case of love rarely does anyone's nose light up.

To that end, she joined a number of dating apps and began to communicate with men from around the world. She was always very honest about not having any feet.

Then one night as she was sitting in bed chatting with one of these men, she became aware that she was developing real feelings for him. That's when she realized the flaw in the Operation strategy. She was unable to remove her heart for safekeeping. This terrified her, but eventually she was comfortable enough with this man to show him what she kept under her bed.

He was so freaked out that he beat a hasty retreat to the shadows that had spawned him.

Her nose lit up.



the eggpiphany

We walked together under the night sky. Not hand in hand of course- she did not like overt displays of intimacy or covert acts of intimacy, but the next best thing. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and she commented on the handful of stars that twinkled above our heads.

"There's a lot more than a handful," I pointed out.

"Depends on the size of the hand," came her reply.

And so we walked on, not hand in hand.

Finally she spoke again. "I noticed that you're not eating the non-white eggs." So there it was. The point of the walk.

She had a friend who owned chickens and recently began buying our eggs from that friend. The first time I opened the carton, I almost fell over. There were eggs of every shade. Brown and blue and cream. My head swam. There were a few white ones that were white scattered amongst the others and I immediately grabbed those for my omelet.

She was waiting for an answer. I gathered my thoughts before offering my defense. I decided on an argument centered around childhood memories. "Non-white eggs creep me out. I remember my mom making me eggs every weekend and I never saw any egg being cracked open that wasn't white. In a world of constant change, I find them comforting."

I felt pretty confident I'd given an unassailable and, if I say so myself, incisive retort.

"You're being stupid," she said.

I suddenly found myself feeling exceptionally assailable.

She continued. "You realize the color of the egg is based entirely on the color of the hen, right? White eggs come from white hens, specifically the Leghorn chicken breed. Other colors of hens lay other colors of eggs. The innards themselves are completely and entirely the same."

I absorbed the new information. "Hmmm. I thought stores just whitewashed them somehow."

"Nope. A common misconception." If this conversation was a wrestling match, what she said next was the equivalent of climbing up to the top rope and the launching herself on top of my prone body. In my head, I saw her in flight.

"Different breeds of hen are genetically coded to release different colored pigments as the egg passes through their oviduct."

As I laid there hearing the crowd cheering her on, I couldn't help hearing the last word as "oviduck." I laughed before I could stop myself and the ring and the crowd and her brightly colored spandex disappeared and we were back to walking together under the handful of stars. I played off the laugh as a byproduct of having an egg epiphany (an eggpiphany?) and I felt confident she bought it.

Not wanting to lose the momentum, I mentioned that the strength of an egg's shell comes from the mix of both inorganic and organic matter that it's made of. When I threw in that a nanostructured mineral associated with osteopontin is responsible for its tremendous resiliency, I saw her give me a sideways look and smile.

It was my turn to ascend to the top rope. "Had Humpty Dumpty hit the ground at the correct angle, he would have walked away just fine and saved the king and his soldiers a lot of trouble."

She smiled again.

"Herman Hesse once observed that the bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Whoever will be born must destroy a world."

The referee began to count her out.

The next best thing to holding hands.

Don't

When talking about bands, the term "shoegazer" refers to artists that spend their time on stage staring down at the floor, motionless as they play.

When talking about the cover band that was currently on stage, audience members would say that they were on a whole other level.

During the first song, most of them just assumed that they were mishearing the lyrics. They knew the song so well, they just added the missing words, but after the third or fourth chorus, they realized the lead singer was seemingly encouraging them to step on his blue suede shoes.

When the song was over, he mumbled, head down, a quick "thanks" (that sounded more like a question) at the smattering of applause.

Sheepishly, the band began another song.

Ironically, it was a Nina Simone cover that came out as *Let Me Be Misunderstood*. Mission accomplished, cover band. The final notes spilled out to near silence.

His hands clenching and unclenching nervously, the lead singer approached the mic. "I drive a 2006 Suzuki Esteem. It's a piece of shit. Let that sink in. A piece of shit called Esteem. I hope that explains some things." With that, the band launched, although launched might be an overstatement, into *Stop Me Now* by Queen.

Dream It's Over by Crowded House followed.

They were really not cooking now. The keyboardist spilled his drink on his keyboard and the drummer lost a stick and couldn't find another. With only one drumstick, he pantomimed hitting them together to start the next song, so *Let Me Down* by the Beatles started poorly.

The lead singer couldn't bring himself to look up even once during the entire song. Somehow, this made him sort of endearing to the audience and they began to warm up to the band. By the end of the song, some were even singing along.

*It's in my head, darling, I hope
That you'll be here when I need you the most, so
Let me, let me, let me down
Let me down*

When the song ended, a few of the people near the front continued singing for a little while. It almost seemed cathartic for them. People got up out of their chairs and approached the band, a growing sense of anticipation to see what was coming next.

They did not seem disappointed as *Look Back in Anger* from Oasis came pumping out of the speakers. The reaction was so positive, the lead singer almost looked up as he was singing.

Almost.

When the song ended, there was a roar of applause. The band had the crowd exactly where they had no intention of wanting them.

The guy running the lights dimmed them for a few seconds to build tension. In those few seconds, the drummer found his other stick. Energized, he began to work the pedal on the kick drum with increased enthusiasm and the audience began to clap along in time. As soon as they recognized *Forget About Me* by Simple Minds, the place went bananas. When it came time for the chorus, you could barely hear the lead singer over the crowd's full-throated vocals.

Without a moment's hesitation, the band went seamlessly into Fleetwood Mac's *Stop*.

The place went apeshit. A middle-aged woman gave serious consideration to lifting her shirt and flashing her boobs, but decided against it. A nearly 300 lb trucker with an enormous beard felt no such hesitation.

And then it was time for the last song. Lighters materialized and the crowd was swaying as one. The place was about to burst. Years of pent-up frustration and disappointment was about to spill out of every man and woman in attendance. Everyone just knew a climax was about to be reached... and then the piano part started...

*Just a small town girl
Livin' in a lonely world
She took the midnight train goin' anywhere
Just a city boy
Born and raised in South Detroit
He took the midnight train goin' anywhere*

The singer just stood back from the mic and let the audience sing it. From the stage, it was deafening. Women began to openly weep as they sang and the bottom lips of even the most rugged-looking men began to tremble slightly as the ending of the song, and the evening, fast approached.

*Stop believin'
Don't hold on to that feelin'
Streetlight, people
Stop, believin'
Don't hold on
Streetlights, people
Stop believin'
Don't hold on to that feelin'*

An hour or so later, the lead singer of the cover band Don't made his way out to the parking lot to leave. Smiling. He was about to get into his car when he stopped and walked around to the back. A few years before, somebody had written LOW SELF in front of where the name Esteem was emblazoned on the trunk. He stared at the words for a few minutes. His smile got broader. "Damn right," he said to no one.

the bell jarred

When I was younger, I remember reading a book by Arthur Herzog called *Orca*. In a nutshell, the book tells the story of a fisherman, Captain Nolan, who accidentally kills a pregnant female killer whale and her offspring, which causes her male partner to seek revenge against him. The male orca begins to terrorize the town in which the fisherman is staying, eating various people and blowing up ships, until the townsfolk drive the fisherman out and he is forced to flee in his boat, with the angry orca hot in pursuit.

"I brought this gun to shoot him. Yes, yes I did. But I knew when it came time to do it, I couldn't do it. So I got to thinking and I thought, Well, what if what you say is right. That whales can communicate. Then I thought I'd look at him. Right in the eye. And I'd tell him the killing of his wife and his child was a terrible accident. That I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I'd tell him that I was sorry. I hope he'd forgive me."

— Captain Nolan, *Orca*

The orca finally catches him up in the Arctic, sinks his boat, and leaves the fisherman stranded on an iceberg. Their eyes meet and the fisherman finally comes to terms with what he has done. Content that he has made his point, the orca swims off.

I loved the book. I was always a fan of whales but this made them even more intriguing to me.

When the movie was eventually made, I was the first one in line at the theater. Popcorn in hand, I sat back and waited for the powerful final scene. A scene that ended up being very different than what I'd been expecting.

In the movie, the orca flips up the fisherman and hits him with its tail like he was a beach ball at SeaWorld. The fisherman, broken beyond repair, sinks dead beneath the icy waters.

"What the fuuuuuuuuuuck?!" I remember thinking, popcorn falling from my limp hands. It never occurred to me that a movie could differ from the book. I really thought that it was illegal or something to change key elements of the original story. I was truly devastated at the death of the fisherman.

Why do I mention this?

Because it taught me a valuable lesson, one that I plan on remembering well as I begin to work on the movie adaptation of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*. There is a certain responsibility that a writer has, both to the original author of a literary work as well as the audience that the film hopes to attract. A responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

Especially considering that *The Bell Jar* deals with such difficult issues as suicide, mental illness, identity, and social norms. Semi-autobiographical, it was the iconic poet's only full-length novel.

I plan on making sure I show the humanity of the lead character, Esther Greenwood, as she faces her many struggles.

"But when it came right down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get."

— Esther Greenwood in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

The only slight change I will make is to the ending.

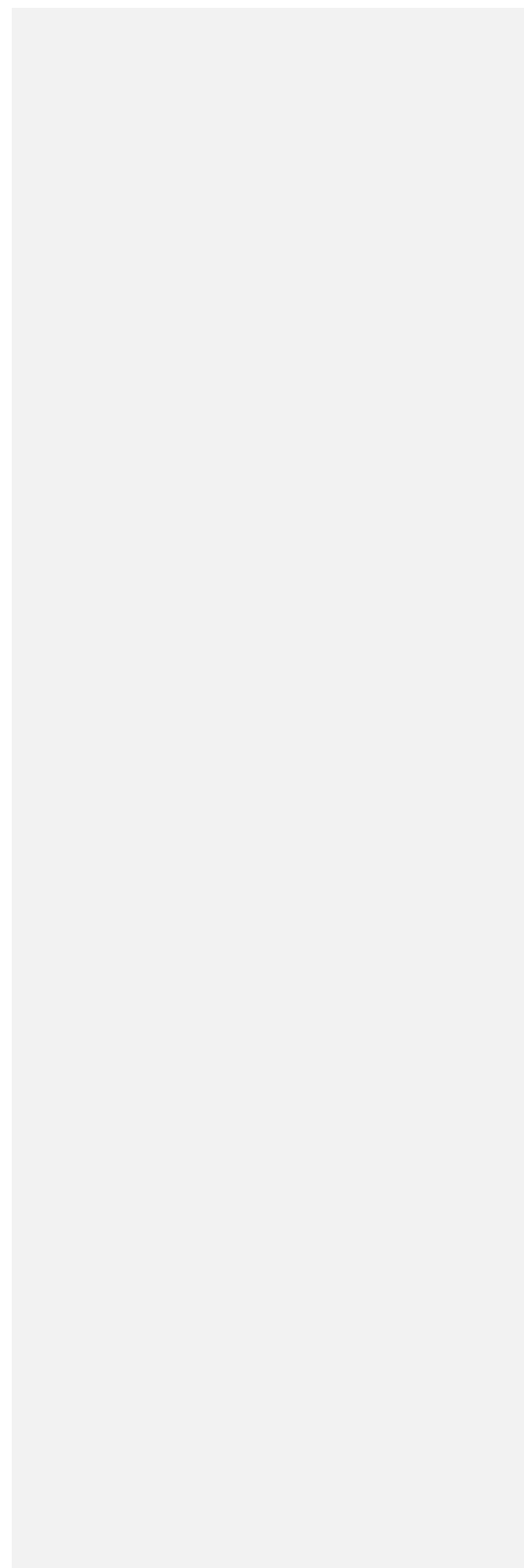
In the book, Esther, who makes great progress in a mental hospital thanks to her psychologist Dr. Nolan's talk therapy, insulin injections, and electric shock therapy, leaves to continue her college education.

In the movie version, spoiler alert, Dr. Nolan will end up being the wife of Captain Nolan and will talk Esther into joining them for an excursion into Arctic waters that will end with her being flipped up by an

orca and hit with its tail like she was a beach ball at SeaWorld. Esther, broken beyond repair, will then sink dead beneath the icy waters.

Box office gold.

I think both Sylvia and Esther would approve.



the noise of life

"I don't think anyone in this room will disagree with me when I say that retail sales are hard. It's hard, plain and simple."

From the look of the faces gathered in the conference room, nobody was in the mood to disagree. Or agree.

The man that stood in front of them, a hired gun from corporate, brought in to settle some ongoing friction between employees at various outlet stores, puffed himself up even further. Many in the crowd were waiting for a button to pop off his suit jacket and fly across the room.

"The thing I keep hearing in these disputes and disagreements is that both of the parties feel that they are getting the shit end of the stick," he said matter-of-factly. He paused and looked around the room, giving off the impression that the words that followed would justify his presence at corporate. As if these next words would have everyone turning to each other and nodding, acknowledging that not just anyone gets to be at corporate. That it takes more than expensive hair gel.

He picked up his bottle of water and took a leisurely swig before continuing. "The question is, why is there shit on the stick to begin with?"

He smiled. No doubt the way a spider smiles when he sees a fly get entangled in his web, if spiders could smile or corporate executives could shimmy down a thread and eat the insides of a helpless insect.

A small rustling went through the audience. Not so much like wind making its way across dry leaves as cattle "rustling."

The man leaned forward and asked "Any questions?"

A dozen hands shot up. He pointed to the man seated closest to him. "What exactly is the shit you are referring to?" inquired the man.

"That's a good question. Why don't you take a shot at answering it?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I just wanted to say 'shit' out loud in front of everyone," answered the seated man. There was a ripple of laughter that swept across the room and the man leaned back in his chair looking quite pleased with himself.

Not laughing was a young woman who was quite taken with the man from corporate. So much so that she discreetly opened up a well-worn copy of Carl Jung's *The Red Book* and began to scribble down the beginnings of a poem on the back page; *Trying to say what can't be articulated. Is this a fight or a dance? I can see for miles behind me but looking ahead I can only see as far as my nose.*

"What exactly does the stick represent in your analogy?" yelled a woman in back without raising her hand. Pandemonium seemed only a heartbeat away.

"Another good question," said the corporate man, loosening his tie and trying to regain control of the room. "What do you think it means?"

"She just wanted to say 'stick,'" someone else shouted.

Pandemonium had arrived.

The man from corporate looked around and realized that the people seated before him had taken the necessary precautions to avoid accountability. This was made clear by the Hispanic gentleman who had successfully fulfilled his desire to say the word "shit" in front of his contemporaries sporting a nametag that announced him as Annie Cho.

"Someone got shit on my stick!" came another voice.

"My stick! My beautiful stick!"

"Someone got peanut butter on my end of the chocolate," offered another.

The man standing at the head of the table suddenly wished that he had a stick. A large stick with a pointy end. They hadn't even given him the chance to take off his jacket and dramatically roll up his sleeves. "No wonder retail is dying," he thought to himself before packing up and beginning his long ride back to corporate.

Hot Gun: Maverick

There is a growing body of evidence that the world we are experiencing is just one of many possible realities. Each decision made by a conscious creature creating an entirely different/parallel world. A multiverse of infinite different scenarios based loosely on our own circumstance.

I would like to take you to one of those worlds.

Like ours, Tom Cruise is the star of the biggest movie on the planet. Except in this particular planet it is called *Hot Gun: Maverick*.

Why?

Because in this reality there is one small difference; there are no aircraft. Air travel is done exclusively by hot air balloon. This could be explained in a number of ways. Against all odds, the civilization in question might never have figured out flight. Electricity? Yes. Thrust? No. Or perhaps they have strict rules against it. Preferring to travel, and fight their wars, in a more serene and dignified manner.

Whatever the case, in this world, Tom Cruise plays Lieutenant Pete "Maverick" Mitchell, a cocky balloon pilot who is once again called into action due to a set of circumstance identical to that of our version of the movie.

The trailer starts the same, the heart-racing visuals of a ballooncraft carrier swarming with crewmen, the blood-pumping song *Danger Zone*, sung by the same Kenny Loggins, thumping away in the background as the men scramble to inflate a hot air balloon.

It's important to note two things. First, the ballooncraft carrier is identical to the aircraft carriers we use. Huge. Bristling with the latest technology and whatnot. The only difference being that it transports hot air balloons. Which brings us to the second thing... it takes about thirty minutes to inflate one.

Audiences in this reality are a lot more patient.

I'll get this out of the way right now: the running time of the movie is about forty-three hours. People invest a lot when they go to the theater. They pack a change of clothes. In the first movie, when Maverick does a flyby of the tower, it takes over seven minutes before the guy notices him floating by, smiling the whole time in those great sunglasses, and spills coffee on his shirt. When it does finally happen, the audience erupts in cheers, feeling the seven minutes was more than worth it.

Did I mention the trailer for the movie is over an hour?

It includes the flashback montage of Maverick being cleared of responsibility in the tragic death of his Radar Intercept Officer, LTJG Nick "Goose" Bradshaw (who fell out of the basket due to unforeseen "balloon wash") and how it haunts him to this day, and it shows the scene where he comes to the aid of Tom "Iceman" Kazansky, when the two enemy balloons shown on radar suddenly are revealed to be four. "I'll be there in forty five minutes!" he says to Iceman, while back on the carrier, a senior officer mutters, "It will be over in thirty."

It sounds like a long time to us, but in this reality, audiences expect a hot air balloon fight to last an extremely long time.

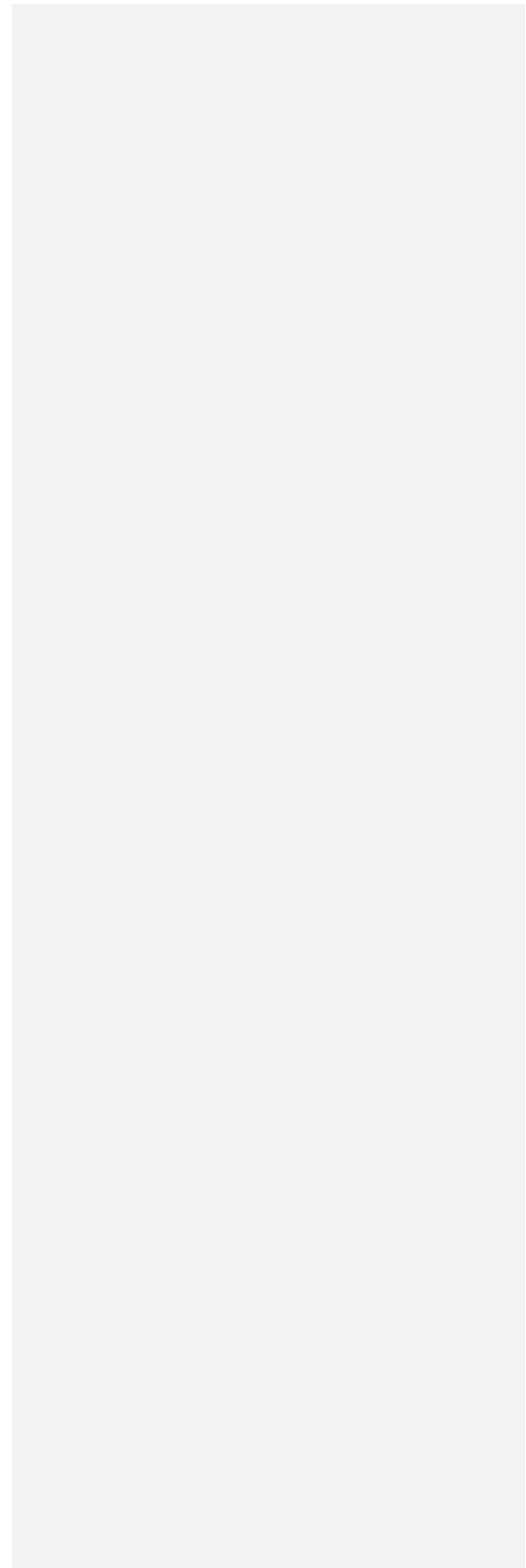
In the new movie dominating their box office, and causing all sorts of chaos due to staffing issues with everyone being gone for almost two days, the plot is the same. Maverick has to try and teach the brash, know-it-all younger pilots how to maneuver their balloons through a narrow canyon, up a steep mountainside, down again to the bottom, deliver their payload, and then float back out the other side. Eventually, it becomes clear to everyone that only he can pull off such a crazy mission.

When it comes time for the action sequences, no expense is spared. Audiences can hear the roar of the burner as it injects the flame into the envelope and they can practically smell the burning wicker as the balloons fight it out over hostile territory.

The hours just fly by.

Until there is only the memory of balloons floating lazily back to the carriers to celebrate their big win as the credits roll.

I think about their version of *Top Gun* and I have to admit I feel a small pang of envy. I also feel a small pang of pity if you don't take a few moments and truly picture their version in your head for a few minutes. Think through the details. It was the best part of my day yesterday. I must have laughed a dozen times.



this is the sea

Henry tugged on the skin of his hand to see if it would snap back into place.

It did not.

A sure sign that he wasn't drinking enough water. He knew that he should be drinking at least eight glasses a day.

He knew it, goddamnit.

On the other hand, drinking too much water causes hyponatremia, a condition where sodium levels in your body drop too low. It can be fatal. A little nausea or a little diarrhea and then BOOM, you're dead. No coming back from dead. While his friends might have noted that the waitress was giving them good service, he worried that she might be an assassin sent to kill him. Smiling the whole time.

Then he read that the amount of water he needs is based on his weight, so every meal, the dance begins again. Walking the tightrope.

His life hanging in the balance.

When he was young, his mother told him that you can drown in three inches of water. He doesn't remember why, perhaps he was running by the ocean and not paying much attention to the tide coming in. Maybe he was fooling around while feeding their goldfish. It's not like they had a pool, so he doesn't remember how it even came up. This was, after all, the same woman who told him if you look out a window long enough, something will come along to look at. Something that otherwise would never have happened. He never *really* believed it anyway.

One day, he needed to know, once and for all, so he filled the tub with three inches of water.

That's where they found him.

the great white menace

I was watching a documentary on great white sharks and the whole point of it was to explain to the viewer that these magnificent fish are greatly misunderstood and should not be feared. They are beautiful and noble creatures. Graceful. Majestic. The platitudes began to pile up. The rare attacks on humans are almost always a case of mistaken identity.

To reinforce this premise, they cut to a number of grisly video clips showing these sharks attacking their intended prey, the sea lion.

It was some pretty horrifying stuff.

Which got me to thinking, what a completely different documentary this would be if I were a sea lion.

When this thought occurred to me, they were interviewing a professor of some shark stuff or other, perched behind his stuffy office desk and droning on about how successful sharks have been throughout the ages. Suddenly, sitting in his place, and looking quite comfortable there, was a sea lion. His front flippers on the desk, he began to bark out what appeared to be a rather pointed anti-shark diatribe.

I don't speak sea lion, but he had a rather stern look on his face, nothing like you see at Sea World, and as if to accentuate his point, another round of video clips started up, each one more brutal than the last. Sea lions being hurled into the air from below, the water stained red with their blood, entrails hanging out from their bellies, the sharks looking like they're grinning and having a ball, chunks of *zalophus californianus* stuck between their enormous teeth.

When the camera returned to our sea lion sitting in his leather chair, you could plainly see that he was thinking, "Great white sharks are fucking cold-blooded murderers."

As if to prove his point beyond a shadow of a doubt, more video clips followed. Videos I'd never seen before. Grieving mothers on the shore watching their daughters being consumed. Fathers scanning the horizon looking for their sons. One in particular tugged at the heartstrings. The father standing with a baseball glove on the ground in front of his flippers, staring off into the distance. Suddenly, you realize that he'd accidentally overthrown the ball during a game of catch and his son had swum out to retrieve it, only to be swallowed whole. "Why did I have to put so much on it? Why were we even playing so close to the water?" That sea lion will have to live with that the rest of his days. The waves lapping gently against the shore. The enormity of the moment. A chilling scene.

By the time the camera returned to the sea lion sitting at his desk, tears were rolling down my face.

And the sea lion behind the desk sported a full beard and was wearing spectacles and a jacket with leather patches where his elbows would be if he had any.

A pipe hung in his mouth.

He barked again. This time slower. Glaring at the camera. "These things are nothing but mindless killing machines!" he seemed to be saying. Again, my sea lion is a bit rusty.

When he finished, the pipe, almost miraculously, still sat in his mouth.

The credits rolled.

I was emotionally spent.

Next up was a documentary featuring a squid sitting at a desk, full beard, glasses and a jacket with eight leather patches where his elbows would be if he had any, about to show video evidence of why sea lions are a menace.

I couldn't bear to watch so I flipped the channel just in time to see another documentary starting up, this one featuring a crab sitting at a desk, full beard, glasses sitting awkwardly on his shell and a jacket with ten leather patches where his elbows would be if he had any, about to show video evidence of why squid are such a menace.

I kept hitting the remote until I finally found a *Jaws* marathon in full swing.

the regular

Dylan likes to play blackjack, but he is not a savant or math genius. It seems like every story involving a person who gambles chooses someone who is phenomenal at it and can beat the game if they just put their mind to it.

Not so with Dylan.

He finds the idea of counting cards as nothing more than hubris. Man's attempt to know the unknowable. As he sits at the table waiting for the next card to come out, the shoe is illuminated as if it were a door to a lighted room as seen by someone in a dark room on the other side.

Dylan recently had to move back home. He took great pains to move into the basement as opposed to the room he grew up in. That just seemed too sad. That room seemed like a museum of his childhood, as opposed to space in which a grown man now lives. Sacred. Not to be defiled by his adult presence. Once cards are shuffled, there is nothing and no one who can change the order in which they come out. He can count all he wants, but that next card is inexorable. It doesn't care what time is it or if Dylan is winning or losing.

It is what it is and nothing can change it.

Dylan loves that about the next card.

He is forced on a semi-regular basis to climb the stairs of his home and pass by his old room on the way to shower. Sometimes he moves aside in order to let his younger self go barreling down the stairs. He does so exorably.

He was who he was.

So he sits at the table and waits for the dealer to draw the next card. Not knowing if he will get the card he wants or not. And that card will lead to another and another. Not knowing if the night will end with him up or down.

He loves the smell of his house. It's like a scrapbook for his nose.

He loves the smell of the casino. One of the last places you can smell cigarette smoke. The green felt on the table has a smell. He found it helps to be caressing it as you inhale. You'd think that type of behavior would draw attention but he's found people are too busy fiddling with their chips.

People who come and go all have their own smell. Caressing them as you inhale might get you noticed... and not in a good way.

He's not a bad blackjack player but neither is he particularly good. Certainly not good enough to make a living at it. That despite all of the YouTube videos he watches on the topic of "beating the house."

One night, he turns to a guy who he has played with on a number of occasions and says "*The Replacements* have a song where Paul, the lead singer, sings 'I used to live at home, now I stay at the house.' Do you think the guy he's singing about moved out and then came back because of circumstances beyond his control or do you think he just never left?"

"Hard to say," the man replies. "The real question is, will it affect the next card that you're dealt?"

Dylan thinks for a moment then says, "Nope."

"So it doesn't really matter now, does it?"

Dylan does not say anything more on the topic.

A half dozen shoes later, the man speaks again. "Did you just sniff me?"

"Nope."

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