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Exemplary!

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Exemplary!

Abstract

Excerpt from a novel manuscript.

Chapter One

A woman drove onto the tracks and stopped there. She put the car in park. She switched off all its lights. Her only passenger, a broad-shouldered and almost totally waistless man in black spandex and bright red cape, was not apparently perturbed by her decision to end it all with him there beside her, though she had not previously declared her intent to die, and though the train would likely hit him first, given the usual eastward direction of the many cars of produce, name-brand breakfast cereals, disposable cellular phones, diapers and dairy products that came through town at roughly 10 PM on Tuesdays. The man in the cape turned to look at her. This movement produced a small puff of air that kissed her passenger-side cheek. He blinked two times, which caused two more little puffs. He asked her was she aware she would die here. The woman said she knew. The man in the cape had beautiful blue eyes, though they were very cold.

Keywords

train, suicide, addict, bottom



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October 5, 2012

Exemplary!

by Mike Meginnis

Excerpt from a novel manuscript

Chapter One

A woman drove onto the tracks and stopped there. She put the car in park. She switched off all its lights. Her only passenger, a broad-shouldered and almost totally waistless man in black spandex and bright red cape, was not apparently perturbed by her decision to end it all with him there beside her, though she had not previously declared her intent to die, and though the train would likely hit him first, given the usual eastward direction of the many cars of produce, name-brand breakfast cereals, disposable cellular phones, diapers and dairy products that came through town at roughly 10 PM on Tuesdays. The man in the cape turned to look at her. This movement produced a small puff of air that kissed her passenger-side cheek. He blinked two times, which caused two more little puffs. He asked her was she aware she would die here. The woman said she knew. The man in the cape had beautiful blue eyes, though they were very cold.

His mouth was tight. It puckered slightly. He said, “The train won’t see your car in time to brake. They’ll hit the car. This will kill you, and inconvenience the train, and the people who operate the train, and those that depend on its timely arrival.” The woman said she knew all this as well. She pointed out that everyone else would be only minorly

inconvenienced by her death, whereas she would be killed. She took a lukewarm swallow of Natural Light, which was legal now, more or less, the car being parked and she having no plans of farther driving. The man in the cape told her he could fly out through the window and stop the train now if she liked. He said that he'd done it before. "Stopped a train," that is, he said. "With my hands."

"I'm sure you have," said the woman.

Somewhere another woman lay on her garage floor shivering. Call her the addict. The addict's hands and cheeks were rashed and flaked from dryness. There was dried vomit and urine on her and the cement. The faintly acidic smell had become a part of the dust and oil smell of the garage, and their combined effect was not unpleasant. A man in a red cape stood over her, the end of his cape lifting and liting from the force of her thrashing, though she could not reach him to touch, though she did try. This man in a cape was identical to the one in the car on the train tracks somewhere else.

The shivering addict had stopped begging him for help the day before, after his three hundredth repetition of the phrase, "But I *am* helping you." He had decided it was time for her to detox, had decided she was ready. He told her so. He pushed her down on the garage floor. She got up and he pushed her down again. She got up and he pushed her down again. He kept pushing her down until she stayed there, and then the shivering began, and all the tearful begging. Now she couldn't get up if she wanted.

Somewhere a family of four sat together at the kitchen table. Standing behind each member of the family, an identical caped man, meaning four caped men in total, which would offer nutritional and dietary information by request, or on their own initiative. Sometimes their voices overlapped, and if they were saying the same word this amplified the word, and if they were saying different words this amplified the noise of their voices, but made the words insensible. The members of the family (a little boy, his older sister, their mother and stepfather) did not speak but ate their dinner, which was rosemary chicken with a side of wild rice. The mother was not wearing lipstick. The stepfather was not berating his children. The children were not using electronic devices of any kind, Gameboy or iPod or other. This peace allowed them, when the four caped men were not speaking on the benefits of fruit, perfect hearing of each other's forks and knives, which scraped each other and their sunshine-yellow plates.

The woman on the train tracks had finished her first Natural Light and now she popped the second's tab. The woman's body was covered with stretch marks all over, which arranged themselves in complicated patterns corresponding arcanelly to the shapes and movements of their underlying muscle and bone, the results being like a paisley pattern on her skin but also like tree rings – a record of her life. Most of the stretch marks were a dark pink in daylight. Now, in what light a distant streetlamp could afford, they were

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purple. There were such marks extending from her eyes to her ears, like exaggerated crow's feet or bolts of purple lightning. Six pairs of stretch mark parentheses framed her mouth. There were purple rings around her knuckles. Her arms were densely networked with these marks, particularly around the biceps, triceps, and other major muscles. Her hair was combed straight for the first time in months. It was green, and in its straightness very fine and thin. It smelled of a certain shampoo.

The man in the cape adjusted his seat belt as if this was the cause of his discomfort. He took great care in his every motion because it would be so easy for him to kill someone by accident. First he looked at the seat belt. Then he decided how he would move it. Then he slipped his thumb beneath the belt. This briefly creased the large red E emblem on his chest. He slid the belt down his chest maybe half an inch, which removed the belt's edge from his neck, where it had exerted certain pressure.

"I would like to stop the train for you," said the man in the cape.

"I'm not stopping you," said the woman with stretch marks. "I *can't* stop you."

"I want you to want me to do it," said the man in the cape. "To stop the train."

"Nobody can stop you," she said.

Somewhere a man watched another caped man remove the books from his bookshelf one by one, discarding those that were intact with a snap of his wrist. Call the watching man the scholar. Those books that were false – the ones gutted with a razor blade to make room for booze, pills, or guns – were usually Bibles. Those books that were false the caped man burned to ash with his laser eyes. The contraband he dropped on the floor, not with the wrist-snap reserved for intact books but rather by burning the false book around the gun or the flask, so that the ashes also fell, and would (the man realized) stain the carpet. The scholar was weeping because of all the Bibles he'd gutted, which were ashes now, or would soon be. He was not a believer in the Bible but a student of its history.

The woman on the train tracks wore a man's white tank top undershirt. The fabric was ribbed. She weighed about three hundred eighty pounds, though most people would have guessed lower. This was not the cause of the stretch marks: she had grown into her weight naturally over a long period of time, the way any person grows into her own body. She had long ago cut the tags out of all her shirts so she wouldn't have to see their size, and the present shirt's threadbare tag-stump itched the base of her neck incessantly. In addition to the tank top she wore a blue flannel shirt, unbuttoned. The sleeves were cut off, these with the same scissors that did the tag, and what was left was

rather frayed, with some semi-shiny strands extending several inches from her arms. Her pants were purple sweats. She did not shave her arm pits or anywhere else, and had not done for years. She drank deeply of the Natural Light.

The train was bearing down on them. They could hear its whistle, rumble. They could see the lights. The boom barriers fell into place on either side of the tracks and the red warning lights flashed, which had the effect of seeming to trap the woman's car. "It's not too late," said the man in the cape. The woman crushed the empty can against her forehead. This had its usual calming effects. Call her Ruth. Call the caped man her Exemplar. So far as she knew, everybody had one.

Ruth was fifty years old. The clerk at the Pic Quik had insisted on carding her before he would sell her the Natural Light. This was three days before, the last time she left the house. He thought this was a little joke they had together. Ruth thought it was cruel. There was no mistaking she was over twenty-one, and there was no forgetting her face, if you knew her; recall the stretch marks; recall the thin green hair (usually unwashed, often pulled up in a sumo's topknot). So the joke was she was a hag. Of course she knew she was a hag. Not every true thing was terribly funny. She had known the clerk's predecessor, and his, and his as well, and hers. That particular Pic Quik gave her a discount for an act of heroism from her youth, is why she always used that Pic Quik. The discount was five percent. They were, she knew, still turning a profit. She opened another can. It was sweating profusely, the can. It was colder on the outside than inside. The night air was humid even in the car. She knew she had drunk exactly thirty cans of Natural Light (or sometimes Busch) a week for the last twenty years because this was what she had allowed herself. This was regardless of whether or not she drank it all in the first two or three days, as became increasingly common. She defined alcoholism as buying more than one case in a week. And so she would spend two or three days at a time in withdrawal before marching down to the Pic Quik for another. The case she had now held two more cans. She didn't think she'd have the time to do them both. They were – the case was – ensconced in the backseat, on the floorboard, among blue piled empty cans (half of them crushed against her forehead), mostly-empty fast food bags, coupon mailers, pizza boxes, and chewed-through ballpoint pens.

Somewhere a young boy tortured a cat. He was using a hammer. Call him the killer. His Exemplar was watching calmly through those cold blue eyes. The killer asked him why he didn't stop the killer. The cat was seeping blood and tears and urine. Its skull was split down the front, which did not offer a good view inside, but rather only blackness, like a fold of night. The Exemplar said the cat was an animal. He did not afford cows or pigs or sheep his protection either, or fish. He did tell the killer, however, that this behavior did cause him concern. He recited the relevant statistics. The likelihood a boy who tortured cats would commit violent crimes against people. The likelihood the boy was sometime in the past a victim of abuse. "Sexual abuse," he said. He asked the killer,

“Has a grown-up ever touched you? ^{Meginnis: Exemplary!} Somewhere you didn't want to be touched?” The cat's eyes had stopped moving. The Exemplar affected an expression of empathetic concern. The killer preferred the eyes of the cat.

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Exemplary!

There was a dead body. The dead body was a woman ninety years. The body died in its sleep. Its Exemplar watched the body, which was in bed on top of the covers. The Exemplar did not tuck it in.

“I can hear them in the train,” said Ruth’s Exemplar. “They see you on the tracks. One of them is begging you to move beneath his breath. Another one is putting on the brakes, though he knows the train won’t stop in time. Another one is saying how it’s been a while.”

“A while since what?” said Ruth.

“Since anyone used a train this way. That is, to die.”

“It’s the only thing in town I’m sure can kill me.”

Meanwhile a woman on a distant road, a highway, watched the tail end of a truck swerve. Call her the driver. It was one of those two-level trucks that carry new cars, the carried cars held fast on what must be ramps by means totally invisible to other drivers, the carried cars being exposed as much as possible to open air, possibly for reasons of advertisement or possibly (the woman felt) because it kept them strong and young, all that air and sun. The swerve of the truck’s tail made its taillights blur. When the tail was at full swing the red ribbony trail of its taillights would grow long, which blurring made the truck seem to move very quickly; when the tail reached the extreme of its sway and

prepared to reverse direction, the red trails of light shortened and then disappeared, which both made the truck seem to slow and to become suddenly much closer to the driver behind it, such that she kept pumping the breaks in short, nervous, ineffectual bursts and then leaning on the gas to make up the difference. The driver had been certain since her childhood that she would one day see the cars on such a truck slide backwards down their ramps and out onto the road, and that this would happen at the precise moment when she let her guard down, when she ceased to believe it would happen. These intuitions are common but usually wrong.

Her belief made it incumbent on her, for the sake of her safety, to imagine this was on the verge of happening whenever she was within sight of such a truck. And the cars did shiver on the truck. They hummed. As a piano string with the hammer held down by some finger past the point of tone. She was so busy imagining how this hum could become a rolling that when the first car slipped free and rolled down to meet her, geared to neutral, rolling slightly forward as its fourth wheel hit the highway but rolling very slowly, coasting purely on the residue of momentum left by the truck that birthed it – when the first car came loose, she didn't believe it, and so continued at the same speed. It was only the second car (a white sedan, four doors, tapering at every angle, not unlike a child's coffin she had seen on display, though empty, when she was a child also) she understood enough to swerve.

The cars on the bottom tier all poured out then, like some stupid eager brood, and pouring jostled one another, crunching head- and tail-lights, bending fenders, but basically harmless to one another because of the way their backwards rolling had sapped their inertia. That is until the second tier began to fall, which cracked the road and impaled one car (a baby-blue hatchback) on another (a new variation on the station wagon concept, sultry red, which fell through the former). The driver was seeing all this, though she didn't know it yet, from fifty feet above the ground, and rising. Her Exemplar, who had been flying several hundred yards up so as to allow her the semblance of peaceful solitude, had lifted the car. It was possible he could have left her on the ground and punched the loose, driverless cars to pieces or hurled them into space, however this was simpler. The woman driver pumped her brakes and shrieked because her car would not stop or even slow. She pulled the wheel hard right, and moaned: nothing. She would figure it out or he would explain it – why the car would not turn – just as soon as he could set her down safely. The cars that had rolled or fallen out of the truck were about as destroyed as they were going to get. Mostly they looked like a herd of very shiny cows on the road, gazing with dull bewilderment around themselves in all directions.

The other Exemplar, the one who served the man who drove the truck that lost its cars, was busy reflecting on the errors, sloppiness, and inexemplary behavior that had brought them all to this point. He could have saved the cars.

Meanwhile there was a husband shouting at his wife. They'd been trying to make love when her Exemplar suggested a different position – one that might better account for her needs and sensitivities. The husband knew that was his wife's language. He shouted that the wife could tell him directly if she wanted something different. He told her he didn't get everything he wanted either and you didn't see him going to his Exemplar about it. His Exemplar was, at this moment, watching television, which was, the Exemplars had found, the only thing they could do to make people feel they weren't being listened in on. In the popular imagination, TV trumped super-hearing. The husband asked his wife why she let her Exemplar watch them. He asked her if her Exemplar knew so much about making love why didn't she just fuck *him* already. And so left the house, slamming the door behind him, trailed by his caped man, who turned the television off in passing.

The wife considered her Exemplar. He was standing rigid at the foot of the bed, eyes averted from her body. She was down to her panties and her nipples were hard. She reached to stroke his jaw.

There was a small man in a hotel. His name was Michael. He was seated on one bed, his Exemplar on the other. They looked into each other's face. The Exemplar's face was like an open tub of margarine. Smooth, simple, pale. Michael was Ruth's youngest son. It was years since they'd spoken. If asked she would say this had nothing to do with her urgent need to be hit by a train.

There was a big man alone in an orchard. His name was Bart; he was also Ruth's son. He could reach most of the oranges without a ladder. In the night the oranges were a vivid glowing gray. When he'd eaten the low-hanging fruit he would shake the trees. His Exemplar, if he had one, wasn't watching.

The train's approach was deafening. Ruth had finished one of the three remaining cans of Natural Light and was now shotgunning the second through a hole she'd gouged with her car key. The foam ran down her jowls and neck, tracing the troubled furrows of her stretch marks. It smelled faintly of bananas. The last can, the one still in the case, would not be drunk. Ruth experienced immense regret over the fact she would never drink her last beer. That beer was *hers*.

Ruth's Exemplar left the car. Otherwise the train would break on his body. He left her inside. Given he was hers, much as the can was hers, it was unclear what he'd do in her absence. (The can would burst.)

To be clear:

The train hit the car.

*

Ruth's Exemplar floated up into the clouds, and through them, and past all the air, and outside the atmosphere, until he no longer felt the Earth's pull. For the Exemplar escape velocity was any speed: he did not need to move quickly, but only to continue rising. He looked at the Earth from this distance, which was not so far that he could see the whole thing. It was a blue horizon toward which everything seemed, even in its stillness, to fall; the sun loomed over its shoulder like a father. The Exemplar's cape floated behind him like an indecisive jellyfish, revealing geometries impossible on Earth. It was still bright red. He did not breathe and did not miss breathing. There were other figures here, looking down at Earth – other Exemplars, their red capes floating shapelessly behind them. They did not speak to each other, though as the planet turned beneath them, and as some came and went, others might drift, like leaves on a water, in such a way that they seemed very close to one another – close, but not touching. And they might glance at one another, might meet each other's eyes, might in this moment seem to exchange some small thought or insight, in the brightly burning shadow of the Earth's yellow sun.

Mike Meginnis has published stories in *Best American Short Stories 2012*, *Hobart*, *The Collagist*, *The Lifted Brow*, *The Nashville Review*, *elima*, and many others. He plays collaborative text adventures with many writers at exitsare.com. He also serves as prose editor for Noemi Press, and co-edits *Uncanny Valley* with his wife, Tracy Rae Bowling.

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