

Mario's Three Lives

by Matt Bell

The plumber has three lives left or else he is already dead. Maybe he leaps across the gorge with ease, flying high through the air to land safely on the other side. The jump is simple because he's able to check the edge several times, waiting until he is sure of his footing, or else it's impossible because on this world there's an invisible hand pushing him forward, speeding him along, forcing him to leap before he's ready. If that happens then the plumber is going to die. Otherwise he continues his quest, sprinting and jumping to hit blocks with his head and turtles with his ass. The blocks contain either money or food, gold coins or else mushrooms and flowers he can devour to grow bigger or stronger. Sometimes they make him fly and shoot fireballs from his fingertips. Of course, he does not actually eat anything. The closest they ever come to an orifice is when he jumps up and lands on them with his ass, just like he does to the turtles. He eats with his ass. He kills with his ass. His ass is a multi-purpose tool. Why do I have a mouth, he thinks, if I never speak or eat with it? He wonders if it's this way for everyone but there's nobody to ask. The only people he knows are the Princess, who's been abducted, and his brother, who is always missing but who the plumber knows would carry on his quest if he should fail.

The plumber always dies with the same surprised look on his face, his mouth hanging open as he flies upward through the air before being born again at the beginning of the world. He's tiny and frightened without his mushrooms and his fireballs, desperately banging his head against blocks, looking for more. Sometimes, between reincarnations, the plumber thinks he senses God trying to decide whether to give him another chance or to just bag the whole thing. He's scared then, but who wouldn't be? He prays for continuation and then God says Continue and the music plays that means the plumber will live again. Back in the world, he realizes that the God he senses between deaths is there when he's alive too,

guiding his motions. His triumphs are God's triumphs but so are his failures. It bothers him that God can fail but he doesn't show it. He is a stoic little plumber, looking for mushrooms and jumping on turtles. He is not a philosopher, or at least not until after the Princess is safe and he has the time to think things through. Still, sometimes when he's alive and running or, heaven forbid, swimming, he realizes that the God Who Continues is possibly not the only god there is. Surely, that god isn't the one who put all the collapsing platforms and strange, angry wildlife everywhere. At first, he thinks it's the Turtle King, the one who captured the Princess and started him on this whole adventure, but then he thinks, Who made the Turtle King? Not God, or at least not his God. Does this prove the existence of the Devil? He doesn't know.

The plumber stomps the tiny mushroom headed foes who wobble toward him, trying to kill him but succeeding only if he's completely careless. He bounces from one head to another, crushing a whole troop of them without touching the ground once. He is an efficient weapon, and these lowliest of enemies are no more than an inconvenience. Crawling through a maze of green pipes, the plumber realizes that he doesn't believe the Devil made the turtles or their king, because that would mean the Devil also made the world and that he will not accept. He hopes he is on the side of good and decides that he must be. He is on a quest to save the Princess, and surely that is a good thing.

Now there is snow covering the land, so he slips and slides precariously down hills toward open crevasses. He springs into the air and bounces off a winged turtle to reach a higher cliff, where he skates across the icy landscape. There is money everywhere and although he picks up as much as he can, it never gets too heavy. This is because it is constantly disappearing from his pockets, going who knows where. All the plumber knows is that when he's found a lot of gold it makes it easier to come back after he falls down a pit or gets hit by some spiky creature thrown from the sky by a

surprisingly anthropomorphic cloud. The more money he finds, the less he ends up in the Place Where One Waits Between Continues. He hates that place, with its tense anticipation, and so he looks everywhere for gold coins or else green mushrooms, which both make the same music and have the same life-giving effect.

Finally, he sees the castle in the distance. He's passed several fake ones on his way, convincing replicas built on other worlds, but he knows that this is the real deal. The Princess is there and so is the Turtle King. He enters.

The plumber leaps across lava and disintegrating paths. He ducks under spikes falling from ceilings and kills every enemy in his path. His mouth, his stupid useless mouth, it is smiling. Soon he will save the Princess. He eats a red mushroom and turns into a giant. He eats a flower and breathes fire. The Turtle King must not defeat him. The music plays and the final fight begins, but the plumber cannot win. He dies until he runs out of lives and then he waits for God to say Continue. He waits for a long time and so he knows that God is frustrated with him. He wants to say, you're the one controlling me. It's your fault too. Give me one more chance, he prays, and I will do exactly as you say. I will jump when you say jump. I will run when you say run. I will hit anyone with my ass that you want me to hit. Please, just say the word and I shall be yours. God ponders and then says Continue, or else he doesn't. The plumber saves the Princess, or else the Turtle King conquers everything. There is no way of knowing what God will do until the moment he does it. He prays and prays. It's all any plumber can do.

