

# Boredom & Ennui

by Smiley McGrouchpants, Jr-Esq-III

I awoke to the radio alarm — unfortunately, it was a commercial (and a particularly *braying* one, at that) — so I awoke with a start, and lunged across my futon to snap it off.

Dazed and incoherent, I sat up.

Fortunately [ — for *once!*] I was able to use this jolt of negative stimuli *constructively* [having enough mental reserves to offset it — *today*, at least] to get my ass out of bed, in the shower, under the water, tooth brushed, tampon inserted, blouse buttoned, through the hose-skirt-shoes combination, to find myself [at *last!*] sipping some Trader Joe's French Roast coffee, peering out the window.

*God. Another fuckin' day.*

And out the door I went.

Work sucked (as usual).

That night [it was a Friday; I changed, for the occasion] I found myself looking from the unfamiliar street sidewalk up at what I hoped would prove, indeed, to be Trent Winston's apartment. I had been “courted” for some few days previous, and — once it became clear that this wasn't so much an attempted romantic overture as an effort to fill out the crowd at what clearly was intended to be quite an “occasion” — I agreed.

What the hell, right?

Once inside, I found myself disappointed to find a bland platter of nothing more than carrots & celery with ranch dressing [*semi-fresh*, at that; it was picked up from a convenience store around the corner, I gleaned from overheard conversation later] and

---

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/smiley-mcgrouchpants-jr-esq-iii/boredom-ennui>»

Copyright © 2010 Smiley McGrouchpants, Jr-Esq-III. All rights reserved.

a sole, glum keg of Pabst Blue Ribbon <sup>™</sup> brewski.

I felt awkward — should I complain, even in jest? I felt like I was back in high school. Apparently, this was meant to be a “festive” get-together — which made it all the more glaring, and hard to ignore. [*I mean, we are living in post-millennial Portland here, am I right?*]

“Yeah, yeah, this is great. Mmm.” (*pause*) “Nice place you’ve got here!”

-----

“Yeah, yeah, this is great. Mmm.” (*pause*) “When do you need this by?”

The pile of files Trent had just dumped on my desk needed “immediate attention.” More applicants. Who were these people?

“Whenever you get a chance,” he said, debonair in his jacket, suit, & tie. [*WAIT: Did I just say “debonair?” I meant: “~~faux-~~debonair.”*] “I mean, within reas-”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.” I flashed my “winning” smile up at him, to indicate I understood the “whenever you get a chance” was pure rhetoric to grease the wheels around the slave-driving directives middle-management were wont to lay on corporate peons, such as — currently — myself. I’d “lose face” if I acted like I couldn’t “hack it.”

“Great, great,” he beamed, adept at this smash-and-volley of “I see we do understand each other” repartee, and therefore pleased. “You always seem to consistently get these things done on time — if not a little quicker, actually.”

It was true, but I didn’t give a shit.

“Yup, pure process, that’s me!” I ad-libbed. “‘Keep it movin’,’ that’s my motto.”

“Pure process, pure process,” he repeated to himself, under his breath, as though he was taking this off-the-cuff throwaway remark (meant to both fill the time and put him off) as something “profound.”

Oh, shit . . . he wasn’t going *hold* me to that standard, was

he?

---

Trent, satisfied and validated by my stock, just-trying-to-be-*cordial* remark about his digs and offerings, headed off for the fridge. I had a weird feeling I had just validated his behavior — provided another tile in the mosaic of his ego and self-esteem — by doing nothing more than entering this hall of mirrors, and *reflecting*.

Luckily, the fact that I didn't really know anyone — and therefore could hang back from the crowd a bit — worked in my favor, as I could choose to assess the situation with a bit more distance.

God knows: otherwise, I would have just been *sucked in*...

---

"We all met canvassing," Ginger-Rose Smith told me one day in the break room, popping her gum[1] for emphasis [or *punctuation*; I honestly couldn't tell which], "but, after a while, we all felt it was time to move on. You know. Broader horizons, and all."

"*We* all?" I asked, prompting her for details, as I kept stirring my coffee — as though I could somehow keep myself grounded through a repetitive [albeit *familiar*] activity.

"Yeah," she responded. "We all." [*Of course!*] "Me, Trent, Brian, Sam-Bones . . . "

"'Sam-Bones'?" I repeated. I had passed a desk near my cubicle with the name: SAMUEL CLARK, III on it, but I had never heard anyone answer to (or be *called*) "Sam-Bones" around the office.

"Yeah," she laughed, blushing a little, giddy at her apparent "jest." "You know . . . Sam Clark?" This last, a question, with an impish smile.

"Uhh . . . I've seen his . . . *desk*, yeah . . . "

[*A pause, then:*]

"Oh!" — she nearly convulsed — "Yeah! His *desk!*" Cracking up, at this.

What the . . . ?

"Well, why . . . "

"Oh . . . *nothing*," she said, reminding me of the way the Catholic schoolgirl Kim delivers the word to the nun in Hal Hartley's *Simple Men* [1992], but minus the irony and self-awareness.

And she was off with another round of giggles.

"Um . . . o.k." Getting enough, here, to know that . . . I didn't *want* to know more than "enough."

"Sam-Bones," she said, again, in a lower, "cutesy" voice, to herself, as her mind receded to the recollection of whatever it was that spawned this charming moniker.

I stopped stirring my coffee and set it on the table in front of me. It was cold, anyway.

-----

The beer was flat.

*This is fucking ridiculous*, I thought. *Who are these people?*

I pumped and pumped and *pumped* the thing, but still: nary a bubble.

I gripped the plastic cup with the flat, warm, undrinkable beer and surveyed the room. I felt like a fucking retard. It was as though I were trapped back in some earlier stage of life — freshman year of college, say — except, apparently, I was supposed to act like *I didn't know any better*, which made it even *weirder*.

*These people don't look all that young*, I thought. I couldn't tell if they were supposed to be consciously playing the naifs or not; everyone had at least hit their mid-twenties — and obviously thought of themselves as "worldly-wise" types to no small degree — so I wasn't quite sure how to take this.

If anything — despite the fact that I was holding a cupful of beer and garbed in my (recently *washed!*) KERPLUNK! t-shirt, with

a lit cigarette dangling from my mouth — the closest analogy I could come up with to this “scene” was the Parents’ Days I’d host after hours in the kindergarten class I’d taught, when I and all the dressed-up fellow grown-ups would confer over milk and cookies on the tiny kids’ tables and chairs.

There were clusters of people here and there about the room, but I couldn’t catch any of the conversation quite yet, so I didn’t know which “island” to choose.

Then, someone turned down the Fleming Limps (or *whatever* they’re called!) on the stereo (which had been BLARING!), and I could hear a bit better. Hmm, it seems that —

*Oh shit!* [Discreetly reaching under left shoulder for bra strap, here.] *Slipped again!*

-----

I looped it back over my shoulder, straightened my blouse, and looked up — to find Gavin (“Mickey”) Williams staring at me.

He quickly looked away, and then looked back again, as though that brief, askance glance had “cleared it.”

“Oh, *hi!*” he said, strolling over to my cubicle.

“Hi,” I responded, looking up into his eyes, not breaking contact, as if to say: *I have no illusions whatsoever that the sole “occasion” for this conversation is you were just reminded of my boobs.*

“D’ya have those . . . *permissions* ready, yet?” His sister, Mary Williams, two years his senior, was head of “Permissions” in our little office. [Her full title was “Permissions Granter” . . . whatever *that* means!]. He was her assistant.

I couldn’t quite tell if this was meant as a “witty” double entendre or just the oddly-resonant result of his blindly groping for the nearest topic of conversation.

I chose to take it as the latter.

“*Most* of them. I still have been having some trouble with *this* batch . . . “

He held his hand up, quickly, and waved it back and forth. He didn't want to hear it. "Just checking."

Oh.

"Okaaay . . . "

I continued to stare at him as he waltzed a few steps away, reluctant [or, apparently, *unable*] to break off conversation so soon.

"You do good work, Leanna." This, accompanied by a quick finger-cock and wink, like he was "playfully" pointing a gun at me and pulling the trigger.

"Okaaay . . . "

"Yup." Then, to himself — or *whomever* — as he waltzed the last few steps away: "Goood work."

Then, he turned the corner.

A beat. I waited to see what would happen next. Nothing.

*What the fuck?*

---

*What . . . the fuck . . . is this?*

I was looking at a painting (apparently, done in watercolor) that, for some reason, was scotch-taped to the refrigerator.

The work was creditable — displaying an art-school graduate's "chops," if no real vitality or sense of purpose — but why it was adorning the fridge with by-now yellowing tape and its corners become crinkly, I had no idea.

Again, the kindergarten analogy occurred to me. I had to resist the urge to try to find a "gold star" to put in the upper-right hand corner and scrawl the words "GOOD JOB! MS. MACFARLANE" underneath.

"Oh! Do you like my painting?" the bubble-gum popping Ginger-Rose asked, having bounded right over upon me surveying

the vista.

Clearly, approval was expected. From the unabashed look on her face, I felt like the proper thing to do was pull out a doggie treat, snap my fingers, and toss it in the air for her to catch in her mouth and munch hungrily right in front of me.

But, alas, I didn't have any treats on me. "Well," I said, taking a long drag on my cigarette, and searching about for something in the immediate vicinity that I could use as an ashtray (somehow it had burned down to the filter without my noticing), "I, uh—"

"I went down to Guatemala last August," she said. "I try to go at least once a year." (*Terrif!*) "Those are *peasants!*"

I didn't know what to make of the fact that the woman who, in the office, had such a level of "superiority" over me that she was empowered to refuse me a fucking stapler if she thought I had used too many already, was now behaving like a five-year-old playing "tour guide."

"Well, that's—"

"It's great, isn't it?"

Meaning: the picture? The subject matter? The trip it inspired? The artistry of the rendering?

She bobbed her head enthusiastically, as a prompt.

"*Yeah!*" I said. "Yeah, sure, it's—"

"Yeah, I knew it," she said. "Everyone says so."

She smiled, and (conversation thus complete) bounded off to the corner, where I heard "Brian Ian" lecturing some youthful folk about something.

"Graphic novels," I overheard as I tuned in to that corner of the living room, "*are* 'Art!' Of course! I don't care what people say, there's no denying it . . ."

The probably-not-accidentally-chosen 19- though 21-year-olds seemed to be taking this as something they hadn't necessarily heard before. Or they were just standing there, a true "captive audience," his words pouring into their heads regardless. One fellow looked down into his flat beer. No bubbles.

*Jeezum Crimony*, I thought, *what the—*

-----  
*What the?*

[BLOOORP!] the water machine “said” to me. “No more water from me, today . . . that's all, folks!”

*Fuuuh—kin . . . A . . .*, I thought. *Where's the—*

“Problem?” Michael (“Kale”) Boyles appeared out of nowhere, and was instantly at my side. I just looked up, and he was there. He might as well have been consciously trying to do a Superman impression, suit and all, for the startling effect it had on me.

“Uh . . . ” — me trying to get my bearings, here, *don't look incompetent, what was this guy's name again?* — “yeah . . . it appears we're out of water!”

(There. Got it out. Said *something!*)

“Well!” — this last intoned deeply, rather than just spoken. “Let's just *see* about that, shall we?”

And he promptly bent over the contraption, surveying the point where the plastic water jug fit into the machine, totally disregarding the see-through plastic bulb of the jug itself, which revealed it to be quite thoroughly empty.

Doo-de-doo,” he hummed quickly to himself. Then: “Hmm.” Then: “HMM!”

Then: [standing up straight, suddenly, inspection complete]: “It looks like you're right! We're out of water!”

I couldn't tell if this was supposed to be a comedic take on a military-inspection scenario, or a domestic disaster situation a la “I Love Lucy,” or *what* . . .

So, anyway—

(*Why was this guy talking to me, again?*)

“Yeah . . . we need, uh, more!” I managed to get out. [NOTE TO SELF: “Way to think on your feet, Leanna! Gold star, for you!”]

“Right-o!” he exclaimed. “I'll be back in a jiff!” And with this, he exited stage right, into the hallway.

I had no idea what had just happened. My irony meter



couldn't track all this as either "sincere" or "insincere," nor what the *point* would be for behaving thus, either way.

I gave up.

[I mean, I hardly *knew* this guy!]

We didn't have any more water jugs in the supply closet, anyway. They were delivered every Tuesday and They had mentioned at the staff meeting this morning that we'd have to make do with what we had left in the break space since that was all we'd have left for the week. I knew he was there; I actually remembered *seeing* him there, now that I had had cause for reflection on the matter . . .

In *fact*, he didn't seem to be paying much attention, come to think of it . . . staring into space, for the most part . . .

I don't know why I bother.

I realized I had time enough remaining in my "break" for a cigarette outside the back entrance, but *oh shit they're in my jacket back at—*

---

*There!*

In the duly-designated "coat room," I managed to find my windbreaker *not* buried by something heavy enough to crush the spare pack I kept in the inside pocket, which was a relief.

As I unwrapped the plastic wrapping, pulled out the foil and looked for a little garbage can to throw it in I realized I had only three (or was it *four*?) packs left in my apartment "stash" which I kept over my computer. Time to go back online, soon, and order three more cartons. Most people I knew seemed to live pack-to-pack, but I think they're crazy. I can't imagine having to think about being stuck without when you could just —

— *well, what's this?*

---

**HALLIBURTON, INC.**, it read, in raised, stamped letter on the height-adjustment cylinder on the back of my office chair.

*What the fuck?* I thought. **HALLIBURTON** like . . .  
“Halliburton”? Dick Cheneyville?

I didn't know what it meant. *Were they an “Inc.”?* (I hadn't kept up with the news and now — feeling shamefaced, foolish, and ill-prepared — I didn't know if was making too much or too little of this.

Or *what* . . .)

*Jeez*, I thought, further [I never claimed to be a profound thinker], *crimony Pete's sake what am I to make of this?*

I looked up.

Silence.

Silence all-around.

The rustling of papers, the hum of the air conditioning, someone typing somewhere [*tappity-tappity-TAP-tap-tap*] on a keyboard some distance away. Pause. A cough. Pause. Another cough, stifled this time.

The wall of cubicles kept us all walled off and apart from one another. Even going over to have a chat with a co-worker felt like [was apparently *designed* to feel like] dropping by someone's college dorm room — people had plants, pic's of loved ones, mini-posters with kittens dangling from precipices with the message: “HANG IN THERE!” printed above or underneath — you had to have an occasion to do so. Otherwise it felt weird.

*My* cubicle had a travel-sized Oregon-themed 2009 calendar pinned up, to remind me that yes, time *did* pass and yes, there *was* a world outside. Overall, I'd rather make myself as *least* attached to this place as could be. (“Just here to pay the bills,” and all.)

Outside, I remembered (thinking just *now* of this), was starting to become like a college dorm as well. The new Viva Voce album [*which I still hadn't picked up yet — shit!*] was being promoted with bus-station ads, replacing those obnoxious internet provider spots with signage that stuck one as being more like the Sonic Youth or Ramones posters you might see hanging in one's

friend's room in college. It was comforting.

**3:34** — my eye just caught the time on my computer and it was *oh shit! I forgot about this last batch entirely! I had to have these by* —

---

"Oh— . . . *hi!*" I said to "Kale" as he walked in, precisely at that moment. Perfect timing.

A little awkward.

"You like my guitar?" Kale said, pointing, soliciting, inviting.

"Yeah!" (They made *his* room into the "coat room," apparently. That explains it.) "Is that a *Guild* guitar?"

"Well . . . yeah." He pointed at the name above the tuning pegs, as if to say, "obviously!"

Stupid question, I guess. I must have been wanting to confirm it wasn't just a copy. It was just so incongruous, really, seeing it here.

"Do you play?" he asked. Firmer ground. I can answer that.

"*Yeah!* . . . uh, I mean, a little." I had *scant* knowledge of some chords and a few fingerings for a couple scales. It had been a while, actually, and on top of that I certainly had no calluses to speak of.

"Well . . . if you like . . . " he indicated the guitar, as if to say, "go ahead."

"Thanks!" I beamed with joy.

---

"Thanks—" (*I had to suppress the urge to say, "Sam-Bones," so I gritted out:*)—"Sam!"

"You're welcome," he said, beaming, as though beaming was his job. So this was the illustrious "Sam-Bones."

I *still* didn't want to know how he got that name — really, really, *really* didn't want to know — particularly if these people were

apt to be so obvious and obnoxious and crass about their behind-closed-doors activities — but the nickname, like a catchy melody or the “SPROING!” tension-and-release of a corny joke you know shouldn't laugh at, remained stuck in my head. Curse that Ginger-Rose Smith!

“You're *very* welcome, in fact.” *Hoo boy*. He was obviously just being friendly — really, really “nice” — but, apparently, his shit had gotten so fucked up it came out like a come-on. The suit and tie couldn't hide the truth — it only made the packaging more palatable. The fact that he had honestly no idea his “friendliness” was coming across this way only made it worse.

“Yes, thanks again, and, uh, by the way — “ (*quickly, change the subject here Leanna, keep him talking so he doesn't notice you've done it*) “ — I hear you have some esteemed family lineage.”

Pardon?” He looked perplexed, at that.

(Admittedly, it came out a bit “wordy,” but, hey, I had to think quick.)

Now, that I could *breathe* a bit: “I heard you're descended from royalty, or something?” A tidbit I overheard in the breakroom, as I puzzled over the NYT crossword [it was a Monday — I can *do* those!]. Recollecting it later, it was the one thing I had heard about him that honestly piqued my interest.

“Oh,” (*laughing*) “well,” (*getting it now*) “if you mean ‘Ethelred the Unready’ . . .”

Hmm. So much for *that* . . .

“Yeah, I've heard of him, actually . . .”

“Oh, really?” Honest surprise, at this. “You're the first person I've told that to who's heard of him.”

*Yeah, I bet*, I thought to myself. *Considering the company you keep, I'd be surprised if those people remembered who Richard M. Nixon was* . . .

“I heard he was ‘unsteady in the saddle,’ and often dismounted by his horse,” I let him know.

“Oh, geez,” he laughed, in a *look-at-my-crazy-relatives!* sort of way. “Do you know *why*, or . . .”

"Well, I guess the obvious answer" (as much as I felt weird saying "obvious," like I was lecturing him, what else could I say?) "would be that horses — like *all* animals — can sense fear."

"Oh."

"Or rather: they can't *ignore* it, so . . ."

"I see, I see," he said.

"You can't bullshit a horse," I said, laughing a bit.

"Right." The beam, again.

"Unlike cars, which is why any fool can almost run you over if — "

"Well, I wouldn't go *that* far."

A beat.

*Did I scare him, or something? Bad shit can happen, dude, I didn't mean . . .*

Well, whatever.

Silence.

Then, to fill the awkwardness, he offered: "Do *you* have any royalty, in your blood?"

Funny way to ask *that* question. "Yes, in fact," I said, straight-facedly, "I'm actually a descendant of Gondal."

"Gondal? Really? What's . . . where's . . ."

"Oh," going with it, "it's a by-now long-forgotten kingdom. You know —" (probably not, but *now*, I'm *telling* you) " — how over time, hundreds of years, boundaries get disputed, wars fought, maps redrawn, countries formerly independent get assimilated . . ."

"Yeah," he said. "History."

"Yeah, history."

(It was weird, how succinctly he put it, and yet without

meaning it, or understanding what he meant. I, myself, couldn't have done it that well on *purpose*, but to him, it just popped out, in the service of passing the time.

[And to think: I had a whole pseudo-plausible line of descent cooked up ("One of my great-greats was the result of an affair between an Archduchess and a Bishop; it was all hushed up, of course . . .") that I wouldn't get to use . . . that wouldn't be *necessary* . . .)]

"Well . . . back to work, I guess!" Another beam. More perfunctorily this time. Maybe he *knew*.

"Yup," I said, "no place here for history!" Quickly, again. (*Did that make sense?*)

"No, no," with a conciliatory chuckle, completely missing the irony of my comment, "not in *this* place!" This last, a commiserative gesture, I suppose.

But then — after perfunctory salutation, perfunctory salutation returned, &c., and he left — that's the phrase that stayed with me, as I looked over the maze of cubicles, the office cooling down to 4:10 lull in energy. Things calming down and not much happening.

"Not in *this* place . . ." I murmured to myself, to hear the words aloud, make them real, make them apply, affix and apply them to this room by my doing so, but not loud enough for anyone to hear and think me crazy.

In short: it was a very deliberate act.

---

Something seemed sealed off, I felt, as I fell into the familiar routine of clocking out, gathering my things, navigating my way past the security guards to the open air where I could light up a cigarette and *breathe* a bit before strolling to unlock my car [it's an Audi; I know, I know: gas-guzzler, toxic-fumes-emitter . . . but: at least it's

“recycled”]. I felt like there was this distance, now . . . I was safe, protected. I could show up for work and not worry about it stealing from me what was most precious about myself — either by accident, design, or the sheer total weight of various competing agendas of denial — because I could see it for what it was.

As I shifted into a higher gear and began to address the problems in negotiating rush-hour expressway traffic, it occurred to me I had, effectively, *stolen* this revelation from someone named “Sam-Bones.”

But . . . fuck it.

*He* wasn't going to use it, anyway . . .

---

#### ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS:

1. I know, I know: “People *don't do this*,” you'll say; “. . . not at *her* age.”

Well . . . *she* does!

Questions? Comments? Feel free to email me at

**residentbollweevil@gmail.com.**

(I could use a little help, here!)

