



(Nick Meador)

Dodging Obstacles In The Dark

by NICK MEADOR

A short fiction piece about being alone most of the time, written impromptu and subjected to minimal editing.

I am completely alone in a dying world. All I can do is record the mess. I catalog the dead bugs as they fall from the leaves. I sit in a one-window room that feels like a pod on some space station – just a fake atmosphere outside, not real air. The earth has been charred, left behind, forgotten. I actually have three rooms at my disposal. I wander through them endlessly, usually in the dark, sometimes with my eyes closed, feeling the walls as I pass, trying not to trip over the ottoman or laundry hamper. I see my shadow in the long mirror, with the off-darkness behind me – but there's no face for my eyes. Light slowly comes, and I'm occasionally struck with the notion that this day might be pleasant. That passes with the slightest mix-up, and I recall that I should have stayed in the dark, reversed my sleeping order, drank coffee at night and alcohol in the morning. Or at least it seems like all literature that I read points towards this suggestion – perhaps as a new theory of human evolution, a shift to nocturnal living. I alternate the temperature between sixty-nine and seventy degrees. At the former I wear a sweatshirt, then remove it at the latter. I wear moccasins until my feet get sweaty, then expose my toes to the cold. I eat cereal with milk, every day, and often concoct a beverage using orange juice and lemonade, about half of each,

measured by sight. I have become extremely picky about things that never before concerned me. I brew low-acid, organic, fair-trade coffee from a certified sustainable company, using a French press. I warm approximately three ounces of organic milk in a glass by microwave. The coffee takes four minutes; the milk takes thirty seconds. I pour milk into coffee and watch curiously as shades of white and brown swirl around the surface of the liquid. I see galaxies, skulls, and dandelions take shape and fade away, sometimes in the same instant. In this way, I can achieve a semblance of balance, if only in a cup of coffee. It's so balanced that it still tastes wonderful when the warmth has dissipated. I sit at my small, wooden, natural-shade desk for most of the day, typing on my electric laptop. The computer has wires fed into and out of it on either side, wires that drape down the sides of the desk and connect to other electrical devices, wires that will strangle me if given the chance. I glance to the side and see my entire collection of books situated on a single shelf. This glance endows me with a sense of accomplishment for having procured all of them and read some of them. But the glance also sends a pang of disappointment down my spine, as if I haven't collected or read enough in the time that's been given to me. So many minutes are wasted each day. But who's counting? And what does it matter? I begin one project, advance a second, finish a third. I am distracted repeatedly by flashing icons on the computer screen. One notifies me that I have received an e-mail. I click a button that opens a browser, but the subject line of the email doesn't grab my interest. It occurs to me that I never purchased the limited edition vinyl pressings of Radiohead's albums released earlier this year. I open a new tab in the browser and retrieve vinyl rips of both *Amnesiac* and *Kid A*. Less than three minutes later, both have been added to my media player. On my ears I place over-sized headphones – the ones that, about a month ago, I purchased on Ebay as an open-box item at a discounted price – after checking the volume to make sure I do no permanent damage to my tympanic membrane. (Before typing this, I open up my college Biology textbook, which I have made a point of keeping throughout the years, when I could just as easily open Wikipedia and type in "human ear," without having to stand up and lift the gargantuan book off the shelf. But in



fact I wish that I had also held on to my Neuroscience, Physics, and Organic Chemistry books. The term I was envisioning in my mind was actually “cochlea,” and not the aforementioned one at all.) The earphones cup over my ears, but don’t cancel all ambient noise, so they are therefore worth even less than the discounted price at which they were purchased. I forget this and sink into “In Limbo,” a digital version of a vinyl copy – but I can see the black record rotating in my mind, in slow motion. This transforms into the spiral horn of my cochlea, slowly spinning in the void of my skull, while a needle held against it extracts these ephemeral sounds. “You’re living in a fantasy world,” he says, and I can’t argue. But what other choice do I have? I open the instant messenger program to see who is available (that is signified by a green, yellow, or red tag next to their user name). I consider typing a friendly message to a friend that I have lost contact with, maybe one from high school, or college, or the time after college, or grad school. Instead I double-click on my brother’s name and type “hey.” He doesn’t respond. I close the program. I open another browser tab and go to Facebook. I click through the profiles of people from high school, college, the time after college, and grad school. Everyone loves Jesus and smiley faces. Everyone belongs to a political party, somehow, without any active duty or even an official notification. Everyone “loves all kinds of music,” which in other words means that they love all kinds of music on the FM radio dial. Everyone loves American Idol and Grey’s Enema. Everyone has a bumper sticker that says, “I live for the days we’ll never forget and the nights we’ll never remember.” I feel cold and put back on my sweatshirt. I glance at the stack of eight books on the elevated platform of my desk (where the printer used to go – now I print only in emergencies): fiction, nonfiction...philosophy, psychology...all helpful, all wasteful. I pick up *Visions of Gerard* and start to read. Jean argues with his father; he wants to write and not do childish, mindless work, because he’s an artist. Maybe this is becoming an artist’s world, since now there aren’t even jobs to be had. I can get no job, nor would I want one. Jean talks of his older brother Gerard, who died at age nine, who – since we’re all embedded from the start with a considerable amount of guilt – was a sinner, even though he was an angelic, large-hearted child, who died

before having a chance to do any real human destruction on this planet. I understand this picking apart of one’s own childhood. Lately I’ve been scanning a box of pictures from ’89-’90 – hundreds of shots of smiling little monkey-like kids, wrestling, running, swimming, mostly in summer and fall, with not a care on their minds, nor with an inkling of the troubles ahead. I wonder how it could be a false goal to want to return to that, how it could not be the source of concepts like heaven and of stories like Adam and Eve. I still can’t decide if it makes me feel better to listen to somber music and read melancholy tales. If I decide affirmatively, I might keep the *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* vinyl rips on repeat forever, and cycle through *The Duluoz Legend* until all the pages fall out. I haven’t cried in months. I may have forgotten how again. I wonder what intoxicating substances are present in my apartment. There’s always cheap liquor, but alcoholism would be too much work. I don’t think I have the capacity for addiction. I get distracted too easily. Had I reached adulthood in the 1890s or even the 1980s, I would just walk to a pub and order a tall brew, where I could at least fake a healthy interaction with other people. But on this day, I am partitioned within a mass-constructed series of apartments, banked up against a freeway that runs from Port Huron to Montana – neither am I likely to see any time soon. The leaves are gone from the trees out my lone window, and I see birds still bustling and rustling the twigs, preparing for the long, icy period of semi-survival ahead. It gets dark before five p.m. now. If tomorrow I sleep until eleven forty-five a.m., then I will only have about five hours of daylight to face. I keep the shades turned until the sun passes southwest, so it never sees me head-on, only indirectly through the cracks in the plastic, with back turned or sweatshirt hood hanging over eyes, ‘til time has run on and the cool darkness comes to me once again. I deal with the patronizing light all afternoon. I think that might be all the mockery I can take.

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