

At the Jube

by Bill Lapham

The steel and glass Crystal River Jubilee Mall rose out of the barren asphalt parking lot on a warm and rainy day. I called it the “Jube.” Yellow fish skeletons stretched across the wet pavement; motorcars moored in the slips of the ribs. Mirrors formed in the black depressions in the asphalt. I broke one to park, splashing a man walking. He got sore and yelled. I examined my conscience, questioned my motives, felt guilty, and apologized to the guy. I offered him a twenty for dry-cleaning. He took it.

The splashed man seemed to be thinking: “Inconsiderate bastard; but nice of him to offer to pay for the pants.” Odd hearing another man's thoughts.

I clicked for the beep, and limped inside the mall. Old war wound. I slipped near the ‘slippery floors’ sign, one of those yellow folding A-frame things. I smelled popcorn, and reviewed the titles of the animated films on offer. My hip hurt; same one. I bought some popcorn, but I didn't buy a ticket. I started walking around the Jube like any other sheep, lemming, or penguin: passing plate glass windows, one after another.

I considered the Red Lobster.

I was ‘circling’ the Jube when I came upon a plate glass window fronting the *Clothes Store*, whereupon I stopped and stared at the male mannequin model. I assumed the store owners presumed the clothes he was wearing would be next season's fashions. How could anybody know for certain? They must tell us what the fashions *will be*. Mannequin Man looked warm, but the air-conditioning was blasting frigid air. I was sure of it. The Jube was making us feel like it was September, time to go back to school, even though it was July and would be blazing hot later in the day.

The mannequin had no eyes that I could see. Still, ‘he’ seemed to be staring at me staring at him through the glass. He saw me; how could he not? We — saw — each — other. Telepathy was our communication. *It was.*

“I have no eyes with which to see you, my friend, yet here I am, watching you; being with you,” it seemed to say. How did I know that?

I saw my reflection in the window and the reflections of the people in the mall walking behind me. I whispered, “I love you,” to my reflection, and my reflection said “I love you,” back. It was a mirror image; same widening beltline; same vocabulary.

I went inside to look through the glass from the inside. Now I could see his reflection in the window as clearly as I could see mine, both of us, together. Neither of us had any hair. He was thinner. We stared at each other; telepathy bounces.

A salesgirl approached to ask me if I needed any help. I thought, don't we all, really? I said, thank you.

Nobody had offered to help me until she had, and I told her I could probably use some help, but none that she could provide most likely. She said she would do what she could. I thought that was damn nice of her.

Then a thought shot through my head like a bullet; not a real bullet, but a thought bullet. It happens. I admit it. The thought bullet contained the notion that the salesgirl was cute. She had: freckles, red hair, green irises. She smelled like blooming lilacs after a cool April rain.

She was years younger than my youngest, and decades younger than my deceased wonderful other.

The last thing she, my wonderful other, had done just before dying was cut a coupon from an advertisement, the kind that come in the newspaper, you know, for processed dog bones by Purina. They come in a box. We had a dog that liked them.

Then she collapsed right in front of me; her head made that sickening hollow sound when it hit the floor. I looked up at the ceiling, but I didn't see anything there; a cobweb.

I knew she was gone immediately. I called 911 and three minutes later you would have thought a national emergency had been called at my house.

The cops were not kind. They asked me what I did to her, my wonderful other. I said I watched. They asked, "What?" I said, "I watched her cutout the coupon." They said, "That's it?" And I said, "That's it. Next thing I knew, boom, dead on the floor." One of them whispered to himself, I think, "You lucky bastard." I didn't blame him; he didn't know.

The salesgirl told me her feet hurt and that she'd rather be studying the conservation of momentum. She had a final in physics tomorrow. She had an Irish accent, doubtless effaced by the constant abrasion of exposure to our common language, English, sort of. I said time's arrow points toward higher entropy. We're headed there. She nodded, knowingly.

I asked her if she thought the mannequin could see his reflection in the window like we can. She looked at her reflection, my reflection, and the mannequin's reflection, and said she couldn't be sure, but it was possible, she supposed, however slight. It would be better, she said, if it had eyes.

She had taken the question seriously. I could tell she took all questions seriously.

I asked if she could imagine how awful it would be to stand there, motionless, hour after hour, day after day, with only your own thoughts to think, and only your own reflection upon which to contemplate. Horrible, she said she thought: if it were a sentient being. Not so bad if it's just a hunk of plastic. Worse to be a guy mannequin, she said she thought.

On the other side of the window we watched people walk by the window looking at their own reflections. The mannequin was locked-in with his own synthetic thoughts of the world, which it thought, correctly, was everything that was the case. The people walking by must have noticed — mustn't they have? — they were two extra large or larger while the mannequin's fashions were medium, maybe. They would never fit in his clothes. I hoped the people would keep walking to burn some calories.

I had a craving for a triple-decker hamburger, deep fried potatoes, a 40 ounce Coca-Cola Classic and a double scoop of Hagen

Das — dipped in nuts. The mannequin didn't. "I'm not hungry," he said to me with a thought bullet.

I think that's how it maintained its fit look: diet, no exercise.

There was no hope in his blank face with no eyes. He would have been crying for the two extra large or larger people if he had had the chemical composition for a saline drip, or an eye to shed it. I wondered what Mannequin Man would say if it could talk?

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," maybe. Seemed a strong possibility anyway.

The salesgirl said that everything in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by some external force. Like friction. I asked her if she would have dinner with me. She looked at me; she cared, it seemed. She said no, no, thank you. She said she could help me find a sweater for next season, but she could not have dinner with me. It was against the *Clothes Store* policy to have sex with the customers. She said it was complicated. A fitting room renovation was in progress. And, besides, like, she was already living a rather complicated life.

A thought bullet opened an image of a fitting room mirror.

She said sex with me would further complicate her life. She had the physics final to think about, and formulas; therefore: she had to pass.

I said it was only dinner. She said, "Thanks for asking, but I can't." She added something about 'flattery,' but other thought bullets were firing in my head by then and I wasn't listening anymore, really. None of the thought bullets were about sex. Our age difference had something to do with it, maybe.

I stared at the reflection of the mannequin in the window. It was looking at me looking at it and the two extra large or larger people strolling by in the background, outside the store. I looked at the salesgirl. Her nametag said Megan. I hadn't noticed it before. Her sweater had a plunging neckline. She had freckles under a fake diamond solitaire.

She was still talking. I could tell. Her lips were moving. She looked concerned. Put her hand on my upper arm.

I said goodbye, Megan; goodbye, honey.

She said she didn't know my name. But I left to join the crowd walking laps without telling her. Mile after mile I walked: thinking about spending a day in Dublin, a semester at a tennis academy in Indiana, or what life would be like if I were the last man alive, maybe in the Heron Bay Estates.

She was standing in the doorway of her store every time I came around on my destination-free journey in the Jube. I kept my focus on the waxed floor, as if I were avoiding rocks and roots. My limp became more pronounced as time pointed toward more deterioration. At some point — I don't remember when, but one of the times I passed the popcorn smell — I went home.

