

A Man about Town

On November 14, Trevor Fern awoke, suffered the slow impalement of his eyes by rays of light, sat up, and decided to end his life, just as he had November 13, and the day before, and all his yesterdays, stretching back perhaps not to the first sad thought that occurred him, but rather the last truly happy one. Morning punctured his blinds. He savored the hazy abyss of waking up almost as much as anesthesia, for, even better than unconsciousness, it gave him the delight of wandering thought but relieved him of the awareness of his body, imperfect and heavy.

Trevor rose and performed the ironic actions necessary to sustain his body and mind, and make himself presentable. Breakfast was a cruel necessity. With French toast, Trevor liked to envision himself awaiting the guillotine in a dark medieval cell roughly the dimensions of the small dining room (truly a misnomer!) in his apartment; cereal conjured the straw-strewn blood gutters beneath the Coliseum, and perhaps the roar of a sympathetic lion. Eggs were often a science-fictional termination; boiled eyeballs, skin melting, perhaps an alien assassin in the form of his landlord Entz. Fruit and dairy naturally brought little to the imagination. Rising from the table, he returned to his room, made the choice between a white or a lilac shirt, brushed his teeth and hair, donned life's eternally tan slacks, checked once more to confirm the presence of a small, white notepad in his back pocket, and egressed.

Trevor was particularly fond of systems, of all kinds, even perhaps the ones that ostensibly oppressed and dehumanized him (for at least they took an interest), and was enormously proud of two he had devised, the first one for the fragmenting of his morning into small, manageable operations that most efficiently and pleasurably allocated his time while providing for his punctual arrival downtown at the firm for which he worked. His digital alarm clock simulated ringing at 7:04. Trevor gave himself the duration between his waking and turning away from the light and the inevitable discomfort of pressing his face and crooked neck into the edge of his bed to acclimate; after that, he got out of bed. If he had slept enough, and thus had the cognizance necessary to dress himself, said action was performed prior to breakfast. If Trevor's mind was still cloudy, it was breakfast first, then dressing. The bus arrived between 7:38 and 7:41, with a handful of historic and upsetting outliers. Provided he had begun his walk

down the begrimed boulevard adjacent his street (21382 Fffffff...) before 7:22, Trevor would be able to smoke a cigarette before boarding. Every minute after 7:22 corresponded directly to millimeters of tobacco that would be crushed, unsmoked, beneath the heel of his boot. He'd stopped buying the lanky Virginia Slims of his high school days and had switched to Marlboro Reds, so as never to be disappointed. Today, Trevor had the pleasure of finishing his cigarette with ample time to spare. He took the notepad from his pocket and a pen from his shirt and, pausing momentarily, scribbled a digit in the right column of the bifurcated page, headed "Later". The ink smelled tantalizingly of blueberries but revealed toxic notes to a more proximate nose.

This little pad was the second system of which Trevor was so proud; this was the daringly original contrivance that provided for a neat, often entertaining way for Trevor to make that grave literary decision to end himself, to take the Hemingway out. Trevor titled these columns variously: Heaven and Hell, Ebony and Ivory, "To be or not to be" when he felt daring, and on dreary days Trevor simply scrawled the affirmative and negative or even two diametrically opposed thumbs. It was the final tally of these columns that decided his fate each evening.

The story is long and tedious, as downward spirals tend to be, but Trevor had simply realized one day that the life of a casual libertine was no longer as rich as it had been, or rich at all for that matter. As if his secret sorrow was plain for all to see, Trevor became a pariah in each of his social circles, and the whirlwind of his former life passed over him quite abruptly. For weeks, he had recycled his memories, rifling through them with the desperation of a vagrant, searching for something to replenish his fervor and fill that terrible emptiness, but nothing came, not until the Pad. It was genius, really. Everyday, he took with him the becolumned pad on his way to work, and after that on the frequent strolls that Trevor had taken to having in the evenings through a city now strewn with the mementos of his past lives, in vague imitation of a Romantic poet, Trevor figured. During these moments of contemplation, he turned himself inside out, and placed the responsibility for his judgment on the world, opening the portholes to his scrawny fuselage and inviting the world, tasking the world, to fill the void within. Everything pleasing to him, everything moral and uplifting, which imbued his spirit with that odd sense of pleasure and peace derived from the triumph of good (now where is the keen German word for that?) would

receive a sum of points on the positive side of the paper. The opposite naturally received its tallies from everything vulgar, superficial, cruel, and depressing. Trevor was fastidious about using the Pad. He knew already, too, how he would take his life. It was a simple affair, a cocktail of narcotics and poison so that he might go to sleep and never awake (so banal a phrase as it is). All that was needed now was the ruling.

The bus arrived and Trevor stepped on.

“Good morning!” the driver offered, beaming unfocusedly at something beyond his windshield.

“And you”, Trevor said vaguely.

The bus roared and accelerated, lumbering through the cityscape. The manifold holes in the wall flew by, the signage and lamps, and the marquees, which Trevor would sometimes follow linearly with his eyes as the bus sped along, tracing an odd tale framed in pastels and cast in majusculars. As there were certain characters that frequented Trevor’s bus: a glassy-eyed old man who bore a resemblance to Humphrey Bogart, a trio of icy-haired women of indeterminate ethnicity who Trevor liked to call privately the Mothers of the Future, and a prototypically pretty brunette whom Trevor entertained in life with raised eyebrows and roguish glances and in his thoughts as his soulmate, or perhaps some sort of female counterpart. A grizzled man on the bench across from Trevor-he of the thousand yard stare, who had honed his skill in lingering his gaze just above the tops of heads without sinking to jarring confrontations with the faces beneath-began to mutter and curse under his breath, several very unpleasant ejaculations, and Trevor conceived insanity at that moment as the combination of an empty stare and dark dreams. It depressed him, and he scratched a 4 in the left column of his Pad, today titled “Now or Later”. Funny, he thought. I often start with a four against myself. There’s a poem in there somewhere. He lowered his gaze to the fabric of his slacks.

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They were catering a luncheon for a political advocacy group, and thus Trevor naturally found himself transporting hundreds and hundreds of devilled eggs and Toms Collins. Flitting in and out of the small room reserved for his company (Cornucopia, unspellable, terrible name!), Trevor, a resigned waiter-thing, brought nourishment to the corpulent and empowdered

attendees. While Trevor sidled and faded about, a large man in a cream suit and a ruddy face, bestrode the stage and took the microphone. He cleared his throat.

“Good evening folks!”

Applause. “Isn’t it wonderful to escape the hubbub for a while and do some good!”
More applause, henceforth omitted.

“I’m sure you’re all aware of the sorry state of the American family. Broken homes, promiscuousness, bad values, atheism, agnosticism, ignorance, poor hygiene, no values, no patriotism, and no belief in the future, the future that our parents raised us to make, the future promised us by the Framers!”

Applause, applause, oh!, how Trevor despised it!

The speaker basked in the clapping before inviting its cessation with a sly tentative upcurl of his moist upper lip.

“And I’m sure...and I’m sure you all know the reason for this mess as well!”

Vitamins. The reply was deafening.

“Vitamins! Poison, more like. Nothing a body needs but sunshine, the warmth of the mother’s love, the approval of the father, and a hearty diet. But the companies and the corporations, oh no, they will threaten and cajole you, scare you silly, convince you that you’re unhealthy, that you don’t have enough iron or aluminum or this and that, try and get you to stop serving what you serve, to drink water, to live a sparse and unna-merican lifestyle! And they even go so far as to pump our water and vegetables full of these vitamins, make them practically impossible to avoid! Sickening-quite literally, actually, a lovely young woman came up to me earlier today and told me her son, wonderful boy, had vitamin poisoning...”

Trevor added a 7 under “Now”. He wondered then if he would break even, as he had done every day before. He religiously avoided mental calculation, but even so it seemed to him that perhaps, finally, the postponement was at an end.

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Trevor walked about the city. His preferred route skirted the business district, at its fringe, where one could easily infer, if not spot directly, the pale grey suits haunting the cityscape. The mirrored giants of the serious stood rather incongruously against the dreamy

peach and lavender of the sun-beset clouds. Trevor paused to look at the sunset, and found himself fending off sentimentality. He withheld long enough to place a digit in the Pad's right column.

Trevor walked slowly down the sun-starved streets of the neighborhood, passing boutiques and cafes, turning at random. He picked up a paper, a local affair, and read that a man had killed himself, his wife, and his two daughters after losing his investment. The grainy picture showed a man with regular eyes and regular hair and clean dry-looking skin, who resembled Trevor's father a bit. Some big venture had collapsed after a logistical failure and a market downturn, or something of that manner. The paper made Trevor feel sluggish and cold. The man had taken everyone on a car ride to the lake, and deposited the family in the water after firing four times. Trevor scribbled in his notebook.

Continuing down the ample sidewalk, Trevor passed through and between figures, proceeding down a wide commercial boulevard. The chain stores always depressed him. Two. He saw a girl who reminded him of a college girlfriend. Nine. He waited in line, waited, and purchased a gelato, mango. It was delicious. Eight. On the next corner, a homeless veteran with terrible scarring of the face and arms begged for change, and Trevor watched distantly as the passing pedestrians averted their eyes. Six.

Trevor walked on, coming up on tennis enclosure that marked the start of the vast park that lay like a green faithful fiend in the shadow of Mother Bank and Father Hotel. It is always others who play tennis, he thought, never oneself. Trevor spotted the mahogany bench, the one with a plaque memorializing a devoted husband, upon which he frequently sat, during these days, where long ago he had come as a younger man, and the scent of her perfume, which acquires an indescribable headiness when it emanates from a supple neck, suffused his nose, and his hand had run up and down the denim thigh in the bottomless quiet of the night. Her name had been a flower and this was naturally never broached. His heart ached and he clenched his hand around the tail of his flannel shirt. Nine? No. Five perhaps. These benches always puzzled Trevor; it seemed odd that they had been commissioned, built by a carpenter, assembled, that they had been once a tiny mark on a vast tract of blueprint, that someone had carefully placed each of them in their real-life location, so that they might persist, and fulfill the lives of the public, when in his experience, it was only the lonely and the nondescript that ever sat in them.

They were slightly out of step in the spacetime of the jubilant public; Trevor felt often that they made him invisible, for a time.

The sun had set by now. His legs were sore and it felt good to sit, although of course one loses something when perambulation ceases. But certainly Thoreau must have spent much of his time seated, thought Trevor. He entertained the notion that there would be something in the forest around Walden Pond that might elevate his spirits, maybe, and he moved to write a reminder and a digit. The Pad had become obtrusive in his pocket, as it was always in his mind, and he removed it, scribbled, and placed it on the bench next to him. My lover now, he thought. What an awful date. I have to do all the work. Today had been a particularly bad day, and Trevor figured that perhaps this would be the last one. Trevor heard from nearby the warmth of the patios and the pubs and the layered cascading roar of the highways. Darkness was rapidly encroaching upon his little Alamo, and he decided at that moment that it would be nice to sit there for a while. He would go home later, around 11:00, when quiet would pervade his journey home and give him some sense of closure, of completion.

The Pad. Trevor picked it up. He gazed out across the park at the fuzzy erratic shapes in the failing depths of the green abyss. Picking up the Pad and then pen, he felt the cool air upon his skin, and smelled the moist verdure around him, and with a sigh he began to add the numbers in each column.