

space mountain in ghost region from absent-minded continent of misshaped planet

by Monogamie

SPACE MOUNTAIN IN GHOST REGION FROM ABSENT-MINDED CONTINENT OF MISSHAPED PLANET, COLLIDING WITH PLAIN METEOR MADE OF UNILATERAL THOUGHTS.

Cody had a face, a still and shivering dark basement of a face, one with a negative intake that seemed like it was leaning at a downward angle, as if falling off of itself, or committing suicide, jumping off the edge of the world and leaving behind the suicide note that was his human brain. Cody had the saddest pockets under his eyes, agonizing in a washed out purple not unlike a melted grape-flavored popsicle. There were faces like that, born crying and always reverting back to that default position, not crying, just ready to cry, or awaiting tears. It was not an unattractive face, just an inert-seeming one that shimmered, sometimes, in a phosphorescent and diluted light, as if coming from underwater. Others thought of Cody as play-less and off-putting, and sometimes wondered if he wasn't handicapped by a multiform and cryptic sort of boredom, like a long-winded polynomial math equation.

Cody had tried, in the past, smiling, with his mouth, swinging with the full range of it instead of bunting a discreet and self-contained grin, making with his face a facial expression that felt cumbersome and forward-thinking, the kind that should be standard fifty to sixty

years from now but for the time being appeared psychotic to those around, in the same way a pirate dog is. Cody felt jealous of cats for being physically unable to smile, often wondering how sane or demented a civilization of cross-breed smile-deprived cat-people would be.

During the last year Cody had made a backward sort of leap into himself, retreating to the safety of a long-lost crystallized fortress sealed somewhere inside his person. He felt like a ghost, a feeble and injured spirit haunting his own body, terrorizing his self, and each day shedding behind him a dash of his humanity. Cody was a continent of self-esteem issues. Could self-esteem be bottomless? Or was self-esteem something with a hard-to-reach bottom, like the ocean floor? Cody would wonder about the exact and precise height of his own sense of worth, concretely, in meters, and if such a thing as a Guinness World Record for lowest self-esteem in a person existed.

Cody felt time was slipping away. Time was a pinwheel on the surface of the sun, firmly entrenched in the ground, blown with fierceness by solar winds and other forces of the galaxy, and spinning and whirling intensely in a singular clockwise direction. Or else maybe time was a narcissistic arrow with a stream-of-consciousness glued to it, and fired nervously from a bow. Cody wasn't sure.

Mallory and Jason, a couple, were Cody's roommates. Cody knew that cohabitation was a system doomed to failure, and that love was a system doomed to failure, also. He hoped, secretly, behind some password-protected backdoor in his head where shady deals occurred at night, that the two failures would cancel one another.

Mallory and Jason were taking the task of being normal with the seriousness of a whistle. Sometimes they made love, together, affably, both of them enjoying it as a pure and undistracted activity,

his genitalia just a sassy duck eager to be socialized, and when finally getting a guest to interact with, spilling his guts all over it. Was that really proper etiquette? It felt strange that sex, unlike everything else, had not been soiled by publicity or marketing. One of the last safe place in this world, they felt.

Mallory and Jason had hobbies such as nothing, reminiscing and French movies. They had friends that came over, sometimes, said things, complained and left. Who where those people? How exactly and for what reasons had they willingly bumbled in here? That seemed so hard, scheduling little arrangements with people, luring people so that they would come stumbling into your intimacy. Coordinating your life with other people's lives was not even a system, and it was still doomed to failure. Often Cody would imagine himself 'making friends' and 'getting a life', which would lead him to a mental image of himself running around outside and catching strangers with a giant butterfly net. There had to be a better way, or maybe all the ways were different but just as equally shitty.

Mallory played violin, sometimes, but often considered giving up altogether, because what was the point, really? What was the point to anything? Mallory and Jason liked to de-bore themselves with wine or good food, which they loved to prepare, stare at and then subsequently ruin. Delicious food, it was like a 'higher plane' of some kind, one in which life was approximately five degrees warmer and winters a month shorter on average, or something. They enjoyed making little comments for every new thing that somehow made its way into their bodies. They quickly outgrew common remarks such as 'so good' or 'hmmmm'. So good that what? Where had that come from, 'hmmmm'? What was the origin of it? Condensing the feeling of taste to a monosyllabic noise was a form of desecration, they felt.

Mallory and Jason wanted food to be more of a dramatic experience, and so they grew accustomed to describing the feel of fine food with elaborate metaphors, that one thing tasted like 'an hymn' while

another tasted like 'an angel', or that this bite had 'made their stomach do a cartwheel'. After a while, they ran out of quirky adjectives, which made Jason take up poetry in night classes. All this wonderful cuisine and no poetry to describe it! That felt like the next 'higher plane', the plane after good food, using vocabulary to capture with precision the spirit of taste.

Cody liked food when it was warm. By force of habit, Cody had grown resistant, thought not immune, to spending time alone, and had given up altogether on concepts such as risk-taking, caring, branching out, smiling, making friends or believing. He liked console games, even if they had thought him very little of any actual tangible use. He felt he understood games more than he understood very basic and concrete elements around him, like the rain.

That night, Cody in his room had been browsing ineptly through the menus of his xbox, opening a pop-up, pressing Y, launching a side-window, browsing to the leftmost separate sub-tab, pressing the left bumper, closing a pop-up, pressing A, converting money that belonged to a credit company into the make-believe currency of Microsoft, and weeping a little, thinking that consummation was a system doomed to failure, that the digital recreation of it is was different but as exasperating as its brick-and-mortar equivalent. For a second, he made an annoyed facial expression that vaguely resembled an empty gas tank gauge, from seeking something actively that always seemed just slightly out of reach.

Eventually Cody purchased a game called 'Braid' through Live Arcade, a title he had read many encouraging things about online. He knew the game had been made, mostly, by just one guy, who had claimed 'Invisible Cities' by Italo Calvino had been a source of inspiration. He had read the closing comments at the end of what seemed like a positive review, and had glanced at the final score number that seemed high enough. Reviews for games were easy to grasp. Games were evaluated the same way a teacher would grade

homework, or the same way a person would review a beanbag. Maybe that was all games were in the first place, the continuation of homework, as a more intricate and mass-market thing.

Cody played 'Braid' recklessly and delightfully, with an absolute lack of physical restraint, like fireworks detonating excitedly in mid-air. Immediately he sensed that 'Braid' was an unlikely and intelligent piece, a place you could visit that would nurture you, and once you left, would age, same as you. Cody believed games were secretly retarded. Feeling himself engaged, recognized and spoken to by a videogame, a stupid, stupid videogame, filled Cody with a joy health-giving and chunky, like guacamole. Braid was challenging. Playing it, his brain felt dilapidated, as if an old street ridden with potholes and hardly ever plowed during wintertime.

Cody played for a long time, most of his evening in fact, without pause, eating cupcakes, some red like the apocalypse, some green and blue like tiny unmanned planets with vegetation made of frosting. Evenings had this tendency to peacefully withdraw themselves when one played videogames, folding into nothing, evaporating into thin air like a smoke bomb. Eventually, by itself and for some reason midnight occurred. Wednesday, the middle finger of a week, a poor option as far as days went, was present and accounted for. Cody glanced at his bed and imagined his body lying diagonally in it, as it usually would, to make the mattress seem less vacant. Sleeping alone, Cody felt void, his interior liquid and cold, like an icy cavern. He would wake up the next morning as a tragically time-lessened and near-future version of himself. Playing videogames was a way of making that reality, and every other reality, fade into nothingness for a short and comfortable while. If home was a place to rest your head, games were a place to bury your mind.

The door to Cody's room was not locked, not even closed, really, just compromising in a half-assed state between open and shut. Doors

did that, sometimes. Cody heard a few wooded knocks followed by the door swaying open, delicately, in an automatized, slow-moving, camera-on-dolly sort of way. He saw Mallory standing in the doorway, inclined against the frame, wearing an unmemorable white tanktop, her dark brown hair fizzy and everywhere, and as a whole looking undefined by brands and stunningly herself. Leaning against the door Cody felt she looked a little like the unlikely bastard child of La Mona Lisa and the Tower Of Pisa.

Cody and Mallory hardly ever talked, as they didn't have much to discuss, really. He knew that sometimes she would get up during the night, unable to sleep, her stomach upset as if brawling with a puma the size of a sponge attempting to claw its way out. For an instant, they looked at one another plainly, in a petrified and rarely practiced sort of way. Being with another person, any other person, just being, took practice. It was a skill, a learned skill, that had to be re-learned for each and every human being out there.

'Classical music', Mallory said, breaching silence, 'never heard you listen to classical music before. Makes me miss violin a little'

'It's not me', replied Cody, 'just the soundtrack to this game I'm on', waiting for her reaction, hoping for delight but expecting some form of mean-faced mockery.

'Oh. It's nice', said Mallory, 'not sure I get what's happening'

'It's Braid. It's great', responded Cody, 'but I hate this piece. I can't get it. It's dumb. Stupid. The guy on screen, the pieces, the scene, just, everything... I kind of feel like I am looking at intelligent beings from a dimension of gifted things and that I am just a stupid person from a retarded dimension filled with retarded notions and beings. I don't know. I am... I am bullshit to tell this guy how to behave, I think'

Mallory laughed, a rice cracker sort of laugh, thin and white. She sat down next to Cody, who was silently taken aback a little. Was this slice of talking taking on conversational proportions? He was so used to interfacing with people mostly in short bursts, a tormenting glimpse at what dialogue could be like. If relationships were literature, a long-term love affair would be a novel, a one-night stand a short story, and Cody's way with others some sort of concise and misunderstood haiku.

Videogames was one thing Mallory had only a broad knowledge of. She liked Tetris. But who didn't? She had reached the ending of the first two 'Silent Hill' games with her from-back-then boyfriend, him playing, her watching, shrieking like a siren being tortured whenever the radio acted up, which had made the game into a much more memorable experience for both of them. These days, though, sadly, any dead animal reminded her of him. She did not mind watching others play, but there was something about games, their cold polygonal exterior, the emphasis on conflict and violence, the lack of sensibility, the burden of the fictional on screen drama, that repelled her a little, not fully, just somewhat.

But Mallory did not mind Braid. The hero was ginger-faced and spiffy. It was a gloomy, artsy and thick meta-thing, Braid, thicker than what she would expect from a game. She was somewhat jealous of the clouds, the ones immune to time. That felt like a wonderful ability, being immune to time. She stayed by Cody's side for a while, getting into it a little, offering advice, ideas, solutions, making short comments as he played, reusing some of the food metaphors in different contexts, thought to Cody those were new and refreshing thoughts.

After some time, Mallory, her stomach a little better, went to the kitchen, took cereal out of a pantry, grabbed a ceramic bowl from another pantry, opened the utensil drawer and deliberately reached for the smallest spoon she could find. Tiny utensils had a way of

making her frail and toothpick hands appear supersized in contrast. As she poured milk in the bowl, she felt cereal was a deranged toy-like food, and thought about the overall eccentricity of mixing white liquid stolen from a cow with severely processed wheat and added sugar. She got back to Cody's side eager to resume their togetherness, the tiny spoon just a hidden dagger between her fingers, ready to backstab swiftly and cunningly a handful of unsuspecting mini-wheats.

Games often provoked seclusion, solitary confinement, though unwillingly so, maybe, apologizing a little, faintly, a barely audible 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' sneaking through the racket emitted by the console's infuriated fan unit as it growled for mercy. 'Single-player' was a technically sound but profoundly misunderstood label. Single-player games were thought of the same way one thinks of sugar packets, designed for the consumption and enjoyment of a single individual. In reality, had anyone ever formally restricted anyone else from sharing half the content of a sugar packet with an acquaintance?

On rare occasions a single-player game could be seen as a different shape, one that possessed at the center of itself something elegant and luxurious, and provided an experience that was more akin to that of a snow globe or a music box, an object activated by a single person and captivating for all around, rewarding those near-by with its riches equally and earnestly as opposed to selfishly or industriously.

A game was a flexible entity, flexible enough so that the very same title could create a myriad of social contexts. Sometimes a game was a space to think. Sometimes it was a realm in which a person could feel good about, or underreact to, concepts such as deception, betrayal, dishonesty, manipulation or personal endangerment. Betrayals could be conveniently paused and placed in a state of uncertainty for a moment so that one could come back to his or her

betrayal at a later point in time. Now and then a game was a task to tackle or a crime to solve, by yourself or alongside an accomplice. A game could be a place to yearn, or a compassionate and malleable dimension to bully until you recovered from the cold and harsh wind of the universe. Some reassurance could be found in engaging a thing that was more pathetic or ludicrous than you could ever be.

A game was not, however, romantic, which made it incredibly, incredibly romantic, in a furtive and unsuspected kind of way.

Cody felt like just a fragile body with a person in it. He felt like a will too weak to occupy more space in a universe that was filled with it. He and Mallory did not comprehend one another and most likely never would, but for a brief instant this finally mattered very little. The game was a neutral conciliator that had taken both of them in lovingly, like a foster family, attaching no importance to their past and confusing history, and yearning playfully for the simple joy of creating a moment, a memory, a point in time with all those who happened to be around, like a two-year old.

