

minimal one

by John Minichillo

In the room is a small square table and a cup. Should the character die one questions the choice. Of his life, why are we shown this? Is his last throe a moment profound? Was the coffee cheap, cold, bitter? Do I love him now? Do I love him now?

What gets me stuck thinking about the man in the room with the cup and the table is that I'm the kind of person who needs to turn on the stereo, the TV, have a smoke and read a magazine before I can even sit down and eat. I smoke good pot, I play Playstation, I walk fast, I drive fast, drink Diet Mt. Dew, pee often, sweat.

I read about him or maybe he reads about me. He has a web presence. This room he sits in, there are depictions of it everywhere on the web. And how can that be all? After you discover *you're* the person in the book, that should mean something. I found out one day that James Joyce was writing about me. It should mean something. And later, years later, Beckett was writing about me too. They wrote about me before I was born and I have the eerie notion that their writing about me engendered me, it made me, it's why I was born.

There should be a girl in the story but there's not. There's a girl he's in love with but he can't make it happen. He spends too much time thinking about her. Meanwhile she thinks about everything but him. She knows him, she likes him, but he can't make it happen. He can't find a way into her life. He doesn't show up in her thoughts.

He's ordinary. He's small. Anyone who has seen him on the web knows she will never make an appearance in the room.

The cup has a stain in the bottom so thick that in a pinch he can pour hot water into the cup and drink what he calls "coffee tea." His teeth are yellow, like mine, from the coffee. I don't drink Diet Mt. Dew. Never touch the stuff. I just liked the way it sounded. Another stupid lie rolling off the tongue. I'd point out the other lies but pretty soon I'd be lying again and we'd be going in circles. I remember a playground I went to as a kid where four tricycles were connected to a wheel like a merry-go-round. It's easy for me to imagine the character on one of those tricycles, going round and round. Maybe he enjoys it, or maybe he wears another expression. The famous expression. The countenance Beckett would wear if he discovered he was in a book by James Joyce. Or the expression Joyce would wear, if he found himself in a book by Beckett.

He calls her in the middle of the night and this is what he says: "I will only stay an hour and I won't touch you. When you want me to leave it's OK. I belong in the room. I know that."

The room is not a painting by Van Gogh. It's not a sound poem. And it's not the captain's quarters: not the captain's quarters on a cruise ship, nor a slave ship, nor the Starship Enterprise. These ships have other rooms that come closer. Like the brig: where a laser shield holds him confined with nothing. There's the suggestion of a hallway that begins on the other side of this laser shield. Kirk would find a way out. Spock would pinch his way out. But the

character can't get out. He's in a small cabin somewhere in the belly of The Love Boat. He will walk past the camera during one of the scenes, but he gets no dialogue, and he doesn't look into the camera. On the slave ship he is shackled below where he dies. After days of the slaves complaining he's dumped into the ocean. He doesn't sink right away, but this resistance goes unnoticed. He becomes bloated and he dissolves into brine without ever touching bottom. If he were a balloon the wind wouldn't blow him. If he were paper, he'd smolder, and the wind wouldn't touch him. If he is born on a Friday, he will forever yearn, and the wind will mock him.

And so there are places for people. You know what I'm about to say. You know where we like to put them. I don't even have to say it. We put them in a room. Each one in his own fucking room. How could it possibly be any different?

I'm thinking about a matchstick castle. I'm thinking I'm supposed to believe someone has actually done this. But why would they? Why would a matchstick castle be something I'd think of as real? I much preferred thinking about the girl. But now I'm onto this matchstick castle idea and all the time doubting one ever existed. Where would I have heard of this? Is it in *The Guinness Book*? And if it's not can I get into *The Guinness Book* if I make one? How big would the castle have to be, how many matchsticks? It would have to sound astonishing. No one could possibly care unless it was a unique and grand but believable number. And forget about a photo. In *The Guinness Book* a matchstick castle will only warrant a number.

Maybe he should have a schnauzer in the room. He could toss a ball and the dog would bring it to him. Again and again the dog would return the ball. But mostly the dog would nap, or stare at the man. And the schnauzer, he would have his own cup.

The character knows an ambush awaits him at the end of the third act and he's afraid to go on. Opening night and all those rehearsals tipped him off. Did they think he wouldn't notice how things always turned out? If he thought he had it so bad, he should try the real deal. He should shut up about tragedy until he knew about reality. He remembered hearing something like this, maybe on the TV News. The phrase had come to him from somewhere. And a matchstick castle is for burning. Put it in a museum if you like, but you can only prolong the inevitable. Maybe this was something he had seen on the TV news.

One good schnauzer deserves another. This is what I put in the ad trying to breed my dog. I wanted to stud the schnauzer in exchange for a puppy. A puppy would make things interesting. And people called, mostly schnauzer owners, but they were very protective of the schnauzer pussy. No one seemed to want to give it up for what I asked. There was a high premium because of the price of the puppies, which I will shell out for in the end. Because I'm sure a puppy will make things interesting.

He finds a woman who puts her breasts on him when she cuts his hair, and he tips her accordingly. He ascribes to the frequent trim and also learns that on Mondays, when the salon is closed, he can

schedule a special appointment, just the two of them, with all the mirrors, implements, and chairs. He books appointments until he runs out of money. There's always another paycheck, and it's easy to get a loan. She nicks him when he acts afraid, scratching him quick with the sharp point of her sheers. But that's not why he quits her—he doesn't mind the cuts, because she soothes him afterwards. She's just too expensive and he's always out of money.

Ice cream and other fine foods find there way into the room. Into my fridge, my blender, my cappuccino maker, my toaster oven, my range, my Weber, my George Foreman, my microwave. Food is very important to me. I'm a food junkie.

The character hates doing dishes, so he eats and prepares meals on paper plates. He goes through paper plates like burning up the rainforest and no one on the Internet is happy with him. He quits eating, or near enough. And he keeps on living. He can eat little pieces of this or little bits of that and he continues living. He gets more traffic at the site and he is still living.

Our bones will outlast kings' bones. We get more calcium, Vitamin D, and sun. Our living bones ache for the light of day. And eventually, no matter what, the smiling white bastards will one day win. Milk is a good meal, the more fat the better. It will substitute for solid food days at a time.

Hunger is what separates him. It makes him worthy. He cradles his belly as he lies curled on his side and he says “Oh, oh, oh,” to anyone who will listen. The pain in his side is dull and penetrating, leaving a debilitated thawing middle. But the hunger is his own, it distinguishes him, like a birdsong that repeats his name.

Electrons can be made to spell it out. They can be coaxed into putting the word in transit. Images of evaporating flesh. Satellite calls from loved ones to talk about weather. Clogged arteries, blood clots, high-fiber foods, sleeplessness, treadmill exercise for more energy. It takes time to heal. Personalized ring tones, in memoriam websites, e-mail archives, Google results in a fraction of a second. A child's kite would lift you and you'd hang from the sky like a lead weight from a stray fishing line. Above the trees you'd traverse night skies in a Northerly direction, the kite bobbing you up and down. Packets of sugar make a good meal. Crumbs can be found if you look. Choose a diner with a single overworked waitress and sit at a dirty table. Drink the coffee she brings and carry the crumbs from finger to tongue in a repeated motion, preferably when no one is looking.

Every shallow grave incubates the next epidemic. Every life-tome sinks the library into wetlands another fraction of an inch. We wear waders in the library now, concerned with the mold, the paper conspiring to live again and centuries upon centuries of scribblings are at risk. Pages are feverishly scanned onto hard drives, back-ups of back-ups made, the books transcribed into brightly pixilated computer screen facsimile replicas, some with random round blotches of dark mold already staining passages into obscurity. I imagine lifting a large book, one of the hefty library dictionaries. Only in my mind could I achieve such a feat. I used to eat paper to

fend off the hunger between meals. I would have liked the taste of this old book, the leaves thin and dusty. I want to hold open this book and fly beneath it, the leaves splayed open on my back like wings.

He would imagine the sensation of eating and he was able to get there in his mind, to remember his favorite foods. Filling foods like pizza, spaghetti, meatloaf. Foods covered in cheese, smothered in sauce, stewed in broth and gravy. But eventually even the thought of food made him retch, and with nothing to expel he found it better not to think about eating at all, to even avoid aromas.

I could no longer stand the sight of the schnauzer gulping down dried meat pellets while the character starved. I couldn't deny the dog, so I gave him away, to a good home. The last time I visited the schnauzer he gave me a bored look and went back to lying on his bed. I prefer to remember the good times, no matter how the dog feels about me now.

He was beyond eating. He had transcended. He tasted flavors in moonbeams. Shadows were like dark chocolate, traffic sounds were spicy or salty, the natural fauna of the park like honey or syrup. He learned to limit water. No telling what toxins are in water. In winter he lives on snowflakes. Walking in fog is like pushing through curtains. There is a weightless ideal he seeks. Somewhere behind the heft of words, between the light and the knowledge, to traverse the optic cable and register in another mind as a penetratingly simple but complete thought. He appears on the computer screen as a living ghost, an object of pity, a suffering human shell. He is

pondered, perhaps lovingly. But is his throe a moment profound?
Do I love him now? Do I love him now? Was the coffee cheap, cold,
bitter?

In the third act a surprise awaits him. He'd seen it coming, a
place and time the rival longed for, the rival's great scene. In the
third act our character is killed on the street by a backstabbing,
cheating, cuckolding, liar. From our prone position we project the
sensation of being snuffed. We denounce the rival unto our last puff
of breath, delivered with conviction, but the rival spits and laughs.
And everyone stays in their seats. Because they're not dupes. This
is only the third act. The romantic spirit will prevail.

