

George and the Misery-Feeders

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Some people live their entire lives in an anxious fear that some terrible tragedy will befall them, only to find out on their deathbed that the biggest tragedy that ever befell them was that very constant state of anxious fear.

George was doomed from birth to be such a person, and it was for this reason he found himself inevitably stuck in his dead-end job. What kind of job, you ask? You know the one, the one where you spend every hour in an assigned eight cubic metre box; the one where you divide the remaining hours of the day into novel fractions to make the whole time appear smaller; the one where you say things like, "I'll be on top of things soon, I just have to get through next week," or, "Maybe I should try out one of those standing desks."

But while George was a man fearful of trying anything new or different, he had recently grown a sneaking suspicion that this ever-repeating lifestyle of his was not the glorious plan that God, Mother Earth or even random chance could possibly have set out for him.

So one evening, as a cloud of a blue-grey colour that seemed like the colour of misery hovered like it always seemed to hover of the building in which George worked, he stood up and shouted, "I have an announcement!"

Twelve heads, short-haired and long-haired, old and young, popped up around him and stared in astonishment.

"My God!" He's got a gun," shouted one man, before realising he had only enthusiastically assumed as such, and mumbled a retraction of shorts.

"I..." continued George, "I..."

He stumbled at the finish line, or rather at the starting block. He hadn't actually planned his announcement, but had only felt a rush of inspiration wash over him to express his emotions.

"I am not particularly satisfied, is all."

And then he sat back down, and continued on working.

Nothing more was said that evening, and at the end of the day, George, along with his twelve co-workers, packed up their things, said their *seeyounextweekend's* and their *catchoolaters's*, and walked out of the building.

Only, when George stepped out into the setting sun, a yellow light shot down from the sky and advised his body to rapidly disintegrate from head to toe into a puff of ash, which it promptly did.

George found himself inside a lattice of metal beams, floating unsupported and unstrung in what must have been an environment lacking the basic necessity of gravity. He was light-headed, and upon inspection was missing several articles of clothing.

“Darn,” said George, “My doctor told me not to mix vitamins and orange juice, and now I’ve foolishly ignored him and given myself an unsophisticated hallucination.”

George closed his eyes and opened them, then he counted his fingers, then he bit himself on the hand. But after all that, his surroundings didn’t disappear. So he bit himself again, very hard this time.

“Ow.”

But still nothing, so he waited, with nothing else to do. Several minutes passed with nothing changing. All he could see was that the lattice of beams criss-crossed and sunk into each other as if it was all a giant system of tunnels, they also had little pin sized holes all along the surface. In the distance, the beams all ended at a wall of blue-grey.

Then, finally, something appeared. Something small, grey, and flying – If it still counted as flying with no gravity– shot out of one of the small gaps in the pipes. It moved over towards George, whining along the way like a mosquito, before hovering in front of his eyes.

George stared blankly at the insect-object, which continued to do nothing itself but emit a whine of slightly modulating volume.

Then, out of the pipes shot two more of the things, then another, then five at a time, ten, fifteen. Pretty soon they were pouring out like water from a leak. They all flew over towards George and coalesced into a large mass. This mass, much to George’s further surprise, began to form into a shape. First the mass smoothed out into a basic sphere, then the sphere elongated and a constriction appeared around the middle like a waist, giving it the form of a molecule of O₂. The shape kept stretching, creating more and more attachments of increasingly finer detail until before George’s very eyes was a sculpture, with the detail of a child’s clay model creation, of an angry man crossing his arms.

A voice, evidently built on thousands of the little insects’ whines buzzed out a barely legible sound.

“You could have ruined everything,” it said.

George stammered out a response. “I... I beg your pardon?”

“We said,” it said, “that you could have ruined everything. That little spiel of yours could have destroyed our whole operation. There only needs to be one voice of dissent, and soon enough everyone will follow. They might stop working, they might stay home, and soon enough they might free themselves from us permanently.”

“I can’t say I’m following along with what you’re saying,” said George, “And also, what in God’s name are you and where am I?”

“Oh, George,” said the mass. A bulbous, buzzing arm stretched upwards like it was hailing a cab and then lowered, making what seemed like a misguided attempt to pat George on the shoulder. It felt like when George had once tripped into a populated patch of flowers and been harassed by an army of bees. It tingled over his arm.

The mass continued, “Who we are is not important to you, nor particularly pronounceable to your grotesquely large tongue and feeding-hole. But just know that we came from afar and have been living above your little workplace for many years.”

George felt very confused and began a desire for this dream to wrap up as quickly as possible.

“But if you must know, we are misery-feeders. We survive by draining the emotions from living things, and you and your colleagues have been the perfect source of energy for us. We can’t let that change, so we’re going to cut you a deal. We will let you go free, and in return if you dare to set foot back in your workplace or try to talk to one of your own co-workers again, we will disintegrate you on the spot. Only this time, we will not *reintegrate* you anywhere else. Sound good?”

George, having still not woken up was now beginning to doubt that this was a dream after all. But just as his suspicion began to grow, he once again felt the odd and excruciatingly painful feeling of having his body ripped apart by the atoms and reassembled somewhere else.

He woke up in his bed at home, with no indication that he had experienced anything but a dream. For now.

“You’re fired!”

George had been halfway through brushing his teeth while looking suspiciously at the box of vitamins in his medicine cabinet when he had gotten the call.

“Don’t bother coming in today. In fact, don’t bother coming in ever again, don’t talk to me again, and never contact any of your co-workers again. I had a very angry, and very poorly spelt email from the boss upstairs –You know, the one that never shows his face anywhere around the workplace– and he simply wanted you gone as fast as possible. It probably had something to do with that silly little magic trick you pulled yesterday evening with the burst of light from the sky and the mound of ash. Anyway, that’s all, have a nice, involuntary, and permanent vacation.”

And then the phone hung up.

Surely it had just been a coincidence, George thought, that this had happened the very day after his bad dream. And come to think of it, even though he had no theatrical ability and no memory of preparing such an illusion, perhaps he had in fact performed some kind of magic trick yesterday evening, and disappeared into a puff of ash voluntarily.

All of this nonsense was, clearly, just a distraction from what he really needed to do. Find a new job. So George decided to make a new C.V.

Opting to draft one the old-fashioned way, George pulled out a piece of paper and a pen and began to write things down, such as 'team player' and 'diligent', 'pushover' and 'compliant'. But as he did so, a strange feeling of restlessness washed over him, along with the strange thoughts, weird thoughts, even blasphemous thoughts such as "I can't be arsed doing this."

George shook off the feeling and decided the best thing to do was probably to go get some tea, so he headed towards the kitchen. But even as he was dipping his teabag he was thinking obscene things, like "I really wish this was coffee instead." There was only one thing left that could stop this. Go for a walk.

As George strolled down the street, everything seemed a little different. The sunlight, normally harsh to George's sensitive eyes, felt tame and pleasing on his body. The birds, whose squawks and screeches normally irritated him, instead sounded soothing and sweet. And the people, normally appearing to George as mere obstacles in his way, now appeared beautiful and charming.

"This is absurd," muttered George to himself, "feeling this happy on a Wednesday is downright selfish."

But, try as he might, he was unable to suppress the rising tide of positive emotions in his gut. He began to swing his arms as he walked, his posture straightened such that his ears were finally over his shoulders, and his permanent frown slowly faded halfway. He even began to whistle, although since he didn't know of anything to whistle, he just tweeted out random notes like a blackbird.

Finally, his inner conscious buckled under the pressure.

"Why shouldn't I feel swell?" he said. "It can't be illegal to be happy while unemployed. At least not if it doesn't ruin anyone else's day."

George stopped in his tracks and considered his next job. What if he started a new, different career? He could get a job that requires him to walk around a lot, or talk to strangers. He could be tasked with running, driving, or perhaps even swimming. But even these extremely radical ideas were nowhere near enough to satisfy his rapidly expanding aspirations. He had to do something crazy.

"I'm..." he shouted in the air, "I'm going to join the army..."

But it wasn't enough.

“...Of the Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Atlantic Ocean.”

The three-years old, entirely dysfunctional Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Atlantic Ocean was started on the premise that every human being was entitled to a \$30,000 11-inch, rocket-propelled grenade launcher from birth. It had expanded into several obscure islands between Africa and South America, and at present had the highest so far population, of nineteen.

They had been very happy to add George to their ranks. It had been quite difficult for George to integrate at first, as he spoke none of the languages that any of the current members spoke. But they were quick to devise ways of communication their wished to him, they had practiced these skills already in fact, as none of them spoke a language that any other member could understand, either.

Very soon after joining he was given his \$30,000, 11-inch, rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and taught how to use it. First, he began practicing by firing grenades into the ocean, then he moved up to firing them onto large, open plains, and finally he graduated to firing them into the clouds and forgetting about them.

“This is jolly fun,” said George on one fine, explosives filled day, “but I'm not particularly certain it's doing any good for the world.”

After going for another walk, doing some soul-searching, and firing a few more grenades into the heavens, George made up his mind.

“I'm going to be a doctor instead, and help sick people recover...”

But once again, it wasn't enough.

“... From lightning strikes.”

So George hugged his new friends goodbye, and then they let him get back on a plane and fly away, but only once they convinced him to take his \$30,000, 11-inch rocket-propelled grenade launcher with him.

Hospitals, elitists that they are, didn't accept George's application to volunteer in surgery rooms once they found out he had a grand total of zero medical experience. So instead, George decided to go directly to the origins of the people in need and just wait it out there. That is how he found himself wandering around a mountain in the middle of a thunderstorm.

As it were, most people tended to stay indoors during heavy rain and thunder, and so in the

end, the only person that ever ended up needing medical attention from being struck by lightning was George, who after being resuscitated back to life, would promptly return to the hills to face his destiny.

In the end he was zapped a total of fifteen times before his body managed to develop some kind of spectacular immunity to the shock, and he began to barely even notice when he got hit. And as he stood in the rain, waiting for the sixteenth message from God saying that man was not meant to stand in open fields during tempests, he realised the fruitlessness of his plans.

“I’m no doctor,” said George, “I don’t know what I was thinking. I clearly need some more humility in my life. It’s time to find religion...”

But for the third time again. It wasn’t enough.

“... In the Nudist Cult of Noisy Meditation.”

And so for the third time, George set off on a new journey of self-discovery and jumped on a plane.

The cult, like the Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Atlantic Ocean, was want of new members. After some discarding of clothing to the wind, George was able to jump straight into a year-long mass meditation with some chatty naturalists.

They taught him how to detach himself from his body and walk around the world incorporeally, they showed him how to see through his third eye and see the inner workings of his own brain and to see the emotions swirling around within—He discovered the misery was indeed the colour of blue-grey. And they showed him how to sit comfortably on itchy grass without wearing pants.

But even after an entire year of meditation and gluten-free, kale sandwiches, George was unable to pass the cult’s final teaching.

“But Sifu,” said George after struggling to learn the final ability of controlling his emotions, “How can I learn to shield myself from misery when I haven’t felt anything but happiness in so long?”

“Everyone has some form of misery within them,” said Sifu, who sat with his ankles behind his ears. “Some show it on their faces, while others hide it deep down inside.”

So George dug deep inside of his mind, and after sifting through memories of electric skies and flying grenades, he came upon recollections of his co-workers in his old job. There was that guy from I.T. whose name George had forgotten, the woman from accounting whose name George had never remembered, and that kid from sales who George wasn’t even sure had a name, as everyone had always just called him ‘the kid from sales.’ But despite the fact that George hadn’t ever made much of an ‘intimate connection’ with these people, he began to worry that they were still suffering as he himself used to suffer, toiling away without a

purpose.

“See that cloud in the distance?” said Sifu, pointing to a low grey cloud in the sky. George noticed that it looked a lot like the one that always hung over his old worksite. “See how it doesn’t rain? This is because it is not a cloud made of water vapour, but of misery vapour. And once you’re able to shield yourself from misery you will be able to sit under that cloud for a year and feel no pain.”

“Misery vapour!?” said George, and squinted at the cloud. The colour was a blue-grey colour that looked like the colour of misery. He jumped to his feet.

“The aliens, They’re real!” He exclaimed. “I have to save my friends from the misery-feeders.”

So George ran off into the distance, leaving behind a confused Sifu.

“That man is crazy,” announced the naked cult leader with his ankles behind his ears.

George stood across the road from his old workplace, back in a suit and holding a large suitcase as if he was an employed man again.

It had always been there, but now he could clearly see the blue-grey cloud high above the building, for what it was. He could even see the faint signs of a sort of lumbering mist seeping out of the windows and heading up into the cloud. Inside this cloud was where he had been transported to on that fateful day. Inside that cloud was the source of all the misery that had plagued nearly all of his life.

If everything that had been said by the strange aliens that day was true, then he was destined to be smote by a yellow beam of light from the sky before being allowed back in. But he couldn’t leave people to live out a sour existence for the rest of their lives. He was going to free them from their shackles or die trying.

George put down his suitcase and was about to cross the road when his old manager, the one who had sent him on his permanent, involuntary vacation opened the door and waved at him to come inside from across the road.

Surprised, but curious, George crossed and followed him inside, and no beam of light shot down from the sky.

“We’re so glad to have you back,” said the manager, “We were afraid we would never see you again.”

“But you fired me,” said George, a little perplexed.

“What? Oh no, oh no. This is all just a result of your hallucinations.”

The manager sat him down on a comfortable seat in a nearby room.

“You see,” continued the manager, “It all started the day after you told everyone you had accidentally drunk some orange juice with your vitamins.”

The manager explained how after complaining of feeling unwell, George had collapsed at the end of the day just outside of the building and fallen into some kind of seizure. Soon he was yelling and screaming on the ground about being in some kind of spaceship surrounded by insectoid aliens. Then he had run off before the ambulance could arrive and the last anyone had ever heard of him he had gone and joined various international cults.

As all this was explained to George, he started lamenting over his past year. He thought to himself, standing on summits and getting himself knocked unconscious by lightning, sitting naked on a grass and starving himself on a paleo diet. All because of some vision he thought he had had of alien insects inside of a spaceship in a cloud. Had it all just been a waste of time.

“The boss has kept us all updated, and told us to remain calm,” continued the manager, “But we were all so worried about you.”

George clutched his head. “Are you certain?” he said, “it all seemed so real.”

“I understand it’s a lot to take in. But I assure you, if you simply return to your desk and do some work for the day, get back into your old routine, it should all come together for you.”

George, whose energy had begun to feel sapped as soon as he had walked through the door, agreed to try it out and returned to his old desk. No harm in trying, he thought, maybe he would feel a little less stressed with some work done.

He was able to pick up where he had left off, as the work never really changed much from day to day, and was several hours deep when something spoke up in the back of his mind. It was his third eye, the one he had trained with Sifu and the Nudist Cult.

“*Remember what Sifu taught you,*” said the echoey voice, “*look into your emotions.*”

So George delved into his mind and observed the swirling emotions in his brain. And there, in the corner, he saw the blue-grey colour of misery seeping out through the gap in his brain. So it *had* been real, the misery-feeders were draining him at this very moment.

But. What did it matter, he thought. What else was he going to do than work here. He wasn’t a revolutionary, or a doctor, or a monk. He was a failure at all three, and a failure at life. He should be happy to have a simple job like this one. But then he caught the eye of someone as they entered into the building. It was the kid from sales. He still had a slight gleam in his eye that was yet to be sucked entirely out of him. George may have felt worthless, but he couldn’t let others feel the same. He stood up.

“I have an announcement,” he shouted to everyone in the building. “I’m not particularly satisfied, is all.” he looked at the kid from sales. “And neither should any of you be.”

And he walked out the door.

This time, a yellow beam did shoot down from the sky, and while it tried its very best to turn George into a pile of ash, after his many similar experiences on top of a certain rainy mountain range, his body simply shrugged it off.

George crossed the road and returned to his suitcase. He popped it open, and extracted from it plan B. He then hoisted plan B with an experienced motion of control, despite its hefty weight of fifty kilograms, onto his shoulder, and pointed it into the sky as he had done so many times before.

A large, rocket-propelled grenade fizzled through the sky and struck the side of the miserable blue-grey cloud, blasting off a large chunk. The cloud swayed one way, then the other, before toppling down onto the roof of the building below it.

“Oops,” said George. He hadn’t expected the \$30,000, 11-inch, rocket-propelled grenade launcher to be so effective. Perhaps the Revolutionary Dictatorship of the Atlantic Ocean had come up with a good idea after all.

His co-workers streamed out in a panic, and George rushed across the road to help usher people out of the building. They were all a little shocked, and still profoundly unhappy, but they were unharmed. What’s more, the longer they stayed outside without the cloud hanging above them, the more they began to change.

“Ooh, it’s quite sunny, isn’t it,” said the woman from accounting.

“All the birds are chirping a lovely tune,” said the man from I.T.

And the kid from sales was most excited. He could barely contain himself, in fact, from yelling out, and finally stammered, “I... I want to be a martial arts master...”

“Go on,” said George.

“...of mid-skydiving-kung-fu.”