

The Suicider (Long Version)

by Josh Cook

He woke up four hours later with the second worst headache of his life. He leaned against the car door, his face against the window, and pulled the handle to open the door, but it smacked against the back wall vibrating the glass against his cheek. He tried to pull himself out of the car by the top of the door frame but his center of gravity was still in the car so the door slammed closed on his fingers. The pain made him fling the door away so it bounced off the garage wall and slammed closed. Stinging pain shot through his fingers all the way up to his shoulders. After a moment of whimpering he recovered his resources and wiggled and slip his way over the emergency break and stick shift into the passenger seat, pushed the passenger door open, and rolled into the garage. He stumbled as he stood up and stepped into the big bag of raked mowed grass which toppled him to the ground again, flipped up in the air from the momentum of his falling and buried him in the raked mowed grass. He picked himself up and got as much of the grass back into the bag as he could before his headache made him nauseous. It was 4:30 in the afternoon. It was Wednesday. His car ran out of gas before the carbon monoxide killed him. He'd been trying to kill himself for two months and he was running out of ethical options.

He went into the house, sat down at the kitchen table. He took out his wallet. He had \$27 and some loose change in his pocket. There were rolled coins in his bedroom. Not nearly enough for a full tank of gas. "Well," he thought, "Been avoiding Drain-O. Movies make it look like such a horrible death. Probably worse than what movies show. Running out of techniques that won't put anybody else at risk and a little more than 30 bucks won't buy much else." He leaned back in his chair. "So much easier if I hadn't been caught

with that ounce of weed. [confirm what makes it a federal offense] That and fainting if a blade gets too close. Still laugh at the face Denise made. 'Sure I'll help make dinner, but I can't slice the carrots.'" He took a deep breath. "Man, my head hurts. Could really use an Ibuprofen. Oh, the irony." He slapped his hands down on the table and stood up. "Least it's a nice day. Nice walk to the store."

He put on his favorite baseball cap and opened the garage to let it air out. He took the garbage to and the recycling to curb. He drank a glass of water, dried the glass, and put it back in the cupboard. As he walked back through the kitchen he bent over and flipped up the loose hinge on the doorless oven, so it didn't stick into the walking space. Since he was back inside he made sure all the lights were off. All the lights were off. He left.

The suburban lawns were so sharply green they looked like algae pools in desalination plants, but from a certain altitude, the altitude of tourist flyovers in vintage propeller planes, hot air balloon rides, and the fifteen seconds before the chord is pulled on a recreational sky dive; perhaps the third oldest altitude from which humanity has surveyed the earth, the first being the limit of our ability to climb tall trees and the second being the limit of our ability to climb tall mountains, though there was of course some concurrence with these two, the fourth being from the atmosphere, the sixth being from the moon, and the seventh, and virtually exhaustive, the above cloud altitude of contemporary commercial airliners; from that altitude desalination plants, with their range of crisp organic colors, look like fields of agriculture, and though most would be unable to say exactly which agriculture is being cultivated, the regularity of the rectangles and the delineatedness of the colors says to our brains fields of something, which says to our brains, the human triumph over fate, which says to our brains the first step in our extraction from the natural world the limits of our biological existences, and through the suburbs, cared for like pets, sustained by expensive irrigation systems and supported by sophisticated chemicals, people

cultivate little visual samples, hundred square foot examples, lush kentucky hybrid arguments that we are more important than the racoons that eat out of our trash.

But there is an additional step away from the natural limits of our biological limits, another layer of paper on the shoji screen between what we imagine and the animal we are, was present, because the tilling of the earth is not an assertion of independence from the chaos of natural abundance and famine but merely a suggestion of influence, for man can still not make it rain, or talk weeds out of growing between their rows of crops, or convince insects to eat something else when the insect wants to eat the fruit we've grown, for the transition from hunter gather to farmer herder was not an end to the conversation between humanity and its habitats but a change in tone, or, if this must be adversarial, the nature of the negotiation was altered, but negotiate we must with the earth for the food we eat, and what a strange and demanding delusion that additional layer of paper in the shoji screen is, for it was built from geographic distance, for in the suburb, no matter how green the grass of the lawns, how thick the hedges along our boundaries, how resplendent the living bouquets of flowers are, one in the suburbs must drive to the supermarket for one's food, and that food too had to drive some distance to get to the market, so that our argument against our animality is really composed of a slight of hand displacement for the same processes of animal and plant growth that fed us when we wandered around our primordial environments, grow our salads and our chicken fingers now, they just do so far enough away that we feel like we ourselves are distant from those forces; the irony being that we have put ourselves near cars and they are a far greater predator of humanity than any of the saber toothed apparitions we imagine hunted our ancestors.

“And how are you today young man?” an elderly woman called to him from across the street. She was sitting in a rocking chair in a semi enclosed porch next to another elderly woman.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old,” he said as he crossed the street. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, just fine. Just fine.”

“And you, Betty, how are you?”

“On a day like this, who can complain?”

“It's true. How's Tim?”

“Like I would know. He never calls, never sends an email. He doesn't even use that whattayacallit, that book thing, on the Internet...”

“Facebook.”

“Right. He doesn't even use the Facebook.”

“Is he still with the design firm?”

“Oh yes. In fact, he just got a promotion.”

“That's wonderful.”

“He's now, a, oh, it's one of those long titles, what is it Marjorie?”

“A coordinator of something. Sounds like they just made it up to me. More managers and coordinators and chief thises and chief thats these days than people actually working. It's a wonder anything gets done.”

“Oh. I remember. He's the Assistant Chief Coordinator of Creative Resources,” Betty said, counting off the components of the title on her fingers.

“See what I mean?”

“Don't ask me what he does. He told me when he first found out, but I don't remember. But he's got a lot more responsibilities and they pay him more, so that's good. And the guy he replaced, that guy was promoted and so was the guy before that, so it's a sign he's moving up in the firm.”

“That's great.”

“Now all he needs to find is a girlfriend.”

“He'll find someone. He's a good guy making good money. It's only a matter of time.”

“Easy for you to say. You're not waiting for grandchildren.”

“That's true. That's true. And how are the girls, Marjorie?”

“Oh, they're doing well. Husbands are good. Kids are good. They just live so far away, I only get to see them a couple times a year.”

“Not a lot of movie work in these parts, though,” he said.

“I know. I know. But still. I wish they could visit more. Just a weekend every now and again.”

“Working as hard as they do, they'll have the money to travel soon, take more time off. Then you'll always have the kids underfoot.”

"I hope so, but I don't know. They found the time to go to London for a week last year."

"Can you blame them for taking the kids to see London?"

"No. I can't. I went when I was in college and had a wonderful time. But is a weekend now and then so hard?"

"You and Betty should rent an RV next summer. You could drive around and see everybody."

"Ha. Are you volunteering to drive?"

"I'll keep my calendar open."

They all chuckled.

"So what are you doing today?" Marjorie asked.

"Oh, not much. Just going to pick up a few things at the store, and since it's nice out, I figured I'd just walk there."

"That's a good idea."

"Walking keeps you young."

"Both of you must still be putting your miles in. You haven't aged a day since we met."

"Oh, that's sweet."

"Well, we have been getting out there a bit, now, Majorie."

"That's true. That's true."

"We started going to the mall this winter. They open up early for people to go walking."

"It's nice. We saw George and Phyllis there a few times."

"Oh. That's great. How are they doing?"

"It was a few months ago, but they were doing OK."

"George is fading though."

"He is?"

"Yeah. You don't notice it at first, but after talking to him for a couple of minutes, you see it."

"That's too bad."

"It is."

"How is Phyllis handling it?"

Betty and Marjorie shrugged.

"Is there a good way to handle it," Betty said.

"It's been a couple of months since we've seen them, since we haven't been back to the mall since it got nice out."

"And they don't use the Facebook either."

"Well, give them my best when you see them again."

"We will. We will."

“I should get going. Many miles to go before I sleep and all that.”

“OK, well, you have a good day then.”

“You too. Good-bye Betty.”

“Bye-bye now.”

“Bye Marjorie.”

He waved one more time over his shoulder as he walked away. “Probably should have just used that gas to drive into a tree. Not as certain though. Well.” He just missed the walk sign at the major intersection he had to cross. What would those who saw men on horses and said “Centaur” would say? “There is an inside and an outside to every animal, a sacredly kept passionately guarded differentiation between what the animal is made of and what the animal lives in, and this differentiation is the most natural of boundaries for when it is crossed in error, when what is supposed to remain outside gets inside or what is supposed to remain inside escapes to the outside the animal either dies or recovers for the injury has happened, for that is what all energy is, for what is the blade across the belly but an inappropriate double crossing of this boundary, the first when the blade that should stay outside pierces into the body, and the second when the entrails that should always remain inside, spill into the environment. What is poison? What is disease? Invasions. And what is death but the inevitable entropic process by which whatever life is on the inside, seeps out through the seems into the outside. This is nothing short of an abomination, no, it is the abomination, this is where abomination started, this wicked free exchange of insides and outsides between separate beings when one is not being eaten by the other.”

And what about those who imagine those who saw men on horses and said “Centaur,” what gives them the right to assume that those

who said “Centaur” said “Centaur” to describe not some imagined animal but a very real symbiosis, a union between two animals, a partnership in the purest and most effective sense, and wouldn't that idea of “Centaur” perfectly described what the Mongols conquered the world with, an exquisite partnership between rider and horse that allowed people to move faster than people had ever moved before, to just push, to execute agilities that would have otherwise wrenched our tendons from our joints, and allowed horses, big, fast, herbivores to churn through the animal meat that surrounded them more viciously than even the most bloodthirsty predator, and could one from any era and any scientific understanding of the animal kingdom condemn a chieftain in China, or Russia, or Eastern Europe if he exclaimed while his men died in droves he did not imagine possible, whisper through his breathless shock, “Centaur.” This chieftain seeing something he'd never seen before, in a tapestry dyed by the blood of his warriors, would you rather him stutter about speed and agility about bows and stirrups; would he tell us more of meaning if he talked about formation and organization; would there be useful truth he speculated about training, practice, and culture, or did he say all that needed to be said when he saw something real, that was closer to myth and said “Centaur.”

The walk sign changed to “Walk.”

Mrs. Martin and her daughters were coming out of the convenience store when he reached the parking lot.

“Good evening, Mrs. Martin. Emily. Kate.”

“Good evening. Girls say good evening.”

“Goodood eveninging.”

“Did you walk here?” Mrs. Martin asked.

“I did. I did. Beautiful day. I'm not so far, so I figured, why not, right.”

“I know. I wish I could walk more. But with these two having to go back and forth across the city, and work, and everything, I just don't have the time. I'm lucky if I get on the bike at home for a half an hour on Saturdays.”

“And where are you two dragging your mother around to?” he asked, bent over at the waist with his hands on his knees.

It took a moment.

“Emily does ballet on Washington and I have clarinet on Main.”

“And do you like the clarinet?”

Kate nodded sheepishly.

“And do you like ballet?”

Emily nodded sheepishly.

“And what are you having for dinner?”

“Chicken nuggets.”

“Chicken nuggets! Sounds delicious. Do you like chicken nuggets?”

They both nodded.

“Are you going to thank your mom for taking you all the way to Washington and all the way to Main and then making you chicken nuggets for dinner?”

They both giggled into their hands.

“I think that's the most you're going to get out of them.”

He stood and said, “And things are going well with you I assume?”

“Oh, they are, they are. The girls are doing very well in school and work is going well. Not too far behind on the bills. Can't really ask for much more than an extra week of vacation once in a while, if you know what I mean,” she said and society chuckled.

He chuckled with her. “I do. I do. Peter doing well?”

“He's fine. We hardly seem to see each other though, he's been working crazy hours. But he thinks he might be up for a promotion soon, so.”

“That's great. Maybe you'll get that extra week after all.”

“Well, we'll see.”

“I'll keep my fingers crossed.

“Thanks. Anyway, we should get going. Got to get those chicken nuggets on the table.”

“OK. It was nice to bump into you.”

“Nice to see you too.”

“And it's always lovely to see, Kate...and Emily,” he said, shaking each girl's hand when he said her name.

“Say good-bye girls.”

“Goodood-byeeye.”

“Have a good night.”

“You too.”

He paused at the door of the store. There were beer brand signs over every door of the cooler that ran along the back wall on his left; even over the doors in front of the soda, energy drinks, water, juice products and other soft drinks including iced teas, lemonades, orange juices, apple juices, and milks. A big sign on foam board hung from the ceiling by fishing line above the hot dog roller, the soda fountain, the slushy machine, and the clear plastic case of wrapped sandwiches, and said, in red letters at an angle in front of a white explosion icon, “GRAB AND GO!” He looked through several aisles for drain cleaner before the cashier called to him.

“Hey man, you too good to say hello to me now.”

“Tito! Hey, sorry, man, I was off in my own little world there,” he said as he walked up to the counter. He reached over and clasped Tito's hand in an upright, bro-handshake.

“No problem man. How goes the battle?”

“Oh, you know. You fight as hard as you can and then someone you've never met decides who won.”

“Ain't that the truth.”

“How bout you man?”

“Livin' the dream, you know.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No, really, man. I just got a raise here. Maria got a raise at the vet's. Now we can really kick back and chill. Maybe save up for like a trip or something. You know. Like, Vegas. Or Atlantic City. Maria says she always wanted to go to DC, which, you know, that sounds cool to.”

“Man, Tito, you've got it made.”

“I know. I should write one of those self-help books and make a million bucks. Just tell them to marry a girl who doesn't want kinds and doesn't give a shit where she lives and the rest is easy. Pad the book with like, charts, and quotes and bullshit.”

“I don't know, Tito. I'm pretty sure you married the only one of those.”

“Well, either I'm lucky or awesome and I don't give a shit which, you know what I'm saying.”

He laughed. “You're trip, man. Maria got a sister? Maybe it runs in the family.”

“She's got like, four of them, but they go for assholes with big cars and want to live in house with, like, columns in the front and shit. I got the only one from that family. You got to fish in other streams if you know what I mean.”

“I know. I know. Hey man, I came in for some Drain-O. Where can I find it?”

“Go back in time three weeks or wait a month.”

“What?”

“There was a recall three weeks ago on Drain-O. I guess some real nasty shit got in it at a bunch of factories, which, like, how do you even know what the nasty shit is when you're talking about Drain-O, but I guess something got in, that, like, gave off these fumes or something. Couple of kids died out in California. Real, sad, you know.”

“That's terrible.”

“Yeah, but what are you gonna do?”

“You got any other drain cleaners?”

“Naw, man. Funny story. All that shit's made in the same bunch of factories, and they don't know which factories have the bad stuff, so all of it's been recalled.”

“You're kidding.”

“Nope. All that clog removal shit's been recalled. Have you tried a plunger?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you could try one of those snake things, the thing that's metal, with the handle, and is, like,”

“Yeah, no, no, I know what you're talking about.”

"It's going to be awhile on that chemical shit, so it's either that or a plumber."

"Yeah, no, it's a good idea. Yeah. I'll do that. You sell them?"

"Nope."

"Is there a hardware store nearby?"

"Well, there's the one up over the hill."

"Passed the river?"

"Yeah No. Over in the other direction. By the highway. Shit. What's the name of that street?"

"Yeah. Now that you say it, I know what you're talking about. It's over near where you pick up UPS packages, when you're not going to be around and it's one of those packages where you've got to sign for it, or they can't leave it on the porch or whatever."

"Yeah, that's right. Yeah, it's just another, like, two streets over. Just by where that old department store used to be, you know, that was around for like thirty years or whatever,"

No, yeah, I mean, that was gone before I moved here, but I know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, so there's a hardware store out there. You just take a left out of the parking lot, got to the light, take a right, and then, the turn before you get on the highway, you take that right. I don't think it's a light or anything. And then it's just p there a little ways."

"Yeah, I know where it is, there's a stop sign on the cross street."

“Yeah, and there's like, a carpet store or something like that out there.”

“Yeah, I know exactly where that is.”

“That'll be your best bet.”

“Alright, thanks Tito.”

“No problem man, I'll catch you later.”

“Catch you later,” he said as they shook hands again.

There was a row of cars parked on the other side of the lot all facing into the street. They looked like horses tied to the railing across the street from the saloon. Because it was the kind of packed-dust, train fueled, scratch on the skull of the earth, town, swaggered, sauntered, staggered, and flopped into by leathered men, tough, thirsty, and hiding. They came from mines, ranches, drives, prospects, and golden spikes, twice as bored as they were angry, and that's pretty damn bored, to drink whiskey like water because you don't want to know what happened to the last guy who drank the water, and there weren't no other place in town that kept its lights on after dark but the saloon so that's where they all went. It wasn't much about preventing brawls from breaking out as it was managing the brawls when they did break out. So there were a couple of rooms on the second floor with bars on the windows and locks on the outside to stick conscious aggressors once everything had wound down and the bartender had a locked and loaded rifle behind the bar and a steady hand and promised and made good on his promise when called to, to shoot dead any man who went for his gun in the saloon, and the men who'd rode into town that day or had their horses with them for whatever other reason a man might have his horse with him even if he ain't going to ride it, tied them to the railing on the other side of the street, because there was always the

chance someone could get thrown through the window and the brawl could get itself into the street and that's when knives and guns appear and there weren't no point in putting a good horse who'd done no wrong to no one close to that kind of risk. In fact, it'd be a sin.

Distribution centers. Delivery hubs. Wholesalers. Biotech firms. The telemarketing and mass mailing publicity company. The national bank call center. The flooring and carpeting retailer. The abandoned factories; gravestones with the inscriptions already gone. Vibration in the air. A ticking, probably, but only probably, a clock in the suitcase. Tension terrible intense quiet. Interior of the buildings packed with people doing things they wouldn't do if they didn't have to do them to make money. Desolate outside because it is not wonderable, you don't wander there, you go there for your job or for some particular errand and that's it. Empty picnic tables on corporate lawns. Food wrappers thrown from passing cars the maintenance staff have not cleaned up. Cut corporate lawns. Clean walls. Distortion of the relationship between distance and time. Standing in a death; a death subject to topological procedures, a coffee mug turned into a doughnut. A trace of life stretched taunt over something isn't quite death; and more terrible. Vastly more terrible.

Could one be faulted for yearning after that wild west town after being in such a place? For saloon brawls and gun fights? For focusing on that which violence does for us and not that which violence does to us? For preferring in a moment of imagination the banquet of demise set by death in the desert that must be crossed to the denial of life shouted by an industrial park that must be walked through on an errand elsewhere? For wanting to take one's chances with a sun-baked mustachioed gunslinger over the exhausted indifference of another receptionist? And if so, what does the moment of fancy count for in relation to the persistence of evolutionarily rational decisions. We all have the opportunity to

make decisions that make it harder to find food in favor of it being easier to find meaning, but how many of us do and what do we feel about those who actually do? Everything that we feel we eventually build and then decades later others look back and conclude what we felt by what we built. After forcing ore out of the earth and turning it into steel and reinforcing concrete with it what did we build with the reinforced concrete; only the most perfect abominations could reserve judgment from such evidence.

Imagine, just for a moment, if you learned that the arbiter of future happiness, according to whatever cosmology you ascribe to, was about to inspect your house, or apartment, or dorm room, or whatever your primary domicile might be, and reward and punish you based on what it (he, she, they) sees, and that you had ten minutes to prepare. What would you do? What if you were woken from a deep sleep with this problem. And if you were just getting home from a party, totally shit-faced, and desperate to annihilate a bag of chips before passing out in your bed. And if your grandparents were there too. And what if they were unexpected and showed up with the arbiter of future happiness. God, can you imagine. And what if you pulled off the lie in the allotted time.

And yet.

In language, anything can be anything.

The controlled temperature of the hardware store made him notice how hot he'd gotten on his walk. He never thought, "I need to hurry," but he realized as he strode towards the plumbing aisle that he was breathing hard and sweating. It took him a few minutes to find the plumber's snake. When he did, he grabbed it and rushed towards the counter. "Why am I rushing," he thought. "Don't even know if the store is closing. Just. Rushing."

“Excuse me,” he said to young man wearing an apron with the store's logo, “ what time do you close?”

“Seven.”

“And what time is it now?”

The young man looked at the clock on the wall. “Quarter past six, sir. Plenty of time.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Can I help you find anything?”

He checked the price of the plumber's snake. He earned some time to look around by the pace of his walk. “Now that I think of it, where is the rope?”

“Against the back wall, here, and then all the way on that side of the store.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“You're welcome. Have a good evening.”

“Thanks. You too.”

He found the rope. If he bought the plumbers snake he would only have enough money for cheap rope. The world of value will not behave. If it did the cheap rope would always and every time break first. But go into your grandad's shed and poke around and, sure enough, if you live in a world where grandads have poke aroundable sheds, there will be a cheap rope, coiled in a dusty dark corner, older than your mother, and just as good as it was when grandad bought it help get that stump out of his yard “Came here for the

snake," he thought. "Thinking a garrote kind of thing. Little ridiculous to get that and cheap rope. Really should be the snake or some really nice rope. Don't want to explain change if I bump into that guy. Bad luck with rope so far. Even dad's army stuff. Something always breaks. Snake might work, even if it breaks." He took the snake to the register.

"You're a lucky man," the cashier said.

"Oh yeah?"

"That's the last one."

