



Penance with a Time Traveler

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Comatose Jean Shagryne felt blindly ahead in the darkest pitch, fingertips fumbling to identify the expansive concave enclosure before her. Or was the wall convex? Inky blackness messed with her neurons as readily as did her sense of touch. Before long her arm slipped through mook up to her elbow, palm brushing something immense and coarse, like a thick rope. “What’s tugging the yarn on my scarf?” came a human voice. She immediately withdrew her forearm, shuddering with the heebee-jeebees. How’s that? She panicked over the novelty. Then she awoke.

As she acclimated, her sensory perceptions were limited to olfactory and auditory. What she smelled was antiseptic cleanser on top of her own sour rank. What she felt was plastic against her face and fabric on her body, something soft beneath her weight. She thought she was sitting, standing, upside-down then lying supine. The female voice she heard was unfamiliar, clarion and somewhat sharp:

“...yes! she is coming out of the coma; be hypervigilant, now, Nurse Monica.”

Another voice, alto, scratchy: “Absolutely, Nurse Practitioner Monica.”

The Monicas giggled, hovering over the spinster schoolteacher in her clearing field of vision. In unison they chimed: “How was your sleep, Miss Shagryne? We hope you’re well rested! Are you able to speak?”

They removed a light plastic face mask from their patient. “Nitroglycerine,” they burbled; “glycerine, glycerine,” they sang off-key from a radio pop song barely memorable to Jean; “glycerine.”

Meanwhile Jean’s eyes adjusted to the daylit silhouettes of her nurses. They were each attractive in a mundane way, same height, same cosmetic-dos and hair-dos. One wore scrubs decorated with smiley faces, the other in plain clothes with a clipboard.

Hurriedly, the smiley-face Monica asked: “What do you remember!”

Choking on her parched tongue over words, her voice somehow a gravelly faintness, Jean said, “Gelatinous neon-pastel pulses and whorls of a distant traveling carnival, a ferris wheel hypnotic swirl that changes colors.”

Monica with clipboard: “She has sensory deprivation going on in that brain. Let’s stimulate her. Would that be all right, if we stimulate you, Miss Shagryne?”

“Y-y-y-yes,” croaked the spinster.

The Monicas set about stimulating her by switching on fans, mood-lights, a television and a radio. On the television was a kiddy program with a teacher preaching: “*You see, children, there are victors and there are victims in this world...*” On the CD player was “I Could Go on Singing” sung by Judy Garland. Fleetinglly Jean Shagryne wondered if it was from the film with the crossdressing theater boy, that unsuccessful Garland picture banned from being shown in classrooms and permanently checked out of the library.

Shouting above the cacophony: “How’s that for stimulation, Miss Shagryne?”

“Turn th-th-them off,” Jean managed to iterate.

The Monicas did that for her, then reset the lighting and turned off all but one fan.

“Better?” asked the one in plainclothes while the other placed a rotting chrysanthemum under Jean’s nose with a command to sniff. “You’re in the hospital in Stickville,” they chimed.

“Is that fl-f-flower from the hospital?”

“Your niece keeps you in flowers,” said Nurse Monica.

“She’s your one steady visitor,” informed Nurse Practitioner Monica.

Jean searched her mind for recollection of her only niece’s name. “My niece?” she mumbled despite trying to keep that question inside.

The nurses broke into giggles again.

“Time to test your memory!” they said in unison.

Nurse Practitioner Monica with the clipboard studied it. “What year is this, Miss Shagryne? Who is our national president?”

After a sigh, Jean closed her eyes. She decided it was 2003 and George W. Bush III spoke for our country. At that, alto Monica chortled. Meanwhile clarion Monica rolled her eyes and informed the patient that “Dubya” was two presidents ago and since him we’ve had a crazy black one (who admitted smoking crack in *Ebony* magazine) and now office was held by a boorish billionaire trying to stop progress of women and minorities. To which alto Monica scratchily added “the economy is up now though”.

“I doubt that! How long have I been comatose?”

“About 20 months.”

“Since November? 2016. October 2016? Over a year and a half, Miss Shagryne.”

“Your more recent memory should return shortly. Until that time you will need to trust the hospital staff.”

“Yes, Miss Shagryne. Us.”

Jean exercised her limbs in minute ways, enjoying the atrophy waking up about as fast as her recalibrating mind. “Who then is looking after the library? What about the latchkey kids?”

“Miss Shagryne, your niece told us the school fired you when they found out you were in the hospital. They can get away with this because you were on an extended suspension due to the allegations. Something about a racy story you told to minors on school grounds?”

“Racy! Mercy,” uttered Jean. She opened her eyes pleading for understanding.

“You had plenty of people coming to your defense, as you might recall. The two of us, most recently.”

“We applied for a hospital grant to keep you here longer.”

“We did that for you, out of the goodness of our hearts.”

“We ‘investigated’ the allegations.”

Jean grasped the concept and accepted their garrulousness as genuine. “Were the two of you my students once upon a time?”

“Monica and I were in the same grade at the school where you worked—”

“We avoided the library like a plague—”

“Our moms were stay-at-home housewives—”

“Our moms told us to avoid latchkey kids until junior high—”

“But we heard all about you, the whole community did.”

“You got a bad rap, that ruined your rep, Miss Shagryne!”

Jean closed her eyes a moment. To get away for a moment.

“Do you remember the deer, Miss Shagryne?”

“Deer? Should I?”

“You were found on the edge of a Sticksville neighborhood park, and the last thing you told the paramedics was, you got hit by a deer.”

“A deer!” Jean searched her the void of her memory. “No, a dear, a dear friend, a dear former student hit me, I think now, yes. The face of the student is blurry and so is the car that struck me. A hit and run? It’s hazy but coming back to me now...”

“A dear student, hahaha, how ritzy!” said alto Monica. “All this time we believed an actual deer attacked you, Miss Shagryenne. You had bruises that proved it was a deer, the doctors said. And it is believable. Wild animals are running rampant on the news every month these days, charging at humans.”

“Someone from the new e-sports gaming arena found you and called 9-1-1. You’ve been silent ever since until just now.”

“Not a peep, not even a snore or a fart, Miss Shagryenne.”

“A deer,” said Jean as she gave in. “Well I suppose it could happen.”

Alto Monica adjusted the fan and turned on then off another fan. “A dear deer, maybe?”

“Are you ambulatory? We could move you to that chair in the corner,” suggested clarion Monica.

“The chair with the fat splat!” said alto Monica. “Monica, did I tell you I’m taking a furniture design course online?”

“Why?”

“I like design.”

“Strange. Huh. Miss Shagryenne, would you like to walk?”

“No. I want to stay in bed.”

“Only for today, then. Your C.O.B.R.A. is about to expire.”

“She has three days left of it.”

“We were all set to unplug you, Miss Shagryenne, if you want to know the actual direness of your situation. Thank goodness you woke up!”

Next came the physician on duty, to perform a physical exam. Jean wore a loose-fitting hospital gown, or “johnnie,” open in the back; out of modesty it was suggested that she put on another backwards and Nurse Monica went to fetch one. Meanwhile the exam consisted of the reflexive knee-jerk test, a peek into her ears and throat, cool stethoscope on her chest, then a protracted wiggling of each finger and toe. “You seem healthy to me,” shrugged the doc before exiting.

Nurse Monica returned with the johnnie and, tugging it into place over her exposed back, informed Jean that she would be “going home” in three days.

“Did you bathe me and cut my hair and my nails?” asked Jean, somewhat in awe. “Can I look at a mirror please?”

Monica fetched a handmirror from a hall closet and held it glamorously for the patient to look at herself. “You’ve lost a ton of weight,” she told her sweetly.

“My hair looks like a football helmet! And my jowls are huge, simply huge.”

“Nonsense! Your hairdo is all the better to wash and comb, all the easier. And your skin looks great, not all crepey or loosey, like some elder women. You look great. Put some earrings on, a bit of lipstick, maybe a velcro curler on the sides?”

Miss Shagryne’s niece—suddenly she recalled the name Sandra!—visited her in the hospital soon thereafter. They discussed Jesus Christ and dreamscapes and the ferris wheel comprised of distant lights. Already Jean doubted if the ferris wheel was real or a figment. God owned and operated a carnival? thought Jean. The afterlife, or whatever it was she experienced, scared her. Frantically she groped for Sandra’s hands to squeeze, a palpable reassurance. What she got in return was love-vibes. If you know your relatives, she thought, you know yourself.

After Sandra departed the room became too quiet with its one fan running and Jean wished for that Judy Garland tune or the kiddy program on television. Coming out of her coma-haze, Miss Shagryne then remembered her house guest, Pearl. The surname Pearbody came to mind but that was wrong, she knew. Pearl, Pearl, Pearl Something. Pearl was an artist? She painted, maybe.

Nurse Monica entered, excited as the faces on her scrubs. “I’ve put your comeback on this hospital’s social media page, Miss Shagryne. I hope you’re agreeable to that! No names, no pix. Just your amazing story. It’s called #comasurvivor”.

“What’s a hashtag?”

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Pearl Pearlbody sardonically wondered when the basket-weaving would begin. She’d ignored the mint-colored questionnaire asking about her happiest moment, her angriest thought, her dream vacation; instead she’d read the postings on the walls of the group therapy room, those optimistic adages about following your dreams or making lemonade when life hands you lemons. Then she looked upon the group, her group, and attempted a grin at the ten of them. Glad to be away from her son, for the hour at least, she focused on the group facilitator, sitting quietly as stragglers found seats.

The weekly group's therapist was an obese person named Thomas who insisted everyone call him "Facilitator Thomas" because the group "isn't therapy—it's a fun place to renew and grow." Last week Facilitator Thomas claimed to be "ashamed" of his German heritage; in sympathy with the Jewish population, he accepted "all peoples, unequivocally" because it was the only way for him to "help" anyone. To the group Facilitator Thomas always brought with him a folder cryptically labeled "Group III" stuffed with multi-colored paper, some of which always got distributed to the group. Alongside this, Facilitator Thomas always carried a wicker basket with items such as koosh balls or stress balls, freshly plucked weeds and flowers, marbles or jacks or latch-hook yarn in bundles, kazoos, whatever.

Facilitator Thomas: "I'd like to open the group with anybody saying whatever pops into their heads! Please limit your speech to one or two sentences at a time, okay? Pass this koosh amongst you as you speak, at random, whether you are speaking or silent. Try to avoid hitting anyone in the face! And everyone please wait for the person talking to finish before you start talking, okay?"

Nodding, Pearl caught the koosh and thought she might enjoy this exercise. Looking around at the nine other members of her group—their group—she saw myriad reactions ranging from delight to panic.

"Go!" signaled Facilitator Thomas.

Pearl tentatively dropped the koosh into the cupped palms of the person sitting nearest. While she did this the group, her group, began babbling like a brook or a television or a radio:

"I go medieval berserk when technology goes wrong."

"Losing wifi connection is either the result of hackers or technical difficulty. I always remind myself that the former is delusion born from irrational thoughts. The world is choking on tech troubles. I am as rational as everyone else."

"It keeps spellchecking my name! It is very annoying. Every time I type my name it gets quote-unquote corrected. Every goddamn time. I have to type my name then go back and retype then click on the left bar with my name correct on it even though I typed it correctly initially."

"You're strange, even for Capitol City."

"Yeah, but you ridicule people who are proud of their heritage or looks or jobs or lifestyle choices. Without empathy or compassion. In a liberal town."

"You do it to yourself. People in this place are sick, crippled or puny."

"People are pretty! Gosh, every person is gorgeous."

The facilitator interrupted with: "Be cognizant of everyone's feelings, please, thank you."

“I’m going to a funeral of my old special ed teacher tomorrow. My laundry is all dirty so I thought I’d wear this.”

“You cannot wear white gym shorts and a Spartans jersey to a funeral.”

“Especially since the sexist-sounding Spartans are now the inclusive-sounding Warriors. That shirt is passé.”

“I have a Spartans jersey too. My closet is full of old boyfriends’ clothes.”

“I have nobody to call my own. I’m lonely and embittered.”

“Get a therapy dog. It will stay with you even if you’re mean to it.”

“Dogs bug me. Wanna know why? Dogs are gratuitous. Like keeping a horse. What’s the use? Unless you have a sleigh or a sled. They’re expensive and they sometimes bite and they always sap attention and make you clean up their droppings.”

“They’re like babies!”

“Babies? Babies grow up and along the way learn how to clean up their own shit. Babies grow up and learn to feed themselves and then if you’re lucky your babies take care of you in your old age. Babies grow up and might solve the complex problems of this society. Babies might one day dream up the solutions our plent needs ot survive. Yet it’s always ‘oh, get a dog,’ or ‘buy a dog’! Yuck.”

“Get a parrot, then, geesh. At least it might talk out something of value.”

“I heard about someone who has a Farabella therapy pony in their house. And everybody knows that equine therapy is big business in rural communities.”

“Horses scare me. Dogs and cats terrify me. Worse are pigs and fowl and especially cows. Squirrels threaten me. Birds freak me out.”

“I gotta get out of this group.”

“I gotta get outta this town!”

“I wanna vacation outta town. Antarctica, Atlantis, the Galapagos Islands...”

“How about a shuttle trip to the moon! This country has secret launch pads everywhere. Like New Mexico, for one.”

“New Mexico is fake. It’s a hologram. The atomic bomb destroyed it entirely in the 1950s but it was remade as a hologram, a tactile hologram. You have heard of a tactile hologram? You can touch it but it’s an illusion. Everything feels dry and coarse, like sand. The moon is an illusion.”

“It’s ‘South Park,’ the photoshopping episode, that makes me believe you.”

“Have I seen that one?”

“Think of a reality show family—”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that one.”

“Now I wanna eat ice cream!”

“Do you know what goes in a cigarette? Tobacco and a paper tube, of course, sure, we all know that. But the rest of it? What about cocoa, corn syrup, carob bean, celery seed, licorice, orange, rum, sugar, tangerine, vanilla bean...”

“Quit holding the group hostage! Cripes I hate that. First the spell-checking, now this.”

“We all need to calm down, relax, take a chill pill.”

“That’s why people need pot. Pot is a ‘plant,’ planted by aliens to soothe and reward and enlighten humans. So are poppies and coca and fen-fen but I’d stay away from those plants this century. Too risky.”

“My social worker, Wilma Something, has a sign up in her office. It says ‘Every person is fighting a battle we know nothing about.’ That means everybody is messed up in the head.”

“The gift of desperation.”

“What is?”

“I’m confused about something. Is ambiguous more important than ambivalent? I dunno which one is which.”

“Euphoric Recall is the answer.”

“Why are all of the good-looking popular people from high school the most likely to go up the ranks monetarily? Because praise and money are lavished early on at the prom kings and queens—the bold and the beautiful—and that type of rewarding continues on through much of their lives.”

“If they play their cards right. Look at me! I played mine all wrong.”

“Being proud of looking good is a sin, yet how many people are ostracized for being vain? Not many. How many beauties cannot help but to condescend to uglier people?”

“Beauty is short-lived. By age 30 the prom kings and queens look like old moms and dads. Short-lived, a transient sheen.”

“That youthful glow is short-lived, yes. Their bodies sometimes hold up.”

“All of my victories are short-lived.”

“I’m uglier than most. That’s why I’m in this group.”

“What’s a card table?”

Abrupt as a power outage, a member of the group began screaming. In a flash Facilitator Thomas reached for a phone on the wall and began speaking in technical terms Pearl had trouble understanding. Paramedics arrived after about a minute of the group staring or covering their ears or leaving the room to mill in the hallway and check their mobile phones. Pearl’s phone remained static as usual. A few of the patients (clients?) were voicing insults such as “idiot” and “spaz” and “labile”; Pearl had her ears covered yet could hear every word anyway. After another minute the entire group returned to their broken-in chairs, silent and subdued.

Thomas the facilitator said: “Remember the rules, people.”

“Rule one: Take care of your psychological and physical space.”

“Rule two?”

“Rule two: Never attack anyone’s traits.”

With much effort, obese Facilitator Thomas plucked the koosh from behind him and tossed it into the air. “Continue the free-for-all another few minutes, please group, thank you.”

“What does S.U.D. mean? I was just diagnosed with it and my doctor never explained what it is.”

“Substance Use Disorder. It means that you—”

“I know what that means. I couldn’t figure out S.U.D. is all.”

“Oh group of mine. I want to tell you all that I’ve time-traveled. I was born 1000 years ago.”

“You travel forward! Alien visitors are, shockingly, Earthlings who travel backward in time—their ethereal qualities come from centuries of weightlessness. They lack the physical traits of those of us bound to Earth’s gravity. They have lugubrious limbs, enlarged heads, pale skin, intrepid eyes. They’ve seen a lot, those time-traveling humans who look alien to the ignorant.”

“Again with the hijacking of Group airspace! I’m gonna leave Group if you don’t stop—”

“Stop!” signaled the facilitator. Thomas then stopped with effort to grab the koosh ball, again abandoned, now on the floor by the door. He dropped it in the basket.

Everyone hushed, obedient yet a few forced hands over their mouths to obey.

“Does anyone remember The Trifecta of Undesirable Traits?” asked Thomas the facilitator. “Nobody? It consists of mental illness, substance abuse, and a criminal record. Everyone in this room has one or more of these traits. Myself, I was an alcoholic during my years as a grad student at Belling U. And I got into some trouble driving drunk! Now, as a nondrinker, I believe I’ve mentioned that I never use the term ‘sober’... Sobriety technically means that a person is serious, somber, sedate, all of which aren’t me! Nor should any of you feel obligated to act that way when quitting drugs or alcohol. But I am sane, technically speaking. It’s a nice place to be and all you people should keep trying to achieve sanity. But don’t any of you ever be sober unless that’s who you really want to be.”

Pearl quivered because she considered herself sane, under her circumstances of time-traveling from 1000 years ago. Which ones in the group were criminal? Who was on drugs? (Most of them were on psych meds.) She’d started the group a month prior and most everyone there was unknown to her as of today.

Thomas the facilitator turned to a group member: “Have you eaten today?”

“I ate a confection.”

“A confection? You are high, on marijuana?”

“More of a body buzz than a pot high. A relaxing kind of high I guess. Okay, yes, I am high. I’m not, like, stoned.”

The facilitator turned to another group member: “You are malingering.”

“What’s that?”

“Look it up.”

“I’ll look it up on my phone.”

Facilitator Thomas: “Use the group room dictionary, please.”

“Right, I forgot that rule. Hold on. Ma...lin...ger...ing. Malingering: ‘exaggerating symptoms for material, financial or emotive gain’.”

“Yes,” agreed Thomas the facilitator. “Everyone does malingering, at some time—even those who are sane and normal with jobs and houses and lives that we all wish to live some day. We all do it from time to time, this criminal activity, to gain sympathy or a gift from a loved one or a disability check! Please, people, please try to be aware of that trait and avoid doing the malingering.”

To conclude, the facilitator named Thomas suggested some Coping Strategies from a goldenrod sheet culled from the Group III folder: “Stretch or exercise or yoga, shower or bathe, read or listen to music, cover yourself with kisses, part your hair in weird places, sculpt your pubes, put on nail polish or fake tattoos, knit or sew something unique, start a journal, draw or paint, buy a newspaper, color the funny

pages, do word-searches or crosswords, write down short- and long-term goals, make a dream-life collage, watch sit-coms or dramas or thrillers, go online and post on web boards, do video games or puzzles, play an instrument, sing and dance, study the sky or a stone, make a face out of clay or play-dough, use aromatherapy, meditate, pray, count your blessings, visit friends, call or text family, memorize a poem, create a playlist of feel-good songs, organize wardrobe by color, clean the closet, alphabetize books, rearrange furniture, bake or cook vegetarian, rip up paper, punch or hug a pillow, turn your name into an anagram, look up new words and use them, go to the movies, plant some seeds, prune a shrub, clean up trash on the street, smile at strangers, perform random acts of kindness..." Facilitator Thomas then passed around copies of the list and, with some flourish, dismissed the group.

Pearl the Time Traveler left in a daze, an eardrum-ringing fluff in her brain. She had to get home to her child, as grotesque as he was, with his "dwarfism" or "physical abnormalities" and the I.Q. of a 2-year-old at the age of 14. (True, Ms. Pearlbody was also "deformed," ("ugly,") although her I.Q. was above average and her height comparable to the females she'd found herself among.) She wondered if she truly loved him, the living aftermath of being raped by that plunger shoved deep inside her by a horde of overgrown women maybe 1000 years in the future. Being impregnated by them was a rape; she'd never consented, yet now she owned the byproduct of moronic sperm as penance for a crime she'd endured and learned to accept.

Anyway, in addition to traveling in time, from the past to the future to the present, Pearl had also traveled in space, she'd figured out. Since she'd read in picture books that latch-hooking originated in old Egypt, and she knew how to hook rugs when she made the traveling pod, she must be African. (The take-at-home D.N.A. kit, after being sent in for analysis, had "lost" her results; the clasp came from Egypt, according to history.) She also figured out that she'd followed several lines of latitude to cross continents from Africa to North America. Picture books had also taught her the English language. She was a candidate for citizenship of the United States if she could complete all the requirements and keep out of jail. All thanks to Miss Shagryne, who took her in as virtual-family, after finding her looking at books in the basement of the Stickville Elementary School library. Jean was who told her about genes and genetics. Oh the chats they had! Until the deer hit. Whatever the "deer" had been. For over a year now Shagryne had slept in her coma, logically leaving who else but Pearl to mind the house and her finances. (Niece Sandra was minus a head-for-numbers, which left only the houseguest, according to the hospital where she was a patient.)

Barring citizenship approval, she might flee to anywhere in the world if she stole Jean's passport or driver's license and birth certificate; as an illegal it was her privilege to steal, commit illegal acts, maybe; already she had fabricated health insurance; she would leave her rape-child to the institutions, probably, or wait til he reached age 18; he would be better off with people who knew how to care for him, maybe; or, she might opt to hook another pod, cast some spells, and hitch a ride way away from today into the great unknown.