

Love Is A Disease Of The Eye

by Chris Okum



Milestones

Two 80-year-old men bump into each other on an otherwise empty sidewalk in the posh neighborhood of San Marino, California. "Get your head out of your ass," says Old Man #1 to Old Man #2. "What?" says Old Man #2. "I said watch where you're going,

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asshole," says Old Man #1. "What?" says Old Man #2. "Did you not see me?" says Old Man #1. "Am I invisible to you?" Old Man #2 adjust his hearing aid and says, "What?" Old Man #1 pushes Old Man #2, who falls backwards, hits his head on the pavement, and dies instantly. At his sentencing for manslaughter, Old Man #1 is asked by the Judge if he would like to make a statement. "My only regret," says Old Man #1, "is that I will not be around to celebrate certain milestones, such as my wife being old enough to have her first legal drink, and my son's first steps and first words." Old Man #1 flings his suit jacket to the floor and rips off his shirt, exposing his naked torso. The Bailiffs corral Old Man #1 and drag him out of the courtroom. "I'm atomic powered!" says Old Man #1 as he's being lead out the door. "The power of the sun courses through my veins! I hope that all of you will follow me!"

Skylab

As a child she was terrified that Skylab was going to fall on her. She asked her mother if this could happen, that she could be standing in the middle of her school's playground and suddenly Skylab would fall on top of her, and her mother said, "I don't want to lie to you. I mean, I could be wrong. But if I'm not, I don't want you to think I don't tell you the truth. So yes, it's possible, Skylab could fall on you. It probably won't, but don't hold me to that. Anything could happen to anyone at any moment on this planet. Some people are here and then they are gone in the blink of an eye. Death comes from above all the time. The sky is void from which we all come and to which we will all return." She cried and could not stop until her mother turned on the television and asked her if she wanted to watch *ABBA live from Switzerland*. She asked her mother if she could have a glass of strawberry milk. She sat in front of the television, wiping away her tears, sipping her strawberry milk, and tentatively singing along with Agnetha and Anni-Frida while they did an extended version of "The Winner Takes it All." Her mother said, "You know, Skylab could fall on our condo while we're sleeping. We wouldn't feel anything.

We would just be here and then we wouldn't. That would probably be better than watching it fall from the sky on top of you while you're playing handball, don't you think?" She looked at her mother and didn't know what to do. All of sudden she felt trapped, as if there was nowhere to hide. She was just a kid and she felt paralyzed. It was the first time, but it would not be the last. "My job," said her mother, "is to keep you safe. And I can't do that. Do you understand? I wish I could." She finished her strawberry milk and looked down into the bottom of the glass. There were bits of powder that had not dissolved in the milk. They were still dry, these bits of powder, as if the milk hadn't even touched them, as if it was possible for the powder to avoid getting wet. For a brief moment she felt a surge of hope, and then ABBA began singing "Dancing Queen." She looked at her mother, who had a smile on her face. She looked at the television. Everyone in ABBA was smiling. The audience watching them perform was smiling and dancing. She didn't understand. This was not happy music. It was the saddest music in the world.

Where Did That Come From? Or, The Innermost Limits Of Pure Fun

1970. Red skies at dawn over Snapper Rocks in Brisbane, Australia. Bob McTavish, Ted Spencer, Buddy Trefoil, Chris Brock, Gary Keys, Russell Hughes are patiently waiting in the lineup to surf some of the gnarly waves any of them have ever seen. They are stoked, to put it mildly. McTavish is ready to make tracks. Spencer can't wait to carve. Trefoil has his eyes closed, picturing a radical tube ride. Brock wants to show off a brand new, ultra-sharp bottom turn he's perfected. Keys is all about the cutbacks, one after another, so many it would make most rippers dizzy with envy. Hughes is looking for perfect pockets to accelerate him like a rocket through the barrels. "When I was five-years-old," says Trefoil, "my dad thought I was gonna grow up to be a sissy. He said I was too attached to my mom. So he took me to see a psychiatrist at the

Naval Psychiatry Unit in San Pedro. The doctor agreed with my dad, said I was gonna grow up to be a sissy, probably wear dresses and get caught on my knees in public restrooms. My dad asked the head shrinker what they could do and they suggested electro-shock therapy. And that's what they gave me. I got the zapper. Cleared my head, though. Look at me now, right?" The others listened to Trefoil and did not respond. They waited in silence for their sets, Trefoil with a big goofy grin on his face. When they were done for the day, the group headed to a bar just a few miles down the road. McTavish nursed a beer and had a pensive look on his face. When Spencer asked McTavish what was wrong, McTavish said nothing, but that simply wasn't true. McTavish had cried while inside of a tube. He had pictured Trefoil, age five, getting electro-shock therapy, imagined how scary it must have been for the little guy, and the tears just started to roll, tears that tasted saltier than the ocean. There were kooks everywhere, thought McTavish as he ordered another beer. Some people had no idea what they were doing. Or maybe they did. It was hard to know what to do, sometimes, even when you were an adult, a professional with a certificate hanging from your wall. We've all been there, thought McTavish as he threw a dollar bill down on the bar, and some of us still are.

Geometry Tuning

He was sitting next to his clone, and still, he felt alone, just like always. "Please don't think of me as your clone," said his clone. "Think of me more like a twin." He looked at his clone and could see nothing to like. It was worse than looking in the mirror. There was nothing his clone could say that he would find interesting. It made him feel empty. The joy of other people were the bits and pieces you could take from them, the theft of their essence, inhaling someone else's specifics and seeing if they fit within yourself. There was nothing to take from yourself. The clone looked at him and in the clone's eyes he could see an abyss. It was worse than sitting next to no one. The clone's impenetrability was useless. "What kind of face

should I put on," asked his clone. He looked at his clone and gave a blank stare, as if to say, I'm going to give you what you give me. "We're going to meet other people and their faces and so I think I should put on a face just in case." He had no answer for his clone. It was just as well. There was no rule that said he had to be someone. He was a clone. He didn't have any essence. There was no nature inside of him. His clone had no specific destiny. His clone was empty, insubstantial. Maybe this was because he could not give anything to his clone. Maybe it was he who was empty. Maybe it was he who was the most insubstantial of them all. Maybe it wasn't his clone. Maybe it was him.

Did I Die

My dad started going bald around the age of 50. He never expected to lose his hair because his father had never lost his hair, and neither had his three brothers. All of them had thick, lush, silky heads of hair, with the only consistent change being the color, from deep chestnut brown to an electric, metallic silver. So when my dad started to notice that not only was his hairline moving backwards but also thinning he freaked out. "Why is this happening to me," I would hear him say from behind a closed bathroom door. "What did I do? Why me? Why are you punishing me?" I never knew who the 'you' was in that last question, but I'm going to assume my dad was talking to his body and not God, even though the older I get the more I believe there really isn't a difference. At the time my dad started losing his hair he was dating a very tall 20-year-old model named Kristen. I don't think she was dating my dad for his hair, but that doesn't mean it didn't bother her. It did. She would say things like, "Wow, you're losing your hair, aren't you," and, "I never pictured myself with a bald man," and "There are things you can do, you know, to stop yourself from going bald. They have treatments, you know." My dad told her he refused to get a toupee or a hair transplant. "Those only make it more obvious how bald you are," my dad would say. Kristen was in to crystals and astrology and New Age

healing practices, and so one day she came home with a jar of mustard. "Supposedly this works," she told my dad, who asked her what brand of mustard it was. "I hope it's not French's," my dad said, "because I can't stand the way French's smells." Kristen assured my dad what she was holding in her hands was no mere supermarket product. "My friend Bodhi made this," she said. "It has mustard seed in it. And homemade yogurt made with chia seeds. And a lot of other stuff, like ginseng. And dandelion. And just a trace of belladonna." My dad flinched when Kristen said that the concoction contained belladonna. "That's poisonous," my dad said. "Only in large amounts," said Kristen. "In trace amounts it stimulates growth of the follicles. Bodhi has a study that proves it. Do you want me to ask him to give it to me so you can read it?" My dad said no and told Kristen to get to slathering. And so she did. My dad sat in a chair in the kitchen with a towel around his bare shoulders while his young girlfriend coated his scalp with something that smelled far worse than French's. It was so bad that Kristen plugged her nose with a hair clip. I looked at my dad all covered in mustard and I felt sad for him. My dad looked at me looking at him and I could tell that he could tell that I felt sad for him. Kristen looked at my dad and I think she felt sad for him, but I also think she felt fairly disgusted, because about two weeks after applying the goop to my dad's head she was gone, never to return. When I asked my dad what happened to Kristen he said, "Oh, she took my credit card without asking and used it to buy her friend some clothes. I told her that was unacceptable and she told me she didn't really care, so..." My dad was wearing a beige bucket hat when he said this to me, and since that day I have never seen him without it.

Dark City

In the early 1970s the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (AN SSSR) built a replica of a small mid-20th Century Texas town in the flats of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR). The configuration, architecture and feel of the town was based on reconnaissance and

intelligence gathering done by Soviet spies during the 1950s. Two young Americans who had defected to the Soviet Union in the early 1960s were tasked with playing a married couple who lived in this town, the man pretending to be a pilot and the woman a homemaker. The town was stocked with Soviet Citizens pretending to be small town Americans, including a mime who suffered from grand mal seizures pretending to be the woman's father, an odd touch that some in the Politburo found amusing. The point of this elaborate experiment was to study what made Americans American, whether it was simply the environment and general atmosphere of Capitalism or something more intrinsic in their character. The woman had three sons in rapid succession and found that she enjoyed being a mother, as it teased to the surface a latest spirituality she was unable to access while living in the States. She was tender with her sons, and promoted in them a sensitivity to the lightness of being. The man, however, did not like being a father, and treated his sons accordingly, with a martial sense of propriety and little to no affection. For over 18 years the boys of this jerry-rigged family were unaware of their circumstances and assumed that they were being raised in a small town in the heartland. The parents got lost in their characters, forgetting for weeks, sometimes months, who they were and what their ultimate purpose was. Having accumulated more than enough data under generic, fairly normal circumstances and with a minimum of melodrama, the AN SSSR decided to up the stakes of their experiment, killing off the family's middle son (secretly the woman's favorite) in order to study the effects of sudden trauma and ineluctable grief. The woman reacted with an acute sense of despair and had to be talked out of taking her own life by her "mother," a former prison guard from a women's gulag in Siberia, who, for some reason, chose to play her character with a thick Irish accent, another bizarre detail that members high up the Communist food chain found funnier than a fake execution. The man reacted to his son's death with almost no emotion and buried himself in his work, coming up with new designs for airliners, despite the fact that he wasn't really a pilot and had no training or formal

education in aerodynamics. The surviving sons wept and mourned appropriately, and then continued on with their adolescence, which was standard for a teenager being raised in Texas in the 1960s, complete with cars, girls, cheeseburgers, and football, albeit a type of football which would have looked slightly unfamiliar to any real American. Years later, long after the end of this bit of extreme social engineering, the youngest son of the family, who had still not fully processed or accepted what had happened to him, was living in Stalingrad as a fully-integrated Russian citizen, and employed as an architect. On the thirtieth anniversary of his brother's death he called his father to talk about the death of his brother, only to be greeted, once again, with a request from his father to stop referring to him as his father and to please never call him again. After hanging up the phone, the youngest brother, in something akin to psychogenic fugue, walked all the way to the Black Sea, where he attempted to drown himself, only to be stopped by a small group of vacationing sunbathers from Budapest, who reported to the authorities that the man they saved had been shouting *The Pledge of Allegiance to the United States of America* to himself over and over, even while underwater.

