

James

by Erin Fleming

"It's a moving-beyond, right? Like one day you realize that nothing applies to you and, hey, you're free to do whatever. Except there's still an issue where you're in the world, where you have the same basic type of body as everyone else, where as much as you will yourself to vaporize or whatever you'd have to commit suicide to leave humanity. So when your head isn't there anymore, what are you supposed to do? You put yourself back in the world.

"Except everything looks different now, right? Like everything looks kind of silly and limited, so you try to pull things back into your beyond-space with you. Like you pick the people and things that seem right and try to pull them with you. And probably you don't even realize this is happening, that you're trying to pull people into you, until you drunkenly try to eat your best friend, and then that's when the shit hits the fan."

I am said near-eaten best friend, visiting James in a sanitarium in upstate New York.

"But I'm not crazy, you know? Like maybe I shouldn't be Out There because I'm not right for it, or I haven't learned how to live in it. But I wasn't trying to eat you because I'm crazy, I was trying to eat you because I love you."

I know and I tell him I know.

"And you know, okay, the problem is, so I go back and start living normally, then I'm just letting myself down. Like this problem of getting other people into a world that only exists in my head isn't gonna resolve itself. You know like you can't get into my world, can you? But like I can't see forgoing this world, or forsaking it I guess is the word I mean, like trying to re-enter the corroborated world is just giving up. Added to which it's gonna be really fucking hard to get a job and shit with a mental institution on my record."

I remind him that part of the problem earlier was that he didn't get any of the jobs he wanted. James is smart but kind of limited, like he only likes one or two things, so he only applied for jobs as a

writer for comedy shows basically, and he's not that funny, or rather is only funny in a deeply worrisome nihilist-y way that's kind of in vogue at the moment but still there's problems in James' humor, namely that James' jokes make everyone feel like he hates them. Which he might, kind of, or he at least hates big parts of humans, not like their torsos or legs but their blindness and how they ignore their minds. But anyway James already felt marginalized and then when he didn't get any of the jobs he wanted he decided he wasn't cut out to socialize with any Real Humans—this is his term—which led to him choosing like four of us that he actually liked and obsessively trying to make us get in his head, which was pretty fun for awhile and consisted of him like taking us to weird abandoned buildings and cemeteries and having like fantasy games while getting drunk or high or eating or whatever but ended badly when he tried to eat me. And I mean part of me wanted to let him eat me, I thought maybe I owed him my body because I couldn't enter his mind and I really wanted to on some level but we both knew that him eating me would just make us both feel awful—him because he'd wake up sober and realize he'd tried to reverse-transubstantiate me (I am not Jesus or anything) and me because I'd be dead and partially cannibalized by my best friend. And at that point I was the only person still seeing James; he'd offended or scared everyone else enough that they didn't really see the fun in our playing. A big part of that was the demise or rather real-ifying of the Ultimate Game, which was James' initial strategy to get us in his mind. He created like this larping site for us where we went to this block of gutted buildings in Canarsie and each dressed up as a character from his mind but like instead of role-playing we were supposed to slowly become these characters until we understood what his mind looked like. So for instance I was a large beetle-like creature, only I was mostly blue, and he explained me as a sea-bug with teleportation powers, and I guess it was a bit more complicated because I could control people by speaking power words at them. Like James had this idea, it's maybe Wittgensteinian but less sophisticated and maybe more true, where speaking words could make things real. I

guess it started with the word “love,” James' big theory was that telling someone you love them makes it true, but for my beetle creature I could like make a table appear by naming a place TABLE and could make someone die by naming KILL. Meaning that I had to be very careful about my words during these games. But the Ultimate Game turned people away because James took it very seriously and insisted that our friend Sara kill herself when she was killed in the Game, which was really the point that everyone turned away, when James started stalking Sara to kill her because she refused to kill herself, so afterwards it was only James and me and then he tried to eat me.

“Yeah I fucking know that not getting a job was part of my problem, like my head-world could only exist for x hours a day if I had a job, I'd have to focus on other tasks the rest of the time—like when I'm cooking eggs I'm in the outside world, I almost never cook eggs in my head-world. So like I know I'm not that special, like I fucking know I'm just maybe not that prepared for living, but where does that leave me? Like suicidal maybe. I don't fucking know.”

I tell James about how my grandmother just died and what I've been thinking about, that worlds inside people's heads just die with them, and it's totally amazing and magical in a bad scary way that dumb bodies control those worlds, and why do the beast-parts of humans ultimately matter more than the mind-parts? Or at least why can't the mind-part function on its own? I tell him that I think humans are in a really unfair position and like I don't really want to keep living but I'm not going to kill myself and I hope he doesn't either. I tell him that a concept I have is that sex would be the best human action if it didn't end in orgasm, that sex being directed at orgasm is the most unfair part of being human maybe, and that if he wants we can lie with him inside me for awhile but we can't have sex for pleasure's sake. That I wish I had something I could stick inside of him to warm him up, maybe. James has gotten kind of fat at the sanitarium but I don't bring it up because he is extremely vain and I don't want to make him feel bad about himself. Plus I know he has been eating a lot because he couldn't eat me and is trying to fill his

void. I tell him that in a Lacanian sense he's a woman because he has a void and that I am objectifying him. I smile in a sad way and tell him that if I were as magical as him I would control him and let him fill me with himself and warm him up but I caution him that I don't mean magical as a compliment.

“Yeah you're talking about unfairness but here's what's really unfair, I'll tell you, how can we imagine things that don't exist but not understand them? Why can we think the thought, ‘I'm not capable of understand that.’? It's just totally fucking unfair. Like am I supposed to stop considering things because they don't make any fucking sense? So humans are just like destined to not live up to their potential because you'll go crazy if you do or like degenerate into alcoholism or some shit.”

I hold up the bottle of Cutty Sark I smuggled in. I thought of bringing like sunflowers or cheese or Chinese Checkers and then got whiskey instead, not for any reason in particular. Maybe my choices define my life but there's no reason there. Like I don't even want to get fucked up now, but we're probably going to because there's no reason not to. Like there'd be no reason not to play Chinese Checkers if I'd brought it. The sky is not any discernible sky-color outside and I am starting to doubt its existence.

“And you know here's another thing, this is the dumbest thing, all the clichés and dichotomies that we were taught and then taught to destroy as like insubstantial or human-created, take for instance big and small, these are all right, you know? Like I can crush anything smaller than me, and a bigger thing crushes me. Like I can impose my head on things inside me but this whole fucking world imposes itself on me, and you know? Calling that a cliché doesn't stop it from being true. Like humans said all these true things at some point and then grew tired of them and got disaffected and started saying lies because it was like more pleasing or something, but now they intermingle so seamlessly that you know who's to say? Like who is really fucking supposed to say?”

A bad thing about James is that if you're friends with him for long enough you start to talk like him, which is annoying but what's

worse is that your thoughts start running on like his and that makes your mind—or it made my mind—more like his, at least however I imagine his to be, and I've picked up this like concept of his where your mind is your universe and all these people are little universes competing for existence except then there's this great universe of SOCIETY or some shit that's, you know, superstructurally universal. But okay so I met James at a bar a few years ago where he was playing pool and I was drinking alone and I was trying to read but it was dark so I was just pretending to read while watching all these other people interact like people do in bars, like there are obviously drunk ones who want to fuck or fight and less obviously drunk ones who want to cry or like confess love and I was high, I always used to be high, and I could tell James had been doing coke too, he was sniffing and rubbing his nose and talking nonstop and so anyway he came over and asked what I was reading and I made out with him. I was reading Kierkegaard and really didn't want to talk about Fear and Trembling because I both hyperunderstood it and didn't totally understand it, in words I mean, so I kissed James instead and then explained why I had done that thing. And he told me it was nice that I'd done something, that when you can't think of what to say or know that you can't say a good useful thing it's nice to do something instead because if you try to say something anyway then you've brought your wrong mental state into the outside world and that's that, it's become real to another person. Which all led to his theory about saying “I love you” meaning you love someone, that even if you don't think you mean it if you say something it becomes true. I told him I think you sometimes have to say things more than once to make them totally true but he said I just didn't realize that they were true from the moment I said them and I asked him if maybe just thinking something made it true but he thought no, maybe if you think something in word-form but really until it leaves your head and becomes public its not true. There was some confusion about talking to yourself.

We were both younger then than we are now because that's how time and aging works, which is weird even though nobody like

points out that it's weird on a regular basis, like people have just accepted this thing, but anyway we thought that talk was pretty coke-driven and like special and I mean not necessarily life-threatening. It wasn't until later, with the marginality after graduating from college and realizing that other people didn't like us, that we took all these things really seriously and thought about like what saying those words then meant to us now and how conversations about words could even take place and how we wished we had thought about how we were using words to talk about words then when we were still able to think about these things without head-holding and retching. About that time James decided to study math and to try to find an integral to express all his thoughts but he was too careless to be a good mathematician and there'd always be the mathematical equivalent of "like" or "or some shit" in his equations which made them unbeautiful and you know not really equations at all.

"But how do you get to that point, you know? Like first you feel disaffected and then you realize that you're not like worse than other people, you know more than them, and it carries you so you're, you know, invincible for awhile, and there's obvious setbacks there—like who's invincible without doing too many drugs or fucking around? Because you're basically a sociopath, right?—but then there's some point when people just like refuse to accept your invincibility or your rightness and there's the next phase, the non-corroboration, the point where the world denies that you've seen through it to something realer, and then like fuck there's nothing you can do, you know, like you've seen through everything, you know people only do things to fill their lives and avoid thinking but you realize that you have to do things too, so you're just trying to do the right things, but you know what's right? Because you've already broken down those fucking moral systems. So right okay then there's all those vacillations, you have all these versions of the right thing, like the right thing being being kind to yourself and others, like loving everyone, or maybe the right thing being like acting really wild and proving your greatness, or maybe it's like settling

down into a routine that feels like a good life. But my point is like where does this go? And nowhere! Fucking like if you have no direction then where are you gonna go?"

It's terrible that he's talking so much in the second person because he shouldn't be implicating me, I'm already overimplicated and obviously I know everything he's saying, we've lived it hundreds of times. In the Ultimate Game our friend Sara was the Death Beetle—James said his mind was literally teeming with all these versions of beetles but so I told him about how when I was a kid my parents would send me into our vegetable garden with a can full of gasoline and have me pick beetles off stringbean and potato plants and drop them in the gasoline and he gave me honestly the most disgusted look of my life and told me (a) he didn't mean that kind of beetle and (b) where did I grow up, Kansas, to which I replied (a)(b) no, Connecticut—and Sara was like always dressed in black tattered gowns during this period, she was kind of haunting already but during the game when the tattered gowns would have been perfect for her Death Beetle role, which by the way mostly included her making sibilant noises that we were meant to and actually did first find ridiculous but eventually be inhumanly afraid of, she stopped wearing these gowns during the game and re-outfitted herself with these gauzy multicolored fairy-like floor-length gowns, which were really beautiful but like less immediately deathlike, and she told us it was because her definition of death had changed. So she meant that she wore floor-length tattered black gowns for awhile because, well mostly because she was a heroin addict and didn't have money for clothes for two years but she had bought all these black gowns because she wanted to look like death incarnate, like very dark and horrifically beautiful, but then she decided that death itself was I guess like a really pretty multicolored fairy when she moved on to a meth and lorazepam habit supplanted by tripping almost every day, which she never really articulated that well (her new version of death) but rather like explained her colorful death-visions to us constantly, like death as an exploding water droplet that breaks into millions of tiny colored water droplets from the one original and

clear water droplet. I'm not saying she was too smart or anything but rather that like the malleability of mindstates is nothing new to me and just that James isn't making things any easier for me by making me go through this with him as he sits, kind of fat and disgruntled and silly looking, staring not exactly blankly but kind of darkly at such a no-colored sky that I am really seriously doubting its existence at the moment.

“But you know the worst thing is like when I'm thinking all these things it's just funny as hell, right, all this is funny as fuck, and yeah I get down but mostly everything's alright inside here. And then I try to talk about it even to like you who I know, I mean I know you understand what I mean mostly, and I say it so deathly seriously. Like as soon as I start talking I'm not even fucking funny anymore. And it's funny, like how is it serious that I'm in a sanitarium because I tried to eat you and you called the cops? It's like it's too fucking funny to joke about, but that's the worst part.”

I have to go and I tell James I'm leaving. Like there's no sky left and I'm worried we're on an island somewhere and if I don't leave now I won't be able to. And I want to leave, or at least I have to, which James thinks is funny.

